



Matteo

Author: *Cassandra Doon*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Crime And Mafia

Description: SHE BELONGED TO HIM

Eleanor:

In her mind, she believed that she had escaped to safety. She had convinced herself that she had saved both herself and her son from their past.

Matteo:

For a decade, he tirelessly searched every corner of the world for her. And now, at long last, she was within his grasp. He would never let her slip away again.

Matteo is Book 1 in the 4 Seats book series.

All books are stand alone, can be read out of order and separately, they are fast paced, with HEA.

Although reading in order for the full experience is recommended.

The 4 Seats is a Australian-based Italian Mafia Romance Novel featuring Sydney, Melbourne and Gold Coast.

This book has Trigger Warnings attached. This book is a work of fiction.

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Chapter One

Matteo Ricci

It has been ten years since I last felt the warmth and tightness of a woman's body. But that doesn't mean I've been celibate. No, I've indulged in other pleasures to satisfy my needs. However, nothing compares to being inside my forever, the one who got away.

I've searched for her tirelessly, spending more than ten million dollars in my pursuit. But she remains elusive, like a ghost haunting my memories. And so, I haven't touched another woman since she left. Sure, I've received blow jobs and fucked sluts up the ass when necessary - after all, I am a man with simple needs.

But none of them could ever compare to Eleanor Motherfucking Wang - the woman who was the bane of my existence yet also completed me like no other could. She is the missing half of my soul that I can never replace.

The last time I saw her, she was walking into her apartment, her last words being, "I love you, Matteo." Then, poof. Gone, never to be seen or heard from again. She left everything behind. Her apartment was untouched, her car in the underground car park, her handbag and wallet on the hall table. As for Eleanor herself, nothing.

Ten years....Ten motherfucking years.... And the thought of her still brings me to my knees.

Chapter Two

Matteo Ricci

"Fuck!" I growl, gripping her hair and shoving her face down hard; all control surrendered to raw need. "Swallow it." My voice is a command, not a request, echoing in the dimly lit room that reeks of sex and sin.

With that ridiculous name, she's probably plucked from a cheap strip club sign; Candy hums against me, vibrations sending jolts up my spine. Her eyes water as mascara streaks her cheeks, painting her with the mark of my dominance. She's skilled and knows precisely how to work me over, her throat relaxing like she's done this a million times before. And she probably has.

"Good girl," I mutter, though I don't care about praising her. It's just another form of manipulation to keep her eager for the next call, the next wad of cash. She's nothing but a means to an end — getting off while keeping my mind off the one woman I can't fucking replace, no matter how many Candy's come crawling to my feet.

Pressure mounts like a crescendo, every muscle in my body coiling tighter than the springs in a bear trap. I can feel the imminent release clawing its way up from my depths. "That's it, I'm gonna cum," I grunt through clenched teeth.

My balls draw up, a sure sign the edge is near, and my legs tense like steel cables about to snap. The world narrows down to this moment, the heat, the friction, the blinding rush of impending ecstasy. It's raw, unadulterated power coursing through my veins, a fleeting escape from the relentless chaos of running an empire built on blood and shadows.

"Fuck!" The word rips from my guttural throat as I hit the peak, my release tearing through me like a raging storm. My vision blurs, every sense hyper-focused on the pulsating pleasure that shatters my composure.

Candy's head pulls back, and she's a mess of smeared makeup and raw, used lips. She rocks back onto her heels, eyes lifting to meet mine. They're glazed, but there's a spark in them — the kind that knows the game and plays it without asking questions.

Sweat beads on my forehead and my breaths come hard and fast. I tower over her, my heart still hammering in my chest, blood roaring in my ears. Control—that's what this is about. I hold the reins in this room, even if chaos reigns supreme outside these walls.

Her gaze holds steady, not flinching, not wavering. She's seen the darkness in men's souls, tasted their sins, and swallowed them whole. A part of me admires that resilience, even as I wouldn't say I like the necessity of her presence.

"Get out," I command, voice rough like gravel, still catching my breath. It's all just a transaction, flesh for cash, nothing more. But somewhere deep down, a twisted honor stirs within me — one that yearns for Eleanor, the ghost who haunts my every waking moment.

"Money's coming," I add, dismissing Candy with a jerk towards the door. It's not personal, it's business—the Ricci way.

She's fucking hot, no denying that. The type to make a man risk it all for a taste. And she's mine, at least for these minutes that bleed together, hazy and raw.

"Good girl," I murmur, though there's no warmth. It's not affection; it's acknowledgment of services rendered. She doesn't need my praise. We both know her worth is counted in crisp bills, not words. I'll transfer her payment later; she knows it's coming. She always gets what she's owed.

She nods, the motion detached, and rises without a word. That's how it works between us—no small talk, no lingering glances. She's in, she's out, and that suits me

fine. The silence echoes with unspoken rules that keep life simple and my mind clutter-free.

I stride into the en suite and peel off the condom with a practiced ease. The latex snaps as it leaves me, a sharp sound in the quiet room. Leaning over the sink, I let cold water wash away the evidence.

