

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

Windows

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The poem “Death is Nothing” is written by Henry Scott Holland, canon at St. Paul’s Cathedral.

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To my mum and dad, thank you for my life, the heritage you have given me, and for introducing me to sparkling wine. My brothers for not laughing at me, not too much anyway. My friends for giving me hope and inspiration and ideas and laughing with me so much my face has ached for days afterwards [Let's get martinis!] Jeanie & Jayha for giving me an amazing opportunity. To London! My city! Do not ever, ever change.

P.S. Mum and Dad, you don't need to read any further.

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Author's Note

As you may have guessed from my *nom de plume*, I'm a Londoner born and raised, which means I've spent years picking up various rude and non rude words and phrases unique to the UK. It also means I've used terms that will probably make you say 'huh?' So I've done a little glossary for you to refer to, if you need.

Glossary for Windows:

ASBO: (noun) Anti Social Behaviour Order. Description given to disrespectful citizens who engage in activities such as graffiti, noise ordinance violations and flypapering.

Bum: (noun) slang for buttocks.

Crisps: (noun) slang for potato chips.

Don't take the piss: (phrase) means don't take liberties.

Do sweet fuck all: (phrase) means do absolutely nothing.

Flat: (noun) apartment.

Hire: (verb) to rent.

It was going half twelve: (description of time) twelve thirty.

Jumper: (noun) sweater.

Keep a receipt to yourself: (phrase) being able to keep a secret.

Mardy bint: (adjective and noun) a miserable person, normally a girl.

Moody bint: (adjective and noun) a sulky person, normally a girl.

Paedos: (noun) slang for paedophiles.

Paracetamol: (noun) a painkiller.

Sodding: (profanity) used in lieu of "bloody" which means damn.

To get onside: (phrase) a term of play in football (soccer for you Americans) related to the onside/offside rule. It is also used in general conversation to mean 'to support someone.'

Chapter One

It was Tuesday night poker with the boys, and Nick could do with at least four more beers. Clearly it was his turn to take a ribbing tonight.

“Ma!” he called over his shoulder, as Beppe cut a cigar for him. The guys started laughing at him.

“You’ve got to stop crying to your mum,” Beppe warned him, handing over the lit cigar.

Nick would have flipped him the finger if he wasn’t trying to protect his hand. “She’s in the kitchen anyway, she won’t mind. MA!”

Tony snickered. “What you need is a woman.”

“He’s been trying,” Rocky answered for Nick, throwing a few more chips onto the pile. “Raise.”

Tony’s brows lifted in surprise. “What, still? Oh man, Nick, leave it out. We all know Gina’s not going to play with Mini Da Canaveze. Raise.”

Nick’s face blazed with colour, a physical reaction that always coincided with the mention of Gina’s name and the rush of blood that would inevitably pool in his groin.

“She’s hot for a black chick,” Rocky offered.

“What the fuck, man?” Nick growled. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. I mean, she’s never gone out with anyone who’s even remotely like you. And she’s not really your type.”

“She’s got a womb, hasn’t she?” Tony laughed. “Gina’s got the best arse I’ve ever seen. It’s like she climbed out of a Snoop Dogg video. Arse clothed, obviously, but I’ve got more chance of seeing it naked than you, Nicky.”

Nick flipped him the finger. “Fuck off, all of you.”

“Everyone chill,” Beppe commanded. “Let’s not talk about Gina, her arse or any other part of her anatomy, as Nick will take off your balls despite not using his own anymore around her.”

The boys laughed again, and Nick resisted the urge to punch Tony. He had clearly opened his mouth, seeing as he was the only one who really knew how Nick felt about Gina. Why had he blabbed? Jesus, was nothing sacred on this earth anymore?

Rocky watched the struggle on his face and said with sympathy, “We’d stop if you weren’t so blatant. Anyone can see how much you like her. The other day, I took my grandma to her restaurant and you were ‘paying a visit.’ So grandma asks me, ‘Are those two getting married any time soon?’ So I says, ‘Noni, they’re not together.’ Then grandma says, ‘He should wear baggier trousers then.’”

The room exploded with shouts of laughter.

“Shut up, shut up all of you,” Nick threatened, and while the laughter died away, the amusement failed to disappear.

“Just fuck someone else,” Tony offered. “Anyone else, until you accept she’s not going to open her legs for you.”

He yelped suddenly as Mary Alice’s palm connected with the back of his head. “Don’t use language like that in my house.”

She placed beers in front of all of them and dropped a kiss on her son’s head. “Aren’t you hungry yet, Nicky? I’ve already prepared the fish.”

Mary Alice’s sea bass was legendary, and it had originally spawned the poker nights. The boys gave the excuse of “male bonding,” but it was more likely they just enjoyed eating great food for free.

“Just one more game, Ma,” Nick promised.

“Well, five minutes or you’re eating rubber.”

“I know what he’d rather be eating,” Beppe murmured.

“I swear to God, man...” Nick’s voice rippled with barely controlled rage.

Beppe tried to hold back his own smirk as he spoke, “Mrs. Da Canaveze, please tell your son that he will never get married and give you grandchildren until he starts looking at other girls.”

Mary Alice sighed. "Gina again? Nicky, she doesn't feel that way about you."

Nick thought his chest was going to compress in on itself. "How the hell..."

"Your flat is always covered in photos of the two of you, and if there is anyone else in the photo, you do your best to overlap them. Any girl going to your flat would think you were living with someone because you've got everything there that Gina could ever need to stay for the rest of her life." She stroked a hand over his hair, as if trying to soothe her son's hurt. "She's got a very different life to ours, you know this. And either Gina's blind, or she just doesn't feel that way about you and hasn't the heart to hurt your feelings."

He wished he could deny all of this, that he could stand up and tell them that they were all wrong, that Gina did love him, that they'd spent the whole afternoon in his bed proving that fact, that her life wasn't at all different, and that, hell, Gina understood community more than anyone else he knew. But none of that was true. In all honesty, Gina saw him as a puppy dog, to be petted when he came sniffing at her heels. A weaker man would have been broken by the realisation that everyone knew of and found humour in his pain. Nick, however, just cracked a smile. "You're all so pessimistic. Who says I won't be with her?"

“A registered psychiatrist?” Tony suggested. “Come on, there are a billion women on this planet. Just pick one who can cook Italian as good as your mother, speaks the language and loves sex.”

Even Mary Alice laughed. “I think you’ve set him an impossible task! Come on, boys, food.”

As Nick placed his cards face down and collected his beer, he was tempted to tell them all just how perfect Gina was, and that the impossibility came not from finding the woman, but convincing her that they were right together.

Chapter Two

Frozen prawns should never be used in risotto, Gina told herself, but hey, use whatever you've got left. With white wine vinegar, a stock cube, a throwaway packet of salt and pepper and olive oil rather than butter, she had made risotto for her dinner. Her dad would have been proud. After all, he had bullied her into becoming a chef, following in familial footsteps.

Her eyes stung instantly at the thought of her father. A short, handsome, fiery Ghanaian man who loved food and loved her. She missed him so badly some days, her whole body ached with it. She had told her boss that she had taken up smoking in the first three months after her father's death, as it was the only way she felt comfortable disappearing on an hourly basis to cry outside behind the bins where no one could see.

She took a short breath and turned off the heating at the mains. She turned the kettle on for a hot-water bottle to rest her feet on and carried her bowl to the living room, huddling into her last remaining sofa. The whole weekend she had stayed in her bedroom, under her duvet, after some of the coldest showers she had ever been stupid enough to

take, and she was more than fed up with those four walls. She should probably check eBay to see if the sofa had also been taken. Then she would figure out how she would sell the laptop. She had no idea. How did one pawn things? It wasn't something she'd ever had to do before. She had been working since she was sixteen years old, and this scraping for money made her tense every second of the day.

The last thing to go would have to be the phone. Her last connection to the world. As if on cue, her phone trilled. She looked at the screen and a picture of Nick popped up. He was cocking his hand as an imaginary gun at the camera. *Good-looking bastard*, she thought affectionately.

"Soprano!" she called out, then realised she'd have to lie to get him off the phone, in order to save the electricity, her battery and most importantly, her bill. "Make it quick, my battery's about to die."

"Just wanted to know if I could come over and see you."

She glanced around, contemplating what he'd think if he came to the house and saw that almost all the furniture was now gone. Could she use the storage excuse? Hadn't she used that excuse already? "Gina? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, look, tonight's not good. I've just come back from work, I smell grim and I wouldn't be great

company. Can I come see you tomorrow maybe?" His new flat was a short walk from her restaurant.

"I haven't seen you in a while."

Because you're too clever for your own good, she thought. "Nick, seriously, I'm not in the best of moods. Look, my battery's beeping in my ear. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

She could almost see the small set of wrinkles between his black arched brows. "Are you okay? You sound weird."

"Just one of those days. I'll call you from work. Promise. Bye!" She cut the call before he argued further and turned the phone off after noting that the call was just over a minute. Goddammit. She'd definitely be over her limit after speaking to the solicitor about the sale of the house.

Her risotto was lukewarm and tasted worse because of it. She thought of Nick's mother, Mary Alice, whose risottos were like clouds of flavour that evaporated in the mouth. She forced herself to eat it and then she collected her old CD player, which still worked beautifully. At the very least, her father's crazy need to have piles of AA batteries in stock would come in useful. She curled up on the sofa, prodding the gentle mound of fat beneath her belly button.

"Thought starving like an artist would have made you bugger off."

As Bob Marley promised her that everything would be all right, she drifted off into a troubled sleep.

* * *

It was the glass on her face that woke her up, as the music was still blaring in her ears. She ripped off her headphones and shook the glass from her body. Huge pieces of it were everywhere. She looked to the terrace windows and saw that the chunk of brick that now sat in the middle of her hardwood floor had taken out almost half of the window.

Her heart was speeding at the back of her throat, fear skating coldly over her skin. What the sweet hell just happened? With shaking fingers she turned the brick over. The note was short. “Time’s Up.”

At first, she started laughing at such a cliché. A brick through a window? But then she touched her cheek, swiping a stray tear and shredding her skin with shards of glass. The note vibrated in her right hand. They’d promised. They had looked her in the eyes and promised that they would give her enough time. They said that they understood what she was going through and they would help her out, as the bank wouldn’t give her the collateral against the house. “It’s the recession,” they’d said, “banks won’t do what we’ll do for you. Take your time.”

She'd thought they'd stop after she cut the landline, but this was what she had reduced them to. Christ...

Her hand tightened around the note and she cried out as a sliver of glass buried itself in her skin. She picked it out with her stubby nails and left half of it embedded in her palm. She tiptoed around the glass and retrieved a comb, some tape and tweezers. After removing the glass from her body, she wrapped it using the newspaper her dad collected. She sent a mental apology to her dad for defiling Princess Diana's Tribute in the *Daily Mail* and dumped the glass in the garden bins outside. A knock at the door startled her.

"Gina?"

Nick. He must have seen the window. She tugged on long gloves from her coat pocket so he wouldn't see her hands, then opened the door.

"Hello," she said brightly, forcing the lightness into her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"You sounded weird on the phone, so I came to check on you."

She grinned. "Stalking me, Soprano?"

His frown deepened at her frivolous tone. "Gina, what the hell happened to your window?"

The note was a curling black ember in her sink, thanks to a rather useful lighter she'd found. "You know this area's just getting worse."

She turned and left him to close the front door behind him, as she sat down on the sofa, glass removed with the tape, like she'd done with her hair. Nick stood in front of her, hands inside the pockets of a thick cashmere coat. She wanted to tell him that *GQ* photographers were ready for him, but any more teasing and he'd probably have her committed.

"That's bull. I mean your windows are double glazed."

She shrugged. "That's why they had to use a heavier brick. Look there."

He stared at her for a long time, tension seeping into his shoulders. Finally he took his phone out. "I'm calling the police."

Calm down, she told herself immediately, *he won't do it if you talk him out of it.*

"Why bother? Dude, seriously, they'll take forever to get here, then they'll take their time to spell out my name and in the end, do sweet fuck all. There's really no point. I didn't even see who it was. I was taking a nap on the sofa."

He crouched in front of her and framed her face carefully with the tips of his fingers. It caught her by surprise, and she nearly flinched from his touch. Oh hell, he could see the scratches on her face from the glass. It was sort of fascinating to see his eyes change

colour, to such a dark blue they were almost black. Wow, he looked mad.

“You were crying,” he stated eventually, small lines of worry appearing around his eyes.

She took his hands off her face and gave another shrug. “It was a shock. I’m fine, I promise. I just need a hand putting some cardboard on the window. Then I’ll get some quotes from window companies. Your hands smell like cigars. Isn’t it your poker night tonight?”

His lips twitched, as if he knew she was attempting to divert him. “I lost too much money, so I quit while I still owned my home. We’ll do a deal. I sort out the window and you go and pack.”

“What for?”

“You’re staying with me, until the window is fixed.”

No, not a good idea at all. That meant he would end up paying for the window, and she didn’t know how the hell she was going to pay for it anyway. She would have to, because she needed to sell the house to pay those monsters back, and there was no way she’d be able to sell the house if it looked like a crack den.

She glanced right up into Nick’s eyes as he added persuasively, “We’ll leave a lamp on in here, so if anyone tries to burgle the place, they’ll think someone’s at home. Everywhere else we’ll lock up

properly. I'll call someone to fix the glass and I'll pay up front."

"I can pay for the window, it's fine," she replied irritably.

He gently rubbed her denim-covered calves. "Just stay with me for tonight, so I won't worry about you. We'll get pizza, Ben and Jerry's, a few beers and watch a ton of crap. I'll even throw in a cup of tea." He lifted his brows devilishly. "You know what my tea does to you. Brings all the girls to the yard."

She laughed. Oh Nick, he did know exactly how to make her feel better. She didn't want to be on her own right now; the company of another human being would be bliss. "Okay. I'll be five minutes."

She gave him a brief hug and bounded up the stairs, where she picked up a large overnight bag and sorted out her things for the next day. She picked out flannel pyjamas and a vest top just to keep extra warm. She had a terrible habit of cuddling people in her sleep when she was cold, and she knew Nick's current girlfriend wouldn't at all appreciate that. But then, he made her feel so asexual sometimes, if she hadn't known him for so long, she would be convinced that he was gay.

She'd seen him in action at bars and watched women flock to him like mosquitoes. It was the hair thing—far too long for a man who was a fully qualified

accountant, it was long enough to sweep his hands through in frustration, and it fell into his face in straight blue-black swathes. Girls wanted to play with it, and he would give them a slow, near vulnerable look under his pitchfork-length lashes and hold them with eyes the colour of the Aegean Sea in high summer. If that wasn't enough, he'd drawl in a slightly husky deep voice, tinged with an Italian accent Gina swore he put on, though he hadn't lost it in the ten years they'd been friends.

She checked to make sure all the windows were locked and bolted, then skipped down the stairs and saw that Nick had covered up the broken one with cardboard. He'd discarded his jacket to complete the job and was checking the bolts on the remaining windows. She watched him turn on the lights in the living room and as he flicked the light of the corridor, he gave her a sweet smile. "You ready?"

"Yes, yes. Can you check the back? The key's inside the lock."

He did as she asked, then shrugged his coat back on. "Come on—I want to watch Bruce Willis kill bad people." He hustled her into his car, a brand new BMW convertible.

"When did you get this?" she gasped, inhaling that wonderful leathery new car smell.

He threw their coats into the back seat and said lightly, “Bonus for the quarter.”

“You should probably dirty it up a bit if you’re going to drive through here.”

Nick gave a short bark of laughter. “I’d like to see the little bastards try to touch this.”

It wasn’t the little ones she was worried about. It was the big ones.

“You, me and pizza, okay?” he promised, picking up her hand and giving her knuckles a brief kiss.

She turned his hand over and did the same. “Soprano, if you carry on like that, I’ll marry you.” She turned her head to look at him, his face shadowed in the poor street lighting. “Then you’d really be screwed.”

“How? I’d have a free cook in my house. Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll register us at Habitat for the good kitchenware.” He stuck his tongue in his cheek to give her a sly grin. “I know kitchenware to you is like Prada to other women.”

Should be—hers had sold for enough on eBay. Maybe it would be worth the trouble to marry someone for the kitchen goods. She would, on the other hand, have a lot of explaining to do.

Chapter Three

Nick leaned over Gina's shoulder and realized that she was really asleep. It was going half twelve—and how they had eaten. They had ordered an extra-large meat feast pizza, had split a six pack of beer, watched Bruce Willis kill bad guys, followed by several episodes of *Family Guy* and ice cream, and ended with a specially prepared cup of tea, made by Nick.

She had helped him move into his new flat a few weeks ago, and on entering it again this evening, she was surprised that he hadn't done anything more than move his boxes into the appropriate areas.

"Come on, you're living in Chelsea, you've got to smarten up a bit," she'd scolded.

The outside of his building was in the style of a nineteenth-century town house, and the inside had been split into several flats. Nick had the top floor to himself, complete with a roof garden. He had sorted the bathroom already, which was a beautiful mezzowet room with a large claw-footed tub and a huge crystal-clear shower.

"Can I live in your bath?" she asked weakly.

"You might have to," Nick said grimly. "I'm stuck on the second bedroom..."

Gina put her bag down in shock. "This is a palace of a flat and it's only got two bedrooms?"

Nick blinked at her slowly. "Location, Gina. You know that's what I've paid for, not the room space."

"Er... so where am I sleeping? You tosspot, are you sticking me on the couch?"

He started laughing.

"It's an awesome couch, but I need to sleep on a mattress."

"So just sleep with me," Nick said nonchalantly, trying to not feel himself blush at the simple joy of sharing a bed with her. "Bed's the size of a minibus. I won't find you dry humping me in the middle of the night."

Gina's cheeks blazed a deep red. "That was once. It was Glastonbury and it was damn cold. It wasn't humping. It was survival."

"Woman, you were just missing a collar and cocking your leg on my arse."

Gina failed to suppress her own giggles. "You are a tosspot. If I dry hump you, won't Maria gun for me?"

Nick hadn't quite told her that Maria had wanted to get married in the next three months. They had only been dating four months, the majority of which she had spent cursing Gina's name.

"She's always around, taking up your time. She clearly wants everything to revolve around her," Maria

had complained. Nick had taken this as positive, rather than a destructive force in his relationship with Gina. Maybe Maria had seen something that he hadn't...

"Maria and I are done," he explained. "She wanted to move in."

"Clingy." Gina grimaced. "She really didn't like me."

"I think you dry humped her too."

Gina picked up one of his cushions and threw it at him.

"You need to order pizza now before I leave."

He caught her in a hug, satisfied by how well she fit under his chin. She squealed as he tugged her off her feet, and then placed her in the middle of his bed. "You stay there."

When he came back with the pizza and beers, she already had the TV on and the DVD menu up. She had pulled her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail and had her pyjamas on. She looked so sweet; actually, she looked like jail bait. She put both arms in the air as a greeting. "Welcome, Soprano, to my crib."

"Lay off the drugs," he told her, putting the huge box on the bed and placing the beer on the bedside table.

An hour later, Gina had scrambled under the duvet and snuggled against his torso, having spent

most of the film absently playing with the rosary beads he had wrapped around his left wrist. While he had shared sleeping space with Gina before, this was a little short of self-imposed torture. She had the faintest scent of coconut on her skin, and the slight weight of her arm, tucked just under his nipple, started to make his body feel out of control. He concentrated on the TV, just so he would calm down. Thankfully Gina dozed off, then jolted awake when the speakers connected to the TV made the explosions sound a little too real.

“Like napping with Grandma,” he teased as she peered at him with sleep-swollen eyes.

“Going home—don’t need to take this verbal beat down.”

He gently eased her from his body to get up from the bed. “You’re not going home. You feel less like Bridget Jones when you’re here. Before you say anything, I’m bringing you tea.”

He was genuinely worried about her, but thankfully this sadomasochism would end soon. Gina would go to sleep, and then he would be able to take up the far end of the bed where she would have no chance of touching him. There had already been a few hairy moments where quick thinking had resolved any chance of exposure.

Gina had gone back to the bathroom and noted the one remaining box. “What’s all this? Since when did you start using Pink hair products?”

“That is all your shit, Robinson,” he lied.

“Collected over the years of you using my place like a hair salon and attempting to deafen me because I don’t have the right hairspray. Resolved.”

She pouted. “Just admit you use it on your silky locks.”

He leaned on the door frame of the bathroom, watching her wash her face after making her promise that it wouldn’t make her scratches sting. “If you want to play with my hair, you just have to ask me nicely.”

She bent at the waist to wash the soap from her face. The fabric of the material was thin enough to show her bright blue lace-edged panties, and he allowed himself to enjoy the view for a brief moment. “Are you flirting with me, Soprano? Because you know I can’t take you seriously when you wear those *Big Bang Theory* glasses.”

He pushed himself from the doorway, stopping himself from watching the near hypnotic motion of the jiggle of her bottom. “I can’t watch TV without them,” he told her defensively as he walked off.

“I believe you!” she called back. “Do you want another beer? Say yes so we’re both a bit toasted.”

He agreed and firmly locked the store cupboard, which had in it not only her straighteners, but a hairdryer which was the exact replica of her own, with a pick comb, for goodness' sake. No wonder Maria had felt intimidated by her.

Earlier that evening, Gina had looked at the photo of the two of them that was lying carelessly on the side table. Maria had tried to break it on her way out. It was of Nick and Gina at his cousin's wedding last year. Gina had worn the sexiest little dress, a warm turquoise colour that hung off one shoulder and skimmed an inch above her knees. She'd tucked a faux blue tiger lily behind her ear. Nick had proudly introduced her to all who attended, and she'd charmed everyone she met. A distant relative had been happy to take the picture of the two of them. Gina had been trying not to laugh at the relative turning the digital camera back and forth. Nick's arm hung loosely at her waist, her palm at his chest. It looked far more intimate than either of them intended, but Gina had said that they both looked pretty, and she wasn't ready to spend the rest of her natural life waiting for the relative to take another more formal picture. So he'd printed and framed it.

"We look like a couple," Gina had said gently. "I hope you hid this from Maria." She gave a dramatic gasp. "Maybe she saw this and she threw the brick!"

Again, the other photos were hidden in a cupboard. The ones where they had gone to parties, when they had been on holiday, glazed with food, after their various graduations; Jesus, the one of Gina in a bikini in Thailand with a bottle of beer in one hand and a spliff in the other. That image both shamed and excited him on a near daily basis.

That image would now be joined with the mewling noises coming from Gina at this moment, fast asleep. Damn, they sounded like sex noises. No, he had to get out of there. He slipped out of the bed and sat on his sofa in his own pyjama bottoms and what Gina termed a “wife beater” t-shirt. He picked up his iPod from the dock and scrolled through his films for something completely non-sexual to counter the blood slowly stiffening his sex. How could he have possibly thought he would be able to sleep listening to that? No way would his knob allow him.

He pulled up *Saw III*, lowered the under-floor heating to twenty degrees Celsius, and then started watching the film with the dregs of his beer. Gina had been unnaturally quiet this evening; he guessed it was the shock of the vandalism. People didn’t do that anymore. If people wanted to burgle you, they didn’t give a shit if you were in the house or not.

When her father had died, Nick had gone through the accounts. In a rare moment when Gina

had exhausted herself emotionally, he'd seen the state of her finances, and it was not pretty. Most likely, the only way she'd be able to pay the inheritance tax would be through the sale of the house. And he'd clocked the rest of the house while he was there and seen that most of the furniture was gone. That didn't cover the monthly payments on the mortgage, how she had sorted out her father's loans and credit cards, the bills she still had to pay. And the temperature in her house had been Arctic. Her tears had surprised him that evening. From the moment when she had called him to say her father had suffered a heart attack, he had only witnessed her cry once.

The day of Benjamin Robinson's funeral had been a bright, perversely sunny day, and Gina had held on to his hand the whole time. One of her father's favourite songs had been a gospel version of "Que Sera Sera," and it played as the coffin was lowered. Gina turned to him with her huge dark eyes swimming with tears and whispered, "I can't. I can't do this. Dad made everything right. What do I do now? It's impossible. I can't."

He squeezed her hand so tightly, his rosary beads pressing into her skin. "You can do this, because he's your dad. So you will."

She gave him such a smile, bravery and gratitude giving her sweet face the wonderful veneer of serenity.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Saying he *is* your dad. Not he *was* your dad.”

“*Mia Cara, Georgina,*” he sighed softly, wrapping his arms around her. “Don’t make me join in—you know I have a terrible voice.”

She giggled and held him tighter. The wake hadn’t been its namesake, but a riotous party with piles of food, singing, dancing and broad tales of Benjamin Robinson’s gregarious life. Having never seen her in traditional clothing before, Nick had asked about it politely, even as his eyes had been glued to her bum. She’d explained that traditional dress was worn to funerals and memorials and the black and white pattern was known as Kente. The cut of the Kente made her bum look like it had a mind of its own.

He had to tell himself that her father’s funeral was not the place to try and cop a feel of his friend’s doubly accentuated arse. He had done his best helping out while her family watched him with suspicion. He was used to being automatically accepted, and the waves of mistrust made him go for the whiskey, then stay by the makeshift bar to serve drinks. An elderly aunt, Comfort, frowned at him and told him that she wanted a rum and coke, “With ice.”

He handed it over and received an even more blunt, “She’s got no money, young man.”

He burst into such surprised laughter that he accidentally shut his hand in the fridge. It made him laugh harder. Gina came over to find out what the fuss was all about.

“Your aunt thinks I’m after your money.”

Gina gave him a look of disapproval. “English, please. Speaking Italian around my aunt will only make her give you a slap.”

He stared at her in astonishment. She’d told him off in fluent Italian. “When did you...?”

She shrugged her shoulder carelessly. “It was something to do.”

“If you start eavesdropping...” he warned her gently, not at all impressed by her secrecies.

She gave him a conciliatory kiss on the cheek.

“I meant it, Robinson. If you think a slap from your aunt will hurt, you’re in trouble.” He looked down at her aunt, who was still eyeing him through wrinkled and heavy lids. “She’s cheeky, your niece.”

“She’s not as bad as you,” her aunt retorted, sticking a bony finger into his arm. Fuck, that hurt. “Come, Araba, let’s get some food for your uncle. He loves your jollof rice.”

After that, it was a free-for-all on his relationship with Gina. “And who are you?” he was asked, to reply that he was a friend only, nothing more.

“Boyfriend?” her aunt Belinda demanded.

“No, just a friend.”

“Hmm... Frederick! This young man is Georgina’s boyfriend!”

Nick wanted to drop cyanide ice cubes into all their drinks when Fredrick called back, “But he’s not Ghanaian. He’s white.”

“Well observed,” Nick muttered. “Look, I’m just a friend. And to be honest, I think Gina’s got other things to worry about.”

Why were they so intent on embarrassing her at her father’s wake? “Eh heh,” came the response, Belinda’s eyes cutting into him over the rim of her glasses. “She doesn’t need any more trouble. Am I clear, young man?”

“What are you doing, Aunty Belinda?” Gina asked, coming to put some more cold beers in the huge bowl of ice by the makeshift bar.

“Telling this young man to keep his hands to himself.”

Gina curled her arms around Nick’s bicep and said coyly, “Well, it’s a little late for that. Nicholas and I have engaged in quite rigorous premarital sex. It helps with the grief.”

Nick's face turned near tomato red; he barely registered the shock on Belinda's face as Gina dragged him outside into the garden. "Sorry," she apologized immediately, "but that woman was always a busybody. Dad couldn't stand her, but she was one of Mum's best friends, so he held me back from saying what I wanted to say to her. Last barrier has gone, so she asked for it."

"It doesn't matter," he said, clearing his throat and trying not to think about what rigorous sex with Gina would entail. "Maybe you should take it back. She'll probably want to help."

"Please," Gina tutted with bitterness. "Same thing happened when Mum died. They were all here for the free food and drink, but when it came to the physical effort of each day, they were nowhere to be found. When the bills come, they won't remember my name. Believe me."

Nick eased an arm around her shoulders. "You will tell me if you need help, won't you?"

Gina gave him a rather plastic smile. "Of course."

They both knew she was lying. Gina was so forcefully independent, she wouldn't hear of someone even buying her drinks unless she was able to do the same. If she couldn't afford something, she would simply not have it. He knew she'd taken a few credit

cards in the last couple of months, when she had never owned one before. Whatever pride she had left where money was concerned, he hoped she would let it go enough to talk to him about it. He couldn't bear to think of her worrying unnecessarily when he would do anything to help her.

A hand waved in front of his face, and he nearly fell off the sofa. Gina's bare legs came into view, and she bent at the waist to catch his gaze. She was braless under her tank top, which was a yellow colour that gave her nut brown skin a golden tone. He ripped the headphones from his ears and finally heard her.

"I woke up and you were gone! I thought you'd just rolled over so much you were under your bed."

"Sorry, I couldn't sleep."

She leaned over and caught a glimpse of the film at a particularly gruesome stage. She made a face. "No wonder. Come back, or you'll keep me up."

"You're getting an extra two hours in bed as you work down the road. Silence, harri-dan!"

"Come on! Actually, can I have another tea, and if you like, just watch it in your room and give me the iPod so I don't hear it. Hate Jigsaw. Pointless character."

He handed the iPod over. "All right. I'll get the tea. Just get me to this point on the TV."

She saluted him and swayed back to his bedroom. “Da Canaveze,” she called out, “you are a wonderful human being.”

He wondered if she would be so agreeable if she knew his motivation. He rummaged around in his medicine cabinet for the sleeping pills his GP had prescribed him when he was doing his ACCA examinations. He figured it was the only way, unnatural as it seemed, to get some rest.

Chapter Four

Gina had really enjoyed her day. She had slept right through his alarm, but Nick had woken her up before he left for work at half eight, half blooming eight, and told her where everything in the kitchen was. She apologized for his iPod ending up under her bare thigh.

His mattress was a thing of beauty, and she hadn't slept so well in ages. Work had been almost breezy, no complaints, no mix-ups and each ticket had flowed out. The restaurant had been marvellously busy for a Wednesday. But then she had to go home. She had taken the bus and got off early, so she still had a half-hour walk before her own stop. She walked slowly, almost as if trailing through drying cement.

The house, once her favourite place in the whole world, loomed large and imposing into her view. It was now the sum of everything that was wrong with her life. The loss of her father, the money she owed, her own loneliness. Not only had friends drifted away when she stopped "being fun," but her last relationship, with Tim the stockbroker who dined in her restaurant every Friday, had ended at the same time as the markets had crashed spectacularly, causing

him to have a mental breakdown. He had told her that his cognitive behavioural therapist said a relationship would hamper his recovery. Gina would have told him that any recovery from his love of money was highly unlikely, considering he had millions saved in the bank while others were losing their homes, their jobs and their marriages. But Tim was the type of person to serve a suit for harassment if someone even had the idea of contradicting him. So she let Tim fly. It wasn't as if the sex was out of this world, but then sex rarely was. Still, the company had been nice.

She had been standing outside of the house for ten minutes. It had become her personal prison. *Go inside!* she told herself sharply. Her feet ignored her. If she went inside, everything, all her failures, would be there in neon lights. And fuck it, she had to fix that sodding window. It was too late now. She'd done a fourteen-hour shift at the restaurant. She'd have to call the credit card company to see what little of her limit she had left to pay for the window. Or maybe she should just sell the laptop? Or have those pieces of jewellery valued first?

She took a breath and rounded the hedges, expecting to see cardboard, and instead saw a smooth pane of glass. Her stomach burned in irrational anger. *Nicholas Da Canaveze, you fucking arsehole.* How the

hell did he get in? *You gave him a spare key. Like he gave you the spare key for his flat.*

She opened the door to find him sitting in the living room with boxes of Chinese food on the floor. “Well timed!” He grinned.

She gritted her teeth. “Don’t you ever work?”

He looked bemused at her tone. “I was in the neighbourhood and worried about what time you’d finish your shift, so I called someone I know and he did it. It was probably the last thing you would want to see at home.”

She searched for patience that she had clearly sold at her father’s grave. “What is the matter with you?”

“What?”

“I told you that I would do it myself! Why don’t you listen to me? Do words just fall out of my mouth that you can’t hear?”

“Hey,” he said firmly, “calm down. I had the time, I didn’t want you worrying about it and it’s done.”

“Do you know what this is? It’s the symbol of you pushing my buttons like I’m a remote control. I said leave it. What part of ‘leave it’ did you fundamentally misunderstand?”

Nick got to his feet slowly, clearly unsure about her anger with him. “Gina, it’s just a window that got

fixed. It doesn't mean anything. I was trying to help you out."

She stuck her hand in her bag and dragged out her cheque book. "How much was it?"

His brows snapped together. "I said don't worry about it."

"I do. I have to because I can't owe anyone else any more money."

He paused, and Gina could have hit herself for being so stupid. Why tell him that?

"You don't owe me," he insisted, reaching out a hand toward her.

She edged away, as she would most likely belt him for touching her. His hand dropped away. "If you're struggling, just talk to me. Like you said you would."

"Because I'm not capable? Because I couldn't possibly manage without you and your superior financial IQ?"

"Stop putting words into my mouth," he growled, his own irritation finally steeling his words. "You're my friend. I know money is a touchy subject, but you would never owe me anything."

"Saint Nick to the rescue? Just leave me alone," she threw at him, turning into the corridor and opening the front door. "I don't need you interfering."

With his coat under his arm, Nick followed her. "I am not going to leave you alone. Just talk to me about what's going on."

"Leave it," she warned him. "And go. You just make me feel bad about everything I can't do."

Nick lifted a hand in defeat. "Fine. I can't win with you. Just call me when you've sorted your head out."

He stalked past her, and she slammed the door behind him.

"You know what, Soprano? Double fuck you!"

She slipped into a mood of utter defiance, turning on the central heating at full blast. She washed and blow-dried her hair and she spent a good hour straightening it too. She tugged on knee-high socks with a short white skirt that she only wore when it was summer and there was no chance of a breeze edging it over her waist, topping it with a thin jumper that slid off both shoulders. In fact, it had been Nick's before he shrunk it in the wash.

"Why do you try to do washing when you're drunk?" she'd asked.

"It makes it a more enjoyable pastime."

"But this jumper's like two hundred quid!"

He'd looked bored. "So? It'll look better on you anyway."

She had left the Chinese food in the oven on a very low heat. Her stomach grumbled, and she gave in and ate most of it until her belly protested. She was a massive bitch. She hadn't the right to take her frustrations out on Nick. If she was feeling inadequate, it wasn't his fault; neither was it his fault that he was considerate enough to have the window fixed for her and bring food as well. He was only trying to help her. Because she was so pathetic.

"Stop it," she commanded herself. But like everything else that had been thrown out this evening, so went the rule that she was not allowed to open the Nick box.

They had both been nineteen when they'd met. She'd been an overexcited teenager, so full of the prospect of studying her beloved history for three years at one of the best universities in the country. She was going to sit and discuss the Civil War with intellectuals and embrace the idealism behind the Industrial Revolution. Her very first lecture, she looked up when someone had cleared his throat and asked if anyone was sitting next to her. With his six-foot-three height, she nearly pulled a muscle looking up at him. He had skimmed his hair from his forehead and given her a shy smile. "You don't mind, do you? I've always been a back seat man."

She had to touch a hand to her jaw to make sure it was still attached. “Go ahead,” she croaked, moving her bag.

She tensed as he eased himself into the chair and his scent billowed around her, lemon tang with a warm hint of nicotine. She felt horrified at the increasing moistness between her legs.

“Can you smell smoke?” he asked her, leaning in so he could lower his voice. “Sorry, it’s my first lecture and I’m a bit nervous. Stupid, isn’t it?”

“No, I was feeling a bit nervous too. That I wouldn’t be smart enough for this. Also, it means we’re proper adults now.”

“Oi, don’t get carried away,” he teased, and his eyes lightened with his amusement. They were extraordinary; they seemed to run the gamut of blue shades with his emotions. “I’m Nick.”

“Gina.”

“*Multo buene.*”

“Don’t put that on!” she reproved, immediately telling her body to calm down, he wasn’t that goddamn sexy. “Yes, you look like Eddie Cibrian, but you’re as much a Londoner as I am.”

“I don’t know who Eddie Cibrian is, but tell the Londoner thing to my dad.” He elbowed her. “Stop distracting me, and make sure you take good notes. My writing turns to shit when I write too fast.”

Tamping down the urge to laugh, she spent most of the insanely dull lecture wondering what colour eyes their babies would have.

“That was bullshit,” he announced, stretching in his seat and exposing the trail of hair that ran from his navel and disappeared into his jeans.

“I know.”

“Fuck three years of this sideways.”

She started packing up her things despondently. “I’ll tell your parents they were right if you tell my dad for me.”

Rather than asking about her mother, Nick caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Deal. I’m going to meet my girlfriend now. Do you want to come? We’re having beers.”

Deflated by the girlfriend pin of destruction, and genuinely concerned by his plan to start drinking at one in the afternoon, Gina refused. “I can’t. I’ve got to think of what the hell else I can do for the next three years.”

“Bollocks to that. She’s nice, trust me. And you won’t be a spare wheel—I’ve got other mates there who’ll like you too. I’ve got good instincts with friends.”

Swayed by his lopsided grin, she had agreed. His girlfriend, Annabelle, was nice. But like any girlfriend, she was far from impressed that he had collected a

single girl at his first lecture and was introducing her to his friends as if he had known her for years, an arm around her neck. Annabelle had labelled Gina as a boyfriend stealer, and Gina could not deny that she was repeatedly tempted, each time he hugged her or gave her a kiss on the top of her head, telling her she smelled like cotton candy. But Nick's fidelity when he was in a relationship could never be questioned.

And she tried, she had really tried, to not pick anyone who looked anything like Nick. Or try and turn them into Nick mark 2. She didn't date anyone Italian despite learning the language and accepting the group invitation Nick gave to all his friends for a week in Naples where his family had a villa. She didn't date any accountants, which wasn't a stretch, but she really didn't; she avoided anyone with black hair and definitely anyone with blue eyes.

Anyone else who was remotely similar would inevitably be compared to Nick and fail. They didn't have his sense of humour; they didn't understand money like Nick, or have a London accent iced with Italian. They weren't six feet three inches tall, they didn't have his buttery skin or his eyelashes, or wear rosary beads around their wrist because "It's religion and not a fashion statement. Fucking Dolce and Gabbana," and they weren't him. No one else was him or had even come close in ten years. She needed to call

him and apologize for being a complete cow. He was the only person who had stuck by her since her dad died. *Close the box now, Gina. It's never going to happen.*

There was a knock at the door and she leapt to her feet. It had to be Nick. He'd come back, probably to yell at her for being a moody bint, but she'd take that with a hug. She threw open the door to two men who looked like rejects from a Guy Richie film. "Can I help you?"

"Gina Robinson?"

Realization crossed her face, and just as she started to shut the door, one of them grabbed her by the throat. "Bad idea, sweetheart."

He hustled her into the house, and at his height, her toes were trailing on the floorboards. The other thug shut the door. Thug One's hand tightened on her throat. "You owe a lot of money. Where is it?"

Gina foolishly tried joking, "All my money's in hedge funds?"

"Try again," he suggested.

"Look, the money I have is this house. You find me a buyer and I'm good to go."

Don't give me lip." He squeezed her windpipe. "All right?"

She nodded, feeling as if she were about to throw up.

“Good. Now where’s the money?”

His hold on her throat slackened slightly to allow her to speak. “In the house. The actual house. There’s nothing in here. Like my fridge.”

Thug One’s eyes bulged, and he threw her against the corridor wall, his hand immediately reaching out to grab her again.

This is bad, she thought, her head throbbing at the contact with the wall. *Really bad...*

Chapter Five

Nick stormed away from the house, thrust himself into his car and rammed his fist against the steering wheel. What the hell was her problem? He pushed the key in the ignition and pulled away from her house. He was halfway home when he stopped and pulled into a supermarket parking area. Gina and her stubborn, stupid, irrational pride.

In the last few months, they had been so close. When her father had died, she'd called him first, before anyone. It had been three in the morning and his phone startled him awake.

"Nicky," she whispered, tearful and breathless.

"Gina, what's wrong?" She never ever called him Nicky.

"Dad's gone. He had a heart attack and he's gone."

His heart twisted for her, and he immediately threw himself out of bed. "Where are you?"

"Charing Cross Hospital. I don't know what to do..."

"It's okay, honey. I'll be there in ten minutes. Just stay by reception and tell the unit where you are."

She'd whispered okay while he had pulled on clothes, shoved his bare feet into trainers and jumped into his car. When he'd arrived, jumping two red lights and getting clocked by a speed camera, he'd run into the reception only for Gina to collide into him, her arms snaking around his neck immediately. They'd stood like that for half an hour, not saying anything. Eventually, Gina had started to release him and he'd stroked a hand over her hair. "Whatever you need, tell me. We'll do this together."

She had been unable to speak, burying her face in his neck. How could they go from that to "don't interfere"? How could she possibly misinterpret his worry for her as interference? Fine—he should just let her cope on her own.

Never having felt more frustrated, he put the key back in the ignition, ready to go home. He was fooling himself. There was no chance of him cutting Gina out completely. He was a mug, entirely hooked on the way that silly girl smiled at him and called him "dude." He hadn't been able to stop being in love with her for years. In fact, the realization he was in love with Gina had made him physically sick a single month after they'd met.

Nick had been raw from a row with his father, involving phrases such as "Why aren't you more like your brother?" and "wasting your life." The only way

to drown them had been with beer, then tequila following the huge DJ event on the beach in Brighton.

Annabelle had left in disgust, taking the last train back into London. He would need to apologize to her in the morning. Gina had gone from mildly amused at his inebriation to concerned in an hour. She had forced a coffee down his throat and bought him a litre bottle of water to drink through steadily. And their designated driver, Karl, had to stop every ten minutes for Nick to void his bladder, bouncing off the walls of whatever alleyway was nearest. In the car, he had flopped onto Gina's mini-skirted lap and gazed goofily up at her. She had trailed her fingers along his scalp, his hair on her bare thighs.

"Dude," she murmured.

"Wasted," Karl snorted.

"Can you just concentrate on the road?" Gina flashed. "He's had a hard day—leave him alone."

Nick started to laugh uncontrollably. Gina held up a few fingers. "How many?"

"Five," he guessed. Only to realize what he'd said and laugh harder.

"Jesus," Karl swore.

"Road, fool!"

"There's only one of you, G, that's a shame," Nick murmured.

“Silly boy,” she admonished, continuing to filter his hair through her fingers.

He turned his face into her soft belly and thought he could stay there forever if need be. What would he do without her? Annabelle had fucked off; his father didn’t think much of him at the moment because he was questioning everything his father did. And Gina, sweet, beautiful, fantastically curved Gina, just accepted him as he was. She didn’t want him to be anyone else, not like that insane Candace or credit-card obsessed Kelly or what was that junkie called, the one who loved prescription drugs? Sam! He loved Gina instead.

He sat up.

“What’s up?”

Bile rushed up his throat. “Karl, stop the car!”

She pushed him out just before the car fully stopped, and Nick heaved out everything in his stomach, and maybe his feet; he’d never thrown up so much. When he was finished, Gina gave him a bottle of water to rinse out his mouth. He sat down on the floor of the car; a small bottle of fizzy water and a packet of ready-salted crisps were placed in his lap. Eyes red from the force of vomiting, he looked up at Gina. She touched the tips of her fingers to her lips and drew them over his cheek. “I know you.”

“You’re my best friend,” he stated, upset by this fact and the indisputable realization that he would never be able to change it.

“And aren’t you lucky!” she laughed.

He’d waited for his feelings to change, for them to go away, or die down, to disappear altogether. He ended things with Annabelle, but tried to have meaningful relationships and concentrated on making his father happy by doing something useful. So he completed his studies in accountancy, assisting with the family business in a committed manner. Every effort he made was so much more worth it after a simple text message from Gina. He treasured a hug from her more than three or four months of incarceration with the girls he chose to replace her. He was the satellite to her world.

A few years ago, he’d finally resolved to make her see what they could be together. He’d gone to Tiffany & Co. and bought her an engagement ring. She had thrown him a congratulations party at the restaurant/bar she had been working at and introduced him to her new boyfriend, who had shaken his hand warily, having heard a lot about Nick. Gina, with a glowing face, had silently asked for his approval, and he had given it. Devastated, he’d kept the ring. He still had it. If Gina had opened the drawer in his bedside table, she’d have seen it. It sat gathering

dust while he waited for the right time. There would never be a right time.

He drove back to her house and forced himself out of the car. He would tell her tonight, and end his daily torture with her. He knew how amazing they would be together, if she gave them the chance. As he approached the house, he nearly came to a grinding halt. There was a man peering through a crack in the front door. Instinct kicked in, and the heel of Nick's hand connected with the man's chin, then a sharp chop to his neck left him in a heap on the floor. Nick stepped over him, and for the rest of his days, he would marvel at how he didn't kill anyone.

Chapter Six

Thug One's hands were on her throat again. Shit. "Why are you giving me more lip? Don't you think I'm serious?"

She couldn't breathe this time; her eyes watered with the pain. He was going to choke her to death, she realized. Obscenely, she felt an immense sense of relief. If he killed her then it would all be over. She'd be with her dad.

"Oi!" He shook her awake.

"What do you want me to say?" she wheezed slowly.

He released her throat abruptly, and she immediately cupped her cooler hands to the burning pain under her chin. He caught her by the arms and pressed her against the wall.

"Now, how about you give me the incentive to let you go?"

Thug One had on about four layers of clothes along with a leather jacket in her twenty-five degrees Celsius heated house. That had to be why sweat was beading on his upper lip and pasty forehead.

"Listen, I've told you the only money I have is this house. There is nothing else. I've maxed out my

cards, everything I have is gone. If you want to take the laptop, fine, but I won't be able to get the money without it. I've got some jewellery..."

"Drop in the ocean," he dismissed her offers.

"There isn't anything else!" she said in desperation. "The house is everything that's left. I've sold everything else of value."

His eyes travelled over her body, stopping at the white skirt, which was hanging precariously from her hips. "I don't think that's true."

Wait, what? Was that sexual? "Can't you take the jewellery? I mean, won't your boss be mad if you go back without anything?"

His clammy hand was sticky on her bare thigh as it slowly travelled upwards. "Nothing he hasn't let slide before." He shrugged. "Perks of the job."

"What? Rape?"

Thug One's eyes narrowed at such a term. "Mutual exchange to ease a situation."