The condom swirls in the sink before I knot it tight, a grim ritual performed with precision. No chances were taken, and no trails were left. I toss it in the bin and hear it hit the bottom with a soft thud, like a final note in our sordid symphony.

Hand on the cold marble, I stare into the mirror, barely recognizing the man who looks back. He's a ghost of the past, haunted by memories and promises. A promise to Eleanor. She's the only one who ever got close enough to taste my soul, and I swore she'd be the last.

"Boss," Spike's voice jolts me back to reality, his tone piercing through the thick air like a switchblade.

I turn, fixing him with a glare that has made grown men piss their pants. Spike doesn't flinch; he knows better than to show weakness around me. We've been through too much blood and battles for nerves to get the better of us now.

"Spit it out," I snap, already feeling the itch to move, act, and find the piece of me that's been missing all these years—Eleanor.

Spike holds my gaze, unspoken loyalty in his eyes. "Sorry to interrupt, but you need to hear this."

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I can tell it's serious, something more than the usual street squabbles or police bribes. My heart hammers against my chest, an echo of the old drum of war, readying for whatever hell is about to break loose.

"Talk," I demand, my voice edged with steel.

"Mr Morelli is here." Spike's words cut through the haze, and a tight tension wrapped around my spine.

"Fuck." Morelli's timing is as impeccable as it is suspect, slithering into my domain with his serpentine grace.

"Let him stew for a minute," I growl, pacing the room. The shadows cling to me, an extension of the darkness deep in my soul. I don't trust Morelli; I don't trust anyone who isn't bound to me by blood or loyalty. And even then, trust is a blade that can turn in your hand without warning.

"Boss, he—" Spike starts, but I shoot him a glare that could freeze hell over.

"Did I stutter?" I snap, and he shuts his mouth with an audible click. He knows better than to question me when I'm riding the razor's edge. "Give me a second to get my head straight."

I stride toward the massive desk, every step planned and precise. Control. That's what I need now. The image of Eleanor, fierce and undeniably mine, flares in my mind. Her face anchors me when everything else wants to drag me into chaos.

"Alright," I say after a moment, the word a bullet shot from my lips. "Bring the rat-faced bastard in."

Spike, or Domino as his birth certificate claims, pivots on the balls of his feet, a fluid motion that belies the lethal precision I know he carries in his slender frame. He's nothing like the muscle-bound goons you'd expect to flank a man in my position—boss of Sydney's underbelly. But then, appearances are for the fuckin' sheep, and my right-hand man is a wolf in hipster clothing.

His hair, more suited for a beach bum than a butcher, is knotted up top, and those ice-blue eyes have seen more crimson than a goddamn vintner. The guy's got a collection of knives that would make Jack the Ripper blush; each blade baptized in the blood of those who crossed us.

As Spike saunters out the door, I lean back in my leather chair, every inch of me coiled tight, ready to spring. A lesser man might find humor in our nicknames, drawn from some vampire slayer show. Eleanor saw right through us, though—saw the demons we wrestle with, the darkness that clings to our souls. She named us, and the names stuck like blood under fingernails.

She was always like that—sharp, seeing things others missed. A laugh in the dark, an ember of defiance. Her absence now scrapes at me, a constant itch under my skin. And as much as I want to find her, part of me fears what I'll do when I do. What it'll mean for my empire, for the fragile peace I've carved out in this cesspit of a city.

The door clicks open, and Spike reappears, trailing the scent of treachery that always seems to hang around Morelli like cheap cologne. It's time to dance with the devil again and play the game of smiles and lies. But I'm ready. Always fucking ready.

"Matteo, it's a pleasure." Enzo Morelli's voice oozes into the room like oil spilling over pristine marble, tainting everything it touches.

I don't rise from my chair or give him satisfaction. "Pleasure as always, Enzo." The words taste like acid on my tongue. His presence alone is enough to send a shiver of disgust down my spine, raising the fine hairs on my neck in silent revolt.

He steps into the room—a fucking peacock, all flashy suit and smug grin. He thinks he owns the place, or worse, that he can play me. Not in this lifetime.

"Have a seat," I say, though it's not an offer. It's a command, my tone brooking no argument. Control—it's the game we play, and I'll be damned if I let him think he has even an ounce of it here.

Spike hovers in the doorway, a silent sentinel. His slight frame belies the cold killer beneath, a deceptive calm before the storm. I give him a curt nod, and he vanishes, leaving me with the serpent that is Enzo Morelli.

I lean back in my chair, the leather creaking under my weight, and steeple my fingers, eyes locked on Enzo. The room's thick with tension, like the calm before a storm that's sure to wreck everything in its path.

"What can I do for you today?" My voice is steady, cold as steel sliding into flesh.

Enzo takes his sweet time settling into the chair opposite me, the shit-eating grin never leaving his face. He knows he's got something, something that'll rattle my cage.

"I wanted to inform you that Eleanor has been sighted." His words slither across the desk, a poisonous offering meant to unnerve.

Fuck. My heart hammers against my ribs, but I keep my face a mask of indifference. It's not the first time Enzo's come around peddling hope like a street corner dealer. And every damn time, it's nothing but smoke—no fire.