"Yeah, no. Still sounds like rape to me."

"Whatever you want to call it. You've got no money, so you need to offer something to buy more time. Stubs!" he called to his identically dressed colleague, "Watch the door."

He started pulling her toward the living room. "Come on. You look like the type who likes it a bit rough."

“No, don’t!” she begged, all humour thrown aside. She’d take death over rape by this gorilla.

“You’ll enjoy it,” he assured her.

She started to fight, screaming, “Get off me!”

The front door slammed against the wall. Stubs was lying on the floor a groaning heap.

“She said get off,” Nick said to Thug One.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I won’t repeat myself.” The near hypnotic insistence of his voice made Thug One release her. Gina skidded to Nick’s side. He simply eased her behind his back.

“Who’s your boss?” Nick asked gently.

Thug One smirked. “You don’t need to know.”

“What’s his name? You seem like a smart man. Don’t make any stupid decisions.”

Gina peered around Nick’s arm to see Thug One contemplating Nick’s question and its implications. Gina honestly didn’t care; she just wanted them out of her house. “Renaldo Santori.”

Nick stilled, and she felt the freeze of his muscles. “Do me a favour. Tell Mr. Santori that I’ll come to see him. He’s a client of my father. My name is Nicholas Da Canaveze.”

Gina barely caught the look that crossed Thug One’s face. What was that? Fear? Nick’s dad was an accountant as well—it made no sense. Gina loved to

tease Nick about his Italian heritage; she called him Soprano as a light joke, but no way... There couldn't be any way...

"I believe Miss Robinson would appreciate an apology."

Thug One grunted a "sorry" before Nick nodded toward the door. "Just so you know, if you come to this house again or approach this woman again...it will be the last thing you do."

Thug One nearly dragged Stubs out of the house in his hurry to leave. Nick carefully shut the door behind him, then pulled his phone from his coat pocket. "Tone? Can you come to Gina's? I need you to sort out the locks and a new security system. Yeah, complete. No, not tomorrow, Tony, now. I'll text you the details. I said *now*."

He typed out a text message then put his phone back in his pocket. For some reason Gina felt more anxious now than she had when the leather bandits turned up. He still hadn't said anything to her.

"Do you know them?" she whispered.

He stared at her for a long time, and she regretted her fury at him earlier and more so her choice of outfit.

"No," he said eventually. "So how much do you owe?"

"About eighty grand," she admitted.

Nick's mouth twisted, while he searched for some semblance of patience. "With interest, I suppose."

"That's why the house is for sale."

"Who do you owe?"

"Inheritance tax, Inland Revenue bastards," she said airily, feeling the need to joke as her neck began to ache with pain. "You know that old tale. If they had sold the house, it would have gone for the first person's offer."

"Where'd you find them? The people who lent you the money?"

"They found me." Oddly, there was no sense of relief or unburdening; instead it was an increasing discomfort, as if her body was preparing her for a slap from Nick. "I had to advertise for the probate. You know because Dad didn't leave a will. They offered me the money, and they said they'd give me the time and then..."

"The threats came," he finished for her. "Is there a reason you couldn't come to me?"

"I was handling it."

Nick shook his head. "Gina, the only thing you would have been handling if I hadn't turned up would have been that guy's dick. Jesus Christ!"

She flinched away from his anger, and, feeling cornered, she thought it would better if he were

somewhere else, not playing dad. “Okay, well thank you for stepping in, but you don’t get to talk to me like that. We’re not related.”

“Feeling stupid?” he queried. “That’s the only time you get defensive with me. The faster you realize just how fucking ridiculous you were to get involved with something like this, the easier this will be for you. And as none of your relatives are here, I guess I’ll take honorary membership.” He snorted a bitter laugh. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

She put her hands over her face in horror. She was awful. “I’m sorry, okay? I just... I felt helpless.”

“You didn’t need to,” he told her flatly.

The doorbell rang, and Tony’s voice called through the wood. “You rang, m’lud?”

Nick leaned over to open the door. Gina folded her arms and looked at the floor instead of at Tony, who, ever sensitive to an atmosphere, said, “If you two are going to fight, can you take it elsewhere? I’ve got work to do.”

Nick nodded. “Fine. Gina, go and get some overnight things.”

Tony tugged at his jumper collar. “Phew, roasting in here, Gina. That can be the only explanation for the Lolita getup. You look like Nick’s about to pimp you out to some closeted paedos.”

“Shut up, Tony,” Nick and Gina said simultaneously.

Gina slowly climbed the stairs and put a clean uniform and underwear in the same overnight bag she’d taken to Nick’s before. She caught sight of herself in the mirror, welts slowly rising on the flesh of her neck. She almost wished he had squeezed tighter and longer. The weight of Nick’s anger and disappointment was heavy. She swallowed painfully several times to stem the desire to cry, then started to edge downstairs. She could overhear Tony and Nick talking.

“Think he did it deliberately?”

“Had to be. But I need to think a minute. Then I’ll go see him.”

“What will you tell Gina?”

“Gina’s lucky I haven’t smacked the stupid out of her. I can’t understand it.”

“You can’t believe she didn’t run to you. She’s not the type who stays ten paces behind you and does as thou commandeth. She’ll question you. She’ll want the whole truth, and I know for a fact you can’t handle the truth. Nicholson never acted a truer phrase.”

“Watch me,” Nick challenged, then bellowed her name so loudly she nearly fell down the stairs. “Let’s go! Tony’s got a lot of work to do.”

She hurried downstairs and collected her coat. After saying a quick goodbye and thank you to Tony, they headed toward Nick's car.

"Hey, hey, hey. Listen." She caught his arm and made him stop so she could look in his eyes, the cold wind biting at her bare thighs and under the skirt. "Thank you."

Nick's eyes lowered, and then he glanced toward his car. "Okay. Let's go."

Her heart sank. He didn't even want to accept her gratitude. She sat down inside the car and wondered what Tony had meant. The way he had spoken, it was as if he knew how she felt about Nick. And no one knew. Someone who asked questions about a friend's background or family history had elevated ideas about their importance in that friend's life. She was just his friend. Which was why it had been so tempting to let go altogether. Because there was no one left here who would really mourn her passing.

Once they reached his building, he pushed her into the flat and nearly threw her overnight bag to the side. Gina turned around, the motion making the skirt flare. "Okay, you're mad. I get it. You didn't say anything the whole car ride. With no music. That makes life unnecessarily painful."

“No, Gina,” he told her bluntly, shutting the flat door, “you don’t get it.” He removed his coat and tossed it over the back of the sofa.

His eyes met hers, and for the first time in their relationship, Gina was a little frightened of him. She backed away, leaving her own coat on top of her overnight bag. “Okay, so I did something silly, but if the house had sold it wouldn’t have been a problem.”

Nick threw his hands in the air. “Ignoring the point that eighty grand wouldn’t have been the final figure for people like that, you honestly thought your house would sell at full asking price in a slumped housing market? Why didn’t you just ask me?”

She touched her hand to her forehead. “I was embarrassed to ask you.”

He caught her by the arms. “That bastard had his hands all over you. You preferred that to a moment’s embarrassment?”

“No, I...” She didn’t know what to say to make this better. Christ, he was furious; his eyes were midnight blue. “I’m sorry, okay?”

His stare travelled between each of her dark irises, searching for honesty in her words. He pulled her closer. “You’re not sorry. You put yourself in such fucking trouble to prove what? That you can take care of yourself? Or more likely that no one gives a shit about you? Why are you so goddamn blind?”

He was gripping her in the same place as Thug One had, and it was really starting to hurt. "Nick, let go," she said firmly.

"No."

She blinked. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"Exactly what the word means. No. So this is me, showing you that I give a shit."

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed the full length of his hard body against hers. *This is way too sexual*, she thought nervously. *Does he mean to do that?*

His mouth landed on hers, and she completely froze. *What is he doing? Why is he kissing me? I thought he was angry.*

His other arm wrapped around her waist, locking her into place against him, and she gasped. He took advantage of the gesture and slid his tongue into her mouth, demanding her obedience. Her hands automatically braced against his biceps as the rest of her body sagged against him, the contact of male flesh against her own sending waves of need to her lonely pussy. Until she remembered just who it was.

She tore her mouth away. "No, Nick, no, what are you doing? What is this? Why..."

He promptly ignored her, sliding his fingers through her hair to cup the back of her head, kissing her again. He felt incredible, his lips coaxing her

mouth open, the touch of his tongue drawing over her own, making her shake. He felt the dissolution of any real resistance and kissed her even harder. His hands trailed over her back to cup the ample cheeks of her bottom.

Before she realized it, he had her on the sofa, pressed into the cushions, his hips spreading her legs apart and his beautiful hair falling softly onto her face. She moaned, feeling the roughness of his jeans on her inner thighs and the gentle sweep of his palms on her outer thighs. She could feel him, growing harder and starting to press into her. She pushed at his shoulders. “Stop. We need to stop. We can’t. Stop.”

Her voice faltered as his mouth slid over her neck, soothing the bruises there, only to nip at her collar with sharp, insistent teeth. “No.”

“Please, we must.”

“I’m not stopping,” he said eventually, his hands sliding underneath her jumper. She jolted at the sensation of his rosary beads brushing against her ribs, his palms brushing the tightened points of her nipples through her lace bra. “Not until you come all over my cock.”

Her body jumped at those words. Did Nick just say the word “cock” to her? In reference to him being inside of her? It sent a flush of wetness to her pussy just as Nick’s hands were back at her thighs.

“You don’t want me to stop either.” His hand reached her panties, and she closed her eyes in shame. She gave a little cry at the sensation of his finger tracing between her cotton-covered lips. “You’re soaked already.”

He hooked them to one side, brushing over the neatly trimmed hair, and grazed his fingertip over her moistened clit. His thick finger suddenly surged into her. Gina’s eyes flared wide open. This was wrong, it was all wrong—her friend, her best friend, had his finger inside her cunt, twisting as he searched for the spot that would make her his completely. She shuddered as he brushed over it, then tried to grab his wrist and pull him away from her, only for him to catch her wrist and press it into the sofa, his beads digging into her. She couldn’t even close her legs against him, as his torso kept her left leg nailed to the sofa back, spread open for him. The thought and the hook of his finger against that little patch of flesh inside her made her leak all over his finger.

He felt her flow of juices and added a second finger, curling them both with rhythmic insistence. It was only when he leaned forward to kiss her that she realized just how loudly she was moaning, her hips rolling to meet his increasingly drenched hand. Oh God, she was going to implode, already.

He lifted his mouth from hers by millimetres.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” she breathed, sighing softly, then crying out as he pressed a little harder.

“Do you want to come now?”

“Unh, yes, yes, I want to...”

Her eyes drifted closed again, until his teeth caught her bottom lip. “Say please, Gina.”

The pressure was building too quickly, her knees rising upwards to greet what was going to be a huge orgasm. His fingers were rubbing excruciating circles within her body, and she felt her juices sliding into her arse.

“Please, Nick,” she whimpered, pushing down on his hand and arching her back.

“Please, Nick, let me come,” he advised.

“Please, Nick, let me come. Please let me co...uh...uh...”

His thumb swept rapidly over her clit as he thrust his fingers inside her until her body burst with pleasure, silken waves of her release washing over her convulsing body, her throat strained with her scream of release. When she eventually came down, gulping for air, she saw Nick was on his feet, taking off every stitch of clothing.

And oh, fuck a doodle, he is completely naked. Oh my God, it's Nick's cock. It looks huge and purple

headed, and it's pointing right at me. She knew he went to the gym regularly, but he was so cut it was unreal. She really wanted to trace her tongue on the definition marking his hips...

He gathered the juices that had left a large spot on his couch underneath her bottom. "Taste yourself," he commanded, pushing his index finger into her mouth. The tangy sweetness of her own cream, combined with the salt on Nick's hand, made her pussy contract. She wanted more.

"Don't you taste good? Why wouldn't you want me to taste it too?"

His mouth was on hers again as he pulled Gina's arms up to curl around his neck. She realized that her panties were an ineffectual barrier against his leaking cock, which was currently leaving wet, chalky trails on her inner thigh. They really shouldn't fuck. They couldn't. They would completely devastate everything else.

"Take off that jumper. I want to see your tits." She hesitated.

"Now, Gina! Don't make me ask you twice."

Obediently, she pulled the jumper over her head, displaying a white lace bra, her nut brown skin spilling out of the cups. Nick's eyes went to the puckered points beneath the lace, and he nodded to the bra. She reached behind herself and released the

clip, smoothing the straps down her arms. He fell upon her, cupping the naked flesh, pinching her tightened nipples with a force just on the side of painful, watching her suck in her breath as he did so. He took one nipple into his mouth, the warmth and wetness soothing her until he began to suckle. The pull of his lips and tongue teasing her breast made her arch into him, and the rough silk of the sofa rubbed against her bare back as Nick transferred his attention to her other breast.

She couldn't help herself; her hips began to rise, silently begging for him. The tip of his cock brushed against her dripping opening, and she yelped. Nick's teeth sank into her nipple, and this time she screamed. He released her nipple from his mouth and looked down at her; she was completely lost in the need to feel him inside her.

His hands reached for the ties of her panties on either side of her hips, and a second later the garment flew over the side of the sofa. He hooked her left leg over his shoulder and pressed the other into the cushions. She'd never felt more exposed, wearing knee-high socks, her little white skirt around her waist, her breasts tingling from his touch, and now she was spread open for him as the underside of his cock slid wetly along her slit.

“Still want me to stop?” he asked on a rough whisper.

She shook her head, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. He started to push into her, her pussy giving way to him. He felt too big inside her already and she clenched against him, trying to press her legs together. He held her down more firmly and drove his full length deeply into her with one hard thrust. She felt stretched to her limit, but he pushed deeper still until she felt his balls press against her swollen cunt lips.

“Oh fuck, Gina,” he groaned, drawing out slowly before pushing back in, the force making her breasts bounce with the motion. “You’re so fucking tight...”

Her pussy throbbed around him; she felt each and every single inch of his veined, steel hardness within her. He slowly began to pump into her, the pistoning of his hips easing her pussy open for him. She almost wanted him to stop; she felt impaled on a monster, her fingertips digging into his thighs. Nick slid his hand to the back of her head, lifting her so she could see his cock, glistening with her juices as he rammed into her relentlessly.

“Look how your pussy takes my cock.” He forced himself even deeper, and she gave a trembling cry. “Watch yourself being fucked.”

It looked obscene, his white cock rapidly delving into her darker chocolate folds, stretching them wide over his thickness, coating him in a clear glaze of her cream.

Pleasure was now flowing with each stroke of his dick. Her eyes drifted closed, her whole body locked on the sensations caused by the motions between her spread legs. Jolts of electricity speared all over her, her hips rising to meet each punch of his hips. She began trembling, her toes curling as his cock ripped moans from her. He reached down to rub her clit, and she cried out; the sound vibrated as he continued to pound her into the sofa. Her orgasm suddenly blossomed from her, flushing his cock with her creamy juices as her cunt milked him.

When the shattered pulses began to subside, there was nothing she would have liked more than to roll over and go to sleep, but Nick hadn't finished with her yet. He pulled out of her; the sucking noise made her shamefully aware of how much she had come and how far she had been opened by him. He untangled her legs from him and turned her onto her tummy, easing a cushion under her to lift her arse into the air. His hands smoothed over her globes in near worship, spreading them apart so he could glide into her quivering hole once more with his legs outside her own.

She tightened instantly around him, and he groaned with satisfaction. The sensation of him inside her was of such searing intensity, each stroke in and out of her pussy dragging over her spot, setting every inch of her body on fire, edging her closer to a third climax. Gina buried her face into the sofa, trying to muffle her sobs.

He fucked her hard, her juicy arse jiggling with the power of his motions, and she suddenly slipped over the edge of her orgasm with a scream. He grunted with each thrust of his hips, moving faster until he finally gave a pained groan as he flooded her cunt with his thick cum. She could feel him pulsing inside her as he released load after load into her pussy. He continued to pump into her until his cock fully softened, and then he slowly, almost reluctantly, pulled out.

Gina was exhausted. She was covered in sweat, Nick's cum was leaking from her stretched and well-used pussy, her nipples felt raw and her thighs ached. She wasn't surprised that she was pretty much on her way to sleep when she felt Nick touch her hair.

"You okay?" he asked gently.

That sounded more like Nick. Not the dark-voiced, crazed sex demon with the eight-inch cock who had quite brutally fucked her three ways from Sunday and made her come so many times. She opened her

eyes a crack. "I'm not on the pill, you know," she mumbled.

His fingers caressed her cheek. "Doesn't matter," he assured her.

She wanted to laugh at such a cavalier attitude to a potential pregnancy, but instead she fell asleep.

Chapter Seven (His)

Nick lifted a lock of hair from her face. She really was fast asleep. He took it as a compliment rather than an insult. He left her sleeping; her skirt bunched around her waist, his own opal-colored cum oozing from between her nut brown thighs. It was as if every unrequited moment had built up in his balls to spray copiously into his friend. Jesus, the feel of her pussy when she came underneath him...

There was a delicate knock at the door. He searched for something to cover Gina and picked up his coat. He then tugged his jeans on and, with a wince, tucked his semi-hard dick inside, still sticky with their combined juices.

He opened the door to Tony. "Locks changed and the alarm is done. Set to the last time Italy won the World Cup."

"Thanks, Tone."

Tony looked over Nick's shoulder. The silk lining of his coat had slipped right off Gina's body, leaving her looking like a porn-star cheerleader in the socks and skirt.

Tony smirked. "So you finally dipped your pen in the ink. Was it worth the wait?"

Nick didn't have the patience to feel embarrassed. "Fuck off, Tony."

Tony cocked his head to a better angle. "Fantastic tits..."

"Tony..."

"Much better than I ever expected. It's either arse or tits, and Gina's got both. You have got taste. Is she a screamer? She looks like she'd make your neighbours call the police."

"Anthony!"

"But hey, if I ever need a favour from you, are you going to expect me to suck your dick?"

Nick pushed him out of the flat and slammed the door in his face. Gina jerked awake. "What's wrong?"

"It's okay," he replied softly. "Tony just dropped off your new keys."

She winced as she moved into a sitting position. He felt the warmth of male pride at her discomfort.

He reluctantly wrapped his coat around her body. "Want to go to bed?"

"To do what?" she asked warily.

"Sleep," he said on a light laugh. "You don't believe me?"

She rubbed her face. "I don't believe a lot of things at the moment."

"Promise, just to sleep." *Unless you want something else to happen*, he added silently.

He caught her by the hand, tugging her to her feet, then swung her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she muttered against his neck.

“Just chill,” he ordered as he carried her to his bedroom. He gently placed her on his bed, and then carefully removed her skirt and the socks. He retrieved a warm, wet hand towel from the bathroom and cleaned the sticky mess between her legs. She watched him guardedly the whole time, tense, as if he were about to pounce on her at any moment. He really hoped she wasn’t going to ask him what the hell he had just done, because he really didn’t have an explanation. One moment he was going to strangle her for being so fucking thick, then the next moment if his dick wasn’t inside her, he’d have died.

“What do you want to say, Gina?” he asked quietly.

“You know we’re not friends anymore”

He stood up and removed his jeans, wiping himself down with the towel before throwing it toward the sink in the bathroom. “I don’t see why not.”

“Friends don’t cross that line. They certainly do not fuck, and if they do, they have the courtesy to either wear a condom or pull out.”

He struggled not to laugh. “You need more friends.”

“Don’t take the piss,” she snapped. “Nothing about this is funny.” She folded her arms under her naked breasts and stared up at the ceiling.

“You really don’t know?” he said in surprise. “You still don’t get it?”

“What?” She sat up, then remembered her nudity and wrapped her arms around herself. He took her hands and linked them through his own, loving the contrast between their skin tones.

“You’ve never been *just* my friend.” He pulled her closer, resting an arm over her waist while the other cupped her cheek. “Why do you think I wanted to sit next to you in that lecture?”

“You and your crappy handwriting,” she retorted. “So what, you had a bet with Tony or something? How much is a shag with me worth?”

He’d have to tell her. She’d definitely run either way. “It’s not like that. Gina, I want to be with you. I...” He stared at her, unable to form the words anymore. She pushed his hand from her cheek and shook her head.

“Wow, you should have done this years ago. Clearly would have just saved you the crashing disappointment.”

“It’s not...”

“Why did you have to spoil everything?” she demanded, tears filling her eyes.

“Don’t say that. It’s not true.”

“You are my best friend. You’re my only friend. I don’t have anyone else. So when this fucks up, then what? What do I do? I’ll be on my own.”

The pain in her voice stung at his throat. He pulled her into his arms, her face resting on his shoulder, and he felt her tears trickling slowly over his back. “You’ll always have me,” he swore, stroking his palms soothingly over her soft skin.

“I won’t. You’ll get bored. You always get bored. You’ll find something wrong with me...”

“I know you. I couldn’t possibly get bored—I’ve known you for too long. And I got bored with those other girls because I wasn’t with you. And I told you not to worry about earlier.”

“Why? Planning on dropping me off at the Sex Health Clinic for the morning-after pill?”

“Come on.” He grinned. “I’m Catholic—you know we don’t do contraception.”

She pressed the heel of her hand into her forehead. “So what if I’m pregnant? What will you do then, smart arse?”

Ah well, keep the shocks coming, give her less time to argue about it. “As we’re getting married, I don’t see a problem. My mother wants grandchildren, and you know I have to do what my mother says.”

She pushed him away. “What parallel universe are you living in?”

He leaned over to his bedside drawer and pulled out the ring box. “I’ve been carrying this around for the past five years. If this doesn’t tell you I’m bloody serious, then I’ll really just have to get you pregnant.”

He opened the box to show her the two-carat white gold solitaire diamond boxed in by two smaller diamonds. She stared at him open mouthed. “You’re not fucking with me, are you?”

He shook his head and plucked the ring from the satin bed and slipped it onto her ring finger. It fit her perfectly. “How does that feel?”

“Like I’ve got a brick on my hand.”

He kissed her knuckles, resting the back of her hand against his mouth. “I’ve loved you for so long. It’s enough for the both of us, if you give us the time.”

“Wait, you love me? You don’t love me!”

He glanced up at the utter disbelief in her voice. What the hell did she think he was talking about? “Yes, I love you. I’ve been in love with you for years.”

She stared at him for a moment, mouthing the words *You love me* on a querying sigh. She gave a shaky laugh. “Doubtful it’s as long as I’ve loved you. But that’s just semantics, right?”

“What?” His voice whip-cracked around the room. “What did you just say?”

She smiled at him and trailed her fingers over his cheek. “You were the one who had a girlfriend when we met. I’ve told you, you’re my best friend. My only friend. Of course I love you.”

This felt unreal. “But do you love me in *that* way?”

Her smile turned knowing, and he demanded, “What the hell, Gina? Since when?”

“I spent that whole lecture thinking about what our babies would look like. Then I stopped when you said you had a girlfriend. And I really tried not to. But there was that moment, when you held my hand at my dad’s funeral and I thought to myself, ‘I love this man more than anyone I will love for the rest of my life. But he’s just my friend. He doesn’t feel like that about me. And my dad’s just died. So I shouldn’t be thinking about Nick’s knob. At all. Stop it.’”

“You were not thinking about my knob.”

“I was! Why’d you think I came up with that rigorous sex crack to my aunt? It was at the forefront of my mind. So I put it in the Nick box.”

“The Nick box?”

“The box where I stuffed any delusions of grandeur toward being your significant other.”

He searched her face, as this was incredible to him. Gina, his Gina, was naked on his bed, wearing his ring, talking about when she fell in love with him.

“Now you don’t believe me, do you?” Her fingers trailed over his chest, down along the ridges of his stomach to encircle his cock. He sucked in a sharp breath as she pressed the tip of her finger into the slit at the head. The blood stiffened him instantly so he swelled in her hands.

“I figure, I tell work I got burgled and I’ll get the day off. So I’ve got all night to change your mind.”

Nick pulled her into a hard, deep kiss, wrapping his arms tightly around her. She was his now. And nothing would make him give her up.

Chapter Seven (Hers)

Gina watched him sleeping, feeling insanely Bridget Jones-like, but she didn't care. He loved her. He wanted to marry her. She stared at the moon-sized rock on her hand. She couldn't fathom him walking into Tiffany & Co. and saying, "It's for my best friend. No, she has no idea. I figure I'll overpower her with my cock first, then propose."

She nearly giggled, but didn't want to wake him up. Maybe she should wake him up. No, she shouldn't unless she wanted to spend her first day as an engaged woman in hospital. In a way, she had known just how damn good they would be together in bed. All he had to do was brush the tips of his fingers over her and she convulsed with pleasure.

Nick, her best friend Nick, Nick who had given her platonic hugs and ended his text messages with the ever neutral "x," who treated her like one of his guy friends and let her have sleepovers at his place, was her fiancé. He'd kept her up the whole night, making her sigh, making her cry at the very edge of orgasm after orgasm, making her taste herself from his still hard cock, only for him to come inside her mouth then thrust three demanding fingers into her pussy until he

was ready to fuck her again. She had begged him to take her, as he'd teased her opening with both his hand and his cock, and weirdly enough he had made her laugh. It was as if he couldn't do enough to please her.

She had whispered to him on a sob that she loved him, as she'd fought for breath while shaking from her last climax. He had cupped her face and waited until she opened her eyes. "You don't know what it does to me to hear you say that." He had kissed her deeply, until her arms tightened around him and the room tilted. "I'd have waited forever to hear you say those words."

"I'll have to remember that you're not that patient," she'd teased and was rewarded with a slap on the bottom.

Nick's palm was hot on her hip, his thumb drawing lazy, unconscious circles over her skin. She felt in awe of his feelings. She nearly jumped as his alarm kicked off, playing Daft Punk's "Digital Love." Nick stretched and opened his eyes, the colour lightening to sapphire at the sight of her. "Morning, Mrs. Da Canaveze-to-be."

"What up, ho?"

He laughed and pressed a sweet kiss to the spot between her neck and shoulder. "Mmm. I'm going to

clean my teeth, and then I'll give you a proper good-morning kiss."

He got out of bed and she heard him rummaging around in the bathroom. She stretched and turned onto her back, dozing lightly. So this was what it was to not worry. Gina eventually pushed herself into the bathroom and cleaned herself up. She pulled on one of Nick's t-shirts and climbed back into bed. Seriously, how long did it take a man to clean his teeth? Just because this place had two bathrooms...

He suddenly swept in with a huge tray of goodies, wearing dark blue boxer shorts. The aromatic scent of espresso made her sit up with interest, and his bare chest made it all the more appealing. "Breakfast in bed. I've brought you pretty much the contents of Waitrose."

He placed the tray on her lap and stroked a loving hand over her hair, now tidily brushed, rather than the unsalvageable mess that had greeted her reflection fifteen minutes ago. "Thank you," she cooed and then recoiled. "Oh God, please don't let us turn into one of those couples? You know, the ones that people can't bear to be around?"

Nick shook his head at her. "You should have thought of that before making me wait around for you for years on end."

She took a sip of coffee, then gave him a lingering kiss on the lips. "Sorry."

He sat opposite her as she started shovelling the warm croissants into her mouth. God, she was starving. Nick watched her indulgently. "Speaking of waiting around, will you move in here?"

Gina choked on the croissant. He edged the glass of orange juice toward her. "I just thought there wasn't any real point in wasting more time apart. You're selling your house anyway. It'll be temporary until we find something together."

She couldn't take any more shocks. Could he not have waited for the ache between her legs to subside before dropping that bomb? "Isn't it a bit...fast?"

He gave her a slow smile, which she now recognized as growing lust. "It'll make me less likely to get arrested for indecent exposure because I'm trying to get inside you at every opportunity."

She felt her face heat and looked into her glass of orange juice. "Well, that's rather..."

"Do you want to get done for dogging in Sainsbury's car park?"

She started giggling. "What is with you and shopping car parks? Did you lose your virginity in one or what? They seem to just turn you on."

He touched his mouth to hers, then again for longer. "You turn me on. I'm just concerned I won't be

able to control myself now that I can have you whenever I want.”

She couldn't help the dazed smile that lit her face. “Are you real?”

“Yep.”

“Okay,” she laughed, “I'll move in.”

Nick's eyes crinkled with happiness as he put her tray on the bedside table and pulled her into his arms. “We're going to be so fucking happy,” he vowed, pressing kisses to her jawline and along her neck.

“Dude, there's just one little problem. I've got a bit of a bill to pay off.”

Nick lifted his head. “He's my dad's client. Debt gone.”

“But Nick...”

“Trust me, Mr. Santori has some debts to settle. Look, just keep the money when you sell the house, you can put it toward our own. Honest, Dad won't mind for his future daughter-in-law.”

She rubbed the corner of her eye, trying to prevent herself from crying. Could it really have been that simple? Had she told him earlier, could they have got here faster?

“Hey, don't get upset. You know my dad adores you, right? He'd do anything for you just as I would.”

She loved his father, who was surprisingly laid back for a man with such an austere exterior. Still, she

wasn't quite ready to believe he would let eighty grand just slide, no matter how much he appreciated her skills at chess and her imitation of Ella Fitzgerald. Who just had that much money sitting around?

Nick read her mind. "It's available. And it's a decision he wouldn't think twice about. Family comes before money, and this"—he picked up her left hand—"is just confirmation to everyone else that you're my family."

She couldn't hold back the tears this time, and she curled her arms around his neck, kneeling to hold him tighter. "You're my family too," she whispered brokenly. "I love you."

He made her turn her face to his and pressed his lips to hers, his eyes open the whole time. He looked elated. There wasn't anything else he needed. "Love. You. More." He punctuated each word with a hard kiss. Possessive, maybe, but kisses all the same. "Sorry I fucked up breakfast."

"You haven't," she told him. "It's the most wonderful morning of my life."

"Good. I also shoved a lot of food in the fridge. I know you're the best cook out of the two of us."

Rather than take such blatant bait, she sighed, sitting back on her legs. "You're going out."

"I've just got something to do—it won't take long. But we can do lunch."

“Sounds perfect.” She shook her head. “God, sickening couple alert.”

“Get over it, Robinson-Da-Canaveze-to-be.”

“You’re going to let me hyphenate my name? That’s not very Italian Catholic.”

“Gina Da Canaveze sounds very Italian. If you want to keep Robinson, it’s up to you.”

“I want to have your name,” she responded honestly. Her name fit so beautifully with his. “Nick, you know you can be normal with me. I’m not going to change my mind or take back what I said. You can call me a stubborn moody bitch if that suits you. You can tell me to take your name and that’s the end of it. I’ll call you a backwards Neanderthal, but I’ll still love you. I’ll still want to marry you.”

Nick searched her eyes with a wariness that told her he was hesitant to believe her. She sighed. “Okay. I swear on Sky Plus. I swear on Rupert Murdoch, dark lord of all media. I swear on Apple, your Philips Wide Screen HD and the rise of my cheese soufflés.”

His lips twitched. “Well, if you put it like that...”

His hands smoothed under the t-shirt, removing it altogether, as he laid her down on the bed and drew her into a long, bruising kiss.

“Don’t you have something to do?” she breathed out as his mouth trailed along her breastbone down to her navel.

“Fuck it sideways,” he muttered, continuing his mission downwards until he reached his prize. “Now this is breakfast.”

Gina put her hands over her face in embarrassment.

“Stop that,” he ordered, barely lifting his head. “I did this two hours ago, so get used to it. I’ll be doing it on a regular basis. Now open your legs for me.”

She did as she was told, her arms by her sides, trying not to laugh at Nick telling her off about the prospect of having her pussy eaten frequently. She arched from the bed as his mouth met her lower lips in a slow kiss, his warm palm skirting along her thigh. He moved in closer and curled his tongue around her hardening little clit, which, after being thoroughly abused the night before, was pulsing on the edge of pain at receiving yet more attention. How did he know to do that with her? It was as if he was psychic when it came to her body. Her stomach suddenly twisted as she watched Nick at the apex of her thighs. In rare unguarded moments, she’d dreamed of him tasting her the way he was now.

He pushed his tongue deeply into her, thrusting into her as he had with his cock, catching the increasing flow of juice in his mouth. *He feels so good*, she thought on a rising gasp, her nipples tightening into hard points and immediately squeezed by his firm

hands. Her breathing became shallow, the contact sending a bolt of sensation through her, increasing her wetness instantly. She pushed down onto him, sending his tongue deeper. Her thighs instinctively closed against his head as he latched onto her clit and sucked at her hard, the underside of his tongue sweeping over her with excruciating softness.

He must have felt her trembling toward an orgasm when he lifted his head, his thumb replacing his tongue as he released himself from his boxer shorts just as the convulsions started. He sank his cock deep into her pussy, and she gave a sigh of completeness. Nothing felt better than this, her pussy clenching around his thick full length, her palms slipping on the sweat of his back as his own fingers curved about her thighs, urging her to wrap them around his waist.

He slowly moved his arse up and down, riding her deep. She started to take that climb again. "Oh, Nick," she moaned, closing her eyes and gripping his shoulders tightly, "more, please..."

"Tell me you're mine," he demanded through gritted teeth, his cock rolling in her juicy wetness.

"I'm yours," she swore breathlessly, panting audibly as he increased the pace. "Belong to you..."

Yes, she wanted him to make her his just like this, under him, straddling him with his hands gripping her arse, on her side with her legs pried open

and his finger on her clit. The sound of his balls slapping wildly against her intensified as her juices coated him even more, flowing onto the sheets beneath her shaking bottom.

She whimpered as Nick's mouth landed on hers, his cock repeatedly plunging into her, each stroke of his hips drawing a moan of pleasure from her lips. The rough caress of his thickness made her even wetter, racing her to another orgasm. She tightened her legs about him; her hips rhythmically joined with his with each gliding thrust within her. He tore his mouth from hers, pounding into her faster, lifting slightly so she could see the blur of motion that was his cock inside her swollen, soaked cunt. He started to swell within her, and the increased stretch of her delicate walls made her orgasm break over her, shattering every cell within her body. Her name left Nick's lips on a grunt as he forced himself inside as far as he possibly could, to fill her womb with cum, then pulled out so some of his juice dribbled onto her belly. They stared at one another, taking shallow gulps of air.

"See?" he beamed at her. "Worth getting arrested for."

Chapter Eight

Nick spent ten minutes kissing Gina at the door, barely stopping when his downstairs neighbour dropped off some mixed-up mail for him. “Thank you, Mrs. Miller.”

She frowned as Nick refused to release Gina. He introduced them, “Mrs. Miller, this is my fiancée Gina. She’ll be moving in, what, tomorrow?”

“Doable,” Gina agreed, stretching over Nick to shake Mrs. Miller’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Miller.”

“I thought you two were just friends?” she queried hesitantly.

Gina caught Nick’s eyes with unholy amusement. “Yeah, we totally ruined that friendship. So we’re giving marriage a go.”

“Right...well, congratulations!”

They both murmured a “thank you” and waited until they heard Mrs. Miller’s door shut. “How does she know we’re friends?”

“She asked if you were my girlfriend when you helped me move in and I said no. So she’s confused.”

Gina made a face. “Not surprised. That’s going to happen a lot.”

“Don’t care.” He tugged her back into his arms, giving her a long, slow, sweet kiss.

“Okay, stop, you’re just going out for all of an hour. I’ll need to get cooking if we’re going to have a decent lunch.”

He gave her one last kiss and let her go. “Call me if you need anything,” he told her.

She saluted and closed the door, and he caught the dreamy smile on her face. He jogged down the stairs and revved his car. Renaldo Santori didn’t live too far from him, a fact which now disturbed him. He couldn’t have Gina running into him in Marks & Spencer, or even worse, cooking for him at her restaurant. They would move anyway, somewhere bigger. Maybe Kensington—it wasn’t too far from her restaurant, and they could find a place big enough to not upset his mother about “having enough space for children” or some such rubbish.

He wanted to spend time alone with Gina before they had any babies, although unless she went and took the morning-after pill, they’d have babies a lot sooner than expected. He couldn’t count the number of times he had come inside her, not even counting the half an hour he’d spent hammering her pussy in the shower until she screamed. Even coming in her mouth felt a little like a waste—he preferred it when their

pelvic bones ground against one another, so she would take as much of him as possible. It felt primal.

He laughed to think of Gina daydreaming about them at that first lecture. Gina's hair had been much shorter then, about four inches or so all over her head in mahogany layers, which made her liquid dark eyes look so much bigger, highlighting her cheekbones and drawing far too much attention to her cello-shaped lips.

He could barely remember Annabelle's name when he watched Gina organize her notebook and Dictaphone for the lecture, looking as eager as a bunny. He hadn't thought twice about sitting next to her, or taking her with him to the Student Union or warning his friends not to try it on with her. He had backtracked by claiming she was far too sweet for any of them, but the truth was he couldn't stand the thought of anyone else touching her. He cursed himself for wasting so much time, when he could have been with her for the last ten years, if he'd had the balls.

At any rate, it didn't matter now; it was all relative. They were getting married. Each time they had settled from the sex, exhausted and sweaty, he had cuddled her to him, linking their fingers, and dreamily talked about having their wedding in Naples, by his family's villa. The step from friends to lovers to

almost husband and wife was so easy, as if they had been together that way all their lives.

He pulled up outside Renaldo's home and eased himself out of the car. He nearly found himself shoved through the metal by two bodyguards.

"I'm expected," Nick said easily, curtailing the urge to put a bullet in both their empty heads.

"Name?" one grunted.

"Da Canaveze."

They both looked visibly disturbed and accompanied him inside the house. The hallway was spacious, decked out like the Vatican; pictures of the Virgin Mary in gilded frames surrounded him.

Sorry, Holy Mother—I've paid for my sins. He glanced down at his rosary beads. *Well, I will do on Sunday.*

"Nicholas!" Renaldo called, opening his arms toward him.

Nick suffered three kisses on alternate cheeks and was then hustled to Renaldo's study, a room Nick remembered Renaldo had based on the Cabinet Office at Number 10. Nick immediately checked each point of the room and clocked no cameras. As Renaldo took his seat at his oak-wood desk, he figured there was a panic button underneath it.

Renaldo smiled easily. "How is your father?"

“Back from Italy tomorrow.” His father wasn't due back for another week, but why give him the room to manoeuvre?

Renaldo stilled, then continued with false lightness, “Really? I hope everything is well for him.”

Nick tried to look neutral. “Everything's gone really well. It'll be good to have him back.”

“Sit, please. Drink?”

“No, thank you.”

Renaldo made a pleading face. “Just one. Juliette!” he yelled.

A few moments later, a brunette brought in a bottle of aged whisky and poured two glasses for them, then vanished like smoke. “Salute!”

Nick wasn't touching anything in his place. Hard lesson learned early on. His father had wanted to kill him for being such an amateur. “Renaldo,” Nick said in a bored tone, “Gina Robinson.”

Renaldo choked on the drink. “I'm sorry, who?”

So he was going to play that game? Insane.

“Gina Robinson. I introduced you to her at my cousin's wedding last year.”

Renaldo put his drink down and shrugged. “I don't remember everyone I meet, Nicky! Don't be absurd.”

“You remembered her. Because the last time I spoke to you, you asked after her. You called her my little blue flower.”

Renaldo’s face was a pallid white. “I think there is some sort of mistake here.”

Nick leaned back in the seat to carefully explain to Renaldo what he had done. “Gina and I are going to be married. So what you’ve effectively done is send your goons after a Da Canaveze. No, Renaldo, it doesn’t matter if you knew it or not. As far as you’re concerned, one of your thugs tried to rape my future wife. Why would you do that? It’s like you’ve signed your own death warrant.”

Renaldo leaned forward, fear darting in his eyes. “It went a bit further than it needed to. I needed to readdress an issue. There was a crossover on my patch, and it should have been dealt with properly.”

“You don’t own any patches,” Nick reminded him on a derisive laugh. “You rent everything, right down to your fucking liquor, from us. Why didn’t you talk to my father about your boundaries?”

Renaldo squeezed the whisky glass. “I did. He didn’t want to entertain the idea of any changes. I thought I’d give him some incentive.”

Nick had heard enough. This prick had terrorized Gina for nothing. “You’ve got twenty-four hours to leave. I want you cleared out of here this time

tomorrow. I don't want to see a trace of you in the UK, let alone London. I don't want to see that you ever existed. Because if I come back and you're still here, you won't see another twenty-four minutes."

Renaldo stood up as well, shaking with his panic. "You can't threaten me."

Nick sighed wearily and removed his gun from his inside jacket pocket. "Touch that panic alarm and I'm going to give you a sex change for free. This is a one chance offer, Renaldo. You touched my family, and you know that means death. I've given you a way out, so take it. My father's back tomorrow, and when he finds out that your arseholes laid a finger on Gina, he'll rip you apart himself. So get packing."

Renaldo rounded his desk and put his hands together, imploring in desperation. "Nicky, I'm sorry. I just wanted to get your attention. I've said it went too far."

Renaldo tried to grab Nick's arms only for Nick to order quietly, "Sit. Back. Down."

He did so, wide eyed and fearful, and immediately changed tack. "I'm sorry. I didn't know she meant that much to you. I thought you were just fucking her. It was meant to be a simple exchange. I let the debt slide and I get my boundaries back."

“She’s going to be my wife. It makes her untouchable. You’ve fucked up, but I’ve given you a choice. Leave or pay for your mistake.”

“Your father would do anything for you. Just ask him to let this go. I’ve made my apologies. He’ll understand, especially if you’re in love.”

Now he was really pissed off. “I’m not stupid. My father’s more likely to kill you for trying to hurt Gina, even more so if she’s going to give birth to his grandchildren.”

Renaldo went on his knees, begging for mercy and a little more time to put his affairs in order. Nick had never wanted to put a bullet in someone more. The phone calls, the threats, those men, all to get something his father had already said no to.

Nick sat down, so he was face-to-face with Renaldo. “You’ve got something I’ve never given to anyone else who has ever dared to fuck with me. Remember Sonny Michaels? I didn’t give him twenty-four hours. He didn’t even know what was coming. No one found him. Not even a finger. Nothing for his family to cry over. Do you know how old I was when I did that? Sixteen. Just think what thirteen years practice has done for me. In this way, at least your children will get to visit you.”

Nick tucked his gun away as a tear rolled over Renaldo's cheek. "Your time starts..." He glanced at his Rolex. "Now."

He got up and eased past the guards, then got into his car and started the drive home. For years, he'd committed acts that went against his very nature, but now those same acts allowed him to protect Gina. Yet at the same time, because of who he was, Gina had become a bull's eye for Renaldo. Would she always be a target if people doubted they were getting what they believed they were entitled to? Would he have to take himself in deeper to reinforce the fear that his name created? And how would he tell Gina? How would he even begin to explain it to her? She thought he was a simple accountant, for Christ's sake.

"Fuck!" he roared. He was going to lose her. She would leave him; there was no way she'd marry him knowing what he was. He just wanted more time. *I've had one night with her.*

It wasn't as if they'd go back to what they were before; he'd never see her again. Just a little more time, and he'd know what to do. He'd know.

Chapter Nine

Gina had made a cake in record time. Nick was taking liberties, though—he'd been gone ages. She'd finished with anything really messy and put her engagement ring back on her clean hands. She had worn it under her gloves as she had thoroughly sterilized Nick's kitchen before starting any work. There was no way he'd touched it since he'd had it refitted. Lazy boy. Well, she'd just have to keep him in line. She'd give him a smack on his hard arse when he got home. Odd, how this flat now seemed more home to her than the one she was about to leave. Without her dad, her old house didn't feel like home anyway, but with Nick she couldn't bear to be anywhere else but here. He had been so right in his determination to not waste any more time. *Hurry up*, she thought on a giggle, *I'm horny again!* Although on the other hand, she hadn't ached this much since she lost her virginity.

Also, if she was going to live with him, then he was going to have to leave detailed instructions on the heating, because it was not on for the under-floor heating to switch off and force her to wear socks. She had pulled on one of Nick's cricket jumpers and warmed up through cleaning and cooking.

“What do I want now? Ooh, lemon zest!” she proclaimed. She needed zest to top the lemon panna cotta before it went into the fridge. She threw open his huge American-style fridge and removed the fruit. “Naughty Nicholas—produce should be at room temperature.”

She wondered at the kitchen utensils Nick had, as she found the most wonderful curling grater that shaved the lemon zest beautifully for decoration. She heard the front door shut and called out, “Soprano! About sodding time! Come and taste my cake! Actual cake and not my pus...”

She turned around and saw Nick’s mother in the kitchen, gawping at her. Shit. A. Brick.

“Hello, Mrs. Da Canaveze,” she said weakly.

“Hello, Gina,” she replied eventually, a gloved hand at her chest. “I came to help Nick arrange his kitchen now that he’s finished it. I always do every time he moves, or he has no idea what to do with himself. But I see you’ve done that.”

Gina felt ill. She’d nearly said “pussy” to Nick’s mother. “Yeah. I can’t work in an unclean kitchen. There were dust marks on the counters.”

Mary Alice raised her brows at what was now on the counters. “Did you...make your own pasta?”

“From scratch,” she admitted. “He has a pasta dough roller... So yeah... I mean yes. And I’m

marinating some prawns and boiling the lobster for the ravioli when Nick decides to turn up.”

Mary Alice glanced at her, and she remembered that she wasn't wearing any panties under the jumper. She'd thought Nick would just get impatient with any unnecessary barriers. She tried to tug subtly at the hem with her free hand, only for Mary Alice to clock the motion and see the ring. She gasped audibly and exclaimed, “Oh my God, what's going on!”

“Nick, er...proposed.” Did he really propose or just tell her they were getting married, and put a ring on her finger after fucking her into submission?

“When was this?”

“Last night. We were going to tell you, but Nick wanted to wait until his dad came back from Italy.”

“Oh my God.” Mary Alice groaned and went off into a peal of rapid Italian.

Gina started to get annoyed. What was there to disbelieve about her and Nick getting married? He'd told her that everyone used to tease him about his feelings for her, that everyone had known how he felt except her. He knew what he was doing, and he was a grown man, for crying out loud.

“I didn't force Nick into this,” Gina stated, firmly interrupting Mary Alice's despondent monologue. “He told me he'd carried this ring around for years. I don't want to marry him because he's got money, if that's

what you think. I want to marry him because I love him. I've always loved him. And I didn't think he would ever love me too, but he does. You'll understand when you see him. He's happy. You can ask him."

She reached out to Gina and took her hand. "Listen, *miele*, I'm not worried about my son. I'm worried about you."