"Is that so?" My voice scrapes out, rough with suppressed urgency. The ghost of Eleanor, always hovering at the edge of my mind, flares bright and hot. But I can't let Enzo see the turmoil beneath. I can't give him the satisfaction.

He leans back, a predator assured of his prey, a greasy smile plastered on his face like he's already won. "My sources say they saw her in London on the tube heading into the city center."

Bile rises in my throat, acid and suspicion churning together. My pulse kicks its pace, thudding in my ears like war drums. If he's playing me, if this is another dead-end chase, I'll make sure he pays with more than just his pride. I'll make his nightmares look like fairytales.

"Your sources better be fucking gold, Enzo," I growl, leaning forward, my hands clenched so tight my knuckles blanch.

"I can prove it." The words slither off Enzo's tongue like a serpent's hiss as he flings a stack of glossy prints across the polished surface of my mahogany desk. They scatter like fallen leaves in autumn, each a potential harbinger of hope or despair.

I snatch them up, my fingers working hastily through the pile. Each photo feels like a shard of glass cutting into my calloused hands—sharp with possibility, yet likely to draw blood. Images blur past: tall, slender figure; long black hair; Asian features. It could be her. Could be any dime-a-dozen wannabe lost in the sprawling labyrinth of London.

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But then, the last one stops me dead. My breath lodges in my throat, a chokehold tightening around it. There she is, close enough for me to count the damn mascara-laced lashes framing those eyes—an amber blaze set against perfect skin. That beauty mark, a signature etched by nature's hand just above her lip on the left, was unmistakable as my inked skin. It fucking screams Eleanor.

She's clad in a tight black business dress that hugs every curve—a second skin concealing the map of tattoos I know and my treacherous heart. Not a single inked line in sight, but I don't need them to recognize her. It's her. It's got to be.

The desire to see her, to confirm it's Eleanor and not some cruel trick of fate, claws at me with razor-sharp urgency. I've got to lay eyes on her myself, witness the fire I know will be burning in her gaze, feel the pulse of life beneath the flesh—the very beat of her heart that I've been missing like a severed limb.

My fingers twitch, the glossy prints cold and slick between them. I lift my gaze, locking it with Enzo's smug expression. "When were these taken?" The words are a controlled growl, each laced with a barbed wire of suspicion.

"Yesterday." He leans back, the smirk curling like smoke around his lips. It's a look that says he's got the upper hand, that he knows it, and loves every goddamn second of it.

I stare at the photo—her face, mark—it's a punch straight to the gut, winding me. My jaw clenches hard enough to grind teeth into powder. Yesterday. She was breathing city air, walking those filthy London streets, alive, just yesterday. So fucking close yet a world away.

The photo's still burning a hole in my hand, Eleanor's eyes drilling into mine from glossy paper. It's like she's looking right through me, daring me to find her.

"What do you want for the information, Enzo?" My voice is flat, with a blade on the table between us. This prick knows how to play his cards, and he plays them fucking well. Money's no object for either of us; this is about power, the kind that has Sydney by the balls and Melbourne kissing our rings. Information is his currency, and I'm ready to bleed for it.

Enzo reclines, one arm draped over the back of the chair with the ease of a man who owns the world—or thinks he does. "Nothing," he smirks, and the word slices through the air like a threat wrapped in velvet.

"Nothing," I echo, skeptical as hell. Enzo's smirk tells a different story, one where he's holding a royal flush while I'm bluffing with a pair of twos. But I can't call his bluff, not with Eleanor on the line. This game, this filthy dance of mafia lords—it's all just ash in the wind compared to getting her back.

"Nothing," I repeat the word, leaving a sour taste. If there's one thing I know, nothing comes without a cost. And whatever price Enzo's hiding up, his tailored sleeve will be steep. But fuck it—I'll pay it. For Eleanor, I'll burn the world to the ground.

I lean back in my chair, the leather creaking under my weight. My fingers drum a steady, impatient rhythm on the dark mahogany of my desk.

"Oh, I find that hard to believe, Enzo; you don't give out information for free." My voice cuts through the stillness, razor-sharp. My gut twists; this fucker's playing games. But what's his goddamn angle?

Enzo's smirk doesn't reach those cold eyes. "You're right, I don't," he admits, casually as if discussing the weather. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his

knees. "But think of this as a gift. You have been searching for this girl for over ten years now." His gaze finally meets mine. "We need you to take your seat seriously. So be it if that means helping you find the girl."

The audacity of this prick. A gift? Since when does the devil hand out favors without wanting a soul in return? There's a price tag hanging off this 'gift'—I can almost see it fluttering in the murky shadows of his intentions. And yet, the thought of Eleanor, somewhere out there, possibly within my grasp again... It's enough to make me consider dancing with the devil.

I slam my fist onto the desk, a thunderclap in the charged silence. "What do you mean to take my seat seriously? I've been sitting in it for ten years now!" My voice is a growl, a low rumble of barely contained fury. Each word is a bullet, and Enzo's smug face is the target. "I see that as taking it pretty seriously."