Gina frowned. "What? Why are you worried about me?"

"Because you don't know what it is to be married to a man like that, a Da Canaveze man. It's telephone calls at all hours of the day, policemen who want to trick you into giving things away, money that has no end or explanation." Her voice shook. "People you know of disappearing. Washing blood from their clothing and never being allowed to ask where it came from."

Gina couldn't fathom what she was saying. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

Her fingers tightened around Gina's. "Nick has responsibilities. Family duties that he can never give up. And you will always be second to that. I've been very fortunate to know you a little bit, and I know you are a very independent young woman. You are nothing like me; you won't be able to cope with this life because you'll want to know where he is and what he's

doing. And if he tells you, it'll scare you. It'll terrify you."

Gina pulled her hand away and turned back to the panna cotta, taking the lemon zest to decorate them. "Nick is an accountant. The terrifying thing is the dull accountants at the wedding I'll have to make conversation with."

She placed the desserts at the back of the fridge, her hands trembling. What was Mary Alice trying to do?

"Gina, please." The tone of her voice made Gina look her in the eyes. "He did all the exams and does consultancy work to pay taxes, to not make it obvious where his money comes from. He fills invoices and completes his self-employment tax forms. It's easier to have someone who understands accounts back-to-front in order to make it seem as if there is nothing untoward going on. That's why his father was so angry when he wanted to study something else."

"No," Gina laughed, "history wasn't a very manly subject. And no one really makes money from being a historian."

"It's all illusion. You have to understand that the name carries such weight. And there will always be someone who owes him, or someone who insulted the family, or someone who has stepped over the line and needs to be reminded of their place. All those people

have to answer to my husband, and one day they will all have to answer to Nick.”

Gina’s head started to ache with the information.

Mary Alice cupped her cheek in a motherly fashion. “Before you let my son believe he has a future with you, please just think about what sort of future you would have with him. You’ll want to know where he is, what he’s doing, and who he’s with, man or woman. And he will not tell you. I’m so sorry. But you need to know. Better now, before you give my son the wrong idea.”

“So, you’re telling me that Nick, my Nick...the man I want to marry...is a gangster?” Gina wanted to laugh; it was so utterly ridiculous stated out loud.

“Yes, for want of a better word. Yes, he is.”

Gina carefully removed Mary Alice’s hands as if they were diseased. “Well thank you for coming around, but you see, I’ve got a lot to do. I’ll tell Nick you stopped by and said congratulations.”

Mary Alice lowered her eyes to the floor. “Again, Gina, I’m sorry.”

She picked up her bag from the breakfast bar and quietly left. With a near mechanic determination, Gina finished the sauce for the ravioli and boiled the lobster. She iced the cake, then sat down at the breakfast bar and started mixing dough for shortbread

to go with the panna cotta. "I'm on fucking *Iron Chef*," she muttered to herself.

What she was doing, she had no idea. So Nick was really a Soprano. The fact he hadn't buried her somewhere in Fulham cemetery for such disrespect, she accredited to her skill at oral sex making up for years of abuse. Mild-mannered accountant, with his hair too long to be taken seriously, was a mobster. Nice. This was insane! None of this could be true. And yet...she'd seen...she'd seen those thugs' faces when he told them his name. The man who had been willing to rape her with his buddy watching had apologized to her after the gentlest of prods from Nick because of his name. His name, which was the most beautiful one Gina had ever heard, and now it was tainted. It was a name that was apparently associated with fear and violence.

Okay stop, stop, stop! This is Nick. You met him at university. He likes Family Guy! He's never had a parking ticket. He owns a hoodie! What self-respecting mobster goes to Glastonbury? Or smokes numerous spliffs in Thailand or gets bladdered in Brighton and has a waltz with a drag queen? His hair is too long. He goes to church every Sunday. Notwithstanding the fact that he lapses when it comes to sex before marriage. A tiny thought snuck into her brain. You've never seen his office.

“Jesus!” she swore, tears blurring her vision. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on Nick. She could feel his palms stroking the length of her ribs. She could feel his mouth on hers, demanding; she could feel his mouth everywhere, the tips of his fingers drawing underneath her to make her arch toward him. She could feel the weight of him on top of her, the smoothness of his skin beneath her own hands, the coolness of the rosary beads against her neck when he touched her face. She could feel him inside her, God how he felt inside her...his thumbs at her hips to keep her tightly to him as he pushed deeper and harder and so fast. He was her Nick. The one who made a fantastic cup of tea, made her laugh, who gave her the best cuddles, with whom she had shared a third of her life, their holidays, birthdays, their disappointments, their successes. He’d been with her when her dad died. Her throat thickened as she tried to hold back the need to cry.

He loved her, he told her he’d loved her for years, he’d bought a ring, he’d made love to her. He sighed her name in his sleep. He’d waited for her. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck! He loved her. *He loves me. I love him more.* What was she supposed to do? What the hell did a mobster do? How did they even make money? She fell asleep each time she’d tried to watch *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*. *Casino* was just plain

ridiculous, and she'd given up about half an hour in to get ice cream instead. She'd make a good mob wife, as she obviously knew fuck all. She giggled to herself. Now she was losing her natural mind.

She'd only spent one night with him, and it wasn't enough; now she was being pushed to give him up for some bimbo who would look the other way and not question him. Fucking Mary Alice! Selling her a postcard from Hell before she'd even taken the sodding holiday. She tried to steer her brain away from the image of being in bed and smelling the perfume of another woman on him, because she had run into a debt she couldn't pay. Would he do that? He had with her. No, that wasn't right. They were different. Their love was so different. It had grown over ten years. She was making shortbread for him. He loved shortbread.

This wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all; they'd just spent one night together! She'd know what to do when she saw him. She'd make up her mind then. Gina finished the shortbread mix and placed it in the oven. She would tell him to his face, when she saw him, and she would know.

The front door opened, and her heart plummeted in fear. Behind a huge bouquet of roses appeared Nick. His eyes met hers, and it was as if he knew what she had been told.

“Did my mother come around?” he asked, a caginess darkening his eyes.

She nodded, her throat swollen from forcing back tears.

“And, what? She gave you my family history? The Simon Schama version of the Da Canavezes?”

She nodded again, the tears threatening to fall. Nick put the flowers down on the counter and curved his palms about her waist. “Gina, look, whatever you want to know I’ll tell you. Just stay. I love you, believe that. And stay. We can talk.”

She braced her hands on his forearms and took a deep breath before looking up into his eyes. And she knew what she would say to him.

Her engagement ring suddenly felt very heavy and very tight.

Chapter Ten

“I can't marry you,” she said brokenly, as her hands fell away from his arms.

Nick tightened his hold on her, his pulse racing in his throat. Now he was scared. “Gina, no. You can, of course you still can. Nothing's changed from this morning.”

She gave such a shuddering breath, she bent in on herself, pressing her hand to her stomach. It was like she was in physical pain. “You've been my best friend for ten years. You know everything about me. But I can't say the same about you.”

Nick stroked his hand over her hair to curve his palm to her cheek, horrified by how reddened her eyes were. “You know I love you, you know I'd do anything for you.”

She pulled his hand from her face. “You're not answering me.”

He'd never wished a stroke on anyone, but hell, his mother fucking asked for it. “What did my mum say exactly?”

Gina rubbed both hands over her face, her shoulders so high with tension. “You know, death, blood, you, Da Canavezes something or other that

makes *The Godfather* look like *High School Musical*.” Her voice was jerky. She looked at him finally. “But it’s true, isn’t it?”

There was no stalling, no avoiding this. She knew, and the way she’d found out was completely out of his hands. Eventually, he sighed and said, “Gina, I’m sorry.”

He reached toward her and she edged out of his grasp.

“I can’t... I don’t... Oh my God,” she whispered. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am,” he insisted softly.

She shook her head again. “I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“Listen to me, please. Just hear me out...”

His mobile trilled, screeching into the quiet of the flat. He yanked the phone from his coat. Jesus Christ. His father. He glanced at Gina, who was now sitting down at the dining table, her head on the glass. That was a first. He’d actually made her speechless.

If he didn’t answer his father, the landline would ring and alternate between two numbers until he picked up.

“Nicholas, are you at home?” His father always spoke Italian to him. He debated answering in English, but it wouldn’t matter—Gina would

understand either way. If she wasn't in a catatonic state.

"Yes. Where are you?"

"I'm at home. I just spoke to your mother; she's extremely upset."

Nick sidestepped that. "I thought you weren't coming back until next week."

"Be home in twenty minutes, Nicholas." He ended the call without waiting for a response. Nick looked up at the ceiling, searching for any sense of patience that would allow him to deal with his parents right now. Gina hadn't moved. He walked over to the dining table and went on his haunches, placing his hand on her bare thigh, stroking her soothingly. His whole body recoiled at the notion that he would never be able to touch her like this again.

"I need to go. My dad's back."

"Da Canaveze conference?" she muttered against the glass, not lifting her head.

His eyebrow twitched at the accuracy of her words. "Pretty much. Stay here, all right? I won't be long."

She breathed out slowly. "Can I have my keys, please?"

He pressed his mouth to her woollen covered shoulder. "I'd like it if you stayed."

"I'd like it if you weren't the Antichrist," she retorted, lifting her head and glaring at him. "I need my keys."

"Not the alarm code?"

"2006," she flashed. "Keys."

"No," he said firmly getting to his feet. "You're not running anywhere. Stay here. I'll be back in a bit. And we'll talk."

"Fuck's sake!" she raged, and perversely he felt relieved. Her anger was far easier to deal with than her tears. "You can't keep me here forever!"

"I'll give it a bloody good go," he said under his breath. He heard something whistle past his ear then smash to the floor. It was his two thousand-pound crystal bowl that was now in pieces. He glanced over his shoulder to see Gina's eyes burning into him, her chest heaving with fury.

"Never liked it anyway," he taunted, closing the flat door behind him. Theirs was suddenly a relationship of immediacy. Doing everything at once: sex, babies, parents and now fighting.

He got into the car and breathed out slowly. She loved him. He had to make her see that was all that mattered. Anything he'd done before didn't compare to the way he felt about her and what she swore she felt for him.

In the required twenty minutes, he pulled up outside of his parents' home with resignation. He locked the car and entered the house. His mother was sitting in the living room, her mobile phone pressed to her ear; she hurriedly ended the conversation and edged toward him. Before she could even open her mouth, he held up a hand. "You are un-fucking-believable."

"Nicky!" Her voice was tearful. He had to at least be grateful she didn't pretend not to know what he was talking about. "I did that for you. She had no idea."

"It was never your place to say anything to her!" he thundered. He wanted to strangle her. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"I know you—you would never have told her. I did it for you. I didn't want you to be hurt if she found out and left you."

Nick choked incredulously. "Are you having a laugh? She fucking will leave me now!"

"Please, please listen to me." She grabbed his hands and tried to press them to her chest.

"Why did you have to interfere?" he said, disgustedly pulling his hands away.

"Nicholas, don't speak to your mother like that."

Nick tensed at the voice behind him. *Daddy's back*, he thought mockingly. He didn't acknowledge his father, instead speaking to his mother. "For all of a

few hours, I thought I had something that had nothing to do with you or us or this fucking family.”

His father put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “She was trying to help you. I’ve already spoken to her about this.”

He shrugged his father’s hand off. “I don’t care what she was trying to do,” he said through his teeth. “You know what, it’s the same with the both of you. You’re both as controlling as each other. You both want to dictate my life so badly, go ahead—you tell me who I should be with. Or shall I just roll up at St. Andrews church and guess who’ll be coming up the aisle?”

“Nicky...”

“Nicholas...”

“Shut up, both of you!” He took several breaths to try and calm himself down. He thought he’d been angry last night, but this... “You,” he pointed at his mother, “you do not play me.”

“I didn’t mean to, Nicky.” The fact that she was looking like a Disney character with her eyes swimming in tears didn’t touch him either; he only felt angrier.

He leaned in toward her so she could look him in the eye and see he wasn’t lying. “You ever do that again, you ever try to come between me and Gina

again, and I don't know you." He ignored her immediate intake of breath before she started sobbing.

He turned to his father. "I am trying to save my relationship, but you've summoned me here. What the hell do you want?"

Nick's father pointed him into his study and followed him inside. Massimo shut the door carefully behind Nick. "Sit," he insisted.

Still internally shaking from his utter fury, Nick did as he was asked and slumped into a seat. His father's office couldn't be more different from Renaldo's—less of a war room and more of a meditation room. He'd need it, being married to Mary Alice "Stalin" Da Canaveze.

"I had a call from Renaldo Santori."

"Really?" Nick said disinterestedly. He felt like he was ten years old, being told off for climbing trees again. What a fucking ridiculous situation. He was too old for this bullshit. Mummy telling him not to play with that girl, she could give him chicken pox, what the fuck, man?

His father finally spoke. "It would be nice to know if I'm to be a grandfather from my son, and not a desperate man ranting about threats."

Nick released a pent-up breath. "It wasn't a threat. I gave him an opportunity to leave, or stay here and I'd tear his heart out."

“With any particular implement, or just your bare hands?” his father asked dryly. When Nick didn't answer, he continued. “He told me you had taken something completely out of proportion.”

Nick tried to hold back a sardonic laugh. “Yes, my reaction to his goons nearly raping Gina was totally overboard. You can tell him I'm sorry.”

Massimo's eyes narrowed. “Do not take that tone with me. I was not aware of what had occurred, but as you so rarely lose your temper, I assumed it must have been quite extreme. Is Georgina well?”

“No thanks to your wife.”

Massimo sighed. “Then I should ask you why Renaldo is still alive to be asking me to speak to you.” His father leaned toward him, his hands in a prayer position. “He made demands on me. I refused, naturally, and he challenged you. However apologetic he is for it now, he has crossed our line. You should silence him. Make sure it's clear it came from you.”

“I'm not going back on what I said. I said twenty-four hours. It's been three. Until I went home and found out that my mother's playing God with my...” His what? Girlfriend? Fiancée? He wasn't sure she was any of those. He'd be lucky if she hadn't just thrown the ring down the toilet, got dressed and left. “Up until then I was feeling quite generous.”

His father watched him for a still moment. "It's taken a long time for you to accept who you are and what you are responsible for. You should not be taking several steps back for a girl. No, listen to me, Nicholas. Trust that I have more life experience than you. You cannot change the things you have done; you should be proud of them. If Georgina makes you try to undo what you have done, then you should not be together."

"Not happening," Nick replied simply. "If that's all?"

"Will you not accept my advice?" His father gave him a beady look.

"What advice? If she doesn't accept what I've done, what I still do, I never see her again? Nah, thanks but no thanks. I need to go home."

Massimo gave a weary mutter to one of the saints. "I would like it if you apologized to your mother."

Nick glanced at his nails. "I'd like my mother not to pull my strings."

Massimo frowned disapprovingly at the disrespect he was receiving from his oldest son. "Will you apologize or not?"

Nick flashed an insincere smile "Tell your wife not to interfere with mine, and I'll send her a card."

His father gave the barest of chuckles. "That young lady certainly has steeled you. Maybe she'll be a

good influence. You will need to come back to see me. I have warned you about Santori. You still have time to reconsider.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He got up and left the study. His mother was hovering outside, and she grabbed his arm. “You have to understand,” she started.

“Mama, just stop.” She pressed her lips together immediately. “I don’t have to understand anything.” He could almost see where she was going to try and make him feel guilty, but he was ready for this.

“Will you stay a little? Your father is angry that I’ve upset you.” Her fingers tightened around his arm. “He won’t...express how angry he is if you stay for a little while.”

Nick’s chest was burning with his fury. His mother must be on drugs to be trying this again. “He’s not angry. I’m angry. Therefore, I’m leaving. You want me to still come home for family dinners, to pick up the phone and talk to you, to acknowledge that you are my parent? Yes? Then stay out of my relationship. I couldn’t care less about all the others that came before, but if I’ve lost Gina because of you, I will not forgive you. And you know I mean that.”

Mary Alice nodded, nearly choking on her tears. “I do. I’m sorry. But I’m your mother. I will never stop worrying for you, or trying to do what’s best for you.”

Nick stepped around her, heading for the door.
“Whenever you feel that urge, try to remember I'm a man.”

Chapter Eleven

Gina had eaten the shortbread herself. There wasn't much else to do, once she'd cleaned up the glass and thrown away the pasta and sauce. And the bloody heating still wasn't on. She looked through Nick's wine collection and pulled out a bottle from her year of birth.

Hmm, why not? Serves him right, absolute fucking liar! She poured herself a huge glass and drained it. Then she cut herself a piece of cake, a layered gâteau with raspberry cream. It was pretty damn good, if she said so herself.

She was tempted to look for secret cabinets, mess up his probably pretty gun collection, hide any silencers and start cutting holes into his secret spy ops clothing. Then he really would get sodding shot. She had another glass of wine. And another. She tried not to think about the ring. She'd tried taking it off, and maybe it was the stress, but the thing would not budge. She really should have searched for some knickers, but getting through what was probably a three hundred-pound bottle of wine seemed a better plan in the immediate future.

She put her mobile phone on the table and watched it, sending vibes of fury that she hoped were causing Nick as much pain as a kick in his nuts. Her mobile eventually bounced across the table. Nick: *On my way back now. X*

One x? *You know I love you*, then he sends one lousy x?

While my drug-toting, gun-slinging, prostitution-racketing fiancé drives back, I'm going to have another glass of wine. Why not? She felt much less like crying or banging her head against the table and more like having a fight.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Nick swept back inside.

Gina pushed the bottle of wine toward him. "Take a seat, Al Pacino. Let's talk."

He picked up the bottle and saw it was one of his reserve wines. She dared him to say something about it, but he simply poured himself a glass. "All right." He looked at her, seemingly pleasantly surprised that she was still there. "You've still got your ring on."

"It won't come off," she told him belligerently.

"I didn't superglue it on, if that's what you think," he said, removing his coat and pushing up the sleeves of his jumper. "What do you want to know?"

She looked at him suspiciously, her fingers gripping the wineglass. "Are you going to answer

everything I ask, or are you going to hide more things from me?"

"Depends on what you ask," he replied, leaning back in the chair.

"I'd like the truth, please."

"You won't want to hear all of it," he warned her. He folded his arms on the table and moved the wineglass ever so slightly to his left. A gesture of uncertainty, or was he planning a strategy? she wondered.

"I think I do."

"I beg to differ."

"I want to know."

"No," he said firmly.

Okay, she told herself. Throwing something else at his head won't work, so change tactics. "Rock paper scissors you tell me the truth?"

Nick gave a half smile. "Tried and tested way of you getting what you want from me. All right. Rock paper scissors I get to choose what I tell you."

She'd win hands down. "Deal." They held out their palms, then slapped their fists three times. Nick drew scissors, and Gina cried out in disbelief, "You're such a cheat—you always start with rock!"

He took a sip of wine, reminding her, "Deal's a deal."

"Best two out of three."

“Ask your question,” he pressed softly.

She relented and took a fortifying gulp of wine.

“Who knows about you? About your Batman existence?”

“A select few. And now you.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Her voice broke over the last word. She ignored his hand curling toward her and picked up her glass of wine instead. She dared to glance up and caught the look in his eyes. He didn't have a right to be hurt.

“Yes, I was.”

She snorted. “I call bullshit on that. When?”

He gave the barest shrug, taking a sip of wine.

“Probably when you were in the middle of giving birth to our fourth kid? Then it would have been incidental to a lack of an epidural.”

“I'm glad one of us is finding this funny.”

He swept his hand through his hair. “I was going to tell you. My mother had no right to barge in here and bitch slap you with this. I just wanted to make sure you'd be safe first.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded slowly. “Your neck looks painful.”

Oh. That. She felt her face heat with shame. “So those twats did know you?”

“Not me personally. They know of me.”

“We planned our wedding,” she reminded him, her voice high with disbelief. “Down to the fact that you weren’t going to wear a tie. And nowhere in that fantastic plotting where the minister would be off his face, and we’d all crush grapes afterwards, did you think ‘Maybe I should drop the Original Gangster bomb’?”

He exhaled tiredly. “I wanted to be with you without anything else getting in the way. For once. Just you and me. Don’t you think it would have been easier to take if we’d spent just a little more time together?”

“That was a perfectly straightforward question, Nicholas.”

His jaw tightened ever so slightly, but she caught the irritation flaring in his eyes over her use of his full name. “Deal’s a deal.”

She drained the dregs of her glass. She was feeling fantastically fuzzy around the edges now. It all seemed more like a hazy dream. “So what do you dabble in?”

“Stuff that would see me do at least twenty-five years in prison,” he admitted.

“Right, turf wars with teenage boys and knives?”

“Actually, this is how London cuts up on the street.” He pulled over a discarded newspaper and drew the vague shape of London. “You have the

Albanians here, the Columbians, the Irish, the Romanis, the Turks and the Vietnamese. They run the gamut from firearms trading to sex trafficking to growing little pots of weed in amounts that would make up about a third of what you and I smoked in Thailand.” She was not going to get into a moralistic argument with him about the demons of cannabis. “Then you have the more sophisticated operations, like money laundering schemes that involve creating shelf companies to make the exchange of money look legitimate. Lower down you have your teenage boys who've watched Idris Elba on *The Wire* and think they can do better.”

As fascinating as his mini lecture on the underbelly of her beloved city had been, he still hadn't answered her question. “So where does your crew come in?”

He took a slow, deep breath. “Do you want another glass of wine?”

Gina rolled her eyes. “You’re not being fair.”

He put the pen down and folded up the newspaper. “You do not want to know. Believe me. It’s probably better that you don’t.”

Yet another brick wall. Great. “What was the history degree about then?”

He breathed out a laugh. “I had the briefest idea that I’d be Indiana Jones. When my father told me not to be so stupid, I dug my heels in and said fuck you.”

“But you changed your mind. You dropped the course—we both did.”

He rubbed the blunt tips of his fingers over his scalp, looking a little sheepish. “Remember the time my dad got sick? He wasn’t sick. He ended up in hospital because someone tried to shoot him. He was lucky, the bullet just grazed his temple.”

Gina’s mouth dropped open. “What? You said it was an ulcer!”

“He had one of those too. I just left out the bullet bit. It made it obvious to me that I would have to take over regardless of what I thought I wanted to be.”

She couldn’t quite grasp the idea of Nick being helplessly folded into the role of heir apparent. “How many times have you just been lucky?”

He gave her a grin. “Whatever do you mean by that?”

She closed her eyes in a hopeless search for patience. “Bullets, dude, not pussy.”

“I’m still alive, so pretty lucky. I’ve been shot at. Stabbed once or twice. Poisoned. That wasn’t fun. Run over...”

She pressed the tips of her fingers to her mouth, failing to hide how utterly dismayed she was. “And

that time you had a dislocated shoulder. And you told me it was a fucking skiing accident...”

“Yeah,” he explained slowly, “this bloke was really pissed off and he came at me with a sledgehammer. It would have been my head, but I slipped. Slipped, skied. Same difference.”

“Why didn’t you just become an actor? Lies just pour out of you! Seriously, Nick, this isn’t funny!”

“I am a comedic genius. And you’ve blatantly lied to my face as well—‘Everything’s fine, Soprano.’” He mimicked her inflections perfectly. Bastard. “Do you want a tea? The wine’s finished.”

“No I bloody don’t,” she said with hostility, irritated that he was right. Alcohol was working for her now. “What else do you have to drink?”

Nick leaned back and checked the glass drinks cabinet. “Limencello, sambuca, tequila, whiskey, rum, vodka and gin.”

“Tequila. Please,” she added on a long drawl.

He got up and pulled the bottle from the cabinet, and two shot glasses from the shelf above. “Here. Oh, come on. Don’t ask for tequila then sip it.”

She gave him the finger and drained the shot glass. He poured her another then topped up his own.

“What do you want me to do?” she challenged.

He sat back down, frowning at her question.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not baking any drugs into cakes for you.”

She had a horrible sensation that he was laughing at her naiveté. “I don’t want you to. I don’t want you to be involved.”

“How do you expect that to work if we’re married?”

He poured out some more tequila. “Well, when you say ‘how was your day?’ I’ll say ‘my darling Gina, you don’t want to know.’ We’ll have dinner, maybe go out, I give you a good seeing to then we sleep.”

“You’re such a clown. So while you’re off sawing people’s limbs off, you want to bring children into this...this carnage?”

He gave another shrug. “I’ve turned out all right. You could do with a bit of therapy, work out your trust issues.”

“You must be schizophrenic.”

“No, I’m just better at keeping things to myself. Skill I picked up from you,” he added on a taunt, pouring out some more tequila. He leaned over to fill Gina’s, but she turned her glass over to avoid it.

“Don’t. I can’t drink any more of this. It’s grim.”

Nick stood up and extracted the sambuca.

“No no no. Limencello.” Ooh, this was good—she was seeing two of him now. Maybe she could push the bad one out of the nearest window.

“You’ll throw up the limencello.”

“Just bring a drink.”

He poured the sambuca into her glass. “What else have you got?”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” she said quietly, throwing the drink down her throat.

He paused, contemplating the question. “Yes.”

“Oh.” The drink did a reverse turn in her throat. “Scuse me. Limit reached,” she said shortly before she knocked the chair over in her haste to run to the bathroom. She collapsed onto the floor, her face clammy and sweaty. She pulled the toilet lid down and folded her arms over it. This was so unreal it wasn’t right. She felt Nick come and sit beside her.

“Are you all right?”

“Great,” she muttered. “Fantastic.”

“It goes with the territory,” he continued, as if she hadn’t just been sick, handing her a glass of water.

“But you... You wouldn’t hurt anyone. I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that you wouldn’t have hurt a fly.”“

It’s an inevitable part of the job.” He sighed, resting his arms on his raised knees. “And I hate flies.”

There was a disgusting taste in her mouth. She swirled the water around before spitting it out. Urgh, wrong. “And that’s all it is to you? A job?”

“It has to be.”

“Or you’d never sleep at night, right?” She set the glass on the tiles.

“It would make it harder.” He shrugged. “But I can always get sleeping tablets.”

“Oh good. For free, or do you at least see your GP?”

“I have a GP,” he reminded her. “You’ve met her.”

“I don’t know who the hell you are!” she burst out suddenly.

“I’m still me.” His insistence was starting to wear thin. How could he tell her that he was still the same person when he was doing God knows what to God knows whom?

“My Nick doesn’t kill people.”

“Your Nick wouldn’t have fucked you on a sofa either.”

She pointed a lone finger at him as she saw the faintest hint of a smile on his face. “Don’t you dare!”

“Why don’t you think of it as a step up from being a dull accountant?”

She shook her head, pressing the heel of her palm into her temple. “Why couldn’t you stay who you were? I loved that accountant.”

“This is just...sidelines.”

“So everything’s okay as long as I ignore that bit of your life?”

“Couples who share everything get bored quick. This way you and I will never run out of things to say to one another.”

She stared at him. He looked exactly the same; the only thing betraying his own upset was the slight shadows under his eyes. “Doesn’t it haunt you? I’ve only seen my dad pass, and I can see his face every day.”

Nick’s lashes lowered defensively. “That’s why I go to church.”

She gave a strangled laugh that sounded like a sob instead. “Oh fuck, dude, this is not going to work. It won’t.”

“Nothing’s different from the plan we had a couple of hours ago.” He rubbed a warm hand over her bare knee. “You don’t love me anymore? After you swore on Rupert Murdoch?”

She didn’t want him to touch her because of how he made her feel. Oh God, the way he made her feel. If she let him touch her, it would be harder, so much harder to let him go. What else could she do?

“That is such a bastard thing to say. I may just be sick on you for saying it.”

“Attractive.” His palm trailed along her thigh. “What are you thinking?”

“I think I want to sleep. I think I want you to be the person I thought you were. I think I don’t want to

be waiting around for you to get sent to prison or shot. Or both. I don't want to see an artist's impression of you on *Crimewatch*."

His fingers curved into the pit of her knee. He knew that was her little weak spot. "Well, you can do all that by yourself or we can do that together. You know what I want."

Gina felt her throat freeze in pain; she had the most awful flash of seeing him covered in blood. "I can't... I can't cope with this..."

He wrapped his arms around her, his palm cradling her head against his chest. She completely dissolved into tears. She had lost everyone she had ever loved, and she was going to lose Nick too. She couldn't bring herself to sit around and enjoy the spoils of his gains if ultimately he would pay for it.

"Don't cry, okay? We'll be fine. I swear on Michel Roux Junior, Gordon Ramsay and Heston Blumenthal." His voice vibrated over her head, as she buried her face into his neck.

"Well what if you die?" she hiccuped.

Nick started laughing, "You do realize what you just said?"

"You smart-arse wanker, you know what I mean."

He lowered his knees and pulled her into his lap. "It'll happen regardless, you silly girl. We lost ten

years. We haven't even started to catch up. All we planned yesterday, this morning, everything we want to do together hasn't changed."

There was a muted throbbing in her head, and throwing up on an already bruised esophagus hadn't at all helped. "Okay. I think I need to pass out now."

"There's my girl. Pisshead."

"You're a tosspot."

"I love you too." He somehow managed to pull himself to his feet without releasing her and carried her to the bedroom.

"Gerroff," she mumbled. "Don't like you any more."

He glanced down at her, a dark brow winging toward his hairline. "Still lying, I see. You know that gets you into trouble."

Giving him a dirty look would have been more than useful if every brain cell wasn't protesting at her being conscious. She tugged the duvet over her head and closed her eyes. She'd wake up, she told herself, and it would all be different.

Chapter Twelve

Nothing like making the woman you love physically sick to make you feel like the biggest cunt on the planet, Nick thought, closing the bedroom door. His mobile was ringing again. He looked at the screen. His mother again. He ended the call and sent her a brief text:

I've told you to stop it. So stop.

He slumped onto the sofa. He would talk to Gina again, when she was less likely to throw anything else at his head, vomit or otherwise. She'd lain beneath him, taken him inside her and sworn she was his. He was holding her to that. He played their conversation in his head over and over again, trying to figure out if he had told her too much or too little. Probably both. If he hadn't told her anything she would have left, house keys or no house keys. He'd had this idea when he was making her breakfast this morning that they would go away, on holiday for a few days, and they could talk about everything. But the option had been taken from him by the puppet master who was his mother.

His phone again. At least it wasn't his mother. "Paul, what's wrong?"

“You’re wrong. What’s this about you marrying Gina?”

“Thank you, I’m really happy, we’re looking forward to spending our lives together, any time you want to say you were wrong, feel free.”

His sarcasm melted off his brother. “Does she know?”

Nick had no doubt as to what Paul was talking about. “Since our mother is like *BBC News*, she does now.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What is she going to do?”

“She’s going straight to Kensington Police Station,” Nick mocked.

“You’ve got to handle this—Mama is going schitz.”

Nick pinched the bridge of his nose. “There’s nothing to handle. Everyone is going to leave Gina alone to deal with it. You included.”

“But...”

Nick didn’t want to hear it; he ended the call.

Text message. *I want to talk about this. It’s not just about her. We’re your family.*

Stay out of it.

You're being stupid. I'll come over in a few hours to talk to you. You're not making sense on the phone.

Do not come to my flat.

Nick chucked his phone onto the floor and turned on the TV. How different he felt from twelve hours ago. He concentrated on things he could deal with, some complicated work, making sure that Renaldo was erasing his existence from London. Rocky was sending him regular updates and had all the passport numbers Renaldo had ever bought, legally and illegally, and confirmation from immigration officers who would let them know when he'd left the UK. Maybe his father was right and he should have just killed the bastard on sight. That was where he and Massimo differed. Massimo didn't honour anything if that person had touched what had belonged to him.

The flat gradually darkened. His mobile would light up every so often with an ignored phone call or message. He grabbed a bottle of water, slipped on his glasses, read a paper, and watched the news, waiting patiently for Gina to wake up. Eventually, he heard the shower running and the mildest grumble of, "Christ, woman, you look awful."

He sensed her hesitation in leaving the bedroom. He glanced over to see her standing there, looking as

fresh faced as a teenager, in a skinny rib top and cropped pyjama bottoms that reminded him of Rupert the Bear.

“You all right?” he asked.

God, her neck looked livid now. She rubbed an unconscious hand over her skin. “Been better,” she admitted, biting on her bottom lip. “What time is it?”

“Going ten,” he told her with a flick of his wrist. She gave a grave nod, as if he'd told her the world was ending. She cleared her throat then stared at her bare feet.

“Are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to come over here?” he said with a wry smile. The teasing prod was enough to make her shuffle to the sofa. He held out his hand toward her and she took it. He pulled her to him until she was lying down, tucked against him, the soles of her feet resting on his denim-covered shins. The scent of coconut was mild on her skin, and he tightened his arm around her waist, feeling an immediate ease at being so close to her. This was where she was meant to be.

“What are you watching?” she asked.

“*World's Strictest Parents* on catch up,” he told her, surprised as her palm stroked over his hand, her fingers sliding against his. “They send unruly teenagers to random parts of the world so they can

experience discipline. This one was in Botswana. The mum was almost as scary as Belinda.”

She gave a little chuckle. He rubbed his mouth over her temple. “Are you hungry?”

She shook her head.

“Are you still cross with me?”

She nodded. He pressed his lips together to keep from smiling and offered softly, “Would a kiss help?”

She gave a mutter in her throat that could have meant *I don't know*, coupled with a shrug. He touched his mouth to her neck soothingly, then moved it along her jaw and in the barest of touches over her cheek. He felt her shudder against him; goose bumps rose over her arms. “You smell like the bathroom side of Superdrug. Did you swallow the mouthwash?”

“It's this smell or sick. Your pick, dude.”

He did chuckle this time. “I like it. You should start wearing it like perfume.” He kissed the back of her neck for a lingering moment, enjoying her trembling again, but then he realized she was crying.

“Gina,” he sighed sadly, hugging her more tightly to him.

“I just...feel like you're already gone. I had the worst dream. I was looking for you everywhere, and I couldn't find you. Now I just feel like I'm not waking up.”

He eased her onto her back and leaned over her, watching her tears slide into her hair. Making a snap decision to give his woman a little perspective, he took off his glasses and chucked them onto the floor. He removed his jumper, then took her hand to trail her fingers over the pale thin scar that ran under one of his ribs. "Feel that? That's where you nearly lost me." He moved her hand to the spider web of scars over his left arm. His breath caught at the aching lightness of her touch. "And here. And countless other times. But you didn't. I'm still here."

"Oh God," she swore breathlessly, stroking her hands over his torso. "Why'd you have to wave your body in my face?"

"Because I'm clever." He grinned, leaning his full weight on her welcoming body. She had her eyes closed before he brushed his mouth over hers.

"Mm, minty," he murmured as she gave a giggle, a sigh escaping her mouth as she leaned up to kiss him back, her lips parting underneath his. He could feel her heat on his thigh even through the pyjama bottoms, his hands sliding underneath the skinny ribbed top to knead her beautiful, hypnotically soft skin. "I swear," he breathed against her lips, "this sofa has a direct link to your g-spot."

Instead of laughing she pulled him closer, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. Christ, he

was hard already. He pressed himself into her more firmly, liking that Gina may think sex was an infinitely better idea than crying. He needed to feel her against him. Now. He yanked the top over her head and gave a little growl of satisfaction at the thrill of her naked skin pressed against his. She lifted her hips against him, catching the hardened tip of his cock against her clothed thigh, her hands cupping his cheeks.

“Don't leave me,” she begged, her hands trailing into his hair.

“No chance,” he promised, lowering his mouth to hers again. Just as her hands took a delicious downwards turn and began to delve inside his jeans, the intercom to the flat rang. They stopped.

“Who the...” Nick started, confused.

“Oi, Nick!”

They both gave sighs of disappointment, Nick's head lowered to Gina's breast. “I am cursed today.”

Reluctantly he sat up and handed her back her top. Gina raised her brows. “You may want to calm down your boy downstairs before opening any doors.”

“Trust me, in three seconds this is going to go,” he replied irritably. He pulled on his jumper and watched Gina lay back down, modestly clothed now, an arm behind her head and a rather relaxed expression on her face. *That's better*, he thought.

“NICK!”

“Fuck off, Paul,” he said into the intercom.
“Night.”

He turned back to Gina. “I’m starving now. Do you fancy a curry?”

“Dude, I threw up. Curry’s going to screw me over... Why is Paul here?”

“Mother’s bidding,” he said dryly.

“Unless you want everyone in the building to hear this, let me up.”

Prick, Nick thought with a shout of frustration, then buzzed his brother up to the flat. *Dickhead launch in five, four, three, two, one...*

Nick opened the door, and as Paul opened his mouth to release a tirade of displeasure, the child in him hooked Paul’s foot and sent him sprawling into the wood floor. Nick reached over his brother’s body and shut the door. “Hello to you too,” he said sarcastically. “I’m guessing ‘don’t come over’ wasn’t clear enough.”

Paul scrambled to his feet as Gina sat up and gasped at the blood on his face. She leapt to her feet, intent on helping, but Paul flung an arm out. “Don’t!”

“I...I was just trying to help,” she said.

“This, this whole mess is your fault!”

Gina’s brows nearly shot off her face. “Me? What did I do?”

Nick's muted anger was rising to the surface again. "No one asked Ma to get involved."

"You have fucked up my family!" Paul threw at Gina, pressing his hand to his chin. "My dad comes back from Italy and goes nuts at my mum for upsetting the Golden Child here."

Nick closed his eyes. "Jesus, Paul."

"He...what? What do you mean 'nuts'?"

"I mean, he's obviously hit her—why else would she be so bloody upset?"

Gina's mouth dropped open. "What? Your dad doesn't do things like that!"

"He hasn't for years," Nick explained, eyeing his brother with a well-founded suspicion. "What are you talking about? I went over there and he hadn't touched her."

"Are you thick? He obviously waited for you to go before lamping her one. She called me afterwards; she's lost her mind, and she's still worried because you won't talk to her. Because of her." Paul jerked his head toward Gina.

"You're such an idiot," Nick said disparagingly. "Did you actually see her, or was this some tale she spun over the phone?" At Paul's reddening face, Nick guessed it was the latter. "Mate, I'm not joking, you need to be deprogrammed or something."

Paul fished in his pocket for a tissue to try to stem the bleeding. “Is she really more important than your family?”

“She *is* family, you muppet. Now take your chin issues somewhere else.”

Paul turned to leave, then snapped, “I don’t fucking understand! Is she lactating crack?”

Nick planted his fist firmly in his brother’s solar plexus. Paul bent double, wheezing as he struggled to catch his breath. Feeling satisfied that at least someone had taken the brunt of his frustration, he patted Paul on the back. “Don’t talk about her like that. Not to her face, not to mine, not at all.”

“I’ll get you some...something” Gina offered, wincing at Paul’s state. He was turning purple. She ventured into the kitchen to arrange something.

“Gina, don’t worry about him, he’s leaving.”

Paul hissed in Italian, “No, I want to know what you’re doing about Mama.”

“I’ve told you, I don’t believe he’s touched her. He knows what will happen if he does it again.”

“She wouldn’t lie about this!”

Nick gave a derisive snort. “You’ve met our mother, right? He hasn’t hit her in years. Why would he start now?”

“Because you’ve stirred it all up! He’ll get away with it, again!” Paul looked apoplectic. “Take your

finger out of her arse and look after your mother! She comes before pussy.”

Nice. Nick put his hand around his brother's throat and hauled him out of the flat. “I don't need you Fabio Capello-ing from the side lines. Nothing's stopping you from giving Massimo what for if you really believe he's slapped Ma around. Out.”

He shut the door firmly. A minute's silence told him that Paul had finally heeded his advice and taken his chin elsewhere. Gina beckoned him toward her. He did as she bid, leaning against the bar in the kitchen as she pressed a tea towel with ice folded into it to his damaged hand. “Good to see Paul.”

“He's such a dickless twat, I don't know how the fuck I'm related to him.”

“Where did he come up with that? Lactating crack?” She laughed helplessly. Nick didn't, couldn't join in, he was so utterly fed up now.

Gina was watching his face carefully. “Is your mum okay?”

“She'll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded slowly.

“How bad was it?” she asked quietly. “Before, I mean. When he did hit her?”

Nick removed the tea towel from his knuckles, throwing it into the sink. “Not that it’s an excuse, but she had an affair.”

He could see what she was thinking. Mary Alice the Stepford Wife had banged around behind his father's back? Not possible. That was what he had thought at the time, but Mary Alice had been in no position to deny it. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Dad found out and he lost it just once. I intervened. Ma and Paul had to pull me off. It was the only time Dad and I had a physical fight.” He exhaled deeply. “Sorry. My family’s pretty fucked up.”

“You’re not kidding, are you?”

“Look, it was really messy with all four of us for a while, and it was like a switch flipped in my mum's head. Sometimes she feels like she needs me to prove I still care what happens to her. So she'll remind me what my dad did. She’s a control freak. Like you in the kitchen.”

“That’s not control, that’s OCD.” She curled her hand to his damaged one and kissed his bruised knuckles very tenderly. “I’ll go to therapy if you come with me.”

“Done.” He trailed his fingers over her cheek. “Can you be my best mate for a minute?”

She curved her arms beneath his and wrapped herself around him, hugging him tightly. He relaxed

immediately, breathing slowly over her head, his hands running scales along the length of her back. She looked up at him and gave him the sweetest little smile of reassurance. He bent his head and caught her mouth with his own.

“Best mates don't do that,” she muttered, pulling back uncertainly.

“We do,” he advised, kissing the frown from between her brows. “And we started something on the sofa.”

There was a flicker of hesitation in her eyes, but she accepted his lips on hers, his tongue inside her mouth. He didn't mind the mint taste at all. He felt her arms slide around his neck as she pressed her body harder to his.

He trapped her between his body and the bar, pressing her unbound breasts against his chest, her uneven breaths pushing him even closer. He pulled the neckline of her top down her chest so he could free her breasts to his hands. His thumbs instantly swept back and forth over the tightened peaks, before his palms encompassed the silken weight of them. Her lower body cradled to his own sent a heavy, demanding tug to his already aching balls. The stark light of the kitchen still caught the gold sheen to her smooth skin, making his fingers look pale against her. As his lips trailed from her mouth to her neck, he

could feel the jump of her pulse beneath his tongue. She even tasted a little like coconut.

She gave a crying moan as his hand delved firmly into the pyjama bottoms and cupped her pussy, satisfyingly dripping wet, his fingers sliding slickly between the hot lips of her sex. He gave a growl at the sensation of her own hand reaching into his jeans and cupping the length of his cock.

“That's what you do to me,” he told her softly, swearing under his breath as her thumb rubbed over the damp tip of him, the stroke of her palm sending shivers through his whole body. He kissed her again, swallowing each gasping little cry as two of his fingers struggled to sink inside her. She still felt incredibly tight; he didn't want to hurt her, but he couldn't wait any longer. He needed her to be prepared for him.

He lifted his head. “Are you ready for me now?”

“Yes, she cried, “please, I need you.”

He pushed the bottoms down firmly with a short swift tug. With a foot firmly on the bottoms, her legs were freed from the clothing. His hands worshipfully curved over the cheeks of her arse, while she shakily unzipped his jeans and released him. He sat her on top of the bar and parted her legs. He took the briefest of looks at her, from her breasts pushing over the skinny top down to her pussy, swollen and shiny with her desire for him.

She shuddered involuntarily as the tip of his cock melted into her, and her hands tightened around his neck. He paused for a moment. She'd embarrass him if he didn't control himself.

“All of you,” she whispered, her teeth nipping at his jaw before her hands fisted into his hair and she kissed him fiercely.

He wrapped a firm hand around her waist before driving deeply into her, as far as her juicy pussy would allow.

“Wait,” she begged weakly, her body resisting his entry. He allowed her to adjust to him before his body took over with an urgency that bordered on pain. He pushed deeper until he was completely, fully in her. Her breathing was shallow, her mouth open over his. He could feel every single part of her, every single part squeezing, dancing all over his cock. Jesus, he loved her so much. She moaned as he pushed even deeper, hooking her ankles behind his back, opening her pussy to him. He couldn't hold back any longer and started moving inside her with short, sharp thrusts.

Her hips rocked to meet him, rolling so he circled inside her, the slick collision of their flesh sounding loudly in the quiet of the kitchen. She was so wet, he could feel her juices sliding down the rigid length of his cock and over his balls.

He gripped her thighs tight as he pumped harder, feeling the shivers beginning to scatter over her body. "Yes," he growled, "just like that. Come all over my cock..."

He felt her body tense as her orgasm took over, her head thrown back, her legs around his waist nearly tight enough to bruise. He pressed his palm to the small of her back as he increased his speed, powering toward his own release. Unable to resist the magnetic pull of her cunt, he locked her body against his and with his cock deep in her body he came, spurting inside her endlessly, her whimpers barely audible over his own groans. He felt utterly drained, yet strangely replete.

Gina's arms were still around his neck, and he felt her lips brush his ear. "I'm hungry now."

He gave a weak chuckle. "I love that you have your priorities in order."

He gave her a smart kiss before they carefully untangled themselves from each other and righted their clothing. Slightly disappointed that she was dressed, Nick pulled her back into his arms. He couldn't imagine his life without her, and could only hope that she felt the same.

"We can cuddle until the food arrives," Gina mumbled into his chest. She pulled back and touched her hands to his jaw. "Just...give me a minute. Okay?"

He understood what she was asking and agreed gently. A minute should only take her to the same conclusion they'd reached last night.

Chapter Thirteen

Gina was woken by the lightest of kisses that started at the back of her neck and left a gingerbread trail to the base of her spine. Light was filtering into their bedroom and a large, warm palm was cradling her belly.

“Morning.” She gave a helpless smile, turning over to see Nick, his chin balanced on her arm.

“Good morning,” he answered, his voice gravelled with sleep. He was so close she could see the individual hairs on his face and each eyelash surrounding his vivid eyes. They were the warmest of blues today. The two watched each other with an unconscious contentment for a moment.

“I think that's your phone,” Nick said eventually as the vibration of a mobile disturbed them. She sighed and sat up. Her phone was plugged into its charger. It was work. She answered cautiously.

“Hi, Gina, it's Mark.”

Mark was the operations manager. He'd been horrified when she'd told him she'd been burgled and was waiting for someone to sort out everything for her. He was a nice man, a lot more sympathetic than

people gave him and his penny-counting ways credit for.

“Hi, Mark, how are you?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing. Is everything all right?”

She gave Nick a glance over her shoulder. What a loaded question. “As all right as it can be.”