Enzo leans back, his chair creaking under the strain of his arrogance. His lips peel back in a semblance of a smile, but his eyes... they're ice-cold, calculating. "That's not what I mean, and you know it." He spits out the words like they're poison, venom in his voice. "We need to run more drugs and more girls, but without you on board, that's not going to happen."

I slam my hands on the desk, standing so fast the chair crashes behind me. The sound echoes like a gunshot in the tense silence of the office. "I'm not going to traffic girls through Sydney, Enzo. Not a chance; it's not happening. Leave that shit down in Gallo's territory."

Enzo's smug expression doesn't falter, but I can see the flicker of irritation in his dead eyes. "I'm a sadist, Enzo," I say, leaning over the desk, invading his space, making him feel my presence, my threat. "But not a psychopath. We already run enough drugs through the city. How much more do we need to push?"

"More," he spits out like venom. "Always more." He stands up, mirroring my aggression, a twisted smirk playing on his lips. "We need the girls, Matteo! Think of the cash we could push through the city if we had girls to sell?" His eyes gleam with a mix of greed and malice.

I stare him down, feeling the darkness churn inside me, a beast restrained by thin chains of self-control. But even beasts have their limits, and mine is trading flesh like it's just another commodity. My knuckles are white, itching for the feel of his throat beneath them. But I don't move; I don't give him that satisfaction.

"Money isn't everything, Enzo. Remember that," I growl, the words low and dangerous. My tattoos itch under my tailored sleeves, reminders of a life drenched in sin, but even I have lines I won't cross. Girls aren't currency. Not on my watch. "You are a psychopath, aren't you, Enzo?"

"Ha ha ha," he laughs, and the sound grates against my skull like sandpaper. Suit stretching over his slimy frame. "Nope, not even close; I like money more than people." His smirk is a slap to my face as he tosses a USB onto my desk. It skitters across the polished surface, coming to rest at the edge, a physical manifestation of how close we are to crossing lines that should never be blurred.

The room feels colder, darker, as if his presence sucks out all the warmth. I stare at the USB, a small piece of heavy plastic with implications. It's the link between finding Eleanor and sinking further into this cesspool of depravity. Every fiber in me wants to snap the damn thing in two, but every beat of my heart screams her name.

"Here is the information we managed to grab. Think about expanding our trade." Enzo's words slither through the air, rife with a venom that chokes the room. He doesn't even bother with pretense, his gaze fixed on me like he's already measuring my fucking coffin.

I don't need to look at the USB; it's bait, a hook with Eleanor as the lure, and this motherfucker knows I'll bite. Because she's the pulse in my veins, the one itch in my brain I can't scratch away.

"Expanding trade" – code for peddling flesh and souls. Over my goddamn dead body. But I nod, just a tilt, giving nothing away. "Will do," I lie through my teeth, the taste of bullshit bitter on my tongue.

Enzo smirked and probably thought the balls would get him me. But he'll learn. Ricci's balls are made of steel, so they are not to be squeezed by his likes.

With a last glance that tries to drill into my skull, Enzo turns and strides out. His steps are quiet, but they might as well be fucking thunderclaps for the storm that's brewing in my gut.

I watch Spike shadow him, lean from gliding silent and deadly. Spike may look like a breeze could take him, but he's a hurricane in a fight, knives dancing like extensions of his twisted soul.

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"Keep an eye on that slimy fuck," I murmur under my breath, knowing Spike's already ten steps ahead. The door clicks shut, sealing off Enzo's presence, but the stench of his ambition still fouls the air.

I turn back to the desk, the USB glaring up at me. It promises answers, but at what cost? Power plays, dirty trades – this game's rigged, but I'm not folding. Not when Eleanor's face might be waiting on the other side of whatever digital hell Enzo's offering.

I slam my fist on the desk, the sound echoing through the thick silence of my office. It's a futile gesture, an attempt to release some of the fury boiling in my veins. Enzo's twisted games play out in my head, scenes of violence and depravity that have left a stain on Sydney's underbelly.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, dragging a hand down my face. The images won't fade – women broken and discarded, the ones who make it out forever haunted in their eyes. They're scars on my conscience, even if not my doing.

Enzo's got them all thinking he's just another power-hungry bastard, but he's worse. Way fucking worse. He's chaos with a goddamn smile, leaving nothing but wreckage in his wake. And he thinks he can drag me into this cesspool of human misery? Not a chance in hell.

I let out a harsh breath, my gaze fixed on the USB. It's a small thing, innocent-looking, but it's heavy with the weight of a decade. Eleanor's face flashes before my eyes – her sharp wit, her laughter, how she could cut a man down to size with nothing but a look. She was fire and ice, a contradiction that set my world spinning.

"Fuck it all," I growl, snatching up the drive. My fingers close around it so tight I half expect it to shatter. But it's resilient, like her. Like us.

I can't let Enzo's lunacy derail me. There's a line, and trafficking girls is miles past it. I deal in other shadows, other sins, but not that. Never that. Because what separates men from monsters if not our choices?

The USB is cold against my palm, a beacon of hope and a possible dead end wrapped into one. Do I have it to chase her shadow across the globe again? To sift through lies and false leads, to risk everything on a whisper of maybe?