“Would you be all right to come in today? Short shift, just eight hours.”

Again she looked at Nick, who was lying back against the pillows, his arms folded behind his head. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Great, can you be here for twelve? We could really do with your help—lunchtime is pretty booked up.”

“Okay. I'll see you later.”

“Thanks, Gina.”

She ended the call, then dived back under the duvet, warming herself on Nick's body. He was like a human hot water bottle. “What's up?”

“I'm going to work.” She felt him start to argue and interrupted him. “I can't be here all day, I'll go mad. I need something else to do that doesn't involve thinking about you and me.”

He gave a muted growl of disappointment.

“Fine. What time does your shift start?”

“Not until twelve, why?” She saw from the time on her phone that it was only ten in the morning now. She had to get out of this enjoyable but disruptive routine of eating late and being seduced for half the night until her body physically couldn't take any more, or she'd never get up before ten again.

“Can you at least stay here until eleven?”

She panicked. He'd gone caveman. He wasn't going to let her out of his sight, which was silly. “Dude, come on. I need to go.”

“What for?”

She threw him a look that told him he should give back any qualifications that hailed his intelligence. “The pharmacy? You riding me bareback will give us problems in exactly nine months, especially at the rate we're going.”

He gave a smirk of male satisfaction. “I'll come with you.”

“Why, so you can know when I had my last period?”

“Jesus, woman, I just want to make sure you're safe,” he told her irritably, sitting up and throwing back the duvet cover, exposing them both to the cooler air. “I'll pretend not to hear whatever you don't want me to hear, and this day will move a lot faster.”

She frowned at him as he stood over her, naked. It felt weird now that she knew where all the marks on

his body had come from. She wasn't so much scared as concerned that she may be reproducing with a reckless idiot. "Can't you leave Master Da Canaveze to sexy time? I don't like all this ordering around."

He rubbed his hands over his face. "You're giving me a headache."

"I like to think we're even," she taunted.

"Sarky little..."

"What was that?"

"I said, 'Sarky little...', then you interrupted me. I am so thrilled you're going to be nagging me for decades on end."

Gina shook her head at him. "Decades? You'll be lucky."

"I'm like a leprechaun. Will you hurry up and put some clothes on?" She ignored him and stretched out like a nude nymph. She cracked open a lid to see him watching her, his cock rising with unrepentant eagerness toward his flat stomach. "You asked for it."

Chapter Fourteen

Sex put Nick in the strangest of moods. He seemed almost wired. The pharmacist was a tired-looking woman who had probably heard this tale ten times over in the two hours the pharmacy had been open, but it wasn't made any better by his interjections.

“When did you have your last period?”

“About a week ago,” Gina said quietly, trying to see if Nick was listening in or not.

“Nothing different about it, heavier or lighter?”

“No, it was fine. Normal. Irritating. Painful. See-you-next-month kind of thing.”

“When was the last time you had unprotected sex?”

Ignoring Nick laughing behind her head, she said in a small voice, “Half an hour ago.”

“You’re welcome for that, by the way,” he told her. She put a middle finger to her mouth.

“And are you using any regular contraception?”

This was embarrassing enough without him making it worse. “We’re not going to need any if he carries on.”

“The lies, Georgina...”

The pharmacist shook her head slowly. "Right. Are you on any medication?"

"No," she replied distractedly. "What are you buying?"

Nick looked up from the lollipop stand and shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe those sesame snaps. They'll obviously taste like poo, but I'll give anything a go once."

She looked at him incredulously. "You realize you are completely retarded."

He sent her a mildly patronizing glance. "I love you too."

The pharmacist cleared her throat. "I'll get the pill for you. But you should speak to your GP and test for STDs as well."

Nick burst out laughing. "Now she's calling you a slag."

"I am..."

"Ignore him," Gina advised. She paid for the pill and nodded about the blurb on being sick and feeling a bit woozy after taking it only for Nick to announce, "Come on, let's go."

As they left, Nick tried to take her hand and she absolutely refused. "No way! I am not holding your...dude, seriously, stop it!"

"Why not, what's wrong with you?"

“I’m still mad at you! You know what, the only reason you’re still alive right now and haven’t had an Accra punishment of electric wire on your bum is all down to your tongue.”

Before the thugs had turned up on her doorstep, the only thing that had ever scared Gina was her dad's playful threat of an electric wire beating if she misbehaved.

“Electric wire, eh? So that’s how you like it.” He caught her around the waist and pulled her into his arms, her feet dangling in the air as he lifted her to his eye level. “You’re not mad,” he insisted. “Listen, I want you to think about something at work.”

“I bloody am mad.”

Nick gave her a look and she closed her mouth. “Stop talking for a minute. Let’s do a Microsoft. A one-month’s trial, you and me.”

“What will that do?” She frowned, bracing her hands on his shoulders.

“It will allow you and me and subject non mentionitis to coexist peacefully,” he answered patiently. “No wedding pressure.”

“But living together?”

“Yeah, of course that goes without saying.” He must have seen the doubt in her face and pressed a little harder. “You don’t need to wear the ring. And I’ll

electric fence my parents.” He brushed his mouth gently over hers. “Just think about it.”

She sighed. “All right, I’ll have a think.” She tapped a light beat to his shoulders. “I’ve got to go and take this silly tablet and flambé some filet mignon.”

“You’re pretty special. We’ll get you some help for that,” he murmured, kissing her on the forehead, then carefully released her until her feet were back on the ground. Suddenly she was loathe to let him out of her sight. His hand slid over hers, removing the engagement ring in a simple stroke. Her hand looked rather depressingly naked without it. He tucked it into his pocket and gave her a half smile. “Be safe.”

* * *

Gina had several near misses in the kitchens. All with knives. She liked to think it was to do with the pill, which made her feel more than a little queasy. The sous chef pulled her to one side. “Have you had a shag? Because that’s the only time you’re ever fucking useless on the meat station. It’s like you’re thinking about cock.”

“Piss off!” she growled.

“I’m switching you with Alan. You can’t hurt anyone on garnish.”

“This is such bollocks,” she raged. It was unfortunately true. She kept having rather vivid sex flashbacks, and it made her whole body tingle in a nerved echo of each orgasm Nick had drawn from her. Last night, she'd been on her knees on the bed, Nick's hands massaging her breasts as he'd commanded on a whisper, “Spread your pussy for me.”

“Oh God,” she sighed, squeezing her thighs together in an effort to calm herself down. Why wasn't she at home with him now? Oh yes—the unfortunate, unavoidable issue that he happened to be a violent thug. That problem would soon enough catch up with what he did to her body and how.

“Gina!” one of the waitresses called out over the noise. “One of the customers wants to see you.”

“Leave your weapons here,” the sous chef warned. She held up two fingers and tugged her hat from her head. There wasn't any way to make herself the least bit presentable; she looked like a shiny faced butcher. Ah well. “Where is he, Carly?”

“Table four.”

Stepping around the lunchtime guests, she saw who her customer was, and nearly made a Gina-shaped hole in the nearest window. Massimo Da Canaveze sat there, calmly drinking a glass of red wine.

“*Buonasera*, Georgina. Please sit with me for a moment.”

Jesus, Nicholas, where’s your electric fence?

“Let me just get my phone,” she said distractedly, edging backwards.

“He’ll find out later. He can’t do anything about it right now. Please. Just for a moment.”

She felt quite dirty in her kitchen whites, sitting on the pure white, Egyptian-thread-counted cotton-covered chairs. Massimo looked so effortlessly elegant, from his sharp grey suit down to his manicured hands. Facially he was a more jowled version of her Nick. *Stop thinking about Nick’s cock*, she warned herself. *Dammit*. Did Hallmark do a card that said *Sorry for fucking your son*? In her defence, Nick was knee-knockinglly incredible at it, and she had a weakness for defined abs on a man.

“How was Italy?” she croaked, trying not to imagine how his face would have contorted giving Mary Alice a backhanded slap so she skidded over their perfect marbled flooring.

“Productive,” he answered. “Then I return home to be enlightened with so much information. Apparently, I’m to expect not only a wedding but a grandchild.”

Gina’s jaw dropped. How long had she and Nick been holed up in his flat?

“Was I misinformed?”

“I...I just don’t know if your son will live long enough for either of those things to happen.” *Or you, if you carry on*, she added silently.

Massimo’s eyebrows rose. “At your hands or his own?”

Gina bit on her lip to shut herself up.

“Georgina, it didn’t come from Nicholas. I heard from...other sources.”

“Oh, well that’s good.”

Massimo took a sip of wine. “I would like to be happy for him. My only concern is if he does something that makes him look weak.” At her expression of confusion, he explained. “He has already made one mistake. Probably in his hurry to return to you.”

“What?” Gina asked slowly, her hands suddenly shaking with nerves.

“Ask him.”

“He won’t tell me,” she told him quietly.

Mistake, mistake, what mistake? The only logical mistake would be Nick not killing that Renaldo bloke. She used to think that a man killing for his woman was the ultimate gesture of passionate love. Then she’d come face-to-face with Mary Alice Da Canaveze.

“Maybe his other mistake.” Massimo sighed. “Do you want a drink, Georgina?”

“No thank you. I have to get back to work in a bit.”

He angled his head slightly to catch her eye. “I hope my wife didn’t upset you too much. I’m afraid she’s made our son extremely angry.”

Don’t bitch about your potential mother-in-law. “It’s not her fault,” she lied. “Nick should have told me ages ago.”

“Nicholas is her firstborn. She adores him so much he’s still five years old in her eyes. She wants to protect him still.”

Mary Alice was in no way her favourite person, and something about her little-girl-lost act really didn’t sit well with her. Given her recent behaviour, it would not at all surprise her if she’d prodded her younger son into raking up old dirt to get Nick to reassure her that of course he was still her baby, and no girl would ever come before her. Desperate actions of a desperate woman.

“And what do you want me to do?” she asked hesitantly.

“Just be a good wife.”

“You mean don’t ask questions?”

“Not at all. Mary Alice is my closest confidante. There are some things she understands more than I do.”

Wait, what? Then what the hell was that with the whole 'he'll tell you and you'll be terrified' bullshit?

Massimo smiled. "I see you're not convinced."

"Mrs. Da Canaveze phrased it a little differently. Like I should look the other way and keep schtum. Stick to the whole 'Nick deals with balance sheets, that's all and nobody will die otherwise' routine."

Massimo seemed to consider this carefully. "This time last year, there were many people ending their lives as a result of their balance sheets due to the crash."

"I'm sure they had a choice about it," Gina murmured.

"There are consequences for everything. A young lady in your condition should know."

The laughter in Massimo's crystal-blue eyes really irritated her. "Look, I'm not pregnant."

"Trust me, I have a sense about these things. You have never before refused a drink from me."

"I had plenty to drink last night, realizing my fiancé is like some super assassin."

"You're not thinking of the benefits." *Free Kevlar vests?* "A man who worships the ground you walk on. He is who he is, Georgina. If you really love him, you won't want anything more from him than that."

It was something her dad would say to her. She needed to leave. Now. "I should get back to work."

Massimo caught her hand. "I know you lost your father. I'd like to think that you could come and talk to me if you ever needed to."

Absolutely not. "That's...er, a really lovely thing to say. Bye."

He inclined his head and released her hand. "Thank you for listening to me."

Run, run, run. That same hand that just beckoned her to come and sit in his lap and tell him all her deep dark secrets had most likely shown Nick how to hold a gun and make sure he shot the person in the head for good measure. Maybe if she borrowed Nick's credit card she could leg it to Barbados. No Da Canavezes in the Caribbean.

It was all too much. She went to the bathrooms and threw up. "Much better," she sighed in relief, only to realize she must have thrown up the pill. She scrambled around in her handbag for the stupid little booklet which told her that if she'd taken the pill more than three hours ago then she didn't need to take it again if she was sick. It was going three in the afternoon now, just over three hours since.

Her phone started ringing, which scared the bejesus out of her. It was Mr. Possibly Over-Fertile Himself. "How are you, beautiful?"

Lie, tell the truth, lie, tell the truth? “Okay. Your dad rolled up.”

“I know. He's fucking sneaky. I'm sorry, my parents keep ambushing you. Let's go out when you come home. Cinema, dinner, bar, whatever.”

All of those things involved drinking, or some proximity with Nick, which pretty much guaranteed she would be thoroughly shagged out. “That sounds nice. Please go and buy condoms.”

She heard the smile in his voice. “Nice to know the trip to the pharmacy instilled some sense of responsibility in you.”

“You keep ending up in me,” she hissed irritably.

“You weren't complaining about it earlier. All right, fine, I'll buy some.”

She breathed out slowly. “Thank you.”

“Does this plan to buy contraceptives mean you've thought about a trial?”

“Not really,” she answered carefully. “You just made plans for tonight, so I just want to be careful. Plus I just spent twenty-five quid on the pill, and you can only take it once in a month so...so yeah. Sensible. Let's try that.”

“We'll do sensible. I'll see you back at the flat, okay?”

I could be pregnant. Your family freaks me out. I want to get the first plane to the farthest country

possible, but I want to take you with me. I love you. I love you. I love you. Any one of those could have done, but she couldn't say anything other than, "Okay, then. Bye."

"See you later."

She ended the call and closed her eyes. Mashing potatoes should distract her for a little while longer. Then maybe the sous chef would put her back on the meat station.

Chapter Fifteen

Nick checked his watch. Midday. Santori's time was up. A text trilled from his mobile phone. *Santori's cleared out. No sign of him.*

He sent a text back. *Make sure.*

He felt uneasy. He was far too used to being able to tie things up neatly in a nice little bow. Neat little bows usually meant underwater with lead pumped into the body to make sure it was properly weighed down. Disgusting, but being able to embalm a body couldn't be anything less than a skill.

He called his father. "Have you heard from Santori?"

"Is he still alive to be making calls to me?"

Nick rolled his eyes. "He's taken my offer."

"Then he should not call me. Now, your mother wants you and Georgina to come for Sunday dinner."

Nick nearly banged his head against the nearest brick wall. "Please, tell her it's not necessary."

"I've already spoken to Georgina, and I do not believe dinner would do any harm. She's going to be part of the family; she should join us as a family. Am I not right?"

As much as he wanted to tell his father no, it would make life easier if he wasn't trying to fight his family on the inevitable. "I'll think about it."

"Your mother will be cooking enough to feed five thousand. Come."

"I said I'll think about it."

"Good." His father sounded pleased. "We'll look forward to seeing you both."

He wasn't quite convinced, but the pressure was enough for him to do something. He spoke briefly to Gina, which put him in a much better mood, and he took himself off to Selfridges and bought her a dress. The salesgirl seemed intrigued that he was spending money on a dress that he obviously wasn't going to wear himself on secret days alone.

"It's sort of a sorry present," he explained.

The girl's brows rose. "I wish my boyfriend said sorry like that!"

He paid up and ran into Sofia. "Nicky," she drawled. "Why are you in here at this time of the day?"

"None of your business," he told her sharply.

She tried to peek into his bag and was edged firmly out of the way. "Oh, you're such a spoilsport. You can tell me if it's for Gina. I had to stick a huge plaster on Paul's face last night."

Nick snorted. "I'm sure he's fine."

"People will say I'm abusing him."

“You've been abusing his money for years. Abusing his face isn't a massive stretch.”

Sofia gurgled a laugh. “So harsh.” She eyed him curiously. “So what's Gina like in bed? Paul told me everything.”

“Your husband needs to learn to shut up. A quality you both need to learn.”

Sofia gave a mild shrug. “Fine, fine. Keep it all to yourself. For now. Come Sunday Gina and I will be like this.” She held up crossed fingers and made her way to the escalators. He wondered if Gina wouldn't mind emigrating. He hid the dress to spring on her at the last minute, as she would definitely try the “But I can't—I don't have anything to wear” skit.

He had a text a few hours later. *Passport used. RS has left the UK.* He didn't feel he could quite relax until Gina came home, untouched. At last she came rushing through the door. “Sorry, I was getting told off by the sous chef again. I'll be like...okay I'll be a half hour.” She didn't wait for him to reply, just disappeared into the bathroom. She padded back into the bedroom with just a towel wrapped around her frame. “I've just realized that I haven't got any clothes here.”

Nick looked up from his phone, where he was checking film times. “Probably a good thing. Not sure how Odeon would feel about nudity of the patrons.”

She looked at him contemplatively for a moment, then busied herself by tying the towel more firmly against herself. "Well...I could just...you know, stay here."

His stomach flipped over. "For how long?"

"You know a Microsoft trial is like two months," she argued.

He tried not to laugh. He couldn't quite believe she was negotiating with him about this. "Two months is a job trial."

"It's three months for a job, two for Microsoft. Two months is better. One month isn't enough time. Nothing could happen in a month, and I'd be lulled into a false sense of security." She twisted her foot into the floor awkwardly. "So... two months. Then we can have a little evaluation meeting and decide where we are."

He tucked his phone into his pocket and stood in front of her. "So you're staying? With no clothes?"

She rubbed her chin on her shoulder. "Well, I'd like to get the clothes I have. But you know, bring them here. If that's okay."

He wanted to touch her, but he was convinced this wasn't really happening. "Are you sure?"

She fiddled with the buttons on his shirt. "Kind of."

He eased her closer, the towel damp under his palms. "That's reassuringly firm decision-making."

She calmly started to undo the buttons of his shirt. "It's about as far as my brain will go at the moment." She eased the material from his body and pressed a light kiss to his collarbone, then his neck and finally his mouth. "I just want to be with you. That and food."

He flicked a finger over the knot in the towel and it completely gave way. No clothing was extremely advantageous. Anything that allowed him to explore her beautiful body at leisure he'd take without questioning it. "Don't get overexcited. We can deal with food later—let's just celebrate the trial."

He hooked an arm around her waist and swung her quite determinedly toward the bed.

Chapter Sixteen

“Please, please don't make me do this!” Gina begged. He had dropped the Sunday dinner bomb after she'd done a short lunchtime shift at the restaurant. “I want to relax. I want to watch *The Simpsons*. I want to watch presenters on TV that I could kill with my bare hands. I want to stay at home and eat mashed potatoes.”

“We'll bring mashed potatoes with us,” he suggested to her wail of despair.

“No, I can't do that. We can't do that. I can't go.”

“I'll give you a Taser, if that will make you feel better?” he offered, only half joking.

“No it won't! What would I wear? I haven't got all my things from the house.”

Nick waited quite patiently for her to go through all the reasons why she couldn't possibly turn up to his parents' house in jeans. “...bringing shame on my family regardless of the fact that they're no longer with us, and yours too. Best all round if I stay where I am and you say I'm still working. Or better, I'm just not well. Mentally, physically, take your pick.”

He retrieved the bag from underneath their bed. “I think this will help.”

She rubbed her temples with her fingertips. "You sneaky bastard."

"Not sneaky at all. I bought this all myself."

She grinned. "You're so gay. I've always known you're just a bumner. Are you going to wear this around the flat when I'm at work?"

"It's a little tight around the bust on me," he mocked. "Do you want to look at it first?"

"Gay," Gina taunted before removing the dress.

"I believe the phrase you're looking for is any of the following: thank you, I love you, will you please fuck me later," he drawled. She held the dress up against her body, then gazed at him in shock.

"You are so gay! This is bloody Vivienne Westwood! How did you even...?"

Nick selected a tie from his newly colour-coordinated drawer. Gina had organized it a few nights ago. She'd said she was bored. Gina bored scared him rigid. "I spend a lot of time imagining taking clothes off you, so it was just a matter of working backwards. You'll look hot in that dress and I'll enjoy removing it later."

"Gay," she concluded, laying the dress on the bed. "So I have to come to dinner now."

"Yup."

She wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing herself to his back. "Selecting option one. Thank you."

He chuckled as she kissed his back, then disappeared into the bathroom. He tugged on a shirt and simple blue-black suit as Gina emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of coconut fragrance and a strapless bra and hip-skimming panties. She slipped the dress over her head and rather disappointingly managed to zip it herself. It emphasized each and every single curve. It was going to be totally wasted on his parents. Maybe they should just stay at the flat and he'd amuse himself by taking the dress right off again. No...they really couldn't.

"It's a little on the clingy side," she mumbled, looking over her shoulder, biting her lip.

Nick examined her with a warm light in his eyes. "No it's not. You look insanely sexy."

She gave an embarrassed laugh before she finger combed her hair into a tousled up-do. "Yes, because looking sexy will really get your mum on side." He ran his finger along the back of her neck, the softness of baby curls at the top tickling him.

"You being there with a smile on your face will do enough. She's the one who needs to make an effort, not you. All right?"

She gave a sexy little shudder then pushed him away. "Stop that. And fine." He allowed her to finish dressing, tucked her into a coat and hustled her out of the flat, before she tried to handcuff herself to the boiler.

"Just for the record, you sexed me into this."

"Noted." He laughed, pressing a kiss to her mouth. He put Bob Marley's Greatest Hits on his iPod to make sure she was relaxed on the journey. By the time they arrived at his parents' home, "Buffalo Soldier" had her grinning from ear to ear.

Holding her hand firmly, he knocked on the door. He hoped his mother was going to behave herself. His gorgeous girl looked far too beautiful to have to deal with any nonsense from her future mother-in-law.

Mary Alice opened the door and smothered a reluctant Nick in kisses. She offered Gina a restrained smile. "Welcome," she said and gave her two kisses on the cheek.

"Can we come in now?" Nick asked, unable to remove the edginess from his voice. Mary Alice stepped hurriedly to one side. "Of course, of course, I'm being silly. It's just so lovely to see you, Nicky."

"Thank you for having us," Gina said, in a tone that told him she was determined to be polite.

Mary Alice inclined her head. “*Prego*. We're ready to start eating. Paul and Sofia are already here.”

Gina squeezed Nick's hand even tighter. Great—the one thing that would set her on edge even more than having to dine with his mother would be his sister-in-law. Whom he'd dated once or twice. Sofia was a wind-up merchant. She couldn't help herself. Not that Gina couldn't hang her by her tiny little ankles, but it was the last thing she needed.

The dining room table was laden with fine bone china, huge wineglasses and silver cutlery. Massimo was laying a pure white napkin on his lap, but got to his feet as Nick tugged a reluctant Gina into the room.

“Georgina, Nicholas!”

Gina gave a brave smile before accepting Massimo's kisses on both cheeks. Nick greeted his father in the same manner. “Well done,” his father murmured. “Your mother will be happy.”

Paul formally shook Gina's hand, and Sofia uncurled her long legs and gave Gina a modelesque hug. “Thank you,” she drawled in her smoky voice.

“What for?” Gina asked warily.

“Balancing out the male to female ratio.” Sofia sat back down again, turning an arched brow toward Mary Alice. “Are we eating, Ma, or just admiring your plate collection?”

Nick could have kissed Sofia. It would be a little like kissing a black widow spider, but if she was going to turn the focus off him and Gina, he'd take the risk. He gave her the slightest of winks, which Paul caught. Ah fuck, now his brother would be buzzing around him trying to decipher a meaning from it. Half the reason Paul had even married Sofia was to get one over on Nick. Not that he'd even minded, but Paul enjoyed the kudos of "taking" a woman from Nick.

Mary Alice gave Sofia a tight smile, then disappeared into the kitchen.

"You're looking very well tonight, Georgina," Massimo commented.

Gina looked startled at the compliment. "Thank you."

"Westwood?" Sofia guessed, trailing her perfect nails through her hair. "Good choice, Nicky."

Nick shook his head. "Why wouldn't you think Gina can pick her own clothes?" he asked, pouring out a glass of wine for Gina then one for himself.

Sofia swirled her own wineglass carelessly. "Because I saw you in Selfridges, that's why."

"Why didn't you say hello and compare labels?" Gina asked dryly, before draining half of it.

Nick caught her hand and brushed his mouth over her knuckles. "Just an hour," he vowed.

"I call bullshit on that," she muttered.

“Not in front of the parents,” he replied quietly.

Mary Alice emerged with plates of risotto.

“Porcini mushroom,” she advised. “Your favourite, Nicky.”

“I thought his favourite was Gina's Beef Wellington?” Sofia said with faux innocence, her eyes narrowing with unholy fire. “Have you been to Gina's restaurant, Paulie? Food is to die for...”

“You'd actually have to eat something first,” Nick retorted. “Has anything hit your stomach since 2000?”

Sofia gave him the naughtiest of looks before she took a sip from her own glass. “All meat, darling. How is business, Gina?”

“Busy,” she said shortly, looking into her risotto. The look on her face made Nick realize she was trying to figure out if it was drugged or not. Nick quite blatantly switched plates with her and started eating.

“I enjoyed the lemon sole,” Massimo said dreamily. “It was perfect.”

“The lemon sole is my favourite,” Gina admitted.

“Well, you all have good food right in front of you.” Mary Alice said archly. “Please eat.”

Paul ate determinedly. “This is good, Ma.” Arse-kissing twat, Nick thought.

Mary Alice turned to Nick. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Yeah, yeah. It's fine.”

Gina shot him a look out of the corner of her eye. Mary Alice's face tightened almost imperceptibly.

"It's fantastic, Ma." Mary Alice beamed immediately.

Paul frowned at Nick. "So you were shopping. Is that why you were ignoring my calls?"

"About what?"

He glanced uncertainly at Sofia, who started to laugh. "Oh please, you know I have cloth ears when it comes to business."

"Did you sort out the thing?"

"Christ, Paul, just ask me later. No shop talk at the table." His brother's face blushed with shame, his knuckles white as he gripped his fork. "Calm down," Nick warned.

Massimo nudged Gina. "I saved our chess game."

Gina gave him a suspicious look. "I know where all my pieces were."

"Are you accusing me of cheating?"

"Wouldn't put it past you," she replied.

Massimo gave a broad belly of a laugh. "You can show me after dinner."

Mary Alice ventured, "Gina, have you thought about what you would like wear to the wedding?"

Gina moved a mushroom from one side of the plate to the other. "Not really. We haven't even picked a date. We've only been engaged a few days."

Sofia smirked. "I'd plan everything now if I were you. That way, no one will feel the need to, er...assist you."

Nick rubbed a finger over his eye. "No wedding talk, please."

"Why?" Mary Alice said with innocent lightness. "I've been so looking forward to you getting married. I know Father Jonathan would be happy to see both of you for some premarital advice. And we must have an engagement party."

Gina said slowly, "Like I said, we only just got engaged. We haven't made any plans, party, church, dress or otherwise. We'd just like to spend some time together before being swallowed up by the whole wedding mechanism."

Paul sent Gina a frown. "You'll need to get started. It took us close to a year to arrange everything for our wedding."

Sofia chuckled. "Because we were trying to contend with the opinions of four other people, your parents and mine. You two take your time before marriage ruins everything."

Mary Alice looked mutinous. "Since we will be paying for the wedding, it would be nice to have an input."

"Since when are you paying?" Nick asked, not even bothering to mask his irritation.

"I just...."

"Assumed?"

Mary Alice breathed out, "Gina's mother isn't here, and I just want to help."

Nick was ready to do some damage with that, but Gina put a restraining hand on his thigh. "I do have other family members who know me pretty well and would be really happy to help me, if I needed it, which at the moment, with nothing being set in stone, I do not."

Massimo cleared his throat, and the room became quiet. "As Nicholas has asked for no wedding talk, there will be no wedding talk. Please. Let us change the subject."

Nick glanced at Gina, who seemed to have completely lost her appetite. She took another sip of wine and her hand, still at his thigh, contracted slightly. He laced his fingers with hers beneath the table. While the urge to protect Gina was intrinsic to him, he knew that she could more than take care of herself.

Dinner had been little less than excruciating, Mary Alice trying at every turn to remind Nick of Gina's failings—she wasn't Italian, she didn't have any family, she didn't really have any respect for the Da Canaveze family and the work they did... Nick, to Gina's infinite gratitude, cut his mother short at each attempt. When Mary Alice started a conversation in Italian with Sofia, Nick almost interrupted but Gina shook her head. Some sense of self-preservation told her that Mary Alice didn't need to know what Gina understood. She'd trip up eventually, and Gina would catch her out. When she'd made that crack about Gina's own mum, the fact she hadn't thrown the risotto in her soon to be dead mother-in-law's face was a testament to her strength of will and love she had for Nick.

Massimo noted that Gina was not eating her steak, which was so rare, Gina half expected it to start mooing on her plate and insisted that Mary Alice cook it in a manner that any guest would be able to eat. Nick compounded the disaster of the dinner by refusing the homemade ice cream in favour of a drink. Sofia protested that she was too full, adding, "Ma, you do make your food very rich. Some of us do want to keep our husbands happy."

Only Paul and Massimo ate the entire meal without complaint.

Gina offered to assist Mary Alice with the clean up and was ushered back into the living room with Sofia. Massimo called Nick and Paul into his study. Gina gripped Nick's hand imploringly only for Nick to say, "Five minutes then we're gone. You can handle Sofia."

Thank God Nick had bought her Westwood. No way she'd be in the same room as Sofia otherwise. The woman was, as always, decked out in designer gear head to toe. Paul's wife had to be one of the most stupidly beautiful women Gina had ever seen off the pages of a magazine. She had glossy chocolate-coloured hair that tumbled to her ribs, contrasting with cat-green eyes and a mouth that had to be surgically enhanced to be fair to mankind. The fact Sofia had dated Nick before she even looked twice at Paul did nothing to reassure her.

Gina sat down opposite Sofia and stared at her nails for want of anything to say to her. Sofia examined her as if she were a mannequin in a shop window. "You know, when Paul told me about you and Nick, I had no idea why he was so upset, other than the fact that every man in this family seems to be obsessed with you."

Gina squirmed in her seat. She had no desire to sit here with Atomic Barbie and take this rubbish.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Oh, don't be so defensive!” Sofia exclaimed.

“We're going to be sisters...when you sort out your jewellery. Where is your engagement ring?”

None of your business. “Being sized,” she lied smoothly.

Sofia saw right through that. “Being sized for the future or non-future, depending on how well you can cope with the Da Canaveze lifestyle? I don't know what the problem is; you're not seeing the big picture. Just think how much that little black number cost Nick. It's like pocket money. You could give up work in a while.”

“Stay at home, have babies, cut the coke vertically?” Gina mocked.

“And horizontally, but babies? Urgh, no.” Sofia gave a delicate shudder. “I have enough trouble looking after the one child in my life, and I'm married to him. The fact that he hasn't stopped sucking at his mother's tits since he left the womb doesn't help,” she added disparagingly. Gina wondered if Paul had any testicles left.

“Bloody woman, she's such a bitch. But I'm going to like having you around. You don't take any shit from her.”

“She's not scary. She needs to be chased by a grown woman who wants to shove boiled yam and palm oil in your face because you've had your first period. That's scary.”

Sofia laughed. “Amazing. I fancy a cigarette. Come outside with me?”

Before Gina could refuse, Sofia had taken her by the arm and dragged her outside. The vast garden was lined with thick, imposing apple trees. It was freezing, but Sofia took down chair cushions from the airing cupboard next to the wood porch and dropped them onto the bench. She turned on the outdoor heater and sat down. She tapped a cigarette into her mouth, touched a solid silver lighter to the end, then directed Gina, “Turn that light on there as well, please.”

Gina did as she was asked, then sat down on the bench. Sofia immediately cuddled up to her. “That light's not for light, but it runs interference for any idiot who thinks he can bug us. Did you hear of the Adams?” The Mafia of North London that no one had any clue about until they were caught and the father was sent down for twenty years. “Caught by bugs. If anyone trying to get a taped conversation listens back to whatever they think they're taping, they'll hear absolutely nothing. Do you feel better now?”

“About how far this all goes? No, of course not.”

Sofia blew the smoke away from Gina's face. "You're taking this all too personally. I think you've got enough to worry about with that witch of a mother-in-law."

Gina gave her a stern look. "She's your mother-in-law. At the moment, she's just my boyfriend's mother."

Sofia chuckled, the end of the cigarette lighting her green eyes. "You have no idea. A few years ago, Nick, Paul and I were out with a few friends. I can't remember the name of the girl he was going out with at the time, but she thought Nick was chocolate-covered Gucci. Anyway, he was pretty low about something or other, God knows, I think he and Paul had been doing a clear up. Dead bodies," Sofia added on a confiding whisper. "Then guess who he gets a call from? You, on holiday. And it's like the man has dropped acid, he goes outside to talk to you for fifteen minutes. In minus one weather wearing a t-shirt. To say that he's been in love with you since the dinosaurs walked the earth isn't exaggerating."

Hearing stories like this wasn't helping; it was putting further blocks on the pedestal she desperately wanted to get off of. How was she supposed to live up to the magical creature Nick thought she was?

“And the minute your name was mentioned, this girl, her face... Botox couldn't have cured that droop. All of us were miserable.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don't remember when we met, do you?”

“Yes I do, it was at that ridiculous bar, the one that the Royals keep falling out of now.”

Sofia gave a nod, puffing on her cigarette contentedly. “Fantastic bar. You were late, and everyone else had problems with the bouncers except you. You just waltzed in, with your see-through top and tiny jeans, and it was like the sound in the bar went up decibels. Everyone doubled their game because the competition was in the building. I was there with girls who were models and had just returned from P. Diddy's yacht, and they were giving you dirty looks as if you'd taken their next gig. You offered to buy me a drink. Girls hate me. Girls never buy me drinks.”

Gina didn't quite know where to look. “It was a drink, Sofia. I didn't offer you my firstborn child.”

“Close enough, darling. You were lovely, and utterly intimidating. You still are. That's why Mary Alice is so fucking threatened by you. Stupid bitch. Are you warm? Shall I get our coats?”

“No, the heater's doing the job. How can you possibly be intimidated by me?”

Sofia gave her a dry look. "Don't be so naïve! You're the complete opposite of everything Mary Alice wants for her baby, you're gorgeous, and you've been the most impossible standard of comparison for every girl Nick has ever looked sideways at."

"I'd say thank you, but..." Gina gestured to Sofia's lean body.

Sofia's laugh curled like the smoke of her cigarette. "You need to learn to take a compliment. And any you want to throw my way, feel free."

Gina gave a reserved laugh as Sofia curled her arm into Gina's, rubbing affectionately at the goose bumps the cold was leaving. "Can I ask you something?"

"But of course."

"What did Paul tell you when you first got together?"

"He didn't have to tell me anything. My family was so excited I was marrying a Da Canaveze, they couldn't care less which one it was. They've been desperate to be part of their little gang, and now they are. Favours galore. Mary Alice tried to give me this spiel about being frightened and not knowing what it was Paul does. So I said, if it's money laundering or drugs, darling, it's nothing I haven't seen since I turned fifteen." She extinguished her cigarette in one of Mary Alice's bougainvillea and extracted another.

“It's a control thing with her—she cannot fucking stand any female taking first place with her precious sons. Paul is still so conditioned by her she could tell him he's Jesus Christ and he'd start trying to turn water to wine. She's so manipulative. You know she had an affair, right?”

“Yeah, I heard.”

“And you know Nick went frigging mental when he saw Massimo hit her? She's been playing on that for years. *Nick, your father's scaring me. Nick, come and stay. Nick, don't move out.* But he's twigged when she's trying it and when she's telling the truth. It's Oedipal.”

Gina's heart sank. “You're not kidding.”

“She try the same with you? I wouldn't let her get to you—it's all bullshit. Like I said, it's all control with her.”

“So you don't care what Paul does?”

“Paul can do what he likes, as long as my Harrods card is paid up.” Sofia rubbed her ring finger in careless circles over her thumb, the cigarette burning slowly. “Like I said, you're taking it too personally. Would you be this pissed off if he was a traffic warden instead? It's a job, Gina. As long as he treats you well, you shouldn't give one.”

“Yeah, damn those morals.”

Sofia gave her a stilling look. "I'd cash those in if I were you." She adjusted the silk drape along Gina's shoulder. "You know better than anyone that life is brief. Why worry about things you have no control over?"

Ouch. "It's because life is brief that I shouldn't have to worry about things I do have control over. I don't have to be with Nick."

Sofia's perfectly groomed brow arched. "Hmm. Not sure your bow-legged walking compliments what you're saying. Mary Alice probably made it sound like a Roman Polanski film, but you get used to certain things. And sometimes, your husband will come home with things like this..." Sofia lifted her birdlike wrist and displayed an eye-wateringly beautiful bracelet.

"Sofia, you're not that materialistic," Gina said, seeing spots behind her lids from the light reflecting from the diamonds.

Her new confidante tucked her hair behind her ears to display matching earrings. "Oh, but I am. Shall we go back in?"

"One thing. Do you know who Mary Alice had an affair with?"

"Oh fuck yah!" Sofia laughed uproariously.

"Did you tell Paul?"

“And ruin my fun? Don't make me laugh. It's brilliant knowing that halo slipped because she wanted cock.”

Ladies and gentlemen, my future sister-in-law.

They went back inside to be accosted by Paul. “Were you smoking? Jesus, Sof, you know Mum hates it.”

Sofia cupped Paul's cheeks. “You know how much nicer I am when I smoke. Give me a kiss.”

Sofia touched Gina's arm. “I've stolen your mobile number from Nick. You and I are going to go out and bond and be very close. I don't care if you like that plan or not, it's happening. Come on, Paul, you can break in my new underwear.”

Gina wandered into the living room where Nick had his ankle braced on his opposite knee, jiggling with barely contained irritation. “I'm bored. Can we save this for a day when I'm under general anaesthetic? Good.” He caught sight of Gina and got to his feet. “Ready to go home?”

“Yes please,” she said gently.

Mary Alice leapt up. “At least take some food with you before you go.”

“We'll be all right. Funnily enough, we've had enough help from you.”

“Soprano,” Gina admonished. The corner of his mouth kicked up on hearing his nickname, and he carefully kissed her cheekbone.

Mary Alice's shoulder's sagged. “Nothing less than I deserve. Thank you both for coming.”

Gina stopped herself from saying anything else. She didn't trust a word that came out of that woman's mouth. They said their goodbyes, and Nick led Gina out to the car. “Could have been worse.”

Gina waited for him to unlock the door of his car. “I don't know...we were just missing Hitler at the other end of the table, claiming that I'm an abomination to the human race.”

Nick laughed. “I know who your fantasy dinner party guests would be. You'd rather have Britney Spears over Stephen Fry. So yes, it could have been worse.”

In the distance, a flash starred. “What was that?”

Nick glanced over his shoulder. “Piglets.”

Gina folded herself into the passenger seat and shut the door. “Yay,” she said dully.

Nick closed his car door and turned on the heating and ignition. “Don't worry. You look worlds apart from the girl in the chef whites.”

“I'm not flattered.”

He leaned over and squeezed her knee. “Let me get your dress off first.”

Chapter Seventeen

“I think you've broken me.” Gina laughed, her hands in her hair.

Nick placed a kiss on her tummy. “You started it.”

“Excuse me?!” she squealed. “All I said was hello, and we ended up here. God, my whole body aches. I can't go to work.”

His hand stroked along her thigh. “You're not going to get a promotion if you say you can't go in because you were fucked too much.”

“I think I have been.” She started giggling again.

“You can't handle what I've got,” he teased.

“No, I really, really can't. We need to do stuff that doesn't involve shagging.”

Nick sat up. “What?”

She turned her head toward him. “You don't want your knob to fall off. I'd like to be able to walk sometime soon. Let's find an alternative hobby.”

“Knitting,” he suggested dryly. She had a point. They'd barely been together a week, and it was as if they were trying to catch up on lost time with an infinite amount of sex. He wasn't complaining—she

felt so good around him. But a little break wouldn't kill them.

“Knit one, purl one.” She yawned.

“I'll call the guys. We'll get wankered instead.”

Gina's eyes widened.

“What's that face about?” he demanded.

“When you hang out with the guys, you usually end up at your mum's.” She met his gaze apologetically, “Sorry, just a bit...about her.” He wasn't surprised, and doubted her wariness about her mother would change any time soon.

“You know what she thinks doesn't change anything,” he reminded her.

She stretched out a hand and trailed the tips of her fingers over his bare chest. “Yes, but you do care what your friends think. I know you do.”

He felt strangely reassured by her concern, as he slid his arms around her. “You are so sweet. Nothing and no one will change my mind about you. Even if you are trying to put me off sex by talking about my mum and my mates.”

“We're not doing it for a bit, remember?” she muttered against his mouth.

“Nope. Can't recall that conversation at all.”

He called them all the next morning, to see if they could meet up. At their insistence, they would make it a poker night. Tony, who couldn't keep a

receipt to himself when it came to anything outside of business, had told them what he'd seen last week. He could hear the distance in all of them when he called. It made sense—he had been completely wrapped up in Gina. Beppe had smartly called it “the relationship equivalent to jail.” “I can't believe you're living together already.”

“Makes driving around with a hard-on less likely,” Nick replied sardonically. “Are you coming tonight or what?”

Mary Alice was absurdly pleased that she would be hosting the regular boys' night, and said she would bake a sea bream for them all. Their wariness wasn't helped by Mary Alice putting her two pence in, saying how shocked she was to find her son was engaged to his best friend who had no idea about his family. Then she tried to explain how she had apologized for telling Gina about the family.

“I'm not sure she can cope with it,” Mary Alice said, her eyes round with apology.

“Based on what?” Nick asked. “Your ambush?”

She sighed. “It's not my fault that you didn't tell her.” She looked around at his friends, staring determinedly at their cards. “What do you all think about this?”

Loyalty made Tony and Beppe shrug with indifference. Only Rocky blurted, “We didn't see it coming.”

“I'm his mother and I can't talk to him about it, so you boys please see if you can at least discuss it with him,” Mary Alice said pointedly, leaving the room.

Nick extinguished his cigar. “We're going to my flat next time. I can't take this bullshit anymore. I don't need to eat that badly.”

“She's got a point,” Tony said mildly. “One minute you're her friendly local neighbourhood stalker of a best mate, now you're getting married?”

Nick frowned. “What's the big deal—you all knew how I felt.”

“The deal is, what's got to change?” Beppe said.

“Who said anything's got to change?”

Rocky shook his head. “Everyone knows a pair of tits can pull a bloke faster than a Maserati. Are you going to be under manners, or will you still be you?”

Nick barely glanced up from his cards. “I'm here, aren't I? I'd obviously prefer to be in bed with my girlfriend, but I'm here, bonding with you knobheads.”

Beppe tutted, “It always starts this way. I know you're not like that, but we know this is a massive thing for you... But you've got no perspective when it comes to this girl.”

Nick extracted his phone. What was with the whining? What was wrong with everyone? He was freaking happy—why did this need to be an issue? God, his mother was such a fucking stirrer. “Gina?”

“Soprano, you owe me. Today has been like working after running a marathon. What's up?”

“Can you meet us in half an hour?”

He heard the frown in her voice. “What for?”

“Just at the Crown and Anchor,” he named the pub not too far from the flat. “Okay?”

“Who is us?” she asked carefully.

“Just me and the guys.”

She breathed out. “Okay. I'll see you there.”

“See you there.” He ended the call and got to his feet. “You want to do an evaluation on whether she's good for me or not? Off we go.”

“But...food!” Tony protested, as Nick pulled on his coat and tugged his phone and untouched cigars into his pocket.

“Food or friendship,” Nick advised. “Ma, we're off.”

Mary Alice came back into the living room.

“What do you mean? You haven't eaten!”

He sent her a brief smile. “As you've stressed the importance of my friends having an input in my relationship, we're going to straighten some things out now. See you later.”

They all piled into Rocky's four-by-four and arrived at the pub. Gina was there already, having cornered a table in front of the huge screen that was playing out a football match. She looked crazy hot, he thought with pride. Her hair in a messy ponytail, she was wearing a caramel-coloured jumper dress that dropped halfway down her thighs and warmed the colour of her skin, matched with boots that just capped her knees. She greeted Nick with a modest kiss, then gave each of the guys a hug.

“That nice boy behind the bar is bringing us all some Peroni and they were almost finished with food, but I've asked them to bring some pizzas. I didn't think you would have eaten already.”

Rocky gave Gina a kiss on the cheek. “Bless you, child.”

They sat down as the barman carried over the beers. He gave Gina an embarrassed smile before leaving the table. Tony's brows hit his hairline. “Was he flirting with you?”

“How else do you think I got a table and him to bring over the drinks?” Gina shrugged. “I do need a challenge now and again.”

Nick glanced at her disapprovingly. “You're so out of order.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. “What? You've sprung a 'meet my mates as my lady' night on

me!” She looked around at the guys. “Is he just this rude with you lot as well?”

“All the time,” Beppe clarified. “So what happened? As far as we all knew he was sleeping with your photo under his pillow.”

Gina laughed, then put her hands over Nick's ears, but he could still hear her. “I kind of started it. I've been after him since uni, but didn't think it would come over very well. We had a fight, proper fight, we had a bang, actually we had quite a lot of bangs and now we're together.” She lifted her hands from Nick's head and took a swig of her beer. They were all staring at her.

“What? Is it because I said bang?”

Tony laughed. “You've always been my favourite. More so now I've seen your boobs.”

Nick rubbed his forehead. Gina nearly choked on her beer. “Sorry about that.”

“No, no! Don't deny me my pleasures!”

Nick sent Tony a stern look. “You need to wipe that image from your head. Now.”

Tony mouthed to Gina, making motions to his chest, “Fantastic boobs.”

She tried to tamp down her mirth, turning her face into Nick's shoulder. “I said stop, Tony.”

Beppe said crossly, “How come Tony got to see? And what's worse, you never said a word!”

“It had meaning.” Tony winked. “Deep meaning.”

“Who was that girl you went out with?” Gina asked, interrupting what would have been Nick's threat to remove Tony's balls from his body. “That one with, like, enormous knockers?”

“Megan?” Tony seemed shocked that Gina remembered.

“Closet lesbian,” Gina confided.

The others roared with laughter at Tony's expression. “I say that with all honesty, as she told me that if I ever fancied a threesome, or twosome with just her and me, I should call her. I've got her number somewhere.”

Rocky turned toward her in sudden interest. “You kept it? Because you thought about it?”

Nick looked at Gina with new eyes. “I want to hear the answer to this.”

She warmly stroked a hand over his thigh. “Not going there, dude. I didn't want to be rude.”

“We can talk about that later, Miss 'You Know Everything about Me.’”

“Dude, come on, it was a one-off!”

Not convinced, he settled comfortably into conversation with them all. Gina asked questions not focused anywhere near the business. They laughed about films, the complete inability of the transport

minister to deal with snow in the UK so people could still travel, and the horror of the current prime minister. She even extracted a packet of cards. “As you were probably interrupted by his Lordship.”