"Damn you, Eleanor," I say, the words barely louder than a sigh. "You've got me chasing ghosts."

I flick the USB between my fingers, its weight a constant reminder of what's at stake. As the door swings open, I lean back in my chair, muscles tense.

"Boss?" Angel strides in, his steps measured, eyes scanning the room before they land on me. He eases into the chair across from mine, the quiet creak of leather filling the silence between us.

"You right, Boss?"

His voice is steady, but there's an edge to it—a readiness for whatever shitstorm might be brewing. In this business, concerns are as daily as bullets to the brain.

I let out a humorless chuckle, tossing the USB onto the desk with a clatter. "It's just...that man makes Katherine Knight look sane." The words come out like gravel, and I can feel the darkness that always lurks in my chest tighten its grip.

Angel gives a short nod, his expression grim. He knows the score, knows the kind of

madness we're up against. Enzo Morelli's brand of crazy doesn't have a limit; he doesn't play by any rules but his twisted own.

"Katherine Knight butchered her lover, served him up as dinner," Angel says, his tone even, matter-of-fact. "But she never had ambitions to break a whole city."

"Exactly." My jaw clenches as I stand, towering over the desk. "Enzo wants to rip the soul outta Sydney, sell it piece by bloody. And he thinks I'll dance to his sick fucking tune."

"Fuck that." Angel's agreement is swift and decisive. There's steel in his voice, the same kind that runs through our veins. We deal in death and darkness, but there's a line in the sand—one we won't cross. "Want me to go through the USB for ya?" Angel's voice cuts through the thick tension in the room, his eyes steady on mine, waiting for the order.

"Yep." The USB sails through the air, a streak of potential truths and lies. Angel snatches it from the flight path with practiced ease. "See what info is on there, and I'll arrange for a plane to take us to London—leaving today."

"Got it, Boss." His voice is all business, but I catch the flicker of excitement in his eyes. The hunt is on.

My hand is already on the phone before the USB lands on his palm, dialing the private number that'll get us wheels up within hours. Time's a luxury we can't afford—not when Eleanor's face is plastered across my mind like a goddamn beacon. Every second wasted is another she slips through my fingers.

"London," I growl into the receiver, the word tasting like a promise and a threat. "Today."

Angel's steps echo against the marble as he marches out, USB clutched like a lifeline.

"SPIKE!" The name ricochets off the ceilings like a bullet seeking its mark. My voice cracks through the stillness that follows Angel's departure.

Adrenaline courses through me, a pulsing river of urgency. London looms, a city of shadows where Eleanor might be moving, breathing, slipping away from me with every ticking second. My heart hammers, syncopated with the need to reclaim what's mine.

The office door slams open, and Spike's there, eyes locked onto mine, ready for whatever hell I'm about to unleash.

"Yeah, Boss?"

"Double our security," I snap, the command slicing through the room like a blade. "And place extra around the building." My chest tightens as I think of leaving my empire exposed. "We're going to London, and I'm leaving the building unattended."

Spike's brow cocks up, but he doesn't question it. He knows better than to waste time on bullshit when I'm in this mood.

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"Who knows what Enzo's real motive for the information was." The name leaves a sour taste in my mouth, a potent reminder that trust is just another word for target in this game.

"Got it, Boss." Spike's voice is a low rumble, ready for war. His silhouette lingers in the doorway, a shadow against shadows, before disappearing to carry out my orders.

The thought of leaving my territory unguarded gnaws at me, but Eleanor... she's the game changer, the wild card that could bring this house of cards crashing down.

"Oh, and Spike..." My voice trails off momentarily as I run a hand over the stubble shadowing my jaw. The following words are crucial: strategy is everything in this murky world we navigate.

Spike pauses, half-in, half-out of the doorway, an expectant silhouette against the dim hallway. He seems patient, with a stillness that belies the lethal potential coiled beneath his slender frame.

"Keep your ear to the ground. If Enzo so much as farts in my direction, I want to smell it before he does." My eyes lock onto his, ensuring the gravity of my command sinks in.

"Understood, Boss," he replies, his tone stripped of emotion, a perfect mirror of the cold detachment I strive to maintain.

"Travel light," I grunt, eyes locked on the city sprawling beneath us like a kingdom of shadows. "I don't wanna carry fifty bags of crap!"

"Got it," he nods, his figure swallowed up by the dimness as he retreats to do my bidding. I don't have the fucking patience for this shit. Not when Eleanor's face is plastered across every inch of my mind, and Enzo's slimeball voice is still echoing in my skull like a bad omen.

Fuck Spike and his ever-growing knife collection. It's gonna be a minimum of ten bags of weapons. I'd bet my last bullet on it. Each one is a testament to the blood we've spilled and the lives we've carved open. In this city, violence is just another currency, and Spike's a fucking miser with his knives.

We're heading into the belly of the beast, and my guts coiled tight with anticipation and dread. London could be Eleanor's purgatory or my hell—I haven't decided yet.

"Time to bring my girl home," I mutter to myself.