She kept the flow of beer going due to her friendliness with the barman, who was barely old enough to be serving drinks. He was suitably intimidated that she was surrounded by four men who looked like they could each take a limb home to hang on their mantelpiece. They took turns outside to enjoy the remnants of their cigars.

Rocky was looking at his cards and said in Italian without even thinking, “I wouldn't mind another beer.”

Gina stood up, replying in Italian without a second thought, “I'll get you another one.”

The table went quiet, and then Tony started clapping. “Full house, Nicholas! You didn't drop that Gina had that little skill in her back pocket.”

Nick looked up at Gina. “You managed to keep that secret for all of one hour.”

She pointed at them. “Do not tell anyone else.”

Beppe eyed her carefully. “Like who?”

“Just don't. It was a slip. Caused by five beers.” She wobbled toward the bar.

The guys stared at Nick, who placed down his cards. "Straight flush. And seriously, keep that to yourselves."

"No," Rocky held up his hands, "We get it. Cooks like your mum, speaks Italian, loves sex."

Gina brought over a tray of shots. "Lookie what I got!"

"And an alcoholic," Tony added. "What else could you ask in a bird?"

The pub closed at half eleven, but none of them seemed to want to end the night there. Gina slipped her arms around Nick's neck. "You know where we need to go? Sun Lounge."

"The strip club?" he echoed.

"Yeah! Do you remember my friend Gabby? The one who moved to Greece about two years ago? She used to work there."

"Why would you keep things like that from me?" Nick asked, utterly stunned.

"Didn't really seem something I wanted to talk to you about. Besides, you were dating this girl who was such a strict Catholic, I don't know how she ever forgave herself for getting into bed with you. I felt dirty just thinking about a strip club. Shall we go?"

Tony drained his beer. "I'll drive."

"I'd like to see my next birthday," Rocky said dryly.

They called a taxi to take them to the East End where the club was. Gina jumped out first and gave the bouncer a hug, then waved them all inside the club. Rocky murmured to Nick, "If you don't marry her, I will."

Nick just shoved him firmly out of the way and followed Gina inside. They settled themselves at a table in the back of the club and ordered another round of beers. They were all heading into slurred territory. Gina had an arm around Beppe's neck as she explained, "It's like, you know... Don't you, you know."

"Nah, I do. And you're a nice girl. He loves you a lot."

"He adores you guys. You know how much he values your op... 'Scuse me." She hiccuped. "Opinion. You've probably saved each other's lives back and forth a billion times."

"You know that's not all of him, right? It doesn't define him. He's more than just a Da Canaveze."

"I do. He's my boyfriend," she sing-songed. "Thanks, Giuseppe. I'm really glad he has you for a friend."

"G, that's..." Beppe couldn't seem to speak, and he hugged her instead. "You had me at strip club."

Nick thought it was hilarious. It never crossed his mind that she wouldn't be able to fit in with them or they wouldn't be reminded just how fucking cool

she was. Gina released Beppe and tilted her face into his view. "Hello."

"Hello," he answered warmly. Her pupils were hugely dilated, the smallest fleck of mascara underneath her eyes. He carefully flicked it away before he touched his mouth to hers. She kissed him back harder, and he tasted lime on her tongue only to hear the guys groaning in the background, "Take it home, you two!"

He lifted his head, pulling Gina into a cuddle. "Shut up. I'm allowed to kiss her."

"Loo," she proclaimed, climbing over Beppe to get out from the table.

"Your woman's hot," Rocky stated.

"I know," he tried and failed not to sound smug. "And you were all, what now?"

"Wrong," they echoed obediently.

A few minutes later, they heard the stage announcer say, "And returning to the stage for a one-off performance, Lady George."

Nick turned around to see Gina just wearing her underwear and her boots grinding against a pole, her dress a heap on the floor. Tony scrambled in his pocket for his wallet. "Tenner she gets her tits out."

Nick grabbed their coats, pushed his way through the crowd, picked up her dress and plucked Gina from the stage to a chorus of boos. The bouncer

who had let them in asked mildly, "What are you doing?"

"Retaining some dignity," he answered. "I'm taking her home."

Gina slapped Nick's bottom from her upside-down position on Nick's shoulder. "I did this with Gabby! Needed to drink first, though..."

"I don't care." He headed for the backstage exit, walking through the corridor where other girls were getting ready for their set. He put Gina on the floor and thrust her dress at her. She pulled it back over her head, ruffling her hair further.

"What?" she cried at his furious expression. "No one even saw nipple." She gave him a naughty little grin. "Are you being possessive? Besides, now it's even and all three of the boys have seen my lady lumps."

"I didn't want any of them to see anything!" he roared. He pushed her out of the back door, to a quiet car park. Gina was still laughing. "Are you jealous? It was only once or maybe twice. I didn't do any lap dances." She went on her tiptoes and bit into his bottom lip. "I didn't let anyone touch me anywhere inappropriate."

He couldn't help feeling stomach-clenchingly furious imagining a bunch of drunk fuckers seeing Gina doing the sort of striptease she'd done for him, then going home and tossing off over her.

“Don't be mad,” she whispered, pulling his head down toward her. “If it makes you feel better, I only did this because it was good to feel attractive. Being secretly in love with you hurt sometimes, and being half naked on stage with men being impressed with my lady lumps sort of helped.”

He couldn't quite fathom her feeling the need to strip to cope with her feelings for him. But she was gazing at him with such open sincerity.

“I'll only strip for you. Promise, Caveman Joe.” She stole her arms around his neck and lifted her face to his. “Am I forgiven for being a visual slut?”

Her pout made him grin. “All right, Demi Moore. Let's go.” He frowned down at her. “Do you have a record of every girl I ever went out with?”

She struggled into her coat. “You always forget, I had to make nice with them while they were talking about how good you were in bed. A wonder I didn't become a full-on lap dancer to cope.”

“Okay. How many times did you do this?”

“If your next question is how many men have I slept with, we won't have to worry about the too much shagging thing.”

“You will,” he warned.

Chapter Eighteen

It was a Sunday evening, and thankfully there was no obligatory attendance at the Da Canaveze household for a family dinner. Instead, they had the opportunity to sit down together and discuss the practicalities of their relationship. She wasn't sure whether she should be calling her bank and her mobile phone provider to send all her bills to Nick's flat instead. It felt...almost too permanent. Nick made it worse by wanting to put her name on the flat. "Say what now?"

"Just in case anything happens to me." Her face froze in horror. He went on to explain. "It's because we're not married. I don't want there to be any problems. We hold it as joint tenants, you get the flat and you can do whatever you need to with it. Worse comes to worst, you can just sell this place. I'll send the information to my solicitor."

"I was thinking I should rent out Dad's place," she said carefully. "It'll give me some cash."

Nick looked sceptical. "Well, no one's going to want a short-term let."

She looked down at the list of things they were supposed to be organizing and started doodling. "It

may encourage someone to buy it. At least it will be an income so the other bills are paid.”

“It’ll be harder to get them out when you do get a buyer...”

“Not necessarily.”

“It’s a big place, more likely you’ll get families interested who won’t want to wait for you to kick out a bunch of students.”

Gina lost her temper. “All right, look, stop. Stop telling me what to do.”

“Don’t play nursery school,” he said. “You need to learn to talk to me.”

She did a double take. “Oh, I’m sorry, what do you do for a living again? Remind me.”

He gave her a look under his lashes. “I spend most of my time making you scream about the second coming of Christ.”

Gina burst out laughing. “You’re such a knob.”

“You’re laughing because it’s true.” She breathed out and got to her feet. She eased herself onto his lap and wrapped her arms around his stiff frame. Sensitive little cookie, she thought. “I’m sorry for being a cow. You know I’m touchy about this stuff.”

“Hmm,” Nick murmured. “I know you are. You don’t have to deal with it by yourself anymore.”

She didn’t feel any less scared that she would become so reliant on him, she wouldn’t be able to do

anything without his approval first. Then what would happen to her if she did lose him?

“Will you let me at least pay the other debts? Gina, come on,” he argued as she opened her mouth. “One less thing for you to freak out about.”

“I don't want to be some helpless fifties housewife,” she mumbled, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt.

Nick gave a sigh that told her he had probably rolled his eyes. “I'd like this to not interfere with my day job. What do you need—a contract, payment plan, want me to take it out of your pay?”

She couldn't help the tension that raised her shoulders. “I just don't like it. You bring money into a relationship and it goes horribly wrong. Previous experience, dude.”

He made her look at him. “It's not about money. It's about your peace of mind, which is more important. Okay?”

She breathed out slowly. “Okay.”

“Good.” He gave her a soft kiss, then leaned over the table and crossed through the things on her list. “I'll do you an invoice, like you did a catering job for me, and pay up. How much is on the credit cards?”

“About six grand between three,” she admitted.

“Fine. And the mortgage?”

“Thirteen hundred every month.” Her shoulders sagged thinking about the amount of money that would be coming out of her account in a few days.

Nick pressed a kiss to her neck, his arms tightening around her waist. “I’m proud of you.”

She laughed. “What, that I didn’t end up on the game?”

“Yes, I’m proud that you didn’t turn to prostitution,” he said dryly.

“I know what you mean. Thank you.” She leaned down to touch her lips to his again. “Okay, council tax.”

She didn’t like him paying for anything, but she didn’t want to fight with him over it. Everything else between them was going so well. She adored living with him, despite his little habits and his need to have things in the bathroom cabinet lined in order. She didn’t understand why that didn’t stretch to colour coordination in his wardrobe. There would be days when they would only see each other in the crossover of the night—she would just come home as he would be on his way out, or she was getting up to go to work when he would be coming home. She loved nights when he would wake her up with kisses scattered over her body, so they would end up making love. Or she’d go to bed alone and she’d wake up in the morning and find herself cuddled against him, anchored to his

chest. She couldn't help herself; she looked for new scars on his body, blood on his clothing and didn't find a thing. The only thing that made her slightly edgy was when he'd climbed into bed at some ridiculous hour of the morning and she'd smelled something like acetate. "You smell weird," she'd mumbled. He'd jumped straight out and into the shower.

When they were together her whole body ached with need. Their only disagreement was the use of contraceptives. He'd tried to talk her into going on the pill when she was riding the arc of an orgasm, reminding her how much better it felt for him to be inside her without the barrier of latex, sliding his uncovered cock along the length of her drenched pussy. "We. Can't," she gasped.

He gave her two deep thrusts, his mouth on her ear. "Yes, we can."

She put her hands on his hips and firmly wriggled from underneath him. "They're just here." Nick rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "Why are you so weird about it? Is it because it means thinking beyond two months?"

"No... There's two of us. We don't need three. Whatever happens."

She crawled over to him. "Soprano, it's nothing to do with the trial. But we don't need to take any

more chances, right? You can come anywhere else you like...”

It worked well enough to distract him from what she was anxiously waiting for. A freaking period. Her periods could set Swiss watches. She discretely used the calendar on her phone while she was in the bathroom, the one place in the flat where Nick respected her privacy.

“Love you,” he'd said, “don't need to see you pee.”

She had a period so light it was non-existent. She marked a calendar with a big red “x” to remind Nick to steer clear for a few days unless he wanted to be killed. She wanted to blame the morning-after pill, but a twist in her gut told her she had reason to really start worrying.

She went into Boots and bought a pregnancy test, her face flaming with shame as the cashier turned the packet over for ages looking for the barcode. She could just hear what he was thinking: *Someone's been careless...* No kidding. A friend had told her years ago that a woman could still have periods and be pregnant. She'd thought it was an urban myth, but...the way her luck ran, it wouldn't surprise her.

She'd taken the test to work and put it to use in her first available break.

Please be negative, please be negative, I don't want to be scared about anything else. Please be...

Her hand was shaking so much when she turned the test over. Big digital letters told her how futile her insistence on condoms had been. "Well...well fuck it sideways."

The most expensive thing she'd bought in about six months was going to cost her even more. She'd known from the first night they'd had sex that he'd knocked her up. She'd spent the last fourteen years of being sexually active trying not to get pregnant, then Nick Big Knob made her come like a steam train and she let him inside her without any protection whatsoever. And she was still holding a stick she'd peed on. Wrong. She dropped it into the sanitary bin and left the toilets. She looked at herself in the mirror. She didn't look any different. Just stupid. "Stupid, stupid girl."

It put the condom issue to bed. All she had to do now was tell Nick. She didn't quite know how to feel about it. It wasn't a massive disaster, as she couldn't see Nick disappearing into the horizon on finding out, but...it completely invalidated the trial. Though the trial didn't often cross her mind, she liked having the door open for her to go if she needed to. But with a baby? No door. No exit. Da Canaveze forever.

She just needed to tell him. Then maybe she could start coming to terms with it.

* * *

She baked. It was an unconsciously motherly thing to do, but what else could she do? It was the best way to tell Nick without bursting into tears because it excluded the need to speak altogether. She twisted her hair into a knot at the back of her head and put on a strapless prom dress that would definitely not fit in a few months' time and four-inch heels. She set the table and just as she was lighting the candles, Nick walked in.

His expression asked instantly, *What's going on?*

"Evening," she murmured, lighting the candle on the table. "Are you around for longer than half an hour?"

He removed his coat. "Sounds serious."

She put down the lighter and touched the tips of trembling fingers to the tabletop. "Not really. Do you want a drink?"

"Er...okay. There's a half-finished bottle of wine somewhere." She held up a bottle of red. "That'll do it."

He sat down at the table for Gina to stroke her hands over his hair. He leaned his head back and

pouted at her. She obliged him and pressed her lips to his. "That's better. What's cooking?"

She gave a nervous laugh. "Buns?"

"In the oven," he finished with a grin. When she didn't answer, he turned slowly in the chair. "You've got buns in the oven?"

She chickened out. "Twelve, yeah. Cherry and macadamia nut." She turned toward the oven and resisted the urge to bang her head against the counters. "I think they're ready."

She removed them from the tray and placed them with a hesitant flourish on the table.

"Congratulations, Sir Sperm-a-lot." She held her breath as he read.

Each bun had a swirled italic letter that spelled out 'I am pregnant' with one exclamation mark. He threw his head back to laugh uproariously. "You are brilliant!" She found herself lifted into the air, Nick's arms tight around her waist.

"You worked really hard at knocking me up," she said, confused by his happiness. He stopped swinging her around and arched backwards to catch her eye.

"Wait, wait! Don't you want this?"

She held her fingers up a few millimetres apart. "Little bit freaked out."

"You're such a fake claustrophobic," he taunted, hooking his hands just under her bottom. "Why do you

need a door open at a crack so you can leg it at the first opportunity?”

Her mouth dropped open in indignation, and she slapped his shoulders with her hands. “How dare you? I baked buns! That's a very committed thing to do.”

“I mean you and your need to leave before anyone else does.” He gave her one of his looks, which made her uncomfortably aware of just how well he knew her. “What are you thinking?”

She dropped her forehead against his. “I'm thinking, what about the trial? What about getting married? What are you going to do with my body once it gets all out of proportion? What do we do?”

He set her down finally. “Okay, I'll tell you what I think, then you can worry about pulling on your trainers for a jog, all right?” She nodded and looked up at him, expecting some words of wisdom. “I think you and I will have the most adorable baby in the world.”

What? “That's it?”

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “That's all that matters. That and I love you. Everything else can come second.”

She felt a shiver pass over her skin at his words. “And you don't want to get married?”

He sighed gently, then dug into his pocket. There was her engagement ring.

“You're still carrying that around?” she said in awe.

“Well, I was going to throw it down the nearest drain, you mardy bint, but I changed my mind,” he said drolly. “Of course I still have it. I can't think of anything more perfect than you being my wife and having my baby. That's everything I've ever wanted.”

She felt tears prickling at her throat. She really didn't deserve to be loved like this at all, especially not by him. Her eyes traced over his features, from the slight wrinkle between his brows, the intense blue of his eyes, along the straight slope that was his nose and down to his full mouth. “I get to do this a lot,” she threatened him thickly, as his face started to blur. “I just want to make you happy. And I'm scared that if we get all hopeful it'll go tits up.”

He nodded solemnly. “Okay, we'll just take it a day at a time.”

In that moment, she didn't quite understand what she was so wary about. She wanted this, she'd wanted this for years, Nick, a baby, a home with a stripper pole in the bedroom... Whatever else came with it was the devil's deal, but she'd take it. The idea of walking away from him would never make sense. “Nah,” she said decisively. “I want the ring back.”

He tried not to smile and failed miserably. “Materialism is not what we'll be passing on to our

progeny.” He cupped her face and gave her such a sweet kiss, she felt her tears bead over his thumbs. “You’re here, you love me, that means I’m happy. You don’t need to do anything else.”

“Dude...” Her voice broke, and she wrapped her arms around him so tight her arms ached almost immediately.

“Fair warning, you start wearing big collared floral tents, we’re finished,” he said over her head.

“Oh come on! How can you not find that sexy?” she croaked, sniffing until she found her composure. She pulled back and held out her hand expectantly.

“Yeah?” he asked, eyebrows almost by his hairline.

She hurriedly wiped her cheeks before holding out her hand again. “Do it.”

He went down on one knee, the ring hovering by her fingertip. “Georgina Robinson, my poor beautiful knocked up little gangster’s moll. Will you be my wife?”

“Yes, I will be your wife, Nicholas Da Canaveze.” Even she couldn’t deny the pleasure in his eyes as he slid the ring onto her finger. Now that felt better. Much better. That he didn’t make a comment when she leaned over to turn off the oven before easing herself back into his arms was better than any declaration of love he could have made. Almost.

Chapter Nineteen

They went to the doctor together, and he gave them a due date and advice on diet. Gina wanted to bang her head against the nearest brick wall. “No feta cheese, what the fuck!” As Nick practically howled with laughter, Gina fought irrational tears. “This is your fault. You and your fucking sofa.”

They made a pact to keep the pregnancy as quiet as possible until they reached the three-month safety mark. As the doctor had rather insultingly pointed out, her age placed her in a category where miscarriage was more likely. “It's what happens when you get knocked up as a grandma,” Nick said with such a deadpan expression Gina would have grabbed the nearest needle to push under his fingernails. See how he liked that torture. Even though they tried to not be excited, they separately caved and bought things. Nick came home first with a tiny t-shirt that had “Funky Little Dude” printed on it.

“Is this all you or what?”

“We're not supposed to get overexcited!” she told him crossly. He nodded toward her bag, badly hidden under the dining table.

“I'm guessing that's not a new bread maker.”

“I got it for you,” she explained defensively.

He removed the t-shirt from the bag. It had a pram printed on the dark blue material. “Drive it like you stole it. Funky little dude is screwed.”

If getting together with Nick had made her itch to talk to someone, being pregnant really made her antsy. Nick had no idea, but she woke up in the middle of the night feeling nauseous, and instead found herself in tears in the bathroom, thinking how much she would have loved to have called her mother or her dad to tell them they were going to be grandparents. She felt the pull to her family so badly she made an odd decision.

Nick pressed his chin into Gina's shoulder.

“What's all the food for?”

She cleared her throat. “I'm going to do something almost as silly as getting pregnant.”

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Highly unlikely. What?”

She hesitated before blurting, “I'm going to see my aunt.”

She felt him still. “Really?”

“Mm, Belinda.”

Nick chuckled. “Christ. Enjoy that.”

“You know when you're out of London and you miss the sarcasm, and the smell, and the attitude? I feel like that about Ghana right now. And short of

getting on a plane, going to Thornton Heath is the next best thing.”

“I get it.” He gave her another understanding kiss. “How will you get there?”

“Bus it,” she answered, nodding to the bags she used to transport hot food.

“People are going to curse you from here to Boris Johnson's balls.”

She gave him a persuasive grin. “You could come with me...? Help your pregnant fiancée?”

“Yeah, nice try. Take a taxi.”

“I like the bus. Me and my fish sauce and my Jilly Cooper will have a bloody good time, you just watch me.”

He watched her for a moment, waiting for the trick. “Okay, I'll drive you, but I am not coming inside.”

“Coward,” she taunted.

“Not what you said the other night.”

“A girl will say anything when she's tied up.”

Nick did drive her, but told her to call when she was done and he'd drive her back to the flat. Belinda lived in Thornton Heath, in a flat that seemed to be overflowing with lace. “Eh Araba!” Belinda crowed upon seeing Gina. “What's all this?”

“Parava sauce and boiled plantain,” Gina offered with a smile. Not that Belinda would appreciate it, but

she had gone to the fish market ridiculously early, pissing Nick off at the same time, just to make sure she had the right snappers in the sauce.

“You are a good girl! Come inside.” She ushered Gina into the flat. Belinda had been busy with lace doilies.

“It's probably cold now, but I can heat it up if you're hungry?”

“Yes, yes, let's eat. *Braa*, give me the heavy one. I will take it.”

They heaved the pots together into her aunt's kitchen. They fired up the hob, and the plantain was shoved into the microwave to reheat. Once they had stopped messing around with the food, Gina felt Belinda's sharp eye on her. “What?”

“Don't what me, what is this rudeness! You haven't called me.”

Gina eased herself into a chair at the dining table as Belinda stirred the sauce with hefty arms. “It's been...a little crazy recently.”

“What is crazy?”

Gina winced and ventured carefully, “I'm, er...getting married.”

“Ah!” Belinda gave a yell of excitement and crushed Gina between her hefty breasts. “That's so wonderful!”

Gina tried to extract herself, but it was rather nice being embraced by someone who felt like marshmallow and smelled like doughnuts and Chloe perfume. “Eh, your daddy would be so proud! What's his name?”

“Nick.”

Belinda put Gina to one side. “That white boy who came to the funeral?”

“Well, yes, he is white, but he does also have a name.”

“Mm-hmm.” Belinda's mouth contorted into a suspicious twist. “Are you having a baby?”

“Er...”

Belinda shook her head. “Silly girl. What is wrong with you young people? Why can't you wait? Why do you have to have everything now now now? What for? *Makaachreo*. Your father would not be happy.”

“Aunty, please, that's not fair.” There was the father guilt trip. How would she know—maybe her dad would be really happy for her. Her dad had been getting to the stage where he was wondering if she would ever settle down, telling her that by the time he was her age, he was married and she was three years old.

“I'm not going to tell you any *bagaya* business that it doesn't matter. I'm telling you it does matter. It

always matters.” Belinda turned back to the sauce and turned off the heat. She slammed the plantain back into the microwave and shook her head again. “I don't know. I will have to speak to your uncle Frederick and get everyone together for customary rites.”

Oh. Sweet. Jesus. No. “We don't need to do that,” Gina begged weakly.

“No, you don't come here to tell me this nonsense then refuse to do what you need to.”

“We really don't need to.”

“Georgina Robinson, God forgive me if I am lying, but you do not know what will happen to you if you do not do what is right. Silliness.” She ladled the sauce and plantain onto two plates and put one in front of Gina, who had spots of fear dancing in front of her eyes. She hated the whole customary rites thing. She'd come here for a little advice, something as close to maternal as she would ever get, and instead she was being bullied into an archaic tradition she had no time for. Here, take my daughter in exchange for yards of material and alcohol. Congratulations! You're practically married.

“Aunty, I'm not sure if...”

“You will do things right. Do you want hot pepper?”

Gina shook her head tiredly. “No, I put enough pepper in the sauce.”

How much fun would customary rites be? Uncle Frederick would be sniffing the whiskey to see if it was “proper.” Belinda would wrinkle her nose at the lace. There would be Massimo figuring which one of them to strangle first, and Mary Alice would definitely mutter about what her precious son was marrying into. Paul would feel infinitely superior. If Nick still wanted to marry her after all of that, she would never ever say another word about the “business” again.

Belinda dug into the plantain and sauce. “Mmm, very good. Now I will tell you where to go. Those shops only.”

“Fine,” Gina replied despondently.

“You are like that girl, what was her name? The one who was pregnant before she could barely walk?”

“Nancy? She was sixteen!”

Belinda was now in full flow. “You know she couldn't even have the baby christened at church. The vicar said, 'Eh eh. You're not married, you don't know who the father is...' How she even had the cheek to step into a church, I don't know.”

“Aunty,” Gina started determinedly.

“Why do you want to make your family look bad again?”

Gina looked up from her plate. “What do you mean, ‘again’?”

"You remember your Uncle Kojo? Died from liver disting..."

"Failure," Gina assisted.

"Ah heh. Drank himself to death, eleven children, five different mothers."

"Really?" Gina's brows rose in interest. This was far more intriguing than being berated and compared to a sixteen-year-old who got pregnant in the drive-through of McDonald's.

"Then your cousin Felicia. She was with a married man for thirteen years. And he still left her for another woman. She gave him three babies. Then the worst one. Thomas. Kojo's older boy. He's still in prison. You know what for? Drugs."

Gina's mouth opened. "Er...what? Prison?"

Belinda gave her a look over her glasses. "Why don't you know this?"

"Because my dad was not a gossip," Gina said sternly.

"It's not gossip. It's your foolish family. I'm telling you no one knew a thing until his mother called me and said he's going to prison for fifteen years. The signs were all there. I never liked that boy."

Now you don't. You liked him well enough when you were boasting that he sent you to Ghana for free.

"Maybe they didn't want people to know. It's not something to advertise."

“Especially not the girlfriend. She kept her mouth shut. Enjoying all the money.”

Gina felt sick to her stomach. Maybe she was finally experiencing morning sickness. “She's not in prison as well, is she?”

“No, no, she said to the police she didn't know a thing. I think she's lying, but the police had nothing to prove she did. She lives in Cheam with their baby. Only tiny baby with daddy in prison.”

Well, there was a nice glimpse into her future. She wondered if they still did cavity searches on visitors? “Let me give you some advice. Just because you are a big woman, it does not mean you don't need help.”

“I thought you said people should keep their relationships private.”

“Asking for help is not the same thing as telling the whole world your business,” Belinda corrected her. “A baby is a lot of work, believe me. Do you think his mother will want to help?”

If Mary Alice didn't want to put her paws on their baby, it would be a blessing in bright shining divine lights. “Probably.”

“Hmm. We'll see.”

Gina was very tired. She couldn't argue any more about her family honour. “Aunty, please do me a

favour. Don't tell anyone I'm pregnant. Please. It's really important.”

“Who am I going to tell?” Belinda was immediately affronted.

Gina gave her a dirty look. “I don't know, maybe every Ghanaian in London!”

Belinda kissed her teeth. “You're too rude. You're lucky your father isn't here to see such nonsense.”

“Please, Auntie. It's really early, and I don't want to have to tell the whole world if something goes wrong.”

Belinda watched her carefully, then shrugged. “I'm not going to tell anything to anyone, I've told you. Finish your food. I have some doughnuts for you as well.”

Forgetting how much fat was in those doughnuts and how she didn't want to cause any more offence, she noted that the world hadn't caved in on itself and someone else knew that she was up the duff. *All right, Da Canaveze, we're good to go.*

Chapter Twenty

Gina woke up on her own. She'd been sleeping for ten hours. She turned to look for her phone and found a text from Nick. *Good morning, or afternoon depending on how lazy you feel today. Call me when you're conscious. X*

Cheek. What she really needed to do today was speak to the new estate agent about the house. There had been a few offers, and rather than call them back she'd been trying not to think of anything at all. It was much easier that way. The house phone rang, and she struggled out of bed to answer it. As long as Nick had taken back the flat key from his mother, there was no chance anyone was going to walk in on her naked.

“Hello?”

“No self-imposed imprisonment today,” came Sofia's drawl. “Now you're out from underneath Nicky, you can come and have lunch.”

Was this punishment for not suffering from morning sickness? “Er...”

“Don't stall. Just put on some clothing and I'll be at the flat in half an hour to pick you up. No excuses.”

“Sofia, I have things to do...”

“Haven't you had enough sex? Half an hour.”

The line disconnected. She was never going to get used to being ordered around by Da Canavezes. It was not on. She called Nick just after she showered and pulled on clothes.

“Dude, what is with your family?”

“Who's called you now?”

“Sofia's dragging me out for lunch. Worst of it? I can't sodding drink.”

Nick was obviously trying to control his amusement. “She's much better when she's drunk. Keep the champagne on standby. Are you meeting her somewhere?”

“No, she's coming to pick me up. Is this what it's like for royalty? 'The eagle has left the nest' and all that crap.”

“Possibly. Make sure she drops you back as well. Endure it,” he said over what would have been a four-letter protest, “just so I don't worry about you being elbowed on the tube.”

“I am always doing you favours!”

He gave a warm chuckle. “You know I make up for it, though. I'll see you tonight.”

She ended the call and changed her outfit. Knowing Sofia, they'd end up somewhere utterly unaffordable. Exactly half an hour later, Sofia was calling from her car. “Downstairs, please!”

“Whatever you like,” she intoned. She made a mental note to watch *Coming to America* on DVD. She grabbed her coat and bag and came to a skidding halt. Sofia's car was a vintage Jaguar with a driver.

“Come along, I have reservations for half one.”

Gina got into the car and was instantly kissed on both cheeks. “No designer today?”

“Me and Topshop run along together fine,” Gina replied. “Where are we off to?”

Sofia tapped the back of the driver's chair with a spike-heeled boot. “Harvey Nicks.”

Gina barely stopped herself from grinding her teeth. “Do you have a day in your life when you do something that has purpose?”

“Shopping is purpose,” Sofia replied smartly. “My money keeps the economy running. You do realize the recession happened because I was at a spa and not shopping?”

Gina laughed. “Thank you for keeping the world turning with your spending. How are you anyway?”

Sofia leaned backwards. “I'll be much better when I've got a glass of wine to hand. You don't have any ethical problems with dining at a rival?”

“I can handle it,” Gina murmured. *Edgy much?* she thought. Why invite her for lunch if there was something going on?

The driver let them out right in front of the main doors, and they took the lift straight up to the restaurant. They were waved through to a table right by the window where a bottle of champagne was already waiting for them. Sofia went to pour her a glass, and Gina lied, "Sorry, I'm on antibiotics. No alcohol."

Sofia gave her a suspicious look, then shrugged. "All the more for me." She called to the waiter. "Elderflower water?"

"That'll be nice, thank you."

Gina went for the menu as Sofia worked her way through the champagne. "Sofia," Gina said gently, "what's going on?"

"Nothing!" she protested. "I said I wanted us to meet up and be very good friends. And we can, now I see you're wearing your ice."

Gina started. She'd taken so much ribbing at work over her engagement she'd forgotten all about the ring. Sofia beckoned imperiously, and Gina put her hand in Sofia's. "You could do with a manicure, darling."

"No can do. Nail varnish in food would be frowned upon," she said wryly.

Sofia sighed, releasing Gina's hand. "It's beautiful. Good colour, cut, two carats."

It hadn't crossed Gina's mind once about the carats or cut. It was simply her future with Nick. Sofia shook her head. "You've got this gooey expression on your face. Did you really have no idea that he loved you?"

"None. Trust me, I've replayed every single minute I've spent with him before we got together, and I couldn't see it." She twisted the ring along her finger. "I just felt lucky to be his friend, and I told myself a lot not to expect anything more, to stop analysing everything he said to me. You know the Da Canaveze men—they're good at keeping things under wraps."

"Hmm, one of them in particular," Sofia said, picking up her menu.

Gina watched her for a moment. "Can I be blunt?"

"Naturally, I do enjoy briskness."

"Why'd you even marry Paul? The way you are with him borders on dislike."

Sofia topped up her glass, her gaze firmly on the liquid. "Well, the man I did want to marry happened to be in love with someone else. I took the next best option." *Oh hell*, Gina thought. She definitely wasn't telling Sofia she was pregnant.

"Did he tell you?" Gina asked cautiously.

"He didn't need to." Sofia drained most of the champagne, seemingly searching for fortitude. "You'll

understand I'm used to having things my own way. People don't tend to tell me no. It became quite obvious to me that his attentions lay elsewhere. It didn't help that you seemed to be in every part of his life. It is galling when you call the man you're dating and his 'best friend' answers his phone at three in the morning.”

“He asked me to,” Gina protested. “It was just the once, you sounded pissed off, he finished paying for our chips and he spoke to you within a half a second.”

Sofia rolled her eyes. “That's exactly what I mean. We broke up the next day. Well, that was all his decision. No one should dare to interfere in his friendship with you! How no one has figured to just put a gun to your head, I don't know. I was extremely disappointed, so I called Paul to speak to him about it. He met me for lunch and he was very eager to comfort me. I had hoped to provoke a reaction from Nick, but nothing came of it. He just told me that if I ever wanted anything, to say that Mary Alice would like it. Paul would then definitely buy it for me. As I've said, my family was rather keen on my being part of the family.”

Sofia moved her glass between two fingers. So she did have depths. What was Gina supposed to do? She'd been the other woman and never known it. But

she couldn't apologize, because she hadn't done anything. And neither had Nick. Nick had told her, with laughter rich in his eyes, that Sofia had dragged Paul to a club where he was out with Tony and Rocky and dry humped Paul in front of him. Nick had sent them a bottle of champagne as consolation.

“She really wanted me to start a fight over her, and I couldn't be bothered. She'll find out soon enough when she has sex with him.”

“Dude,” Gina had said disgustedly.

“We lived together until the age of twenty-three. I've heard him having sex. It's what I'd imagine a walrus would sound like in pain.”

Resisting the urge to laugh even now, Gina looked at Sofia. The tragic discarded lady. Gina had been in Ghana with her father when Sofia had married Paul and missed the spectacle that was their wedding. Short of being photographed in *Hello!* Magazine, Gina didn't understand Sofia's upset. She had everything she wanted. Jewels whenever she wanted, money whenever she wanted, holidays to anywhere she desired... It made very little sense.

Sofia touched Gina's hand. “Sorry for being maudlin. Seeing you two engaged just...recalls all that misery. Anyway, my mother always told me to marry someone who adores me more than I do them.” She brushed her hair back from her shoulders and cleared

her throat. "Paul does as I kindly ask. When you marry Nick, you'll find out that marriage is more about the sacrifices you have to make. Nothing much has changed for Paul. We live close enough for him to get some milk from Mummy at every available opportunity, and he's still competing with Nick for Daddy's attention. I'm on the side looking pretty."

If Paul was less of a feckless little twat, she'd feel sorry for him. "Sofia, you don't have to stay with him."

"That notion of choice will also be taken from you. What else would I do?"

Gina gave a surprised laugh. "I don't know, modeling, personal shopping, running your own boutique, starting a blog where you can bitch about anything you like! You do have choices; please don't give me that Victorian bullshit."

Sofia grinned. "It takes drive to do all that. I expunged all of mine when I was modelling. I couldn't go back. I'm in my golden little cage, and every so often if I want to moan I will do so. Besides, Paul could be worse."

"How do you put up with it? I'm in his company for two minutes and I want to knock him out," Gina muttered.

"He has his moments," Sofia admitted quietly. "When he's not around his family, when he's not seeking constant reassurance that he's just as good as

anyone else, he's absolutely fine. He thinks about me. He can be very caring." Her face darkened. "The reason I hate Mary Alice is because he cannot do a single thing right to please her, and she won't let him please her. Nick's her baby, and Paul was the afterbirth that happened to be a baby."

"Sofia."

"It's true," she insisted, ignoring Gina's tone of unease. "It's like those women who make their children sick in order to get attention for themselves. She loves the attention of being the mother who tried to give her children everything, and it's not her fault that they can't meet her expectations. She's awful. If she was my mother, I would need someone objective to tell me I am a human being and not dog shit."

"Trust me, I wouldn't put a cheerleading uniform on for her, but she's all right with you."

"I think she forgives me because I did what she did. I gave up my career when I got married. I say career, I mean trying not to slap awful casting directors who tell me my eyes are too far apart." Her sad eyes sparkled with unholy amusement. "I can't see you doing the same."

"Abso-bloody-lutely not," Gina flashed. "I love my job. And Nick wouldn't respect me if I made my whole world about him."

“He would if it gave you more time to please him,” she assured her with the slightest lift of her immaculately groomed brows. “Isn't it odd? Sleeping with Nick after being his friend for so long?”

“Nope,” Gina replied. “You'd think it would be, but it isn't. It's as easy as us being friends. It's the same. We just argue a little more and instead of buying each other a pizza to make up, he makes me come like a steam train instead.”

Sofia laughed. “Fine, you tetchy little thing. Do you want to order?”

They made their selections, and Sofia asked for another bottle of champagne. “It's my water, darling. The little vice Paul most approves of, because I have contacts with vintage dealers. Makes for nice presents for Massimo. Do you still like him?”

“I do...I did. I'm just not comfortable knowing the lessons he's given Nick. I'm not convinced that he'll let me be. Emigrating is never too far from my mind. I've even picked the country and the flight carrier.” Gina caught the look in Sofia's eyes. “I'm not asking Nick to give anything up. That's his decision. You were talking sacrifices, but we'll have to give up something to carry on living the way we do.” She shrugged. “It's a consequence of life. You can't have everything your own way.”

“Goodness, you really do need alcohol. How can you be so dour? You do have everything your own way. You're going to marry your true love. Massimo's been extolling your virtues to Mary Alice. He's always had a soft spot for you.” She let out a little cry of joy as her champagne was brought over along with their starters. “He likes me better, you'll understand. I make his son moan a lot less.”

“I'm not surprised,” Gina said with a smile. “I'm sure Mary Alice isn't on the same page, though.”

“Couldn't give one. That dried-up old calculating bitch can pickle herself.” Her phone rang. “No, don't panic, it's Paul.” She answered it. “Paulie, what is it? I'm having lunch.” She rolled her eyes. “No, you don't need to know where so your mother can pull up a chair. I have the boys with me. Yes. I promise. Love you.” She blew two kisses down the line then disconnected, even as Gina heard him spluttering about having proper supervision.

“Supervision?” Gina asked. “What's he talking about?”

Sofia tucked into her salad. “Paul's being very twitchy at the moment. Most of the time I can come and go as I please. Then he'll be worried that someone may try to get revenge on him through me, so he insists that I have security with me. He's having one of his phases.”

Gina felt a little ill. "It's just a phase, right?"

"Golden cage, darling," Sofia said simply.

"Whatever he's concerned about will pass, and then I can stop pretending I'm Lady Gaga." Sofia wrinkled her nose. "Are you eating that or just wishing you were engaged to a different man?"

"It's not the man that's the problem." Gina sighed. "All right, let's talk about something else. Anything else."

"How we really need to get you out of Topshop. As soon as we finish eating we'll go straight to Diane von Furstenberg. Something to celebrate all those curves."

Gina should have felt insulted, but instead she felt rather enamoured of Sofia. "We should go out."

"We are out."

"I mean out to a bar or a club. Shake booty."

Sofia's face brightened. "We should. Shouldn't we? If we do that we'll have to go to Herve Leger and Prada."

"Naturally."

Sofia touched her champagne glass to Gina's elderflower water. "See? I told you we'd be close. And all we had to do was talk about you having sex with Nick."

"Sofia..."

“Fine, be smug in your multiple orgasms. Oh, we have to get you something to match your engagement ring as well.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Nick was rather amused that Gina had turned into a narcoleptic. It made keeping an eye on her far easier. That she and Sofia were becoming friends didn't bother him as much as he thought it would. Gina had immediately assured him, "Don't worry—we didn't compare sex stories about you."

"Then what's the pull?"

Gina shrugged. "It's nice having a friend. A girl who's a friend. Who gets the situation. I like her. She's mouthy. And she's pretty."

"If Paul finds you two having a pillow fight, don't bring me into it," he advised. She was so sweet, excited about having a new friend to play with. Sofia's security made him feel a lot less concerned about Gina's whereabouts. If she was at the restaurant, she had knife-proficient hefty blokes with her. If she was at the flat, she was with him. Anywhere in between gave him cause for concern.

A few weeks later, they were sitting on the sofa with Nick's laptop in tow, looking up some pregnancy information.

"So according to this, the baby's the size of a raspberry."

Gina wrinkled her nose. "Mm, with more than enough room for a Walter PPK and a silencer."

Nick cracked up. "You think I'm growing bullets in my balls?"

Gina poked him in the side. "Wouldn't surprise me. Urgh, it looks like the Alien, just before it springs out of your chest and chatters off to bleed acid into something else."

"I hope that kind of talk won't be something our child becomes accustomed to."

She snorted. "What talk? Do you mean sense? Not with you around."

"You'll lose that with the placenta. Good luck remembering how to spell your name."

"It's lovely to know that you're going to be really supportive."

"Of course. I'll get you as many drugs as you need." He kissed her temple. "This kid is going to have crazy hair."

Gina glanced up at him. "I know. But we can't let him or her anywhere near straighteners."

"Christ, our child's going to be bullied."

She grinned. "We're getting way overexcited here, planning a miserable future for this poor baby. We shouldn't do that for another month."

"Isn't that the best part of being a parent? Planning how to fuck up your children?" He turned

back to the computer. “Mm, lots of spinach for you. Counter the bad effects of all that alcohol you've put away.”

Gina scooted herself along the sofa and turned her head onto his lap. “Entirely your fault. Can I have some juice, please? My throat feels really dry.”

“You can only use the 'I'm pregnant' excuse for so long. Next week back to heavy lifting and eating cheese.” He sighed, carefully moving her head from his lap and getting a glass of fruit juice from the fridge. She was out cold when he came back.

“I turned around for less than sixty seconds,” he said in disbelief. He put the juice down on the table next to the laptop and eased her head back onto his lap. His brief moment of contentment was interrupted when Tony text him.

I'm just outside yours. Can you let me up?

Tony wouldn't ask unless it was important. He successfully manoeuvred Gina without waking her and let Tony into the flat.

“Where's G?”

“Asleep.” Nick nodded toward the sofa. Tony looked knackered. “What's up?”

Tony tapped his phone against his thigh uncertainly, then said, “All right, but before I say anything you've got to calm down.”

The only way that would happen was if he was near Gina. He turned back to the sofa and curved his hand beneath her head so she was sleeping on his thigh once more. He filtered his fingers through her hair until he felt tranquil. "Tell me."

Tony took a breath. "Renaldo didn't leave."

It was like a punch to the gut. He'd known it. He'd known something wasn't right. Instinct, instinct had told him to shoot that bastard the minute he'd walked into his office. That should teach him to make decisions after sex with Gina.

"The immigration officer who tipped us off was found by Camden canal. He had his tongue cut out." Nick frowned. That was their signature to caution anyone who dared to speak about them what words could cost them. "And he had the initials RS carved into his left cheek."

Nick shook his head, almost laughing at the audacity of the man. He handed him his life and this was his thanks? "What a cunt," Nick said quietly, his fingers still drifting through Gina's hair.

Tony scratched his head. "He's making it pretty obvious that he doesn't give a shit what you do."

"He really should."

"What do you want to do about him?"

Nick sighed. "Message received. He'll come to me. I'm not chasing him around like a headless chicken."

Tony paused. "He may not come to you directly." They both looked down at Gina, who was quite deeply asleep.

Nick's lip curled. "Oh, he'd better be ready to die if he touches her."

"He's testing you."

"He did that when he didn't leave. Have you checked with anyone else who actually left, if not Santori?"

Tony shrugged. "Must have been his son. His daughter went on her own passport."

Nick wondered what had prompted such a spark of defiance, when he couldn't have been anything less than crystal clear about the consequences if Santori stayed.

Tony lowered his voice. "I know the love of a good woman changes a man, but you need to nip this. You've got more to lose than he has."

Nick's hand involuntarily brushed over Gina's tummy.

"It's up to you whether you allow him to do it or not. People are already starting to get twitchy." Tony halted, clearly unsure whether he had said too much.

It almost made Nick laugh. Tony had the same off switch as Gina. Non-existent.

“Fuck, I hate it when my dad's right.” He leaned his head on the back of the sofa, jerking his chin toward his mobile. “Sort me out. Everything going. I want to catch him out the minute he rings me.”

“You're sure he will?”

“What's the fun in taunting someone if you don't get to share your joy?” Nick said sardonically. “He'll call.”

Tony scooped up Nick's mobile. “I'll get it back to you tomorrow. What are you going to tell Gina?”

“I don't want to freak her out. It's too early with the baby. I don't want anything to go wrong.”

Tony's eyes widened in shock. “Baby?”

Ah hell. “Yeah, she's pregnant.”

Tony shook his head. “You two really aren't wasting any time, are you? You may want to think about putting a camera in your bedroom. You know, profit from your lovin'.”

“Stop watching porn,” Nick told him plainly.

“You do know something, right?”

“Yup,” he admitted. “He's got help.”

Tony's eyes rounded with concern, “I can do a sweep, but you can't think...”

“I'm not going to make assumptions about anyone at all. I'm trusting you to look. One of us bleeds, we all do.”

“I get you.” He left the flat quietly.

Nick gently prodded Gina. “Oi? Did you hear any of that?”

She didn't even stir. He should be thankful for small mercies. He hadn't even told Tony the worst of it, but he would find it soon enough on Nick's phone. A grainy picture of Gina in the dress he'd bought her for dinner with his parents, standing by his car, looking straight at the camera.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nick pulled her knees against his chest, her skin slippery with sweat, and drove even deeper into her body, arching over her. She curled her hands around his neck, pulling him closer to her, her elbows pushing her breasts together into such a sensual vision, he thought he'd come just from that view. "Jesus, you're so fucking sexy," he groaned.

Her eyes drifted open, her teeth grazing over her bottom lip as if she was trying to stop herself from crying out. He tugged her lip free with his own mouth. "If you want to scream, do it."

"Oh holy fuck," she breathed, then made that long mmm-ing noise she always made right before she came. He pounded into her faster, ready to feel that burst of intensity from her when he heard movement outside their room. He paused.

Gina's fingers tightened into his biceps. "What are you doing? I'm so close..." She pushed her arse against his invitingly. Someone was in their home, he realized, his stomach dipping with anger. He caught her legs and pulled his cock from her body. He reached under the bed and extracted his gun.

"What the f..."

“Stay here,” he commanded. She flopped back on the bed as he closed the door behind him. He scanned the room, eyes narrowed. A pure white envelope sat on the coffee table with Nick's name on the front. He hovered by the window, waiting for the intruder to leave the flat. Nick smoothly opened the glass and took a single, silenced shot. The man collapsed to the ground, dark liquid pooling from his head. He picked up the cordless phone and dialed. “Clean up. My flat. Now.”

He didn't wait for a response, only turned to the envelope in the living room.

“Soprano! What the hell, dude, you had better be having a heart attack to leave me!” Gina bellowed from the bedroom. He absently called out, “I'll be a minute.”