Chapter Three

Eleanor Wang

The clack of my heels against polished marble echoes like a damn gunshot as I barrel through the office doors. It's pushing 9 am, and London's heartbeat throbs in my ears—every thump is another reminder that I'm late. The Tube, that metal serpent gliding beneath the city's skin, decided to screw me over with a five-minute delay. Five minutes spiraled into thirty, turning my morning ritual into a frantic dash.

I'm Eleanor Wang, punctuality personified—until today. It has been ten years, and my record has no tardy mark. I can't afford slip-ups as Patrick Murphy's PA—the real estate kingpin whose name is whispered with reverence and fear across London.

That bastard Matteo, with his love that chokes and pulls you under, forced my hand once. Made me jump ship to New Zealand, clutching freedom like a lifeline. Paid a

fortune to breathe, to hide in the belly of a cargo vessel, steering metoward anonymity. That's how I landed here, in this city of fog and shadows, where I became Patrick's right hand.

I flashback to our first encounter, the accidental collision outside a Soho pub. Me, spewing apologies like a busted faucet; him, all charisma and tailored suit, offering solace in the shape of a glass. My sob story poured out more accessible than the liquor, and before my buzz wore off, I was hired. Cash is under the table, and there are no trails for prying eyes.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry." My voice is ragged as I skid into Patrick's lion's den, his sanctuary of steel and leather. "Tube was a mess, coffee shop crammed to the rafters. Here's your bloody coffee."

His grip fastens around my wrist, stopping me cold. "El, chill out. You know I'm not bothered by this."

"I know," I snap back, guilt gnawing at my insides. I'm about to bolt when he reels me back in.

"El." His voice is a velvet command. "Sit. Drink with me. We need to talk."

Oh, hell. Anxiety coils tight in my gut, a familiar serpent. What have I cocked up now? Panic claws at my chest, fingernails dipped in dread. Maybe he's finally pissed about the lateness?

"Alright," I say, heart thudding a riotous beat. I drop onto the chair, my armor cracking. In this concrete jungle, you're either predator or prey, and I'll be damned if I show weakness—even to Patrick. But when the top dog wants a chat, you don't bare your fangs; you sit and listen.

Slouched in the leather that's molded to my form over years of crises and confessions, I eye Patrick across the expanse of his desk. It's an altar where he sacrifices sanity for success, and today, he looks ready to plead for mercy.

"What's up?" My voice cracks the silence between us like a whip. He squirms, and it's almost comical, this titan of London's skyline brought low by the mere thought of social schmoozing without his queen.

"El, I need you tonight." His plea is raw, etched with an urgency that sets my nerves alight. "Fundraiser. Aela's down with the flu; going stag is like chumming the waters."

I can't help but chuckle at the sheer horror sketched on his face. Poor bloke hates these dos more than a hangover on Monday. But I've been his shadow for years, stepping in when Aela can't. And he's spot-on—without her, he's fresh meat for the circling vultures in heels.

"Alright," I concede, already plotting the call to Yvonne. "How's Aela holding up?"

"Sniffles and pride. She won't be seen as anything less than the iron lady she is," he says, relief bleeding into his features now that I've agreed.

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"Solid logic," I mused, recalling how the tabloid wolves had feasted on my gaunt frame last time, hinting at rehab stints and secret sorrows. They can spin their yarns; I'll stick to the shadows.

No Facebook, no mobile to claim as my own—I'm a ghost in this digital age, a whisper on the wind. Patrick's generosity keeps me invisible, his name shielding mine, his bank card fuelling my existence. He's the lifeline I cling to in the riptide that is my past.

And Aela, that angel? The first true mate I made here, brewing coffee and secrets in the same joint that nearly made me tardy today. Six months of lattes and hushed conversations before we traded digits. Not long after, I played Cupid, flinging her straight into Patrick's waiting arms.

A match made in heaven, they were. Both are privy to the chapters of my life that read more like a crime thriller than a fairytale. But fame has a price tag; 'El' became a fixture in the gossip rags once Patrick's empire soared. Niko, my flesh and blood, remains a phantom—no one knows of the boy who doesn't exist.

Except for Yvonne, our guardian angel in nanny form, paid for by Patrick's boundless generosity. Every penny I've bled for, yet he foots the bill for our survival. My days are a blur of appointments, errands, and events—all to keep the Murphy machine oiled and purring.

Niko, my world, schooled in our sanctum, far from prying eyes and probing questions. Born in silence, swaddled in solitude, with only Aela by my side—no midwife, no records. YouTube and sheer will saw us through the stormy birth. I

wouldn't recommend childbirth, let alone solo missions fuelled by internet tutorials.

But it was all for him—for Niko. To shield him from Matteo's reach, to cloak his existence in shadows. If Matteo ever discovers the life I've built from his ashes, it'll be more than just late coffees and missed tubes I'll worry about.

"Hey, El?" Patrick's voice snaps me back to the now. My fingers click like a metronome gone mad in front of my face. Reality check.

"Sorry," I mutter, shaking off memories like a wet dog. "Got lost in the past."

He chuckles a sound that doesn't belong in this concrete jungle. "Get your butt to your desk and find something to wear tonight."

"Yep, will do!" I bolt from his office, the afterburn of urgency propelling me. At my desk, hands fly over the phone to dial Yvonne. "Yonnie, can you look after Niko tonight? Got roped into an event with Patrick."

"Of course, El." Yvonne's voice is a warm blanket, but her following words are a cold splash. "Maybe one of these days you'll snag a husband at one of these shindigs."

"Not gonna happen," I shoot back, a laugh slicing through. "Heart's been off the market for a decade. Maybe I'll reel in a one-night catch."

"Girl, if you're itching, my brother's been begging to be your scratch post." She's cackling now.

"Fuck off, hanging up now!" I growl, but there's a smirk tugging at my lips.

"Have fun, El." Her laughter follows me as I cut the call.

I dive into the next task—armor for tonight's battle. Bella Louise answers on the first ring, sweet and crisp. "Can I help you?"

"Morning, it's El here from Murphy's Real Estate. Need my usual by 4 pm, got it?"

"Of course, El." The attendant's voice buzzes with excitement. "Just in—a black and gold gown, floor-length, tight sleeves, high neck. Your style."

"Perfect," I say, a plan forming. "Thanks." I hang up.

Bella Louise knows the drill. Eight years of dressing me for war. They know every curve, every scar I hide beneath silk and sequins. Tonight's no different. A sheath of shadows to blend into the night, gold to glint like a blade under chandelier light. Power and control are stitched into every seam.

Running from Sydney fueled my insatiable craving for tattoos, an addiction that gripped me tightly. My arms were already a canvas of ink, stretching from shoulders to wrists, each design a story of my escape. London beckoned me next, where I surrendered to a sprawling masterpiece that began on my back and spilled onto my belly and ribs in scattered patterns. Matteo's hand had meticulously etched every tattoo on my arms, binding me to him in ways I couldn't escape. To conceal his artistry, long sleeves became my shield, even under the scorching summer sun. Sacrificing comfort for secrecy, I bared short skirts instead, knowing Matteo's reach would falter as long as my arms remained hidden. A decade of evasion taught me one harsh truth - no matter how far you run, fate has a way of catching up with you.

Chapter Four

Matteo Ricci

The wheels of the private jet kiss the tarmac, and my heart's a jackhammer in my

chest. Twenty-one goddamn hours and Eleanor's face is seared into my brain. That photo - her eyes, the curve of her lips - is like a siren's call, pulling me through hell's time zone to claim what's always been mine.

"Boss?" Angel's voice is a distant buzz, but I'm still lost in those eyes; that knowing smirk says she's seen more darkness than most can handle.

"El," they're calling her now. A decade hiding in plain sight, working for some big-shot developer in London. But every picture's her arms covered, like she's clinging to secrets meant only for me. She's changed, fleshed out in all the right places, each curve a promise of sin. Filled or not, those tits are mine. All of her, every inch, every scar, mine to reclaim.

I stagger off the plane, the need for a drink gnawing at my insides, an itch I can't scratch. The car's there, sleek and black, idling like a predator. No waiting, no bullshit. That's how we roll. But my stomach's a twisted mess, threatening to spill over.

"Boss, you okay? You're looking a little green around the gills," Angel probes, eyeing me with that mix of concern and mockery only he can get away with.

"Need a drink," I mutter through clenched teeth. My throat's parched, craving the burn.

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"Whiskey and gin in the car," Angel throws back, a smirk on his lips. It's the kind of care that keeps him alive, that forethought.

"Keep talking like that, Cock Face, and you'll be looking for a new job." I shoot back, the corner of my mouth twitching despite the roiling in my gut. His glare could cut glass, but I know there's respect there. We've been through too much shit for anything less.

"Lucky you pay my bills, Boss. Any other man would be laid out for a comment like that." He retorts, stepping beside me as we head toward the car.

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath, sucking in air that tastes like freedom and revenge. This city won't know what hit it. Neither will she.

The whiskey burns down my throat, a welcome fire against the London chill. I down another mouthful, feeling the liquid courage seeping into my veins. The car weaves through the city like it's threading a needle—smooth, precise. Angel's got the wheel, eyes sharp as a hawk's.

"Twenty minutes out," he says, voice steady.

I look at the passing lights, the city's shadows hiding her. Eleanor. El. Whatever she calls herself now, she can't change what she is to me—mine, always.

"Good," I grunt, clenching my jaw until it might crack. "Tomorrow can't come soon enough."

Angel nods, silent now, knowing when words are like gasoline on my fire. We've danced this dance before—he and Spike, my shadows, my fists when I need them. But right now, it's about her. About answers.

"Remember, we play it cool," Angel reminds me, his voice cutting through the engine's hum. "Can't spook her."

"Like a fucking ghost," I reply. Still, there's a tremor in my gut that says otherwise. There's nothing subtle about how I need her, the way I'm ready to tear this city apart brick by brick to get her back.

"Boss, you sure you're up for this?" Angel asks, glancing my way with that knowing look. The bastard can read me too well.

"Never been more fucking sure of anything," I snap, but the edge in my voice betrays the storm brewing inside.

"Alright. Just checking." He turns back to the road, no further questions asked. That's Angel—always poking, prodding, but knows when to let it lie. A good man to have at your back, a deadly one in your face.