Inside the envelope was a single feather. One sniff told him the red colour wasn't dye. A white feather was the symbol of cowardice. Dipping it in blood took the symbol to an insulting level. This man was taking fucking liberties now. *Stop hiding in the shadows if you're that brave. Wait, I'll snap your neck for coming into my home.*

Gina strode into the living room, struggling into a lace-edged nightgown. “We're never having sex again unless you explain what the hell you just did. Is it because I fell asleep earlier? You know I can't help it, it's this bloody pregnancy.”

He shoved the envelope onto the table. "I heard something."

"Yes, that would have been me about to have an orgasm."

He cupped her face with one hand, trailing his thumb over her cheek. Her hair was sticking up at all angles, her lips bruised. She never looked more sexy than when she was rolling around with him. She was completely his. "Calm down. It's fine."

Her frown increased. "Something's going on," she said eventually. "And you won't tell me."

He hooked an arm around her neck and pulled her to him. "You worry about too much. It's not good for you."

Gina struggled out of his grasp. Damn their safety, next time he'd know to let her come before trying to protect them. "You mean it's not good for the baby," she said dryly. "What is it? Why won't you tell me? Is it because you think I'll leave?"

Nick unconsciously rubbed the heel of his palm over his forehead. "No. It's nothing you need to worry about."

He glanced at her and caught the expression on her face. Shit—he was still holding the gun.

"Was that...in our room?" she asked, her voice dangerously quiet.

"You know there are guns all over this place."

She touched her tongue to her lips. "That's not what I asked you. Was that in our room?"

"Of course it was." His own temper started to rise to the surface as she shook her head in disbelief. "Why are you surprised?"

"I put up with that because I have to, but not where I fucking well sleep!" she yelled.

"It's not going to change," he told her. "That's just the way it is."

She gave a snort. "Would it really be that hard for you to not have them in our room?"

"Yes, it would. It is what it is. Sorry if it offends your pacifist sensibilities."

"I have changed everything for you," she said, her eyes glittering with anger. "We're going to have a baby, and what, are you going to be hiding machine guns under the crib?" She held up his hands before he could respond. "How about you and your friend curl up on the sofa together?" She folded her arms under her breasts and turned into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

A cramped night on the sofa did him no favours. Gina was doing a late shift at the restaurant, and the bedroom door stayed firmly shut until half nine. She barely glanced at him as she made her way into the kitchen, smelling very clean and dressed in a sleeveless t-shirt and shorts, making an awful ruckus.

He had found boxer shorts and a spare duvet, none of which improved his mood or the ache in his muscles.

“I feel like I've been beaten by dwarves, if that makes you feel better?” he offered. She stopped what she was doing, which was... “Are you making pancakes?”

“I fancied them. Do you not understand why I'm mad?”

“I get it, but I can't change that.”

“Then you're going to have to get used to being beaten by dwarves. Because I'm not sharing my bed with guns. Not now, and definitely not while I'm pregnant.”

“I know what I'm doing with them,” he assured her.

She added milk into the flour and egg yolks. “It's not about your ability—it's about me feeling safe in my own home. It's about me asking you to do one thing differently. And you won't even do that for me.” She gave up with the pancakes. “I'm not hungry. I'll see you later.”

He halted her, his hands on her arms. “Hold on. Gina, stop a minute. It's about us being safe. And if I can't reach it easily, it's pointless having it at all. I'm the only one who uses it, and I'm the only person who shares that room with you.”

“Please don't pull that 'I've got no choice' bullshit on me, because that will really fuck me off. You have got a choice. You're just keeping to your own way.”

“It's not about me, it's about our protection. Why can't you understand that?” he retorted, the itch of irritability roughening his voice. “This is how it has to be. I know you don't like it, but it's just for now. More than doing anything for you, I want to keep you safe. You and the mini bullet.”

She angrily brushed her cheek. “Fine. I've got to go to work.”

“I'll come and pick you up, tonight. Today is supposed to be the end of the trial.”

“I told you one month was too short,” she muttered.

“I'll take you out. We can talk. And I'll explain things better. I need you to get this—it's not about doing things on my terms only.”

“Then why don't you write the Gangster Wife Rule Book, make things crystal.”

“Seriously,” he said firmly. “Look at me. Wait for me to come and pick you up. Don't come back here by yourself.”

“For fuck's sake, Nicholas, just tell me what's going on!”

Rock. Hard place. What if he told her, and she locked herself in the flat? Anyone could come in. He needed Tony to upgrade the security. If she was at work, she'd be surrounded constantly by people and therefore untouchable until he collected her at the end of her shift. If she wasn't worrying about Renaldo, but instead fuming about his gun habit, one had to be less stressful than the other. He had to let her stay angry a little longer. "I'm probably being paranoid," he said eventually. "I don't want anything to go wrong. I'm sorry for stressing you out, but...things like this will happen."

"Goes with the territory, right?" She sighed, seemingly deflated by his response. "You understand why I'm stressed, don't you?"

"I do," he agreed softly. He leaned down and gave her a whiskery kiss. "You know how crazy I am about you being safe. It's gone schitz since we found out about the bullet."

He curved his palms over her belly, his hands delving under the t-shirt to warm his fingers on the heat of her stomach. He swore he could feel the baby's heartbeat on his fingertips. This, then, her was *everything* to him. Making Gina angry aside, he would have a thousand guns under their bed to keep that bastard away from all of them. "What time do you have to be at the restaurant?"

“Half eleven.”

“Can I make up for last night?”

“Which bit?” she asked sceptically.

He rubbed his stubbled face over her cheek, his fingers moving from her belly to delve into the shorts. “The first bit that got you mad.”

She shuddered as his fingers slid between the wet folds of her sex. “That’ll do part of it.”

She could be mad with him, but her body never was. “You are always wet,” he murmured, kissing her deeply. He curled his leg around hers, pulling her to the floor on top of him, cradled in his lap. Her hands went eagerly to his cock, and found him standing to full attention. She looked up at him in surprise. It nearly made him laugh. She still couldn’t understand that she turned him on like that, so damn intensely nothing mattered more than being deep inside her.

“I’m still angry,” she warned, taking her lips from his, as his hands threaded through her thick hair.

“Yeah, I get it. But let’s just put that over there,” he said distractedly. He drew his mouth over her neck and over the swell of her breasts. He could scent her arousal, which sent a further rush of blood to his dick. He lifted her slightly so he could remove the shorts from her entrance, all soft, moist and swollen. He trailed the side of his finger over her, her juices sliding over him. She shuddered again, pressing herself

against him. "Please fuck me, now," she whispered. "Please, now."

He pulled his cock from his boxers and felt scalded by the heat of her nuzzling against him. They could be together like this for the next fifty years and he would never tire of this sensation, the moment when he'd push into her and feel her muscles contract around him, almost denying him inside her tightness, forcing him to press harder, to take ownership, to make her his. She parted her legs wider and arched toward him. He anchored an arm around her waist and thrust hard with determination.

She gave a cry, tucking her face into his neck as he clutched the cheeks of her bottom, moving her slowly along the length of his cock, enjoying the sound of her wet pussy giving way to him. His hands slid back up to her hips and she took over, rocking over him with near agonizing slowness. He caught one of her shoulders and arched her even farther back so his cock rubbed fully over her inner wall. She started to groan. "Oh fuck, that feels good, just there, yes, please don't stop," she moaned, tufts of his hair between her fingers, as she pushed down on him, grinding her hips against his. She came, dissolving with her orgasm, drenching him to the balls.

"Yes, you can take some more," he promised, swiftly turning her onto her back. He used her pussy

hard, opening her legs wide, watching his cock melting into her liquid darkness in rapid motions. She met him each time, rolling her hips up toward him. She was riding that crest again, he could tell, the sheen of sweat over her chest. His hands tightened on her thighs.

A phone rang, and Gina fairly screamed, “If you stop to answer that, I...will fucking...kill you.”

“It’s your phone,” he grunted, ramming even harder. Jesus, her pussy was the most incredible thing on earth. He angled himself so he barely left the depths of the tight wet sheath of her cunt, as his own orgasm built. He needed to come desperately, but he wanted her to come first, and hard.

“Stay in me,” she begged, “come inside me.”

Ah, fuck. Her begging for him was a weakness he could never deny. He grabbed her hips tightly as it ripped through him; flooding her cunt with several thick ropes of cum, he barely sensed her convulsions beneath him. She pushed her hands through his hair, grinning up at him.

“Off you get, you secretive bastard—I need another shower.”

“Payment, please,” he murmured sardonically. He slid from her, and she awkwardly got to her knees. She gave him a long, slow kiss. “Is that enough?”

“No.” He stroked a hand over her face. “We’ll talk tonight.”

She started to hum the song from *West Side Story* and got to her feet, readjusting her shorts. “Goddammit, it’s like I wet myself!”

He chuckled. “You sort that out, and when you’re ready, I’ll walk with you to the restaurant.”

She huffed, “Is this because I’m pregnant?”

“We’re pregnant,” he corrected.

She stared at him suspiciously then nodded. “All right. I may even let you hold my hand after that performance.”

He laughed. “Rewards. I like it.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Gina was tempted to just walk home, but she wasn't up to another fight with Nick. She was pissed off beyond belief, but she had a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach that she shouldn't leave things so strained knowing she couldn't speak to him, when chances were something might happen to him. She was angry with him, but more angry with herself that she kept trying to divorce Nick from the gun-slinging he did on a regular basis. It really, really freaked her out that he had a gun in their room. Around the flat, whatever, as long as there wasn't a chance she'd get shot bending over to check a roast chicken in the oven. In their bedroom... She couldn't explain the irritation, but it wound her up like no one's business. To not tell her or ask her was just one last straw in the “do as Nick says” byline she couldn't carry anymore. She was still doing it, though: waiting for him to collect her, like a primary-school child whose parents had forgotten about her.

After work, she had gone around the corner to the gym and used the facilities to enjoy a shower and change of clothes, into a corseted black lace dress that hid the fact she seemed not to be harbouring a baby

but inflating like a balloon. She waited for twenty minutes. Nothing from him at all. This was ridiculous! Their home was a five-minute walk away! She called Sofia.

“Hello,” came the purring reply.

“Are you around?”

“Oh darling, let me guess. Nick's got everyone and anyone babysitting you. He's become awfully paranoid recently. What's his problem? Are you pregnant?”

“Yup,” Gina said bluntly, knowing Sofia would pick up on a lie.

“Oh dear.” Sofia sighed. “That is awful. I'm just on my way to my favourite bar. Come out.”

“Isn't it too early?”

“It's almost eleven. Time to let the pregnant ones out to shake it like they're about to be impregnated all over again.”

Gina grinned. “If you're here in two minutes.”

“Turn around!”

Gina looked to her right and saw the sleek black Jaguar heading her way. Ignoring the furious horns blasted as the car halted, Sofia pushed open the door and yanked Gina inside. “Where are you and your spawn off to in that outfit?”

“Well, Nick and I were supposed to have a night out tonight.” To celebrate what would have been the

official end of the trial. Probably with a gun strapped to his ankle.

Sofia was decked out in what seemed to be every single Swarovski crystal on the planet. "I'm much better company," Gina was assured.

Sofia offered her a glass of Moët for Gina to give her a look. "What did I just tell you?"

"You want to keep it?" Sofia said in disbelief. Gina's face became bulldog-like. "It's your loosened vagina. You know it will never be the same again. That tight little tunnel I'm sure your husband-to-be has been enjoying will be able to run Eurostar journeys once your child's finished with you."

"Thanks for that information," Gina said warily.

"You're going to be so boring," Sofia moaned. "So I have to enjoy what little of you I can. This is why I don't allow myself to become friends with reproducing women. Ah, we're here."

As the car pulled up outside the club, the door was opened in front of a line of people waiting to be allowed in. Sofia double kissed a man with a clipboard, then was ushered inside. Four huge-looking men followed them. "Oh, Paul's always ensuring that I don't do anything naughty while I'm out. So if Nick gets at all concerned, then he can be very assured that any person who touches you will lose an arm. Feel better?"

“I’m fed up with worrying.” Gina shrugged. “I’m going to let my hair down and have a coke.”

Sofia gave her a hug. “Oh fabulous! You really are letting loose!”

“I meant cola. Not the white stuff.”

Sofia released her disappointedly. “That really is misleading, Gina. Not fair.”

Gina started laughing. “Do me a favour and send Master Da Canaveze a text. I don’t want him to worry about me.”

Sofia typed out a super-fast message on her iPhone, then turned it to silent. “Done. Boys! Champagne for me, cola for the stupid girl who allowed her husband-to-be to fuck her without any protection. The consequences are all her own.”

Gina stared in horror at one of the blank-faced giants, who barely shot Gina a responsive look before he and another of his huge pals turned to the bar. Meanwhile, Sofia pulled her over to the VIP area. “If you’re not drinking, then you’d better fucking dance.”

Feeling a lot lighter than she had in a long time, Gina hugged Sofia tightly. “I’ll shake my booty like I’m not carrying an over-fertilized egg.”

Their drinks were brought over by the blank-faced giants, and Sofia poured herself a glass of champagne. “To you, darling! To what will be your last

night of freedom. I cannot see Nicky letting you out after this.”

Gina touched her glass of coke to Sofia's champagne flute with a wry shake of her head. Sofia gave a grin and put the glasses down. “The boys will watch the drinks. We're going to dance!”

Laughing, Gina gripped both of Sofia's hands and was pulled to her feet, and they made their way onto the dance floor. It was exhilarating; she hadn't been out partying like this with a girlfriend in what felt like ages. She was horrifically sober, but it was quite funny watching people dissolving into a drunken mess, girls trying to reapply lip gloss on the middle of the floor, readjusting their underwear while guys attempted to check them out subtly only to fail.

“Fuck me, I fucking love Frederik Olufsen and his fucking dirty beats!” Sofia yelled, flicking her hair in a rippling wave that looked ridiculously sexy.

Sofia curled an arm around Gina's neck and took a pouting photograph with her camera. “You look hot,” Sofia announced, looking at the result.

“You always look hot. It rubs off!”

Sofia hugged her. “You are my favourite person.”

Gina got fed up a little later when someone tried to grab her arse. And it was not Sofia. “Let's sit back down!” Gina offered. Sofia agreed, and a fresh coke was brought over to Gina. “Why are you down? You

may have a bun in the proverbial oven, but you're attracting attention. What's the matter?"

"I had a fight with Nick today."

Sofia perked up. "A fight? What about?"

"His proximity to guns," she replied flatly, putting down the glass on the table in front of them. "I just feel a bit pissed off that I've changed everything, and he won't do the same for me."

"Oh God! When you make a deal with the devil, you should always read the terms and conditions."

"It's not about that—I'm sure about him and us and having a family—I just don't want a fucking gun in my bedroom. Is that too much to ask?"

"Speaking as a woman whose husband sleeps with a selection of knives under his pillow, yes, it really is." Sofia patted her knee in a motherly fashion. "There are other things to be angry about. This is not one of them."

"I disagree," Gina said primly. "It's his problem, so he should sort it out, not me."

"When he starts asking where you are every minute of the day, and you can't go home without him making sure you're escorted, then be worried."

Gina's brain twigged. "I have to go home," she panicked. Where was her bag? Her coat was somewhere in some VIP cloakroom, and Sofia had the

tickets. She needed to get out of here. She had to go home.

Sofia snorted. "No you don't. Finish your drink, let him worry."

She pressed the tips of her fingers to her forehead. "I do. I've just figured why he's being all twitchy. I need to go. I can't do this to him."

Sofia gave her a disgusted look. "No man is that good in bed. Besides, he would want to make sure you get home safe, and knowing him he's probably on his way here."

Gina wanted to cry. They were both so stupid. Why didn't he just fucking well say something to her? Why did he let her get all distracted about stupid guns when... It had to be that Renaldo Santori. She tried calling Nick from her mobile. The signal was shocking. She sent him a text instead. *I didn't know, Soprano. I do now! Please let me know if you're coming to the club. I want to go home. Xxx*

Sofia was waving another tray of drinks to the table. "Seriously, Sofia, I'm not kidding. Can you get your driver to drop me home?"

"Stay where you are. You are perfectly safe. VIP service as well. I got you a virgin cocktail, much more interesting than a coke." She took Gina's hands from her face. "Now be a big girl, finish your drink and wait for your designated past history man to collect you."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nick never normally needed to oversee clean ups, but this one was close enough to some Turks who had been affiliates of Renaldo. Asking a few questions wasn't entirely chasing, but just a mild investigation, he told himself.

“Nothing, boss,” came the response, from the guy using a knife to clean the dirt from under his nails. “Zoulfik, didn't you have a call from him?”

Zoulfik was a hefty man, very dark skinned, who eyed Nick with wary interest. “He don't like you, man. He told me he cut the tongue out of that officer's mouth to show you that your lot have fuck all.”

Nick's face didn't flicker. “Any idea where he is?”

Zoulfik laughed. “Said he was dust. Couldn't tell you, boss.”

Nick slipped a printed phone card into his hand. It looked like one of those international dialling phone company cards, but allowed the caller brief access to Nick's details. “If he calls again, tell him I'd like to have a conversation. Man to man. Civilized.”

Zoulfik's brows rose. “Have you looked in a mirror, boss? I knew a bloke who thought yous did

civilized, and his family buried him without his insides.”

“He didn't need them,” Nick said gently. “Pass my message on.”

Zoulfik knew not to challenge him any further and inclined his head. Nick turned back to his car and tried to call Gina. No signal. The basement of that sodding kitchen. He glanced at the time. It was going eleven. No way he'd get across town to pick her up. He called Paul. “All right? Look, I need a favour.”

Paul sounded surprised. “From me?”

“Yes, I've called you, haven't I?”

“Well, I hope it involves my using a telephone. I'm flying to Dublin.”

“Fuck! I need someone to pick up Gina from the restaurant. Now.”

Paul was silent for a moment. “You're really scared, aren't you? Santori's got under your skin.”

“Don't be a prick,” Nick growled with barely concealed fury. “Gina's fucking pregnant, all right?”

“Is she?” Paul sounded strained. He'd wanted children since he'd learned biology, but Sofia wasn't ready to sacrifice her size-four frame.

“Congratulations. I'm sure Sofia will collect her.”

“Not your best suggestion.”

“Sofia has a bigger entourage than Madonna,” Paul found his voice once more. “She’ll be safe with her.”

“Tell her to call me. I can’t get to Gina’s mobile.”

“Take a breath,” Paul insisted. “Sof will look after her.”

Sofia is Satan as a stick. “Okay,” Nick said abruptly. “Thank you.”

About ten minutes later, Nick received a text from Sofia. *Gina collected. The package is safe. You’ve fucked up some anniversary, though—she looks far too nice to be lazing around your place.*

Ah fuck. The trial. He pressed call, and the phone went immediately to her answering machine. “This is Sofia. Be beautiful, darling, and leave a message? If I know who it is I’ll think about calling you back... **Beep!**”

“Sofia? Call me. Not a joke.”

Nick was still five minutes from Chelsea when his constant redials to Sofia and Gina finally connected. “Lady Da Canaveze!” Sofia crowed.

“Sofia, Jesus! Where the fuck have you been, I’ve been going fucking schitz!”

“Well, the reception in this place is like the Congo.”

He could barely hear her, there was so much noise in the background. “I’m going outside.”

“Sofia, where's Gina?”

“She's fine!” Sofia insisted. “You know what, did I ever thank you for introducing me to Paul? He's like a colourless version of you with a smaller dick.”

Nick was about to pull his hair out. “Sofia, can you hear me? Where's Gina?”

“She went to the toilet. Said she was feeling weird. She was dancing to David Guetta. She's very good. Almost er...professional.”

“Why the fuck are you out?”

“Because, Nicholas, woman cannot live by cock alone. She needs some social inter...interaction.” She burped loudly into the speaker. “Good God!” She laughed. “Too much Moet. Are you coming too? Lavidia misses you.”

Nick put his foot on the accelerator. “Sofia, take her home now.”

“Oh don't be a spoil—” The line disconnected. He drove like a maniac, swerving to overtake cars, and skidded opposite the club. The bouncer was about to tell him that he couldn't park there, but one look at Nick's face told him to step to the side and let him in.

He scanned the club rapidly and saw Sofia with her dress almost around her waist as she lay on a thick leather sofa, her feet in the lap of one of her bodyguards, who was tapping her hand uselessly. She

barely seemed conscious. Nick caught her face.

“Sofia?”

He looked up at the bouncer. “How much has she had?”

“Barely what she has in a night out. Half a bottle of champagne.”

“Where's Gina?”

“She went to the toilet.”

“Get Sofia to the hospital. She's been drugged. NOW!” Bodyguard didn't wait for another shout, just hoisted Sofia over his shoulder.

Nick pushed his way through the crowd, his heart hammering in his throat. The women in the toilet were outraged that a man was in their space. There was a toilet attendant banging on the door of one of the cubicles.

“Miss? Are you all right?”

Nick caught the top of the door with both hands and looked over the top. Gina was slumped on the seat. Smart girl, keeping herself safe. He released the door and with one sharp shove, the lock broke. He scooped Gina into his arms and carried her from the club. She was barely breathing. Not looking to see where Sofia was, he placed Gina carefully into the car and turned the screeching vehicle toward Chelsea and Westminster hospital. He carried her into reception and screamed, “I need help!”

“She's been drugged, probably GHB,” he rambled as she was placed carefully on a trolley and checked for responses.

“We'll look after her, sir,” one of the nurses assured him.

“She's pregnant,” he said, his voice catching. “She's only eight weeks.”

The nurse nodded and followed the trolley to A&E.

* * *

He called Paul first and found him apoplectic with rage. “This is your fault!” he spluttered. “Why did you have to wind Santori up? Why couldn't you just deal with him! Now he's drugging my wife?”

“Chelsea and Westminster hospital. Turn up, don't turn up, I don't give a fuck either way,” Nick replied blankly. Ending the call, he distantly heard Paul screaming, “But I'm in fucking Dublin!”

He was told he was able to see Sofia, who had woken up from the medication disorientated but as sharp tongued as ever. She wore a hospital gown, but her hair was wild around her shoulders, eyes darting around in panic.

“Where's Gina?” she demanded as soon as she saw him.

“Being treated—she hasn't woken up yet,” he said tightly.

“Don't be angry with her.” Sofia looked unhinged. “She wanted to go home; I dragged her with me.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I made her stay.”

“Sofia, it doesn't matter. I called Paul...”

She gave an angry howl. “God, what is the matter with you? He doesn't give a shit! I'm just a trophy he gets to polish now and again.”

He couldn't find the energy to comfort her. She'd walked into her marriage with eyes wide open. Any drug-induced soliloquy wasn't going to prize sympathy from him. He knew what that drug could do. Sofia grabbed his hand. “You can't be angry with her.”

“I'm not,” he said, carefully removing his hand. “I'll be back in a bit.”

He instead sat in the corridor and removed his beads from his wrist. “In the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I believe in God...”

* * *

There was a ringing in her ears. Was she at home? When she managed to open her eyes, there was an oily film blurring her sight. Where was Nick? She could hear him, reciting the rosary, *we beseech Thee, that by meditating upon these mysteries of the Most*

Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen. In the name of the father...

There was something over her face, a mask. She pushed it from her face and took two large breaths. She felt completely disorientated, her lower body cramped with fatigue and a throbbing ache. Nick edged into her view, and she gave him a weak smile. "There you are."

"How are you feeling?" he asked. Dude looked awful.

"Like I've been hit by a bus." She moistened her dry lips. "Was I hit by a bus?"

He pressed his other palm to her forehead, stroking her hair from her face. "No, you weren't. Let me get the doctor..."

"Where's Sofia? Is she all right?"

"She's here too, she's fine. Let me get a doctor now."

Wait a hoedown minute. "No, you tell me."

"You were at a bar with Sofia," he said cautiously. "And...you were drugged. Someone put something in your drink. In both your drinks."

Right, so that was what the shaking was about. "Scared now. Please get a doctor."

She heaved herself up into a sitting position as the doctor came back with Nick. The doctor, a neat-looking woman wearing scrubs, introduced herself. “Hello, Gina, I’m Dr James.” She ran through some simple tests with her, checking her responses. “We ran some tests on your blood and we found that you’ve been drugged with GHB.”

“Okay,” she answered, her voice trembling. “But I’m okay, right? Nothing else...”

“It’s what made you lose consciousness. You’ll probably feel the after effects for the next few days. We’ve given you a combination of medication to counter the drug.” She paused before hurrying on. “Because you were unconscious, we couldn’t do an internal scan to check your pregnancy. Now you’re awake, we can get an obstetrician to carry out the scan and see.”

“See what?” Gina asked. “Is there something wrong?”

“We won’t know until we do the scan. Just rest, and we’ll take you to the ward as soon as everything is ready.”

Gina put her hands over her face. The baby, the baby... Nick went to take her hand away, but she couldn’t look at him. He’d blame her—why wouldn’t he? She was with Sofia; they’d had fat blokes to look

after them. What had they been doing? What happened? Oh God, God, God!

He waited with her for the obstetrician, every so often asking if she wanted something. She would shake her head and hold back the need to start screaming. She was eventually taken up to the maternity ward. The scanner looked like those massagers women bought as substitute vibrators. When she told the obstetrician, she laughed and prepared her for the internal scan. “Just relax, okay?”

She looked up at the ceiling, her heart pounding frantically in her chest. She'd laughed. A laugh was good, right? She moved the scanner around in a manner that made her wince. “I'm so sorry, Gina. I can't find a heartbeat.”

It was the physical weight of the disappointment that made her close her eyes. “Right.”

“The drug causes miscarriage, as well as the other side effects. It won't stop you from trying again. When you're ready.”

“I don't really want to try again,” she said through the thickness in her throat. “I wanted this one.”

“What we'll need to do is remove the tissue from your womb. Otherwise you run the risk of an infection. Because of what you've had so far, it would be better to

do it this way, rather than wait for a natural evacuation of the tissue.”

“Scrape out what's left? Why not?” she said flatly. She was given apologies again, and tissue to clean the lubricant from her body. She noticed that she was bleeding. She turned to the obstetrician. “Can you please tell my...my boyfriend? I can't...I can't tell him I've lost it. Please?”

The obstetrician looked concerned. “You were drugged. It's not your fault.”

“It is,” Gina insisted, her eyes stinging. “I shouldn't have been there.”

“I'll talk to him. Explain what happened.”

She couldn't hear the conversation, only fiddled with the sides of the hospital gown. If she didn't think too much, it didn't feel as bad. She was wheeled into the maternity ward and avoided eye contact with any woman who was visibly pregnant.

Nick was eventually allowed to join her, and his eyes broke any restraint in her. He held her tightly for a long time. She knew she didn't deserve it, but she cleared her throat and started babbling. “They're, er...waiting for the anaesthesiologist. So I can...well, they'll have a Hoover inside me.”

Nick immediately let her go. “Don't joke. Not about this.”

She opened her mouth to try and reason that he knew her default was to take the piss, but his phone started ringing. “Might be Paul again.” He answered it without looking at the screen, and his expression changed immediately. He turned on his heel and walked out of the ward. She made a snap decision and found her clothing. As she zipped her dress back up, a nurse came over to her, looking horrified. “You need to rest.”

“In two minutes,” she promised. She followed Nick outside to see what was more important than the loss of their baby.

Chapter Twenty-Five

He had to control his anger. He had to. For Gina's sake, at least. Christ, she looked dead behind the eyes. His phone rang just as she made that crack about what would effectively be an abortion. "What?"

"Good morning, Nicholas."

Renaldo. *Don't give him a fucking inch*, he warned himself. "Hold on."

He made his way to the nearest exit. "What can I do for you?"

Renaldo paused, thrown by the geniality in Nick's voice. "I just wanted you to see what happens when you push people into proving what they own."

"Are you still on about boundaries? I thought we discussed that?"

"I didn't appreciate the outcome of that meeting," Renaldo said tightly. "So I wanted to prove something about your family."

"Be a good teacher, help me out," he offered. *Keep talking, you cock—thirty more seconds.*

"I can do what I like. Now you know that not even your women are protected. Shame your mother wasn't there with them. It would have been a nice trio."

“She prefers drum and bass nights,” he quipped. “What's the point? I'm just going to kill you.”

“How? The adage that your family is untouchable is now fiction rather than fact. I would have really preferred to have Sofia all to myself. Word has it that your brother bores her. Another time, yes?”

“Depends on when you feel ready to die.” Nick ended the call and dialled Tony. “Did you get it?”

“Got it.”

“Go get him,” he said simply. He turned to see Gina standing in front of him.

“Business?” she asked.

“Only necessary business.”

Gina gave a cracked smile. “Why don't you set up business here? Lots of beds for you to stash weaponry under.”

“Don't,” he warned. “Someone did this to you. I'm sorting it out.”

“You mean to you? It wasn't really directed at me, was it? I could have been anyone as long as I was on your arm.”

He felt a flame of utter rage. “Are you saying it's my fault?”

She shook her head. “But are you surprised this has happened, though? In your whole experience, no one has tried to make you, what, 'see sense' by going after someone in your family?”

“No one's got this far. So I'm doing something about it. No one should touch you, or Sofia, or call me and tell me that they should have gone for my mother while they were at it.”

“You really don't think there aren't people all over London who wish this on you? People in glass houses, Soprano.”

It was the bitterness in her voice that incensed him. “I will not sit by and let some dick take liberties with me because I'm with you. He took advantage of it once, and this is the last of it.”

“You don't have a leg to stand on,” she said, glancing upwards. “You can't bitch about things not going your way when this is your playground. You don't think you've done this to another family when they've been sitting around wondering where their husband is, their wife, their child? This is the side effect of the gangster drug.”

“It's not a tradeoff! Listen, we were coexisting. It's never happened before; no one has tried this. Ever.”

“I told you a month was too short,” she murmured tearfully. “So now I know. Costs a lot more than I thought it would.” She folded her arms around her waist, her body visibly shaking.

“There is going to be a day when you have to decide what it is you want, because the way things are,

either you can be Kingpin or you can have a family. In your line of work, the two obviously don't go together. If you don't want to shell out for coffins. We can't bring life into an environment that's all about death."

There was a burning in his chest where he should have been roaring at her. "We were fine! Everything was fine."

"No we weren't," she denied. "I think we were lying to ourselves."

"We were fine. No one asked you to go to that bar! You accepted this—yes, you did. Where the business is concerned you just stuck your head in the sand. You were happy to be with me, you just didn't want to know," he replied, stung by the accusations. What the hell was this?

"I know," she said brokenly. "Anyway, you carry on. I'll just go and have what's left of our dead baby scraped out of my body."

She turned and went back into the hospital, and he let her go. A text came from Tony: *Five minutes to drop*. He stood there, searching for calm within himself. So many what ifs. What if he hadn't gone to the clean up, what if someone else had picked her up from the restaurant, what if he'd told her to be careful, to keep her eyes open... It simply came back to the fact that he didn't get rid of Santori when he had the chance. Now Santori was taking it out on Gina. He had

pulled her into this life, and they had barely made it eight weeks before she was in hospital. Because of him.

His phone buzzed with a message, and he glanced down at it. From Gina, hours late. *I didn't know, Soprano. I do now! Please let me know if you're coming to the club. I want to go home. Xxx*

He should have gotten there faster. She'd asked for his help, and he hadn't been there. He started mentally unravelling the threads in his life, all the events that had brought him here, and imagined the changes. He couldn't stand the feeling of helplessness. He wanted the operation to be over and done with. They could talk when they got home...

He made his way back inside and was accosted by Dr. James. "Oh, Nick. I just wanted to explain something to you. I spoke to Dr. Philips, the obstetrician, and she's let me know the current situation. I hope you understand that the drug in combination with the miscarriage will cause all sorts of emotions to come to the surface. You will need to support one another."

Not sure that will work if she's blaming me for the whole thing and expecting to plan a funeral for herself. "Thanks," he said shortly. He turned into the ward and saw the nurse trying to coax Gina back into bed.

“No, you don't understand, I think he's gone and I said really awful things...” She turned to see him there, and he was nearly knocked over by Gina hurtling into him. “I'm so sorry,” she sobbed. “I don't know why I said that.”

“You're angry,” he stated cautiously. “You must have been holding it back, though.”

“No, no, I'm so fucking angry with myself. I should have left. I know I should have.”

“He'd have gone for you another day,” he said slowly.

“I lost it.” Her voice petered out. “It's my fault.”

He held her tighter. “No. Don't say that again.” As he said it out loud, it was nothing less than the complete truth. “It's not. Please, you need to rest.”

“I don't know how you can bear to be near me,” she mumbled, her tears dampening his neck. “I feel so damn weak.”

“You're good in bed,” he joked.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered again, her mouth trembling with the onset of tears.

He kissed her head lightly. “Stop it. Just sleep for a bit, okay? I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.”

He didn't let her go while she slept. Sofia, now discharged, padded into the ward a few hours later and sat on the end of Gina's bed as she slept. He

couldn't deny the pain in her face as she stroked her hands over Gina's covered legs.

"I should have just taken her home, but... Nicky, she's the only friend I've had in such a long time, and I got careless."

"I know," he said simply.

"You know what Paul's done? He called your mother. I spoke to Massimo and told him to make sure she doesn't come. I don't know how you feel about it, but I certainly don't fancy a visit from Ma right now. He agreed with me. He wants you to call him, by the way."

"Not now," he said through his teeth.

"For Christ's sake, I get drugged, and what does he think will make me better? A visit from your mum?" She pulled her hair over her shoulder and rubbed at the dark circles beneath her eyes. "She lost the baby, didn't she?"

Nick just nodded. To his eternal surprise, she started to cry. "Don't let her leave. Just make her feel safe, okay?"

"Sofia, calm down, please," he asked, weary of this. "Let us just get through this, and we'll work everything else out together."

She acquiesced, and he eventually convinced her to go home. Twenty-four hours had to pass before Gina was made ready for surgery, to allow the

medication to work through her and expunge the GHB. He didn't sleep, just watched Gina with hollow eyes. He wasn't going to let her out of his sight until she was in surgery. He wasn't going to let anyone else "look after" her.

He was allowed to walk with her to the theatre, and her hands traced over his rosary beads. "Say a prayer for me. Ask God to make me less of a silly bitch."

"First part: done. Second part: stop that, I've told you already."

"Not outside the bedroom, dude," she mumbled with a slow grin. He caught her tiny little finger wave as she disappeared into the theatre

He made the short journey to the flat to bring Gina some night clothing and a change of clothes and trainers. On the way, he turned his phone back on to see voice messages from both Paul and his mother. He deleted them all without listening and noticed the text from Tony. *All known associates at location destroyed. RS still missing.*

Fuck it hard, he thought furiously, needing to throw something or hurt someone. He had options, including one he was loathe to take but knew would draw Renaldo out. But not now. He returned to the hospital and waited a little longer. Eventually Gina was wheeled back into the ward, and he waited for her

to come around. He wasn't sure he breathed until she opened her eyes. The nurse pulled the curtain around her bed for privacy.

“Yo.” She smiled weakly. “I think this is the good shit they've got me on.”

“You look cracked to the eyeballs,” he murmured, taking her hand and kissing it.

“Did you go to confession as well?” she asked, her fingers closing imperceptibly around his. “You look prayed out.”

“Still time.” He wanted to hold her, protect her like he should have done as her eyes drifted closed again.

“Dude?” she asked. He gave in to his own need and curled up to her, curving himself to her body. She smelled faintly of disinfectant and iodine.

“I'm here.”

“Please stay. Don't be mad with me. I know I sounded like I wasn't sure or anything, but I didn't wish for this.”

“I'm not mad with you, not even a little.” He touched his mouth to her neck and felt her body shudder with a sob.

“Sorry, I'm okay. It's just...my hormones are fucked.”

“Shush.” God, his poor girl.

“Can you sing ‘Road to Rhode Island,’ please?”

He leaned back until he could find the strength to reply to her. "Are your eyes closed?"

She nodded. "I love you."

He coughed a laugh. "You must do, asking me to inflict my voice on you."

Chapter Twenty-Six

She was sitting cross-legged on Hampstead Heath, looking down onto North London. The baby was in a cot carrier next to her, cooing gently. Mary Alice picked up the cot carrier, and she glimpsed at her son, her and Nick's son. He had a baby afro and dimples in his fat cheeks! He was wearing the t-shirt Nick had bought him.

Mary Alice said to her, "I'll bring him back. You don't need him right now."

When she opened her eyes, her vision was opaque with tears. That was a fucking bullshit dream. She couldn't see where Nick was; her body felt too heavy to turn to look for him. Suddenly a hand was around her wrist.

"Hello, Gina," a masculine voice said warmly. "So sorry about your loss. I just need to borrow this. When you speak to Nick, tell him Renaldo sends his best."

She felt the sliver of cold metal on her wrist where her hospital tag was, and then the plastic was stripped from her. She couldn't sit up or move to tell him not to touch her. What made her really angry with herself was that she fell right back asleep.

* * *

It was the flicking of the knife that made him wake up. He leapt over Gina's bed and grabbed the person by the jaw. He was dressed in the scrubs of a nurse in the ward. No nurse should be carrying a flick knife. "Definitely against NHS regulations," Nick murmured.

He removed the knife from the fake nurse's hand along with Gina's hospital wristband. "Let's walk."

He could feel the nurse trembling underneath the scrubs as he walked him to the men's toilets. "Call Santori. Now."

"I can't..." the nurse warbled. Nick took the flick knife and pressed it to the man's chest. "You were about to cut my girlfriend. Make a phone call while I still have my patience."

He moved slowly into his pocket and extracted his phone. Nick watched the screen to see what number Renaldo was saved under. Just the number one.

"Do you have it?"

"Yes sir," the nurse replied.

"Good. I'll expect you at the drop-off. Someone will meet you there."

The phone beeped as the call ended. Nick pressed on two points in the nurse's neck, and he passed out. He sat him on the nearest cubicle and closed the door. Again he flicked his phone. "Tony."

"You don't have anyone else in your phone book, do you?"

"My gay love for you knows no bounds," he replied. "I've got Santori's number. Can you get his location from there?"

"I can do."

"I'll send it to you now. I'm not kidding with this, do not tell anyone."

"What do I do when I find him?"

"Call me back," he ordered. Without waiting for a further reply, he did what he should have done this time yesterday.

"Dad?"

"Nicholas, I have stayed away and I have held your mother back as well. You had this within your control..."

Nick pressed his forehead to the cold glass of the mirror, feeling the little resolve he had left dissolving. His voice shaking, he began, "Dad..."

He heard his father sigh. "What do you need me to do, Nicholas?"

He backed up and caught his reflection in the glass. He looked mental, bags under his eyes, shadow

over his jaw, his hair wild. "Santori is trying to prove some backwards point about our protection. We can't look after our women; we couldn't possibly manage to look after anything else."

"Go on..."

"Tony's looking for him, but I need to look after Gina."

"Nicholas, priorities..."

"She was pregnant. She had a miscarriage." Saying it out loud really fucking hurt. He took a moment before he spoke again. "I've got one of his minions here. So if you need more information to take over, do it." His father didn't say anything, "Dad. I've never asked anything of you. Just this. Please."

"Nicholas, I understand. I presume I will not be able to contact you for some time."

He felt a lump tightening his throat at the release of the pressure from this nightmare. "Just a few days."

"I will do what I can. Give my love to Georgina. Talk to her. Make her understand that it's not her fault."

The tone in his father's voice made Nick pause. "Ma went through the same, didn't she?"

"Two," Massimo admitted. "After your brother. Concentrate on Georgina. When you come back we will have results for you."

Nick thanked him and ended the call. He tucked his phone away and splashed his face with ice-cold water. The shock sent a little colour into his cheeks. He waited a few minutes before two men entered the toilets and nodded discretely to Nick. He left the toilets and made his way back to the ward.

Gina came around. "Are you staying?" she murmured, then turned her face into the pillow. "I'm sorry. I sound so fucking needy..."

"Don't be silly. I'm not going anywhere." He framed her face with both hands and stroked his thumbs over her cheeks. "Promise." She didn't seem to recall the missing wristband. He hoped she thought it was just a dream. For now. When she was better they could talk. In a way he should have before making her commit to a life with him.

* * *

Gina didn't want to let Nick out of her sight. She seemed worried that he was going to do something stupid. Something stupid would be leaving a trace of Renaldo Santori on the planet. She looked so worn out. He helped her put all her things together and thank the nurses for their help.

She lay down in the back seat of the car, covering herself with their coats and murmuring, "Just tell me

when we get home. Come along, Jeeves,” she added with the slightest lift to the corner of her mouth.

“Yes, Lady Penelope.”

Before he started the car, he leaned over the back seat “If we went away for a few days, where would you love to go?”

She sighed softly, answering without hesitation. “Whitstable.”

“Whitstable?”

“I used to go there when I was at school. I used to think if the world ever ended, I'd want to be there. I was a depressed kid.”

Nick turned back to the wheel and started the car. “Whitstable it is.”

She sat up gingerly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we're going to the flat to pick up some things for a few days, I'm going to hire a cottage or whatever, and we'll be off. We're not sticking around here for any more bullshit.”

Her eyes met his in the rear-view mirror, sparkling with an immediate joy. “That sounds awesome. The cottage bit, not the bullshit part.”

Nick cracked his first smile in what felt like days. “Good. Let's go.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Whitstable was just over an hour and a half away by car. They had returned to the flat, where she barely noticed how much security they went through before they were able to enter. She froze when she saw the t-shirt that Nick had bought and hid it right at the back of their wardrobe.

Nick went straight on the laptop and booked a cottage for them both. He called the owner and asked if they could take the property now. Gina packed weekend bags for them both, and a sense of self-preservation demanded that she take her hair-drier and straighteners. She looked at her phone and deleted the pregnancy application she had downloaded. She glanced at Nick, who finished the conversation and asked if she was ready to buy some food to last them a few days. She nodded as he took the bags from her and put them in the boot.

“Laptop,” she reminded him. “You’ve got films and Internet on there.”

“We do tend to get bored quickly,” he said with a wry smile. “What do you fancy food wise?”

“Everything.” They stopped the car at a supermarket nearby and bought like they were going away for a month.

Gina slept through most of the journey, only waking up when a song she liked came on the radio, or if Nick's hand drifted over her knee, squeezing in reassurance. They arrived early in the afternoon, stopping right by the shore.

“We're staying here?”

Nick nodded. “I know it looks like a garden centre, but you'll love it.” He nudged her out of the car as she leaned into the back seat to collect their bags. He took them quickly from her. “You're not supposed to be lifting anything.”

“All right, Dad,” she mocked, then stilled. “Sorry. Just a slip.”

He held his hand out toward her, and she allowed him to pull her from the car. “Don't worry about it.”

A homely-looking lady handed them the key to the cottage and showed them around. It was like a glass house; the line of the sea meeting the horizon seemed to surround them. She felt as if she were standing in the middle of a crystal. “Du-hude!” She chuckled. “Good pick.”

The woman gave a proud smile and said, “I hope you enjoy your break here.”

They thanked her, and as Nick went to sort out the heating, Gina stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows. She could almost touch the sea. She closed her eyes and could hear only the waves foaming on the pebbles, nothing else. No traffic, no police cars, no drunken yelling, just the waves, sunlight on her eyelids. *I want to be myself again*, she prayed. *I want to feel like I'm not the most useless woman on the planet. I want Nick to forgive me....*

He came back into the living room and slipped his arms around her waist. "It's like L.A."

"L.A's got nothing on Whitstable." She grinned up at him. "Arcades!"

"Penny sweets."

"Cream soda."

"Fish and chips."

She held up her hand and he high-fived her. "Let's do this shit." They spent the entire afternoon feeding their inner child, getting to grips with the fruit machines, and playing with the toy claw, where Gina pulled out a teddy bear and Nick managed what looked like a plastic ring in a ball. "So much nicer than this tat," she teased, wriggling her engagement ring at him. He slapped her arse so hard that everyone in the arcade turned and looked at them.

As the sun was setting, they made their way back to the cottage, grabbed a few blankets and sat on the

beach. Nick dug into his pocket and pulled out a spliff. Gina gave a little clap of joy. "You naughty, wonderful man."

They huddled together under the blankets as Nick lit up and passed it to her, her head on his shoulder. The sun turned into a blushing red as it started to dip below the horizon. "Sometimes you just need to be in the right place for a good sunset," Nick surmised.

Gina started to giggle. "Okay there, Dalai Lama."

"You can't say that sunset in Thailand was better than this."

She took another deep drag of the spliff and handed it back to him. "Not that it was better," she squeaked as the drug started to wear through her. "Just...well, everything was so much better when we were twenty-two."

Nick dragged the blunt tips of his fingers over her scalp in soothing circles. "Feels like fifty years ago."

"I can still taste the snake-blood shots. I can't believe I'm still letting you talk me into things."

He squeezed her tighter. "You know why. We got tanked and you promised."

"You can't trust a word I say at four in the morning." She wrapped both arms around his waist and looked up into his face.

“Hello,” he said mildly. He blew the smoke toward her mouth and she inhaled, her lips barely touching his. “Anyone asks you, I’m still twenty-two.”

“You can’t carry twenty-two,” she told him, uncurling an arm from his frame to take back the roll up.

“Shut up, yes I can. I got ID’d the other day. For a bottle of wine.”

“You probably forgot you were wearing your glasses. It’s your Clark Kent thing.” She stared at the glowing end of the cigarette, the smoke curling in the growing dark. “This is good.”

“You’re welcome,” he intoned, taking it back from her. “I know you don’t roll, you lazy cow.”

They watched the sun in silence for a moment before Gina announced, “I wanted a boy.”

“Me too,” he replied, the slightest catch in his voice as he flicked ash from the end. “I was thinking we’d name him after your dad. And he’d have to support Liverpool.” Gina shook her head.

“Not if he was named after Dad. It would have to be Newcastle United.”

Nick roared with laughter. “No fucking way, woman. Have some dignity.” He touched his mouth to her forehead. “We’ll be okay.”

She snuggled closer to him. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I can't help feeling it's my fault. You know when you feel like your body's failed you?” She felt the weight of the disappointment settle on her again.

“You haven't failed at anything. Please don't say things like that.” He sounded pained. “The doctor said we can try again whenever you're ready. It's meant to be just the two of us for now. Enough time for me to change your mind about what team he'll support.”

Gina stroked the back of her fingers over his bristled cheek. He hadn't shaved in days. “Thank you.”

He brushed his mouth over her fingers. “Purely ulterior motivation, I promise you.”

“How do you feel?” she asked, tucking her hand into his tightly.

He seemed surprised by the question, and he gazed at the sea, his lashes almost shielding his eyes. “Like I've let you down. Disappointed. Really freaking tired.”

“I sent you a lousy little text message and you came to get me.” She wrapped her arms around him again, her face against his cheek. She was putting a stop to that right now. “You've never let me down. Ever. Plus you've brought me to a place I loved more than My Little Pony. The other two are solvable. I can let you beat me at chess, and we can sleep for as long as we like tonight.”

“Plan,” he said gently; she felt his voice rumble against her mouth. “Look, look, the sun's about to go.”

They watched as the sun sparkled over the sea before dipping below the horizon completely. She released a breath, sensing that the sunset had taken everything bad about the day away from her, and arched her back. “I think my bum's gone numb.”

“Stay in or go out?”

“Stay in. Have we got wireless connection here? I've got the sudden urge to watch something ridiculous on YouTube.”

Nick stubbed out the rest of the spliff between the pebbles. “I nominate Keyboard Cat.”

“Hell yeah. We didn't leave that food in the boot, did we?”

“Nah, we put it in the fridge before we went and got high on sherbet dips. That stuff is better than coke, I swear to God.”

“Could probably sniff it.” Gina shrugged, getting to her feet and pulling Nick with her. She went on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss so light he bit his lip afterwards. “Love you.”

The fierceness of his hug told her he didn't need to say it out loud at all. They went back inside and had dinner and watched Keyboard Cat until they had tears running down their faces. Nick started yawning, which

was completely contagious, and they agreed to go to bed.

Gina hadn't worn a stitch to bed in their entire relationship, and it felt oddly intimate going to bed with him while they were both at least partly dressed. She felt there was an underlying obligation for them to start getting dirty. Nick was just wearing boxers as he climbed into bed. He stretched his arm out toward her immediately, and she fitted herself into the crook of his arm wearing a thigh-skimming t-shirt.

"This feels weird," she admitted in the darkness.

"What?" Nick mumbled, not opening his eyes.

"I feel overdressed."

He tweaked open one eye. "Then take your clothes off."

"I can't, not everything." She made a motion around her lower body. Nick sat up and removed the t-shirt from her body, leaving her in just panties.

"Better?"

She pressed herself to his side. The feel of his bare muscles against her chest washed a soothing ease into her that made her close her eyes. "Much."

Gina woke up about eight hours later, after a thankfully dreamless sleep. Nick stayed asleep, and she watched him for a while. He was a man so used to doing, and his inability to take action for her would be driving him crazy. She couldn't let herself forget that

he would be suffering too. He'd been even more excited about the baby than her. She gave him a light kiss, then went to the bathroom to scrub herself clean. She slapped on lots of mango body cream, pulled on clean underwear and Nick's jumper, which smelled gorgeous, and made her way downstairs. It really was a beautiful cottage. She made herself a cup of tea and pulled up the laptop to do menial things. Other than the laptop, neither of them had any other mode of technology. No mobiles. "No longer shackled," she murmured. She read all the celebrity gossip on newspaper websites, then decided to watch *Harry Potter*.

"As long as someone else is having a worse time than we are, it's all good. I haven't got the weight of the world's hopes on me. Never mind Harry."

She was just finishing the second film when Nick emerged, hair still wet from his shower. She had the headphones on and nearly jumped two feet into the air when he gently removed them from her head.

"I said hello!"

She pressed her hands to her chest. "Scaring me is not on!"

He gave her a boyish grin. "You do realize Daniel Radcliffe's gay, you cradle snatcher."

"Oi! I just happen think he's a very talented young man," she said to Nick's gregarious laughter.

"You've been asleep ages. You really must have needed it."

"First sleep I've had in about thirty-odd hours." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her mouth, which stilled her immediately. Bit too sexual this early on, she thought, gripping the laptop defensively.

"When did you get up?" he asked, moving to the kitchen.

"About five hours ago, dude." She was still trying to calm herself down. *It's fine*, she told herself. *It was just a kiss. It doesn't mean bang time.*

"Have you eaten something?" He busied himself making coffee.

"I've had lots of toast and tons of Ribena," she answered, putting the laptop on the coffee table and following him into the kitchen. "We can go out if you're getting cabin fever."

He looked her up and down. "You do realize that you have an apple on your knickers. Whitstable isn't ready for that."

"You don't know what Whitstable can handle. I will find jeans, though."

"Come here a minute," he commanded gently. She hesitantly stood in front of him for him to brace his hands at the base of her neck. "Do you want to talk?"

“Can we go for a walk instead?” she begged, not ready for any sort of reality yet. “We can find a gastro pub, get something roasted down our necks.”

“Okay,” he agreed. She could feel the disappointment in him. He was ready to be open with her, and she really couldn't take it at the moment. “Get some clothes on, and we'll find somewhere we can drink a decent pint of ale.”

“Ale?” she mocked. “Where are you talking from, Conan the Barbarian? Ale!”

“What? I want ale. You want roast—we're both talking from the Middle Ages.” She held back her amusement and went to grab some clothing and her bag. They picked up their keys, and Nick poured the coffee into a sterling silver decanter. Then they walked into town, her arm hooked into the crook of his.

They found a comfortable pub and ordered their ale and their much talked of roast dinners. “How's your fruit beer?” Nick asked, a mocking lift to his mouth.

“It tastes like strawberry fizzy drink.” She beamed at him, and he stroked his hand over her cheek. She made to bite his fingers, and while he was distracted she stole some of his mashed potato.

“You are unbelievable! I asked if you wanted any!”

“Always tastes better from your plate.” She took a gulp of the fruit beer, then sighed. “Okay, let's talk.”

He released a pent-up breath. “Just...help me out and tell me something you're not proud of.”

“God, I can pick from a list. Borrowing money from He Who Shall Not Be Named. Lying to my personal banker about what I needed a loan for. Blaming my dad...” She had to steady her voice. “Blaming him for everything, when it wasn't his fault. He just died when he wasn't ready. So, not my best moment.”

Nick caught the seat of her chair and pulled her right next to his own. Gina took his hand in both of hers. “I know you want to be all martyr-like, but don't. I made that stupid decision, not you. Everything else that followed from it is consequential. If nothing else, I now know just how amazing you are at sex.”

“Pest,” he added with a small smile.

“And how much you love me. I wouldn't take that back for the world and his Taj Mahal.”

He touched his mouth to her forehead. “I hope you think it's worth it,” he replied gruffly. “If I had done just one thing differently, we'd just have come here for a short break, not to run away.”

“We're not running away—we're exploring the British seaside,” Gina corrected. “We need this. Your dad knows what to do, right?”

“Santori's had help,” Nick answered slowly. Gina blinked. Good God, he was talking to her about this. He was really talking to her. “And it could only have come from someone close to us. It's the only reason he would have had someone come to the hospital.”

Something fluttered through Gina's memory. “Someone cut my wristband.”

He lowered his head. “Yeah.”

“Someone must have heard you at the club,” she argued, panicked that he could possibly think Tony had betrayed them. He had been on the phone to his friend almost constantly throughout her stay.

“No. I only called Paul and Tony from the hospital. Tony didn't even know which hospital you were at. I never told him. I called Paul.”

“He wouldn't,” Gina assured him. “He hasn't got the guts.”

“Yeah, years of my parents trying to cut it out of him wouldn't help, but if he had someone in his ear telling him he could change the world by getting rid of me...why wouldn't he?”

“Because you're his brother!” She searched his face. “This is really worrying you, isn't it?”

“It's all I keep coming back to. That and what you went through... I just, I can't hack it.”

Gina wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm all right," she murmured into his hair. "Your dad will sort it out."

Nick gave a derisive snort. "Obviously, he can control Paul about as well as he controls me."

"He'll do something. He told you he would, didn't he?" She felt his mouth move over her neck as he lifted his head.

"He'll try," Nick said uneasily. "Food's getting cold."

She touched her mouth to his cheek. "Thank you."

"What for?"

"Talking to me," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. He ruffled the hair by her ear and turned back to his meal. "When we get back I can talk to Sofia."

"I wouldn't get too excited about that," Nick said, his lips twisted dryly. "As much as she likes you, she likes being able to shop in Harrods more." Not convinced, they finished their meal and drinks. On the slow walk back to the cottage, Gina took Nick's hand.

"Are you pity hand holding?" he demanded. "You never hold my hand."

"Yes I bloody well do!" She felt utterly affronted. "You know I like touching you."

“Perv,” he accused. “We’re watching *Blue Harvest* when we get back. No more *Attitude* cover-whoring wizards.”

He curled her hand across her chest so he could wrap his arm around her shoulders. As safe as she felt in his arms, she was preoccupied thinking about the possibility of Paul assisting Santori. It made sense, but Paul wouldn’t do anything without someone’s prompting him. As they watched the film, Gina’s feet in Nick’s lap, she tried recalling every conversation she’d had with Sofia about her husband. Second-child syndrome. Why wouldn’t he want to take his chance for glory, at his brother’s expense?

She got up to take some paracetamol and made a cup of tea. Watching the kettle boil, she worried about Sofia. Before they’d left the flat, Gina had seen a text message from Sofia. It was a picture of the two of them at the club before... Well before it all went hazy and hospitably. Underneath the picture, Sofia had written, *You’re my friend. My dearest friend. Please don’t ever think otherwise. I’m so sorry. Xx Sof*

She had stared at that photograph for a while before sending a message back. *Thank you, Sofia. I’ll call you. Xx g*

Why would Paul put Sofia in danger just to prove a point or to distance himself from any accusation that he could possibly be behind it?

Regardless of what Sofia thought, Paul loved his wife. She got up to make herself a hot drink and asked Nick if he wanted the same. On his decline, she turned on the kettle and thought.

“Tea doesn't take that long, woman,” Nick called. No, it didn't, but she'd obviously taken her time with something, or else why the prodding from Mr. Santori to remind her what she was potentially marrying into? What did he think she hadn't done yet? Left Nick? Asked him to give up the family business?

She forgot her drink and went back to the living room. She touched her hands to his knee. “If I'd ever asked you to give up...the business... Really give it up. Like it's either me or it... Would you have done it?”

“Without a second thought,” he answered immediately. “You'd have to be my reference on my CV, though—I haven't worked for a legitimate company for years.”

“And if you weren't part of the business any more, what would happen?”

“Dad would take back over, until Paul knows as much as I do.”

“So your dad doesn't run it all now?”

“No, I do. What is it?” Nick asked, cupping her jaw gently. She shook her head. She could feel something nudging at her brain, but it wasn't connecting. Only that she had skipped the step in the

grand master plan where Nick handed everything over to Massimo and they skipped off into a Vegas sunset.

“It's gone. Just a thought.”

He tugged her into his arms. “You shouldn't do that too much. It'll only hurt in the morning.”

The only person Gina really, truly trusted was Sofia. If she could talk to her, then maybe that little thought could formulate into a plan where Santori would no longer be that shadowy fear at the edge of her sight.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After two days of exploring the town galleries and having the most glorious meal at two different restaurants, they walked back to the cottage late in the evening. Nick collapsed onto the sofa. “No more freaking art,” he begged. He leaned forward to remove his shoes, and she caught the wince in his face. He started a fire in the grate, then sat back with a small groan. She prodded him in the side with her toe. “Do you want a massage?”

He gave her a strange look. “Where'd that come from?”

“You look like you've pulled something. Did you hurt your back ferrying me around?”

“No, I didn't. You weigh nothing.” A slyness stole into his eyes. “If a massage is going, I'll take you up on that.”

He set up some cushions on the floor, and she found some oil that was supposed to prevent stretch marks, but short of running up to the town and asking if there was any sexy oil for sale, she'd take what she had. Nick removed his jumper and t-shirt and was lying expectantly on his front.

She pulled off her jeans and straddled him. “Is the rest coming off?” Nick asked mildly, glancing over his shoulder.

“Just lie back,” she commanded, pouring the oil into her palm. “Do as I tell you for once.”

“For once?” he echoed. “Have you or have you not demanded that I fuck you?”

“Bedroom antics aside,” she clarified in a high voice, squirming in embarrassment.

“Stop that,” Nick groaned. “I’m lying on my front. It will hurt if you carry on.”

“No it won’t,” she promised, warming the oil between her palms before working them over his skin. He was built like crazy. The glide of the oil over his warm skin triggered an instant warmth between her legs she’d thought she’d have to wait a while to feel again. Guess Nick really was just that damn sexy. As she worked the muscles of his back into relaxation, the heat of the fire both in the cottage and in her own body caused sweat to roll down her back. She removed her top and patted her skin dry.

“You okay?” he asked, sounding contented.

“Er, yeah. You can turn over now.”

“Good. I would like to use my dick sometime in the future.” He nearly unseated her rolling onto his back. He caught her by the hips and steadied her. “Should have warned me about that little striptease,”

he said with a grin. He didn't need to tell her anything—it was braced between her thighs. She took more oil, then angled her palms from the cords of his neck down to his pectorals. She stroked her fingertips over his nipples in short, firm circles before trailing along the muscled divide on his stomach. When she traced the definition of his hips, he bucked up toward her. “Fuck, what are you doing to me?”

“Something nice, for once,” she said quietly. She pressed his sides with her knees. “Someone's been skipping gym time.”

He gave her bottom a double-handed smack. “That's for cheek.”

“Oww!” she protested.

He glanced at either side of her hips. “Still shaking.”

“Hands down, Soprano.” He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. While she had teased about his abs, he could skip the gym for a year and she'd still be able to cut diamonds on him. She scooted back onto his knees and started to undo the buttons of his jeans. “That doesn't need a massage,” he said carefully.

“The bruise on my lower back from this morning would say otherwise,” she murmured. She loved being able to give him pleasure, and he needed the release. As she wasn't quite ready to have anything inside her,

she quite fancied playing Sex Mistress. This was a happy medium.

She released him from the confines of his jeans, to his relieved sigh. She stroked her fingers over his length, enamoured by his continued reaction to her. He still wanted her, and not just because she was a warm body in the morning. It felt like such a long time since she'd touched him like this. She bent down and allowed the head of his cock to paint the oval of her mouth. She noticed the faint tint of her rose-coloured lip balm on him, and brushed her thumb across him and felt his legs rise beneath her. She allowed his girth to part her lips once more; the heat of him in her mouth made her tummy ripple in surprising lust. Her hands lovingly cupped his balls as she took him deeply into her mouth.

“Christ, that feels so good,” he groaned, his own hand sliding into her hair, dislodging her clip so the locks tumbled around her face.

She licked, tasted, feasted on each crevice, each vein full to bursting, swallowed each pearl of pre-cum that beaded onto her tongue, rich with the intoxicating flavour of him. She took him deeper still, edging him to the back of her throat, which closed automatically around him. “Jesus Christ, I'm gonna come,” he rasped, his fingers tightening in her hair.

She felt the tremor in his thighs at his impending orgasm, so she squeezed them gently, letting him know she was ready. He uttered her name, sounding all at once harsh and reverent as his cream burst inside her mouth, each pulse sliding into her throat for her to swallow eagerly. She released him from her mouth and unfurled herself to rest her head on his damp stomach. Not the most comfortable of pillows, but the fact he was struggling for breath made her feel rather proud of herself.

“Oh fuck, woman, you're going to kill me.”

“It's old age,” she said convincingly.

“Come here,” he insisted, curling a hand around her arm.

“Can't,” she refused, glancing up at him. “Still, you know....”

“No, I don't know.” He tugged her along the length of his body and locked his arms around her waist. “If you're not ready, you can tell me. Just talk to me.”

She traced her hand over his neck, his pulse ramming against her fingertips. “My body's saying one thing, my head's saying something else. I'm more inclined to go with my head, as I don't like my body very much at the moment.”

"I love your body," Nick asserted. "Your body's my best friend. Your body's been a better friend to me than you have."

"Joker." She grinned. "I...I'm not making excuses..."

"Mmm, not so sure about that." His hand tangled in her hair so she had to look at him. "I'll know when to change your mind, though." Her heart did a hop, skip and a jump at that. But just because Nick had forgiven her body, didn't mean she had. When they were in bed together that night, Nick's hand covered her belly, rolling in soothing circles as if trying to heal her with his touch, until she fell asleep.

For the next few days, it was as if Nick had determined they were teenagers again, as he coaxed her into rather risqué public displays of affection. It never quite stopped at just a kiss. His bare hands were on her skin; hers would slip inside his clothing until the sound of a cleared throat or a horn from a passing car reminded them where they were. An old lady had prodded them after Nick pressed her to the wall of a house, kissing her like he'd die if he stopped. "Would you mind getting off my house?"

Nick left Gina stuttering to explain. "Sorry, we're just...engaged and...we can't...at the moment because... Sorry."

They scuttled off as the old lady started muttering about disrespect. "Why didn't you leg it?"

"Like you did?" She gave him a look of distaste. "I bet you were one of those little Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) almosts who would graffiti homes like hers and try and get a blow job off some skank in her back garden."

"What an accurate picture you've just painted of my teenage years. Do you want to play skank?"

On their last night in the cottage, just over a week after they'd arrived, Gina felt quite effervescently at peace with her body, and more so her proximity to Nick. As a dare, they raced over the beach and splashed into the oil-black water and had the most furious water fight, Gina tripping Nick so he ended up completely underwater.

"Victory is mine!" she shouted, punching both fists in the air and edging back to the shore as Nick pulled himself from the sea, raking both hands through his hair. Ah hell, he was mad.

"It's on," Nick vowed, stalking toward her.

"Hey, I'm a woman," she reminded him. "A little one at that. I could have been swept out to sea, and then what would you have..."

He wrapped both arms around her and pressed a hot kiss to her mouth. "Be quiet now," he commanded. He lowered his head again, and she let his mouth talk

all over her. She felt the pebbles pressing into her back, then squealed as the waves drove beneath her. She didn't notice the next wave, or the one after that. Her arms around Nick, she moaned softly as his tongue invaded her mouth, his wet hair slipping through her fingers. She could taste salt, heat and him. His hand disappeared inside the waistband of her denim miniskirt, her leggings and her panties to cup her pussy.

“You're burning me,” he said over her lips. “You had my cock in your mouth this morning. Is that what's got you so fucking wet?”

“Yes,” she whispered, arching into him, feeling him part her lips and hold her open for a moment. When his middle finger nudged into her, she gripped him tighter, pulling his mouth down hard onto hers. He pushed his ring finger inside her as well, and she shrieked.

“Okay, stop it, someone's going to come and see.”

“You'd better hurry up and come first then,” he told her bluntly, nipping her neck as his fingers drove demandingly inside her, rubbing over her g-spot. Oh God, she was so on that page now. She didn't feel the pebbles against her shoulder blades, or the chill of the foaming waves on her legs; she was blazing from the fire that blossomed from her pussy and raged in each

and every vein of her body, her blood pumping pleasure that should have dried off both their clothes, as she screamed. The water didn't feel so cold anymore, she thought distractedly.

Nick touched his mouth to hers lightly as he slowly removed his hand from between her thighs. "Told you I'd change your mind." He tugged her to her feet and hustled her back to the cottage. Her knees were shaking so badly, she didn't know how she managed the short walk back. Nick gave her another kiss and said, "I saw you pack your hair-drier. Go forth and make this place smell like Vidal Sassoon."

She grinned at him. "What?" he asked, sweeping his wet hair from his face as he removed his jumper and t-shirt.

"Nothing." She shook her head and went to fill the cottage with the scent of straighteners and 2300-watt hair-drying. When she finished and was satisfied that her hair would never even attempt to curl again, she returned downstairs. Nick had changed out of his wet clothing and had started a fire, which he was poking with a lathe, looking rather satisfied with himself. Why shouldn't he—he could build a fire and make his woman scream to France and back. Wrapped in a towelling robe, Gina linked her arms around his neck and pressed her body to his back, saying gently, "I want to marry you."

He threw the lathe onto the burgeoning fire. "It's happened. You've finally come so hard you've lost your memory."

She slid from him to make him look her in the eyes. "No," she said passionately, "I mean I really want to marry you. Not because I have to, or I should do or anything other than I want to be with you. Just like this. All the time."

He tugged her onto his lap, and she immediately wrapped her legs and arms around him. "It'll be like this," he promised. "When we go back to London, it'll be different. It's just you and me."

She held him even more tightly to her and believed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

That expression on her face, the trust in her eyes... Nick had fallen asleep with that image behind his lids. She had more reason to never trust him again, but it bloomed from her. That first morning in Whitstable, when he'd woken up and she hadn't been next to him, he'd had a moment of sightless panic before he saw her things spilling out of her bag. And his jumper was missing. Cheeky cow, he'd thought with a grin, relaxing back onto the pillows.

While he was tempted beyond anything to stay here, buy this cottage, set up shop as a self-employed accountant with Gina working in any of the restaurants they'd dined in....they had to go back. He couldn't leave his dad to deal with all this Santori shit, and to be honest, he wanted to make sure the dick was dead.

Gina wandered into the bedroom with two steaming cups. "One for you." She handed his over, and he gratefully took a sip of coffee. She sat cross-legged opposite him. "You've got this look on your face."

"Oh yeah?"

“Mmm. Says, 'I don't wanna!’” She trailed the tips of her fingers over his knee. “Home time?”

“’Fraid so. Your shampoo will only last so long,” he teased.

She hid a smile behind the rim of her cup. “You're just pissed off because I defeated you in a water fight.” He curled his fingers around hers. Her gaze collided with his, and he saw the flash of fear in her eyes.

“I won't let anything happen to you,” he swore, his hand tightening around hers protectively.

“Thank you, but I'm more worried about you,” she admitted. “Vengeance shall be mine and all that Charlton Heston jazz.”

“Charlton Heston always got the girl.”

“Charlton died first,” she reminded him solemnly.

He eyed her contemplatively. “What are you thinking about? Going commando at my wake?”

She pulled her hand from his and stared into her cup instead. All right, joke gone too far. He took both cups and put them on the side table.

“You shouldn't feel scared. Not for me or yourself, and definitely not of London.”

She seemed restless without the distraction of the mug. “What about next time?”

“There isn't going to be one,” he stated. “It's only a problem because there's someone in my circle who needs to be weeded out. And there's another cunt who keeps calling you 'little blue flower' who needs sorting.”

She rubbed the heel of her hand against her forehead. “Dude...”

“Don't do this to me,” he pressed.

She looked up at him, her voice wobbling. “It's not about me being unsupportive...”

“You're worried. I know. I understand. But this is what I'm supposed to do. This is my cheese soufflé.” He framed her face with his hands and watched the faint smile on her face melting away. “But I'm not hiding anymore... British seaside exploring aside,” he added before she could correct him again. “I can't give you any babies if I have no balls.”

Tears were bubbling in her eyes. “No one knows us here...”

“No more running. We go back,” he insisted. “We get on with our lives. Like we have been here. But where we live. Where our home is. All right?”

He embraced her, her hair tickling his face. When her arms curled around him, he held her more tightly. “Okay,” she said softly.

“That's my girl,” he murmured, kissing her hair. Forgoing their drinks, they packed their belongings

and with complete reluctance, Gina returned the key to the owner. They drove back into London and, passing through the south side, Gina demanded that they stop at a local market so she could buy fresh snappers, then bought kenke in what seemed like bulk.

“You've had this before!” she reminded him, carelessly throwing the leaf-wrapped food into the boot. “Pepper makes everything better.”

When he suggested a few bottles of Supermalt as well, Gina gave a squeal and kissed him. “You do pay attention to me!”

He talked her through the entry to the flat, and they carried their goods inside. “Home, home,” she sighed.

“Get cooking, wench,” he called, taking their bags to the bedroom. “I saw that,” he warned not turning around to what he was sure was a flipped finger.

He saw his phone plugged into the charger and looked at the screen. He removed it and walked back toward the kitchen, where Gina was preparing the fish with a lethal-looking knife. “How many missed calls?”

“Three hundred and eighty,” he admitted.

Gina shook her head. “No way we'd have been able to live in Whitstable. They'd have tracked you there.”

He sat at the dining table and went through each message, each voice mail for the better part of an hour. He removed the sim card from the phone and destroyed it. He retrieved a new one and sent a text to his dad and Tony: *We're back. Come over.*

Gina moved through the kitchen, humming to herself the way she always did when she was cooking. "I've missed this," she said as she seasoned the fish with an array of spices before frying each one whole. "As nice as it is going out, throwing things in the oven isn't the same."

He gave her arm an affectionate rub. "I love how mental you are."

"Well, wait until you taste the sauce," she threatened. She set up two plates with the fish kenke and sauce with a flourish. "You're in my town now, ho!"

"I've brought ice." He smiled. It smelled delicious, and his stomach growled appreciatively. They were halfway through their meal when the intercom buzzed.

"It'll be my dad and Tony."

She nodded. "Fair dos. Tell them not to mind the smell."

He stood up to let them inside. "Tenner says they'll want to eat some." Tony was first to enter and

nearly choked Nick by throwing his arm around Nick's neck.

“You're not allowed to leave this city again, understand?”

“No.”

Gina was drying her hands and squealed as Tony swept her into a bear hug, swinging her from her feet. Massimo gave Nick the warmest embrace he'd ever received from his father.

“Hi, Dad.” He gave a light laugh, feeling comforted by the familiar smell of him.

“You look rested, Nicholas.” Massimo gave him a light pat on the cheek.

He turned to Gina, and Nick would be forever surprised by the smile Gina gave Massimo and the way she opened her arms to him to receive a hug of equal affection. “Are you well, my girl?” he asked, then made to correct himself in English.

“*Mi sento bene, grazie,*” she assured him to Massimo's delighted laughter. “Come in, come in.”

“Do you want something to drink?” Nick asked, closing the door behind them. Tony was sniffing appreciatively.

“What's this? Exotic delights? Are you trying to educate your man, G?”

“Anthony...” Massimo started.

“Would you like to try some?” Gina asked patiently.

She turned to Massimo, who looked expectant. “I would like to try some.”

Nick cursed the need for food before logical thought could take place. “I’ll only give you half, so if you don’t enjoy it it’s less of a waste.”

“Don’t pay attention,” he said, “she’ll eat all of it.” Before Gina could open her mouth, he warned his father and Tony, “There is a lot of pepper in that sauce.”

“I eat pepper for breakfast,” Tony promised. A minute later Gina was apologizing and Tony was sucking on ice cubes. Massimo was tearing into the fried fish with his fingers. “Delicious.”

“So?” Nick prompted. “What did you find out?”

Massimo and Tony both looked at Gina, who cleared her throat. “Oh. I’ll be in the bedroom.”

“No, where are you going? Stay here,” Nick insisted, pulling a chair close to his so she could sit next to him. “You should know this.”

Her eyes darted to Tony and Massimo before she answered. “I thought it would be better for me if I didn’t.”

He breathed out slowly and said, “I know you don’t want to believe this, but what happened to us

was partly due to you not knowing what was coming. Sit down, please.”

She did as he asked, and he immediately curled his hand around her own. “You can talk, Dad.”

“I believe Anthony needs to explain his findings.”

Tony was able to speak even though his face was still bright from the pepper. “With Santori's number, I was able to pull all the numbers he's dialled out to. He's changed it now—he probably knows as well as we do that we'd be able to trace his location with his phone. We found this one in a bin in Ealing. All of the numbers were pay as you go, but...”

“What?” Nick didn't like where this was going.

“One was used in your parents' home. The other from Paul's.”

Gina's hand went to her mouth.

There was something the weight of large rock in the pit of Nick's stomach. *There has to be an explanation.* “Could anyone else have used the phone in that location?”

“Possibly, but they were long calls. Twenty minutes to half an hour. They would have had time to make the call without fear of being caught. I can only think that it would have to be someone...”

“Who lived there or used to,” Massimo concluded. “It seems your brother has taken a different path from you.”

He didn't understand how Paul could do this. Jesus, if he wanted it that badly, Nick would have given it over. It didn't make sense to him. He wasn't going to sell out his brother so fast because of satellite technology. Family was stronger than that.

“Santori will not emerge without some sort of incentive,” Massimo said gently, breaking into Nick's thoughts.

Nick straightened in his seat. “He'll want both of us in one place.”

“Family dinner?” Tony suggested.

“No, needs to be neutral territory. A reason for the family to be together without a whole lot of security in place.”

Gina put her hand down. “Like an engagement party?”

The three men were quiet. “Oh my God,” Gina croaked. “Listen, isn't there any other way to do this?”

Nick shook his head. “You can hide forever and a day in London. It's the only thing I know that will draw Santori out, him and whoever's giving him a blow by blow of our lives. I'd say tomorrow night.”

“So fast?” Tony asked.

“Less time for fuck-face to plan.” Nick shrugged.

“Good. Now where?” Massimo asked.

“No offence, Mr. Da Canaveze, but your home is impossible to cover. Same for here.”

Gina's voice came into the thoughtful silence.

“My restaurant. We all know it. Two exits. One at the back, and one at the front. It backs a square that you can cover from any angle. I know that place down to the location of the electricity boxes. Huge windows, you can see anyone coming a mile off.”

Massimo's brow was raised. “Georgina, that is an extremely clever idea.”

She grinned. “I'm known to have them once in a while. You can call Mark. He'll be happy to have the place bought out for the night.”

“So it'll be just you, Mr. and Mrs. Da Canaveze, Paul and Sofia.” Tony made a note on his phone.

Gina made a face. “Er...where am I going to be?”

“Not there,” Nick said firmly.

“That's not going to work.” Gina rubbed her thumb over the fleshy pad of his hand. “What will stop him from making me some sort of bait if I'm on my own?”

“I don't want you there,” Nick said through his teeth.

“I do not think you have a choice,” Massimo reminded them all. “She is right—your brother will be

suspicious, more than suspicious if you are holding a party without one of the main guests.”

Gina tried to convince him she wouldn't be caught right in the middle of this war. “I'll stay with Sofia. In a corner, with our backs to a wall. You know it won't work unless I'm there.”

“Fuck,” he whispered. She was right, but he didn't like it. He couldn't be in two places at once. And fair enough, he'd feel better if she was right where he could see her.

“This is the one and only time this happens,” he stated. It was more for Tony and Massimo's benefit than Gina's. All three of them nodded in agreement. He turned to Gina. “And if I ask you to do something, please do it for me.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Good.” As they went over the details of what would happen, Nick's feelings of unease increased, and despite telling himself that if Gina was fully informed she would be a lot safer, he still felt as if he were holding a huge “Shoot Her” sign over her head.

Chapter Thirty

He found Gina laying out an outfit for the party tomorrow. He sat on the bed watching her for a moment. "I want to tell you something."

"I hope it's something to do with the appreciation of my arse."

"That aside..." He smiled, taking her hand and making her sit next to him. He reached under the bed and gave her a small box.

"Not from Tiffany's, I see," she murmured. She opened it and stared up at him. "Seriously?"

"If it makes you feel better. I know what you're like about guns." He took the Taser from her. "We'll charge it, and you'll just press here. You need to touch it to the skin for the best effect."

"I didn't get anything for you," she said quietly, edging the box toward him.

"It's not supposed to be a gift exchange. I did say I'd get you one."

"I thought you were joking."

"Control means having the equipment to feel confident in what you're doing," he said, putting the Taser back in the box. "Just carry it with you. If you

feel the need to put it on someone, go ahead. Paul included.”

“I'm more comfortable with knives.” She was moving back from the box as if it was diseased.

“I'm asking you to do this for me.”

Her shoulders dropped at the promise he'd extracted from her. “All right. Fine.”

One argument over with... “I got all my papers from the solicitor. You're now a joint owner of this place as soon as you sign the forms in here. Tony knows where everything is, so he can take it out. Don't mind anything my mother tells you, my solicitor has my will. Everything's yours, okay?”

“There isn't anything without you,” she raged. “None of it matters, the flat, money, none of it.”

He sighed. “It's not what you want to be thinking about. Practicalities have a habit of getting lost in the fray. So if any bullets go ricocheting near me, it's nothing you need to worry about. It's just done.”

“That's all that is, right?” she demanded. “A just in case, not a by the way?”

He fucking well hoped so. “Just in case. And one last thing...”

“Nick...”

He placed a small mobile phone in her hand. “You'll need to keep this on you. My dad's taking everyone's phone away tomorrow night. I hope you

have a pocket in that tight little outfit of yours. All you need to do is hold down number five and you'll get me."

"This is fucking ridiculous," she muttered, standing up and busying herself with rearranging her products.

He understood her anger at him, but the only way to smoke out this bastard was through this sort of production. He didn't like it at all, but it wouldn't be enough to have just him and Massimo in one place. How would he be sure who the rat was unless all ends were tied enough to leave no exit?

"I don't think it's Paul," Gina said eventually, turning toward him. "Sofia can say what she likes; he would never put her in danger."

"Then tomorrow I'll be certain," he answered. "I don't want it to be him. I don't know what the fuck I'll do if it is him."

"Decide what's more important to you. Your family or the business. That's where this has come from, some deep-rooted, intense loathing of being overlooked. Why else help someone hurt your relations, if not to prove a point about how much better that person could run things?"

"You should write that handbook," he said with a sad smile.

She went on her knees before him. “Dude, I’m not saying this to bitch. The resentment has to come from somewhere. Now. Are false eyelashes too much?”

“You don’t need them,” he assured her, touching her cheek briefly. “Maybe it is about resentment. You were probably on the right track when you asked if I’d have given up the business for you.” His eyes traced over the features of her face. “Why haven’t you?”

Her palms were warm on his thighs. “Because your dad was right. This is who you are. If I love you, which I do more than anyone or anything, I shouldn’t be trying to change you. Being with you is probably more than I ever could have imagined. A bit too much at times. But I’ve spent a decade in love with you. Why change who you are if I truly love you? Besides, you’re my best mate. Mates don’t do that sort of shit. Goes without saying.”

Ultimately, that was the most beautiful thing she ever could have said to him. “Thank you.” He cupped her face with both hands “This time tomorrow it’ll all be over.”

“I hope so.” She gave a sly look. “We’re on our own at last.”

“Noticed that too. What do you want to do?”

“See what else you’re hiding under the bed.”

The last time he'd worn a suit, it'd been Ben Robinson's funeral. Gina straightened his tie for him. "You look like a fallen angel."

"Yeah? What's my deal?"

"You got kicked out of Heaven because you wanted to give the whole sex thing a go."

"Sounds right. You've called to God on my behalf enough times to get me back in."

"Rudeness." She stroked her hand through his hair and stepped back. "Ready."

Not this lifetime, but there was no other choice. "Taser?"

She picked it up and placed it dutifully in her coat pocket.

He held his hand out toward her. "Let's walk."

"Not too fast, okay?" She slid her hand into his and they left the flat.

They rock paper scissors to decide who would go first on their game. Gina won, so she would quote a line from *Family Guy* and Nick would have to guess which episode it was from. They could both feel it—a strange finality to their journey. The walk was over in what seemed like a second. He looked down at Gina under the lights of the restaurant; a simple board was up reading "Closed for a Private Party." Her hair had golden lights shot through it. "You're a bit blonde," he

said in wonder, watching the light play over the strands.

“I just don't act it.” She looked into the restaurant with apprehension. “This place has been my salvation until now.”

“You were saying something about acting blonde?” He touched his mouth to her forehead. “This is the last time you ever do this, I swear.”

“I believe you.” But she said it in a way that made him think it was just a mantra, and not what she really thought at all.

Chapter Thirty-One

Nick closed his eyes briefly, feeling the knife edge tilt in his favour. He didn't feel fear, only that each and every blood cell seemed very close to the surface of his skin. He could do this. This was what he knew. He was again awed by Gina's assertion that the restaurant was the best place to be. They knew it; it was their second home. The exit toward the basement kitchens would be covered by Tony, and the floor-to-ceiling windows at the front of the restaurant would be the only place Santori would be able to enter. The man would walk to his death.

The few members of waiting staff left the building, as arranged with Mark for a price that ensured no one would know what would take place here. Tony had already interfered with the CCTV to avoid any later suspicion. Champagne was chilling in buckets, though neither Massimo nor Nick would be drinking. Gina had already had a shot of sambuca. "I can't stop shaking," she said.

Massimo was the first to arrive, with Mary Alice two steps behind him. As soon as she saw Nick, Mary Alice pushed past her husband and hugged him

tightly. "Are you all right? Why didn't you want to see me? You just disappeared!"

"We," he said pointedly, "are fine. Have a drink." He carefully put her to one side and greeted his father.

"Everything is in place," Massimo assured him quietly before they released one another.

Mary Alice turned to Gina and awkwardly tried to put her arms around her. "I am very sorry for what happened to you. But I did warn you."

"Thanks for that," Gina said sarcastically.

"Mary Alice, that was uncalled for." Massimo sounded disappointed and upset by his wife's words. He had a hand on Nick's chest, as he was ready to start giving his mother some home truths. Mary Alice looked over her shoulder to see the absolutely furious expression on her son's face and became immediately apologetic.

"I didn't mean it that way..."

"Stop talking," Gina suggested.

"That way you're less likely to say things you don't mean," Nick added brutally.

Mary Alice sat down at the nearest table, looking very sorry for herself.

Nick was suddenly struck by the biblical irony of the betrayer in his midst being locked in with those he was so willing to sacrifice for the gain of power. He would find out tonight. The finality of it all was

keeping him on his mental toes. Everything seemed so much sharper; he could hear more clearly, see every detail. The dining table was set out in the middle of the room. They were in prime position to monitor the door. Nick would be seated at the head of the table for once, Gina to his right, his mother to his left. He felt extremely uncomfortable that his father had his back to the front windows, but his father had shown him how lethal his aim was during a rather useful practice run.

Massimo had insisted that everyone hand their phones over, with the unspoken exception of Nick and Gina, who had the small mobile phone he'd given her tucked into her traditional kente cloth in a bright yellow and purple. "So anyone can see me from a mile off," she'd informed him. "Lookie! Slits on the side so I can run like fuck, dude!"

Her optimism despite her obvious fear tilted his confidence in his own ability to deal with this waiver. What made Nick's heart sink with trepidation was the expression on Paul's face as he had handed over his phone. All three of them. "It's so we can all enjoy a nice quiet dinner." Massimo had smiled with reassurance, handing Paul a glass of champagne in exchange.

Sofia hadn't given a shit; she had let the phone go within a second before she'd nearly toppled Gina with a hug. "Oh my God, I missed you so much!"

They had sat down at the nearest table and chatted away, occasionally hugging one another. Nick looked to Massimo, wondering what they were waiting for. Massimo gave the barest nod of his head, acknowledging Nick's patience.

"Ma," he called irritably, "come away from the windows." She held up her hand in apology and sat down calmly at the table, tapping her fingertips on the top.

"When are we going to eat?" she asked, as Massimo topped up her glass of champagne, then poured a glass of mineral water and dropped in a slice of lemon. "We're all here now."

"In a minute," he answered.

He made his way to Paul and touched a hand to his brother's neck. "All right?"

"I don't know how you expect Gina to work here if you're hiring out her place for her colleagues to come and serve her."

"They love her," he said simply. "Almost as much as Sofia does." He nodded to where the two women were seated, looking over a photo album with Sofia pointing out pictures. Something fluttered over Paul's face. Concern. For whom?

“How are you anyway, Paulie?” Nick asked softly.

Paul's face stilled with shock at the question. “I...I haven't been sleeping. Sofia's scared to leave the house, but she won't admit it. Since the drugging, she keeps telling me that Internet shopping's the future.”

“She'll be all right. For all her clear addiction to an eating disorder, she's tough.”

“She hates me,” he choked, rubbing his forehead. “She won't sleep in the same room as me anymore. She doesn't understand why I wasn't there and you were.”

“You'll have to talk to her about it.”

Paul's mouth twisted sardonically. “Come on, Nick. We don't have the same relationship as you and Gina. You two have always been able to talk to each other.” He glanced toward his wife, who was waving her arms, probably describing the hissy fit she threw about her veil about ten minutes before her wedding. “She's better knowing that Gina's okay. I didn't know how much she needed someone else... More than me.” He looked so desperately sorry that Nick wanted to shake him and scream, *What the fuck do you want then?* “And when you went away. I know why you had to, but...people went mental when they couldn't get hold of you. If Dad hadn't handled it so fast, everything would have been out of control.”

“I doubt it.” Nick cracked a grin. His body was suddenly tuned to where Gina was, and he saw her moving toward his mother. He started to question it, as that comment Mary Alice had made earlier was little more than verbal crucifixion, but Paul was still talking.

“It would have. I haven't given you any credit. I couldn't do it, Nicky. So you threw a tantrum when you were nineteen. Who didn't? But you don't even break stride, man. You deal with it, the people, the orders, the aftermath. I don't know how you do it.” Paul met his gaze, and Nick was suddenly reminded of just how young they used to be. When they'd argued over who had the best Transformer toy. Who had the best mountain bike. Which Marvel superhero had the best powers. Which football team had the better players. This was his brother, his baby brother.

“I'm really sorry,” Paul added. “About the baby.” He reached out an arm to curl around Nick, but his father's voice whip-cracked into the restaurant. Mary Alice was standing again by the windows, Gina just in front of her. A single foot inside the restaurant stood a masked gunman, raising his gun toward Massimo. As Nick removed his gun, he heard the shots being fired in rapid succession, and out of the corner of his eye he was aware that Paul had thrown himself toward Sofia, covering her with his body as she screamed in utter

fear. Mary Alice cowered by the window as, to Nick's utter amazement, Gina had picked up the nearest side table and thrown it with all the might of her five-foot-four body at the gunman, disorienting him completely and sending Nick's returning shot askew by inches. There was a burning sensation in his shoulder and, ramming that feeling to his heels, two shots ended the gunman's life.

The gun firmly trained on the body of the man, he removed the mask. Another Santori minion. But the real perpetrator couldn't be far. He would want to be close to see if he'd killed any of them. Nick looked out for Gina, Sofia still howling in the background. Mary Alice had her pressed to her chest, Gina struggling to remove herself from her grasp. "She's hysterical," Mary Alice said, her face white.

Gina pushed her violently away. "Don't touch me!" she yelled. She turned to Nick to continue speaking, and the natural flush of her high cheekbones faded at the blood blooming over his shirt. "Oh God..."

"Come away from the window, now," he commanded. There was something fucked up going on there. As Gina got to her feet, holding her hands out toward him, Paul screamed. "No! Dad!"

Massimo was cradled in Sofia's lap, her tears falling onto his face, as Massimo weakly clasped at his neck, blood steadily pumping between his fingers onto

Sofia's bare legs. Nick didn't even think about the safety catch on his gun, only ran over and removed his own tie.

“Dad...” Paul couldn't seem to breathe properly. Nick wrapped the tie around Massimo's neck, almost retching at the flesh that had been ripped through by the force of the bullet.

“Sharp shot, Nicholas,” Massimo gurgled.

“Don't talk,” Nick told him gently. He pulled the tie tight, ignoring any guilt at causing his father pain. If he was feeling pain, he was all right. The moment that stopped, it wasn't good. “I'm going to get help.” As he extracted his phone, he looked up. Where the fuck was his mother?

As if on cue, the phone in his hand started ringing. He threw one of the phones in the pile Massimo had collected to Paul. “Ambulance, now.”

He pressed the phone to his ear and followed the directions.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Gina knew that Sofia was like Channel 4 uncensored, but she was the loveliest woman on earth. Trying to ignore the resounding echo of Mary Alice's horrible comment, Gina was so happy when Sofia walked in with Paul. After nearly knocking Gina over in her enthusiasm to greet her, Sofia grabbed a bottle of unopened champagne and, after she'd popped the cork, began to swig directly from the bottle, handing Gina the bottle for the barest of sips before taking it back. Gina angled the strap of her bag around her body so it sat at her hip.

“Are you all right?” Sofia asked.

“I'm fine,” she promised.

“You look very feng shuied. Where did you and Nick go?”

“Seaside,” she admitted, giving Sofia's fingers a reassuring squeeze. There was something sacred about their time in Whitstable together, and she didn't want to give away anything more than that. Maybe they could make it an annual retreat. Just to remember what they had lost and what they still had together. Whatever happened to them. “Sea salt always sorts me out. Thank you for your message. I did want to call...”

"I understand," Sofia answered, with the bravery of a person who was still hurt.

"Are you okay?" Gina asked, noting what had to be the first flaw she had ever seen on Sofia's immaculate face: dark shadows beneath her eyes.

"Well, one has been avoiding fresh air for a while," Sofia joked instantly. Her shoulders dropped. "The only reason I even left the house today was because I knew I'd get to see you."

Gina gave her a kiss on the cheek and a tight hug. "I'm special. Like Gaga in a meat dress. Paul's looking after you, though?"

"Keeping him at arm's length," Sofia said with a frostiness that should have refrozen the icecaps. "Just for calling Mary Alice alone I am fucked off. I've taken to my bed rather dramatically. I could quite happily continue to wear Juicy Couture in my bedroom, ordering clothing, perfume, food and giving Apple as much money as Paul can earn."

"Why deny the world the greatest swear box?" Gina teased only to be horrified by the tears glassing Sofia's beautiful green eyes. "What is it?"

"I made you stay. If I hadn't..."

Gina pulled Sofia into a hug. "It wasn't you. It would have happened anyway." She held Sofia's face in her hands, then released her. "You're safest with your family."

“You are going to think I'm the worst person in the world...but I keep getting so scared because I think about what could have happened if you weren't there. If I'd been on my own... The things that happen to women on this drug. I've slept through charity events about it.”

“You're fine,” Gina promised.

“I know. I can't explain the weirdness. I feel like someone is breathing on my neck.” She cleared her throat and visibly pulled herself together. “Anyway. I brought this with me. I thought we could plan how you can upstage all previous Da Canaveze weddings. Give us all something to look forward to.” The eagerness in Sofia's face made Gina want to cry. How could such a sharp-tongued, steely woman be such a softie?

“That is the loveliest idea. I like upstaging people.”

Sofia laughed and opened the album. She had been a beautiful bride: Italian lace had covered her neck and arms, but in the second shot of her fully dressed, her hair had trailed into the scandalous nudity of her back, bared by the large cutaway that just about covered her bottom. Paul looked like a child who had been given the keys to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. Mary Alice looked disappointed with Sofia's choice of dress. Typical. She probably thought it would all be about her.

“My veil was supposed to be long enough to cover my back, but someone got me a veil that was three inches too short. I was not happy. There were injuries,” Sofia added almost wistfully.

“You were a Bridezilla,” Gina asserted. “I can't say I'm surprised. It was better without the veil anyway.”

“Thank you, darling. Ah, look,” Sofia cried, “I've got some photos from Franco's wedding.”

“How? You were in New York at the time,” Gina recalled.

“To be honest, I really couldn't be bothered with any more enclosed spacial time with Ma over there. So I skipped it. These are what Paul took.” Katerina's dress had been much more traditional in the sense that she was covered up.

“No offending the Father,” Gina murmured, turning the pages. “You really did stay indoors, didn't you, to do all this?”

Sofia nudged her. “There you two are. Are you sure you weren't having a cheeky shag during this wedding? Look, in every photo Nick's feeling you up!”

“Don't exaggerate,” Gina admonished, even though it was true. Either Nick had a hand on her arm or one at the small of her back. Photographs tended to imply an intimacy that wasn't natural. But Nick's insistence on them driving to Blackheath in the most

beautiful August weather, with it being one of those days when her hair didn't fight her, her underwear hadn't pinched, and the dress just worked... She'd felt sexy and confident and looked after. She'd got a hint of what it would be like to be Nick's girlfriend. There hadn't been a single person she hadn't been introduced to.

"Who's that with Mary Alice?" Gina asked, pointing to a photograph of a neutral-faced Mary Alice with a regal-looking gentleman.

Sofia glanced around for her husband, then said, "I'm only telling you this so we'll be even and I can stop this ridiculous feeling of guilt. I hate guilt."

"Is that....?"

"Lover boy. Mr. Renaldo Santori. He looks like he'd give her one on the rough side, don't you think....?" Sofia's voice faded out, and everything, everything that bitch had ever said clicked into place.

They answer to my husband, and one day they will answer to Nick... Mary Alice had an affair... Renaldo sends his regards... She is my closest confidante... Paul called his mother... Nick has responsibilities. Family duties that he can never give up. And you will always be second to that... I did warn you...

Gina was on her feet before she knew what she was doing. "Where are you going?" Sofia demanded.

"We haven't started on something focused around your magnificent fun bags."

"I'm going to talk to Mary Alice," she said, her voice ringing hollowly. She did all this. She really wanted to bring the whole family down?

Sofia was tutting imperiously. "As fascinating as that will be, come back and see what Gautier will do for your mammaries!"

Gina noticed that Mary Alice was again hovering by the window, and she had a phone at her ear. Storming over to her, Gina was about to hold out a hand, demanding it, when she heard what Mary Alice was saying in Italian. "They're all here now. Your favourite little blue flower included..." She caught sight of Gina and ended the call. "Just speaking to Nicky's aunt. She was disappointed that we weren't having a bigger engagement party."

"I. Know." Gina said shortly.

Ever the skilled liar, Mary Alice smiled blankly. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Her eyes shifted to behind Gina's back. She whipped around and caught sight of the barrel of the gun before the shots started firing from it. She had never heard real gunfire outside films and didn't even flicker with fear; she was aware only that this man was firing at people she loved. She picked up the nearest table, adrenaline giving her insane strength, and threw

it into the gunman with a scream of defiance. The gunman was toppled with two neat snaps, and she saw two tiny holes on his forehead. Breathing heavily, Gina saw the chaos in the restaurant before Mary Alice brought her crashing to the floor and wrapped two strong arms around Gina's neck.

"You need to be quiet now," Mary Alice whispered with such venom it almost made Gina still, but she fought that bitch. She had lied, she'd almost driven Sofia mad, cost her and Nick their baby... She heard Nick approaching. Jesus Christ—how was she going to tell him that it wasn't Paul at all, it was his mother, his fucking mother who did all this to them?

"She's hysterical," Mary Alice told her son. His stare must have made her waver, because Gina was able to free herself.

"Don't touch me," she hissed. She turned to Nick. She was going to out her, make her face her family so they would know the sort of person she was, but she saw blood dying his shirt bright red.

"Oh my God," she whispered, reaching out to help him when Paul started screaming. She took a step to help Massimo when she felt something hard sharply press into her side. "We're going."

"What?" She glanced down and saw the gun nestling between the folds of Gina's cloth.

“Outside, now.” Mary Alice stepped over the body of the gunman and hurried Gina out of the restaurant.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Where is it? The Taser had been a joke, but she could have sworn she'd put it in her bag. Mary Alice gave her a short, sharp shove with the gun, taking the bag from her and throwing it onto the street.

“Move,” she snapped.

Gina bit her lip as she remembered that the bag didn't matter—she'd put the Taser in her coat pocket. Which was inside the restaurant. “Just let me go back...”

“Be quiet.”

“Nick's hurt—don't you want to see if he's all right?”

Mary Alice gave her another shove, her nails digging into her bicep. “He's fine. He'll have to learn the hard way because he doesn't listen.”

“Learn what?”

“That the name is everything.” They turned into the parking area, lit by the fewest of street lamps. A wealthy area secured by the quality and bank accounts of the residents. *We're so rich, we don't need to worry about crime!* She speed-dialled Nick discretely on the mobile phone and prayed Mary Alice hadn't heard the faint beep of connection.

“Why, because Renaldo Santori touched me? Yes, it's so brave to touch a woman recovering from an operation.”

“Because you're almost family. And no one has done anything about it. It makes Massimo a liar, it makes Paul incompetent. It makes Nick weak. What are they without the name?”

“Mary Alice, please, you love them all.”

“Then why didn't he let me in?” she hissed. “I could have done so much more if he let me. I could have made them so much better, but instead...”

Gina didn't know where they were going.

“Renaldo gave me everything. I felt I had to repay the favour. People are no longer scared of the Da Canavezes. They will go to Renaldo for protection. They will come to me. As it should have been...”

“Well, you've done it; you don't need me. Certainly not on Cramer Square.” *Dude, please hear that. Please get here now. Please.*

“I do. Without Nick, Massimo is nothing. Renaldo and I will finish him together.” She stopped in the street, looking around for some sort of signal. “I just need him out of the way for a while.”

“He'll know I wouldn't have gone off by myself.”

“He'll believe what I tell him. He'll learn to accept what I am saying. With Renaldo by my side, we will—”

A fine spray of mist coated Gina's face, and Mary Alice's grip relaxed from her arm. "Jesus Christ!" Gina cried. She turned and saw Mary Alice, open mouthed, a small hole in her forehead as she crumpled to the floor.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mary Alice Da Canaveze, née Ienco, had the briefest of epiphanies before the bullet entered her brain, fired by the man she'd thought would bring her the glory she had worked so hard for, the glory she believed she deserved. Mary Alice had lived in Rome all her life; she was clever, educated. While her parents were so proud of her plans to train as a nurse, she had better ideas.

She knew of the Cosa Nostra in Sicily, the Camorra in Campania, the 'Ndragheta in Calabria and the Sacra Corona Unita in Puglia. She admired them, she wanted so much to be part of their world. When she thought of the Mafia, she knew if they let a woman like her be part of them, join with them, they could bridge a gap to invincibility. Even in Rome, whispers of the Da Canavezes had begun.

Mary Alice studied nursing, and at the same time made sure that wherever Massimo Da Canaveze was, she was, in a dress that her parents would have completely disapproved of. She became a creature of allure, of intelligence, of discretion. Massimo was besotted. He created a base of organization in London in the late seventies, amid the corruption and

malleable racism in the police force. He made connections; he created rules for people to abide by. Mary Alice reminded him how Al Capone had been caught. Taxes. "Create a legitimate career for yourself," she'd suggested, "you make yourself a golden boy. Distance yourself from the gutter, and no one will be able to touch you."

He had followed her guidance, he confided in her, she felt the wash of power. Then the organization grew, and there were others who apparently knew better than her. "Don't worry, Mary Alice," he told her. "Look after our home."

She had never finished nursing school, not in the move to London. She had tried to keep from becoming pregnant, and incurred Massimo's disappointment when he discovered she was taking the pill. That was her first mistake. She had stopped giving him what he wanted. He wanted a large family. Two years after their marriage, Mary Alice gave birth to Nicholas. She gave birth on her own, in a quiet ward without a midwife or nurse present.

She was packed off home the next day with a baby so beautiful, solemn and quiet. He would gaze at her with his huge blue eyes, as if he could see the cracks in her soul. And she thought she could mould him into what Massimo would never be. He was her son; he would always love her, he would always be

bound to her in a way that Massimo never would. Three years later, Paul was born. Nicholas was a reserved child and took Paul on as a responsibility, which made Mary Alice so proud. It was another sign to her of what he would become. She was grateful because Paul was so completely attached to her, there were days she couldn't bear to be near him.

Mary Alice tried to please Massimo further with another child, but none came. She suffered two miscarriages before Massimo placed the pill into her hands and begged her not to try anymore. He was happy with the two boys, and her health was more important. Her body burned with anger. She had given everything to him, to her family before that, to assisting her husband as he became the man he should be. But she wasn't satisfied she was never satisfied. She resented her life. She was much more than a cook, a child minder, a baby machine. Massimo no longer confided in her, didn't ask her advice. There would be weeks when she would not see him, only to find out from Nicholas that "Daddy" had gone to school and given them presents. "Daddy" gave her presents too. A new house in Kensington, which she was able to decorate to her liking. There were years she honestly couldn't recall what she had spent her time doing—at least, the time that didn't revolve around her children.

Paul needed so much approval, was constantly competing with his brother to do well, to prove himself. Nicholas struggled, God forgive him; it wasn't in his nature to do what his father asked him to do. Mary Alice pushed him, told him that he could pray about it, God helped those who helped themselves. The breaking point was Sonny Michaels. He stole from the family and Nick blossomed into her vision, and attended school as soon as he was finished with him. It was like a fire had burst within her body. That was her calling, that was what she was meant to do. She was to be the Dowager Queen in Nicholas' reign. That night she had watched him sleep, and worried at the tears that sparkled along his lashes. It concerned her that he cared too much. Sonny Michaels was nothing. An ant in his path. If she helped him, if she could make him see what he could be, then he would realize that the only person he could rely on and confide in was her.

It was all going so well until Nicholas decided to rebel. "I don't want to be a fucking accountant," he'd insisted. "I don't want anything to do with this bullshit. I want out."

Massimo had been furious; his son was showing so much promise. "Don't be so fucking stupid!"

"You can't decide that!" Mary Alice had screamed.

"Fucking watch me."

Her influence over him vanished like smoke. She couldn't change his mind. She couldn't talk him around. He didn't want to listen to her. Fear crept back into her life, her goals slipping through her grasp. She took drastic action. She took a gun from the house and waited for the right opportunity. Her aim was not as good as it used to be, and rather than kill Massimo, she merely scarred him. The near loss of his father was enough to bring Nicholas to his senses. "What else do you have to make sure me and your brother will survive? All we really have is our name. And you carry that. You understand now, don't you?" she had counselled Nick, standing with him in the corridor of the hospital as Massimo recovered from his surgery.

Nicholas looked up from the bitter-tasting machine coffee, his eyes as solemn as they had been when he had first opened them as a baby and looked at her. "Don't think I won't resent you or my father every day of my life for this."

She realized at that moment that she had lost him. Her anger turned to Massimo. He was the crux of the problem. She hated him for taking her future from her, her son from her. She had no one else to blame; she had done everything right for her eldest son.

Then, something wonderful happened. She met Renaldo Santori. A widower. A growing power. His confidence and his knowledge and his need for her

sparked a desire in her that she hadn't felt since she first met Massimo. Their lovemaking was rough, intense, taken in odd hours to avoid being seen by anyone who knew them both. But she made a mistake she would repeat in Georgina Robinson's restaurant eight years later. Massimo overheard her telling Renaldo how much she loved him, needed him, how good it felt when they were one with each other. Massimo had thrown the phone away from her. There had been tears in his eyes.

"Why, Mary?" he had whispered. She'd heard the key in the lock and realized Nicholas was coming home from his course. She'd put Massimo's hands to her throat.

"Hurt me, as I have hurt you," she'd begged him. He had shaken his head, but Mary Alice had tightened his hands about her throat and sagged in his grasp, feeling the pressure on her windpipe. She had closed her eyes briefly at the sound of Nicholas roaring at Massimo, both of them struggling on the ground until Nicholas dealt a blow to his father's face. She would have let Nicholas continue if Paul hadn't intervened.

"Get off him!" he'd cried, tears pouring down his face as Massimo weakly pushed Nicholas from him. Mary Alice had got up and grappled with Nicholas' arm to pull him from Massimo.

"She betrayed me," Massimo had wheezed.

Breathing heavily, Nicholas and Paul had looked at her. "He's done this before!" she'd proclaimed. "I just wanted to be cared for. He doesn't care anymore."

Nicholas had stood. "You touch my mother with your fists again, and you and I will have a serious falling out."

Her happiness in her son's physical declaration of his love for her was short lived. Nicholas moved out. She begged and pleaded, she said she was scared of what Massimo would do if he wasn't there to protect her, why didn't he care what happened to her, why was he abandoning her. Nothing moved him. She had his key copied and organized his kitchen for him. Cooking was not his forte; a shame, as her son was perfect in every other way. She made sure all his kitchen supplies were in the same place as they were in his family home. She made him come home for family dinners as often as possible, but he would never come by himself. He always brought one of his friends or a girlfriend, probably to make sure Mary Alice would be on her best behaviour. She adored how he protected his friends and how he'd take them out, go on holiday and relax in a way he hadn't as a child.

She began to notice Georgina from a photograph of his first and only year at university. It was taken at a party, and everyone in the photo was holding a pint glass of beer. It was the way Nicholas was looking at

her in the photo that disturbed her. She didn't recognize the expression at first, but on seeing the frequency of this girl in her son's photos, she understood that it was passion. Not wishing to give this girl more importance than she probably deserved, she asked his friends about her. What she did. Where she was from. What she was like. She couldn't understand it. Why would this girl make him any better than what he was?

Nicholas brought Gina home for dinner, and Mary Alice was assured that nothing would come of it. She was completely different from the girls he had brought home before. She had no idea about their business, about Nick. That he hadn't told her soothed Mary Alice.

Gina had an ease about her that made Mary Alice take an immediate dislike to her. She was a "chef"—nothing more than a glorified cook, self-assured, finding a comfort and rhythm with Massimo that he'd never displayed with anyone. He'd instantly shared his love of chess with the girl, and they'd played jazz CDs together. It was tempting to just kill her, but Nick had such a soft spot for her that she bided her time. There would be a use for his feelings for her. All Mary Alice had to do was wait.

Paul, in the meantime, had taken a girl who had been Nick's conquest and turned her into his wife. She

knew Sofia Lorenzi's family. Opportunists. When she had tried to run Sofia from Paul's life, Sofia made it evident that she knew her place, she understood her role. She was to look pretty, not make trouble and to keep Paul happy. She did her job. Sofia had the little dig once in a while, but she was respectful to Massimo. Her only failing was to not give Paul what he really wanted, which was children. Paul's mistake was to have her after his brother. It only increased his resentment toward Nicholas. In the back of his mind, he clearly thought that if Nicholas ever snapped his fingers, then Sofia would leave him in a heartbeat.

Mary Alice didn't realize just how deep Nicholas' feelings for Georgina ran until he brought her to Franco's wedding.

She had watched them play a little game with their fists before Nick had gone to get them drinks while Gina hurriedly wrote out a card. She had said hello to Mary Alice, who looked down at her looped handwriting. *Congratulations Franco and Katerina! Best wishes, Love Nick and Gina.* The way he'd shown her off reminded Mary Alice of how Massimo had proudly displayed her when they had first met. She couldn't bear it. Georgina would make him change. She'd make him want to stop being exactly who he was, because she would not understand the family or

how they worked. She'd want him to stop, and Mary Alice could not, would not allow that to happen.

"Mary Alice, what a beautiful surprise!" Renaldo had murmured into her ear. Her stomach had exploded with joy. With modesty and restraint, they had discussed their lives in the years since their separation. The conversation turned to Nick as the dancing began.

"Nicky looks very happy. Who is the lovely little blue flower by his side?"

"That would be Georgina Robinson. He's obsessed with her, I can see it now," she admitted with bitter disappointment. "She'll only break his heart."

"You know," Renaldo suggested, "there is something to be said for obsession. It can be...harnessed."

"How?"

"He would do anything for that girl, wouldn't you say?"

Mary Alice gave a derisory snort. "He'd cut the moon for her."

"As I said...it can be harnessed."

On discovering that Georgina's one relation was her father, Mary Alice had found out as much as possible. Taken out debts and loans in Benjamin's name. Ordering the correct drug had been easy enough—Massimo brought her whatever narcotic she

desired. The needle had gone into Benjamin's chest at such an angle that the doctors and nurses hadn't a clue that the heart attack had been induced. Mary Alice hadn't counted on Georgina's stubbornness to handle the matter herself, but Renaldo had been the creative genius in offering his services to her.

Nicholas had nearly ruined it all. He showed his weakness by not killing Renaldo on the spot. Mary Alice's options were limited to continuing to play poker with Renaldo, only until she received her reward. She had attempted to push Georgina out, in the hope that Nicholas might give it all up to follow her, leaving Massimo to claw for power himself. What should have frightened him into leaving the life brought out an echoing stubbornness he shared with his girlfriend.

She had wanted Renaldo to deal with Sofia, divide Paul completely from Nicholas, but that had not worked. Sofia's unexpected friendship with Georgina removed the option of division between the brothers. This engagement dinner had been her last opportunity to simply get rid of Massimo and push herself into position with Renaldo. She couldn't wait anymore; there were no more tricks, no more smoke and mirrors. But once again, she found betrayal—this time from Renaldo. Her last vision was the look of complete, abject horror on Georgina Robinson's face.

Her thoughts strayed to the grandchild she would have had, had Georgina not gone to the bar where Renaldo was to make an example of Sofia. She wondered, just before she died, if the baby would have looked anything at all like her.

* * *

“Don't mourn her,” Renaldo said gently, his breath hot on her neck. “She barely tolerated you.”

Gina was hyperventilating. Oh God, he shot her. He shot Mary Alice. “But...”

“Means to an end. Divided the Da Canavezes fall. Mary Alice and I were close some years ago, but she was of no use to me until we were at a wedding and she pointed you out as Nicky's little obsession.” He pointed his keys to a sleek Jaguar and tugged her toward it. “Obviously I had to give you a reason to rely on me. So we had to contend with your father...”

A strangled cry emerged from her throat. They planned this? They killed her dad? She wrenched her arm from his grip and thrust her fist in an upper cut to his chin. The force made him stumble backwards, nearly biting his tongue in half. He stumbled back into Nick's torso. Nick savagely grabbed Renaldo's neck with two broad hands. With a twisting motion, he snapped Renaldo's neck into two.

The sound cracked across the street. Renaldo was a lump on the ground, his head at a completely awkward angle to his body.

Nick raised his gaze from Renaldo's body to Gina. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head, her mouth still parted in shock. He held out his arm toward her, but she couldn't move.

"Gina," he said in a slow, commanding tone, "Give me your phone."

Her eyes started to fill with tears. "Oh God, Nick, your mum..."

He struggled to take a breath. "I heard." Her eyes lowered to his hand, covered in Massimo's drying blood. She eased her phone from her pocket and touched it to his palm. He started dialling. "Tony, we're round the corner. We need clean up. Call ahead to the hospital and call Peters. We don't need armed response here. Yes, it is my fault for killing him. Get here."

He ended the call. "Gina, did he hurt you?"

Everything that she had worried about was completely and utterly in her face. On her face. Her dress. The sound of Renaldo's neck snapping... She was going to be sick. "I think, I think he...he killed my dad. He just shot her..." Tony came running around the corner and came to a skidding halt.

“Fucking hell, Nick!”

Gina's brain clicked into automatic. She turned toward him. “Santori just shot her. She was trying to protect me, and he just killed her.”

Tony's mouth parted in horror. “Fuck. Fuck, Nick, I'm so sorry.”

No way she'd let that bitch win by telling people what she had been doing. The only two who knew now wouldn't say a word. Tony nodded toward the restaurant. “The guys are coming to sort everything out. I'll take you to the hospital.”

“How's my dad?” Nick murmured.

“Already there. He's going to need surgery.”

Nick swayed a little on the spot, and Gina immediately propped herself into his armpit to support him. “I'm here,” she promised. She felt the scratch of the dried blood on his hands as he curved his good arm around her. “Thank you,” he said with difficulty.

Tony pulled his four-by-four into the street as another three vans arrived. Tony ushered them into the back seat. She tried not to pay attention to the fact that her body was rattling with the shock. Gina sat on Nick's good side, pressing herself into him. He curved his good hand into her thigh, pulling her closer.

Tony started the car, and Akon's “Gun Shot” blasted from the speakers. Gina and Nick stared at

him in utter disbelief. “Musical irony,” he said with an awkward cough. He turned the stereo off and pulled the car out of the parking bay. “They call the police for gunshot wounds,” Gina said worriedly.

“We're sorted,” Nick said tiredly.

“What do I say?” she asked, tears rising in her throat again.

He turned his head toward her. “Tell the truth. We'll be fine.”

A sob escaped her throat, and she forced it down. She tried to wrap her arms around his neck and caught his bullet wound with the tips of her fingers. He barely bit back a groan. “I'm sorry,” she gasped. This time she was wrecked by the force of her tears. He used his good arm to pull her into his body. “I'm the one who should be sorry. I brought this on you.”

No, it was your fucking mother, she wanted to scream but she'd started a lie, to protect him. To protect her family. She couldn't take it back now.

They went straight to reception and asked for Massimo. They were directed to the Intensive Care relatives' room to wait out Massimo's recovery. Sofia and Paul were waiting there already. Sofia gave a soft scream at the sight of Gina, crushing her into a tight hug. “I thought...” Sofia's words caught in her throat.

“I'm all right,” she whispered. “Paul's going to need you.”

Paul suddenly howled with pain. "NO!" He slipped from Nick's arms to the floor, screaming for his mother. Nick heaved him onto the nearest chair, curving a hand around his brother's neck. Paul was inconsolable. He had loved his mother so much, regardless of her response. Nick got to his feet and lumbered sideways, his face grey with pain.

Tony and Gina lunged for him as his legs gave way. Gina refused to let him go and called, "Tony, go get help!"

She looked down at him, blood seeping into his shirt. "I'm getting weak in my old age," he said mildly. "Used to handle bullets better than this."

"Soprano, I don't think it hit just your shoulder..."

"As long as it missed my nads, I don't give one," he replied tiredly. Tony burst back into the room with nurses and a gurney, and together they hoisted Nick onto it. "He's allergic to penicillin," Gina warned.

Paul had exhausted himself and was asleep across three chairs. Sofia went outside to smoke her way through a twenty pack of cigarettes. As feared, the police turned up to ask questions. The officer wanted to speak to Gina separately. She had blood on her yellow and purple kente dress, and her face. It was without doubt the strangest interview she'd ever had.

The officer held out a notebook. "Your name is?"

“Gina Robinson.”

“Selena Collinson. And your address is?”

“Flat 3, Alvern Terrace. SW3.”

“Flat 3, Malvern Palace. SW17. Thank you. We'll send you some information.”

“That's it?”

“Thank you, Ms. Collinson.”

Tony came over to her. “They take down everything?”

“He got my name and address completely wrong and didn't even ask me what happened?” Gina said in disbelief.

Tony cracked a grin. “Good. Never want a copper to ask too many questions. I think you should go to the bathroom and clean up, love. You look like someone turned on a blender without the lid.” Gina shook her head. Tony gave her hand a kiss. “You did brilliant tonight. Well done, Mrs. Da Canaveze.”

She sent him a weak smile before making her way to the toilets. She used paper towels to rub off Mary Alice's brain from her face and neck. It was in her hair as well. She opened a cubicle, sat down on a seat and cried. There was not much else she could do but cry.

Nick had apparently asked for local anesthetic, but the bullet had ricocheted from his shoulder bone and shattered. It took the surgeon four hours to remove the bullet from Nick's body, the exit wound leaving a rather mangled mess that would scar horribly. Massimo was in recovery an hour after Nick went into surgery. Paul insisted on staying until his father woke up. Massimo seemed to have an unconscious connection to his eldest son and did not wake until Nick was awake. Massimo commanded gently, "Paul, go home. Sofia can only smoke so much."

As soon as Nick came around from the medication, he demanded to be given whatever pain medication necessary for him to go home and discharged himself. "Do it, or I walk out anyway." Tony had waited with Gina, who was in a state of zombification. She was grateful for his offer to help Nick back into the flat. He was weakened by the surgery, and nothing would convince him to stay where he was to recover. "I can have whatever I need from home."

He eased himself onto the sofa and asked quietly, "Can I have a drink, please? Whisky?"

Gina wanted to tell him that he couldn't mix alcohol with the morphine, but hell, if it made him pass out for the next twelve hours, wouldn't that be

better? After the drink, Nick turned to his good side and closed his eyes. He was asleep in minutes. Gina removed the kente and washed the blood from her hair. She felt like she was in the shower for hours, but it was needed. Once she had scrubbed every bit of grit from her body, she wrapped a towel around her breasts and her hair.

She went into the kitchen and turned the kettle on. Maybe Nick wouldn't mind waking up and making her some tea. His always tasted better than her own. She covered Nick with a duvet, pulled on one of his t-shirts and went to bed, damp hair and all. She sat up, staring at the ceiling for hours, hearing the cracking noise that broke Renaldo Santori's neck, feeling Mary Alice's pieces of skull on her face, seeing the blood on Nick's hands until exhaustion took her to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Gina tugged at the netting that covered part of her face. Bloody Sofia insisting she wear this overdressed getup. “It's Philip Treacy!” she cried, as if Gina'd blasphemed for asking, “What in God's name is this?”

“Appropriate Da Canaveze mourning,” Sofia answered, taking the hat to the cashier and paying for it before Gina could even attempt to stop her. They were shopping for funeral clothing. The funeral was to take place in a few days, a full week after the shooting, to give Massimo and Nick the time to recover properly. Nick wanted to just “Bury her and that'll be the end of it.” He wasn't blaming Gina, but there was a ten-foot high barrier between them at the moment. Gina was grateful to Sofia for the distraction. More so grateful to clean up, who made as if nothing untoward had ever happened at her restaurant.

“Is it entirely inappropriate that I really want to sing and dance?” Sofia announced.

“Singing 'Ding Dong The Witch Is Dead' would be really inappropriate,” Gina replied drolly, knowing exactly where Sofia was going.

Sofia took the bag from the assistant and handed it to Gina. “I know Paul will be singing along with me. I have a feeling it was you who made Nick tell Massimo and Paul what really happened.”

Gina was still shocked that Nick had taken her advice. She was surprised Nick was listening to anything she said at all. “Learn from mistakes of the past,” Gina replied, feeling so desperately sad for what Mary Alice had done to those men.

“No, I'm thanking you.”

“What for?” Gina asked, as Sofia linked her arm through Gina's and tugged her toward the Fifth Floor Restaurant.

“Because this is the best thing that could possibly have happened!”

Gina stared at her in disbelief.

“Sofia, your husband is devastated!”

“No, you're misunderstanding me—it's like he's been freed. He has been raging against the cage his mother created for him. He feels he's wasted his life trying to live up to her standard when she was obviously a fucking nutter. Saying I told you so didn't help. It was wonderful, like watching someone new being born. And oh my God, he's grown balls the size of honeydew melons.”

Gina couldn't help but laugh. “Woman, we're in public.”

“He’s my husband. I’m allowed to talk about his anatomy, which for the first time he used like he understood what he was doing. He said he wasn’t going to let me turn out like her.”

Gina stopped walking and turned to face her. “What are you saying?”

“Had I known Paul would have fucked me four ways from Sunday the way he did a few nights ago, I would have killed that evil bitch years ago.” Her eyes were bright with amusement. “He did tell me to get out after, that if I wanted to go, I should do. I took offence at that statement, and we’ve been happily sharing our mutual dissatisfaction with one another all day.”

“I genuinely don’t know what to say.” Gina cleared her throat, feeling horribly embarrassed knowing such details of Paul and Sofia’s epic banging session. “Other than I’m glad you’re happy?”

“I know it’s all very blasphemous, but sex and death go together. Until that night, I didn’t really think he gave a shit. But he protected me. He’s never shown that side of himself to me.”

“Why wouldn’t he? He loves you.”

“I thought I was just a little jewel in the Da Canaveze crown. But it’s very strange, finding you have feelings for your husband four years into your marriage.”

“I'm happy for you,” Gina said honestly, surprised that something good had come from Mary Alice's horrors. “When I saw you I thought you were heading for divorce.”

“I'm not saying it's not on the cards still. Good sex doesn't suddenly erase all those months of apathy. We're in early stages of 'fuck you' still. More so when I told him I fancied opening a boutique. He said I could do whatever I liked as long as I gave the baby thing serious thought. I told him he's not going to want me fat. That led to a whole other wonderful fight... It's like, finally, some fucking passion from the man that has nothing to do with his mother patting him on the head and saying 'well done.' Aren't you glad she's dead?”

“In some ways,” Gina said. “In others I don't know if it would have been easier on Paul, Massimo and Nick if they'd had the chance to ask her why. That they won't know, and especially with Nick, the fact he couldn't do anything to change her mind—it's going to haunt him.”

“How is he?”

“Stubborn as ever. I caught him going to the shower after the day surgery and had to talk him out of it. He said only if I went and got a nurse's uniform and gave him a bed bath instead.” She sighed, thinking

about how far away he felt from her. "I know he thinks it's his fault. He's waiting for me to leave him."

Sofia rolled her eyes. "Tell him martyrdom is very unsexy. When the funeral's over, it'll be better. Give him the chance to spit on Mary Alice's grace. Or tip the coffin over. Like the cow she was."

Despite feeling guilty for laughing, Gina hoped Sofia would be right.

Chapter Thirty-Five

It was being done for show, Nick reminded himself, the weight of his mother's coffin on his shoulders, causing him seven levels of pain. He couldn't see Paul's face, but his brother was resenting this exercise almost as much as he was. Normally, they would have had the coffin set up at the front of the church for people to view the body. Since his mother had decided to take up with a madman, she had a dirty great big hole in her head that the funeral director said they could try making up with putty. Paul had flatly refused such a suggestion. "Are you practising for a BAFTA?" he demanded rudely. "You're not going to pretend that my mother's head wasn't shot to fuck, so let's just keep the casket closed."

Nick couldn't even find the energy to reprove him for speaking that way. The director didn't know what his mother had done. Only the five of them, and God help Sofia if anyone else found out. The only reason he hadn't crucified his sister-in-law for not letting slip about Mary Alice's affair with Santori was because he couldn't torture his brother any more. He felt sick knowing what they had done, and frankly, knowing what Mary Alice had done to Benjamin

Robinson was enough to make him feel that she only deserved death at Santori's hands. She had always been a manipulative woman, but he couldn't understand what this had all been for. Nothing more than pure waste of a life. He could almost hear her crowing, "Be alone, Nicky, you don't need any distractions, the family needs you." She wanted him to become some sort of ruling sheriff with Mary Alice smugly standing behind him to boast, "This is my son, fear him." How was it worth Ben Robinson's life? The baby he and Gina should have had? This fucking funeral?

They placed the coffin down, then they sat at the front pew, Massimo closest to the aisle, Nick and Paul with their respective women. Nick felt Gina's hand slip tightly into his own, and he gave her knuckles a brush with his lips. They hadn't talked about what happened. He couldn't do it. Her affections were ever as before, and he felt weighed down by what his mother had done to what was left of her family. They were still sleeping in the same bed, only waking up in sexual positions, Gina with her head on his stomach, her breath warm on his groin, or with one of his hands gently cupping her breast, the other between her legs, or with him partly on top of her.

"Think God's trying to tell us something?" Gina had teased yesterday morning.

He wanted to, he really fucking wanted to, but it didn't feel right to him, taking out his frustrations sexually to get over his mother's treachery. Being with Gina was all at once a relief and a continuous pain, knowing that had she sat anywhere else in that lecture theatre ten years ago, her dad would still be alive.

He looked straight ahead at the coffin, a large laughing picture of Mary Alice with four-year-old Nick and one-year-old Paul in Naples behind it. Paul stared at the picture and broke down. Sofia wrapped her arms around him, and whatever she said to him in a low whisper helped him pull it together with a trembling sigh.

He went through the motions of singing the hymns, but when his father stood to give the eulogy, Nick saw his hands were shaking—whether from the medication he had to take, lingering weakness from his operation, or the fact his wife of thirty-two years had betrayed him in so many ways none of them could count, Nick didn't know.

Massimo spoke of Mary Alice's pride in her sons, how she had dedicated her life to giving them everything they possibly could have had. Bless his Dad, Nick thought, and gave in to quiet laughter. Paul, Sofia and Gina all stared at him.

“Nick,” Gina said softly, her hand curling into his hair soothingly.

“Just appreciating the irony of my mother 'dedicating her life to giving us everything we could ever need.' She took that brief a little too far.”

Her other hand rubbed over his clasped ones until he stopped clenching so hard and the blood rushed sensation back into the digits. “I'm all right,” he lied. His father finished his eulogy and made his way back to the pew. Paul got to his feet to read a poem; his eyes found Nick's, and he shook his head. Nick took the poem from his brother and told him calmly that it was fine.

He surveyed the church, filled with Da Canavezes and Iencos weeping for a woman whom they didn't know. None of them had ever truly known her. “‘Death is Nothing,’ by Henry Scott Holland.

‘I am I and you are you
Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.
Call me by my old familiar name,
Speak to me in the easy way which you always used
Put no difference in your tone,
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow
Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we
enjoyed together.’”

Thank you, Mr. Holland, for setting an example that I'm never going to be able to follow. If you see my mother in the afterlife, let her know.

The formalities didn't seem to want to end. Nick watched his mother's body being placed in the earth, pictured his father taking to his bed because he knew on that day, Massimo Da Canaveze felt every single one of his years, every single scar, every single attempt to end his life on earth, talking to people who said sorry for his loss. Nick didn't know how to respond to that. Mary Alice was a myth. Fucking hell, if anyone had been schizophrenic, it was her. There wasn't enough Morgan Spice in London to make him play nice any more.

"Nicky." A man from one of the old families, Vitale, caught him as he made his way to Gina, who was helping to distribute food. Fuck's sake, he wanted to get his girl and leave this bullshit. "I am so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

"Your mother loved you so deeply. To put herself in place of your fiancée." When Nick didn't answer, only looked into his empty glass, wishing it was full so he could pretend to do something else with the glass rather than smashing it into Vitale's head, he continued. "She speaks our language beautifully."

"Dedicated student," he replied flatly.

"I am sure when you marry, your mother will be blessing you both."

From where? Some fiery pit in Hell? "Excuse me, please." He caught Gina by the hand. "I've got to get the fuck out of here."

She didn't even try to talk him out of it. "Let me get my coat. I'll drive."

"You'll have to—I don't know how I'm fucking upright."

She touched her mouth to his. "It's okay. We're going." Now that the worst was over for Paul, he knew that Sofia would have no problem herding people out of the house when they were ready to leave. Gina drove quickly and neatly to the flat. Maybe it'd stop when they got home. All the thoughts that inevitably pointed the finger of blame directly at him.

* * *

Nick disappeared into the bathroom. Maybe he was throwing up; Gina didn't know. He was like touch-paper at the moment; one little thing was probably all it would take to set him alight. She knew none of his anger was directed at her, but his distance was palpable. How he hadn't actually taken a canister of gas and a match to Mary Alice's coffin, she would never understand.

She gave him ten minutes of peace before she went in search of him. He was standing in the shower, a hand braced against the wall. She could hardly see him for the steam in the room. She removed the jacket of her suit, then unzipped the shift dress. She removed her underwear and stepped inside with him.

The water was almost too hot; it left a red stain on his skin that looked like it must sting. She turned the temperature down until it was just the right heat. She stroked a hand over his back, feeling him tense beneath her touch. The large square bandage on his shoulder was seeping red again, the heat of the water stinging his stitches alive with fresh blood.

“Before you say anything, I know. But it's better than feeling nothing at all.”

His voice sounded as if someone had sucked all the life from it. She took down her bath puff and squeezed some of his lemon-scented shower gel into it. She rolled the puff over his back, avoiding the bandage. Then she eased herself in front of him, water coursing over his head, his lashes spiky with wetness. Once the soap ran clear white, she looked up at him. She didn't know how else to make what he was feeling stop. It wouldn't stop; it was only going to be worse for him tomorrow, when the kind words of the vicar faded, when the flowers died, when he was alone. She squeezed her eyes tightly closed as his fingers curled

around her own. With her other hand she pushed the hair from his face, the colour like wet coal.

She went on her tiptoes and touched her mouth to his. He kissed her back fiercely, pressing her to the tiles. His touch bordered on primal as he hooked his hand into her knee, pulling it up toward his hip. She felt the heat of his cock at her entrance, rubbing demandingly. He probed her pussy once before driving deeply into her.

It was so intense, so needed as he rocked into her, and she accepted every inch of him, gripping his bottom to pull him even deeper into her body. Pushing downwards onto him, she found her release within moments. Nick followed soon after, the liquid heat of him burning into her.

They slid to the tiled floor, Nick's breaths uneasy, shattered, not just from the sex. Gina went on her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Let go," she whispered.

She felt his teeth on her arm, as if he was trying to hold back the tidal wave that was about to break him.

"It's not your fault, Nick. Please, let it go."

His fingers dug into the flesh of her arm, before she felt the tremble in his limbs, his chest racked with tears. Oh God, and those things she had said to him outside the hospital. She pressed herself more tightly

to him, as if she could absorb his pain into her own bones. She barely felt the crack in her knees as Nick eventually pulled away from her. He got up to turn the shower off. Her hands were prune wrinkled, and they felt paper thin when he helped her to stand. He led her out of the shower and handed her a couple of towels. She caught the look in his eyes and swallowed the lump in her throat. He looked broken.

They dried themselves off, Gina taking any opportunity to touch him, trying to translate her concern. He caught on to what she was doing and said softly, "I know you want to sort your hair out." He gave her a muted smile. "I'll be all right."

"My hair will survive," she insisted. "Let's just go to bed."

He allowed her to cuddle up to him, her damp hair on his shoulder. "What did you hear?"

She knew he'd want to analyse it now. For all his secrecies, he was a logical man. "Pretty much everything she said to you. The minute you called, I followed."

"You couldn't have known..."

She could feel his eyes on her. "I had a pretty good idea. But I couldn't be sure." Gina wrapped both arms around his biceps, squeezing gently. "I knew someone was helping cunt face; it was just a matter of

who.” He inhaled sharply. “I could have talked to her. Talked her out of it.”

“There's no knowing she would have listened. She was very set about what she wanted.”

“What's it got her except a closed fucking casket?” He pinched the corners of his eyes. “You were right,” he said eventually.

“About what?”

“About me bringing death to my family. To you.”

Gina sat up. “No, no, don't. Nick, you can't think this is your fault. I wasn't being fair; I was drugged up and two feet from my most hated place on earth. I was just raging nonsense.”

“In morphine veritas,” he quipped. “Doesn't stop it from being true.”

She traced his features with her fingertips. “It's not. It's not your fault. Mary Alice made her own choices. Really bad choices.”

“Aren't you doing the same thing?” he asked in a low voice. “Jesus, your dad...”

She felt her heart tear with the hurt of it, and pushed it away. “It won't bring him back. So no. How can it be a bad choice to be with you? I love you so much. And that's all of you. All I have in the world is you. I don't care about the business.”

“You should do. I thought nothing would be worse than you living your life, having nothing to do

with me. Worse would be anything happening to you like it did to my mother. And not being able to do anything about it.”

“You’re leaving me.” Her voice broke. “I want to be here. I want to be your wife. Bad things will happen; it’s just whether you want to deal with it alone or together. You said that.”

“I was young and naïve,” he joked weakly. “You know that’s the first time you’ve said ‘I love you’ to me without sex or drugs or alcohol being involved?”

“But you know I do.” She took his hand and pressed it to her chest.

“Gina,” he said, amazement in his voice, “your heart’s racing.”

She nodded frantically. “Because you were practically booking me on the next flight to like Mexico! However bad things get, it’s better if we’re together. Don’t you think? You’re not talking, you’re feeling up my breast. What do you think?”

He curled his arms around her, pulling her down so she was cradled against his chest. “I think you should be still a minute. We talk too much.”

True. It wasn’t the time now. But she would convince him.

Epilogue

The photographs told the story of their lives to date. Their individual graduation ceremonies; their thirtieth birthdays; their real engagement party; at the renewal of his brother's wedding vows, his sister-in-law throwing a fit about the length of her gloves; their own wedding in Naples in the vast grounds of his parents' home; before and after she'd slipped on the grapes and put a huge purple stain on her dress, her new sister-in-law had been laughing so hard she'd dropped a bottle of champagne, the liquid spraying over everyone; her aunt heaving a huge pot of meat sauce onto a wooden table for the customary rites celebration; the look of shock on her aunt's face as he had thanked her in Fanti; the moving day to their new home; outside their sister-in-law's new boutique as she posed for photographers; his mouth pressed to her distended belly, round with their first child; their baby Benjamin Massimo Da Canaveze, an hour old; their baby's first birthday, them playing rock paper scissors in the background to decide who carried in the cake, their baby in the lap of his father. Five years in a series of photographs mounted on walls, on shelves, in albums.

Gina had Ben in her lap as he pointed out the dinosaur in the book. "You are going to be a surgeon," she praised, kissing him on his fat cheek, nuzzling him until he giggled. His afro was a little less wild than it had been when he was a baby, but it was still beautiful.

The front door opened, and she felt a kiss land on her head. "Husband."

"Mrs. Soprano." He scooped their son from her lap. "Bennie boy! Are you being good? Are you learning?"

"He's learning that Daddy can't tell time," Gina teased.

"Daddy learned timekeeping from Mummy," Nick advised his son. He fitted Ben to his hip and said, "You're looking blooming lovely."

"You mean fat? Thank you. It's your fault." She heaved herself to her feet. "I just want to make sure everything's all right for Ghana Independence Day."

"Someone would have called you if something was wrong." Nick yawned, only for Ben to mimic him. "Naptime for you."

"No, Daddy!" Ben protested, only to yawn again.

"You know how many restaurants fold in the first year?"

Nick gave her a patient look. "You cater to the two nationalities that eat more than anyone else on the planet. It won't fold."

Gina took back Ben, swaying toward their son's bedroom. "What's Daddy? What is Daddy?"

"Tossplot," Ben replied obediently. Nick shook his head as Gina gave a smug grin.

"Yes he is. Well done."

"Ben, Bennie, what's Mummy?"

"Mummy's mental."

"Good boy." At his wife's expression, he shrugged. "He's screwed on so many levels, I thought we'd start early. He's the practice child. We'll do better with Number Two."

"We're not naming our second child Number Two."

"Pooh!" Ben cried triumphantly. They tucked their son into his bed for his afternoon nap and closed his bedroom door. Nick looked at her mouth with a steady contemplation. "You're teaching him naughty things."

"A skill I picked up from you." His phone started ringing, and he turned away to answer it in Italian. He wasn't trying to hide his family business from her anymore. The pull for him was too great, but it was on the condition that Ben and their next child due in four short months would have nothing to do with it. Her included. She still became tense when he wouldn't call for hours on end, or if he came home in the middle of the night and smelled of smoke. She never found

blood, brains or lipstick on his clothing, not that she even looked for it. She was never assured of anything other than his total fidelity to her and the baby—soon to be babies, plural. They were right together, no further convincing required.

“Mrs. Soprano?” he called out and found her still holding the handle to Ben's bedroom door.

“Yes, husband?” She looked up into his eyes, the warmest of blues. “What are you thinking?”

“Do you know what today is?”

She gave a mock frown. “Hmm, I don't know? The day our restaurant goes belly up?”

He leaned down and said against her mouth, “Four years ago exactly today we conceived that young man in there.”

Her body automatically tingled. He still made her crazy. “Interesting. What would you like to do about that little anniversary?”

“Replay,” he ordered softly. She laughed, touching both hands to her tummy.

“Dude, like five months too late!”

“I”—he brushed his mouth over her cheekbone—“beg”—his mouth traced up to her eyebrow—“to differ”—he gave her a kiss that should have induced birth.

She cleared her throat, rubbing a distracted hand over her damp chest. Pregnancy made her super

horny anyway, but he wasn't playing at all fair. "Well, I propose we reconvene here at midnight for a re-enactment."

He grinned in triumph. "I'll bring the wheelchair for you."

She slid her arms around his neck and went on tiptoes to kiss him. "Thank you. I love you. Let's have a fantastic fuck later."

"Learning; I like it." She touched her mouth to his shoulder where the bullet had struck him five years ago, a gesture to their fortitude and their commitment to one another.

She collected her bag and keys. "I won't be long."

"Love you," he said gently.

"Love you too, on the Ramsay," she replied, crossing her heart. It was a habit they had fallen into: however mad they were with one another, they would always ensure their last words to one another were kind ones, reminding them of how they'd reached this point. Having someone watching her out of the corner of her eye, on her husband's order, for the rest of her natural life was a burden she would happily endure. For her babies, for her husband. Her Nick.

Her phone rang a moment after she left the house. "Husband?"

"Bring tea, woman. It's that sort of anniversary."

Her laughter sent curtains twitching all the way
down their quiet street.

****BILLY****

BILLY LONDON

Ah, poor Billy. The only girl between two boys who each have nearly a foot on her. Didn't stop her from starting physical fights with them. She still thinks she can take them. So while she used to hide away in her wardrobe to read a book or four, she started to question why the heroines in those books would just lie there and take it. No, not just sex, but downright James-Bond-backhand-slapping, do-as-you're-told-woman, inappropriate lie there and take it.

She couldn't understand it. These women were just playing that mental woman from *Coming to America*, Miss "Whatever You Like" who barked like a dog and hopped on one foot. Billy didn't want to do that. Definitely not because one empty-headed fool with different anatomy told her to. So she started to create characters and worlds where the women could own their sexuality, their intelligence, their right to turn around and say "jog on, mate" without apology.

The small problem was that other people wanted to read what she was had written. "Er...why?" didn't cut it as an answer. After years of prodding and pleading and come on and for goodness' sake, what's the point otherwise, she closed her eyes and pressed "submit." Actually, she had Prosecco, limencello and white wine, then pressed "submit." Who would have thought people would actually enjoy reading about the crazy characters who live in her head? But they have done, and Billy feels rather proud of that connection with her fellow man. Billy lives in London with the most patient family in the world and doesn't forget for a minute how lucky she is. Well, she wouldn't mind a BBC adaptation of one of her novels... Ooh, with Richard Armitage!