"Keep your eyes peeled for any tails," I say, scanning the rearview mirror. Paranoia is a constant companion in our line of work.

"Always do," he replies with a grunt that carries all the weight of our world—a world of shadows, blood, and loyalty.

We roll up to the hotel, sleek and silent as a shark cruising through deep water. The place reeks of money and secrets, two things I've got in spades. Sweat prickles at the base of my skull, anticipation mixed with something darker. I crack my knuckles and feel the tension coil in my muscles like a spring.

"Remember, Boss. Morning," Angel says, pulling the keys from the ignition.

"Right." A nod is all I manage. Because once I see her and lock eyes on Eleanor again, all bets are off. This game we're playing? It ends with her. With us. And I'll be damned if I let anyone else hold the cards.

"Let's get settled. We've got a big day ahead," Angel adds, stepping out into the night air. I follow, straightening my suit jacket, feeling the cold kiss of London against my skin.

"Tomorrow," I whisper to myself. "Tomorrow, she's mine again."

The concierge is quick on his feet, scurrying towards us like we're royalty. He grabs our bags without a word and throws them onto the trolley with practiced ease. Angel strides off, purpose in every step, to secure the keys to our temporary kingdom.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath as I scan the foyer. It's all marble and crystal, money dripping from the fucking chandeliers. But none of it does anything for the riot inside my skull. I need to see Eleanor to know she's real, not just pixels on a screen or ink on paper. My heart's a relentless drum echoing in my ears—tomorrow, tomorrow.

"Come on, Boss, let's get up to the room," Spike whispers, nudging me towards the lift. His voice is low but cuts through the noise in my head.

"Right," I grunt, following his lead. The scent of leather and aftershave fills the small space of the elevator, mingling with the faint perfume of wealth that clings to the concierge. He's eyeing us, curiosity clear as day on his young face.

"You here for the fundraiser?" he asks, all innocence and polite interest.

Angel's head snaps towards him. "What fundraiser?"

"Down in the city tonight," the kid elaborates, looking between us, puzzled by our ignorance.

"And how would one get on the list for such an event?" Angel's voice is smooth, but there's steel beneath the velvet.

"Oh, it's invite-only," the concierge stammers, backpedaling fast enough to trip over his words. "Sorry, I thought you were going."

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"Where is the event?" Angel presses all casual curiosity now.

"Down at the Natural History Museum, off Cromwell Rd," the kid spills, eager to please.

"Thanks, mate." Angel's smile doesn't reach his eyes, but it's enough to send the boy into a relieved nod.

The lift's doors glide open, and we step into the penthouse suite—a sprawling space that feels too clean, too pristine for us. The concierge, a scrawny kid who can't be more than twenty, hustles our bags to the center of the room with hands shakier than a leaf in a storm. He darts glances at Angel, and I can see his instinct is screaming at him to bolt. Can't blame him; Angel's got that look that says he's one wrong word away from snapping necks.

"What's with the obsession with fundraisers all of a sudden?" I question Angel, my voice a low growl as the concierge scurries out, practically tripping over his own feet to escape the tension coiling in the air.

"Eleanor attends them all with her boss when his wife cannot make them," he replies nonchalantly, eyes glued to his phone screen.

I feel my pulse quicken, a mix of anticipation and something darker winding through my veins. "Get me on that list, Angel, NOW!" There's an urgency that claws at my throat, demanding immediate action.

"Easy, easy..." Angel's voice is steady, but I can tell he's already on it, tapping into

whatever network he needs to get shit done. "Guest list says Patrick and Aela, his wife."

I'm halfway to the mini-bar before he finishes his sentence, pouring myself a generous amount of whiskey. It burns down my throat, but the heat does nothing to soothe the restless beast. My fingers twitch, itching for action, for the moment I reclaim what's mine.

"Where are you bloody goin'?" My tone is sharp as I zero in on Spike, who's decked out like he's about to wage a war in the shadows, every inch of him strapped with enough blades to outfit a small army.

"Thought I'd scope out the place, maybe follow this Patrick back to his digs, see what he knows," Spike explains, testing the edge of a knife with a thumb encased in black leather.

"That's not a bad idea, actually," Angel agrees, and a wicked gleam in his eyes tells me he's already calculating the risks and rewards.

"Shit, okay, hold on a sec." I'm unbuttoning my shirt, tossing it aside with a flick of my wrist. "Let me get changed into my secret ninja suit, Batman," I mutter, the words tasting like bile.

Angel and Spike chuckle, a dark sound that echoes off the high ceilings. This isn't a game to them, but they're damn sure going to enjoy it like one. They know the drill—get in, get what we want, get out—no matter the cost.

Pulling on the matte black gear feels like a second skin, a transformation from a high-powered mafia boss to a predator on the hunt. My movements are automatic, muscle memory guiding each strap, each buckle until I'm just as armed as Spike.

"Ready to dance with the devil?" Spike grins, his twisted version of reassurance.

"Always am," I shoot back, checking the knife's weight in my hand. London's glittering streets will learn what happens when they cross Matteo Ricci tonight. And God help anyone who stands in my way.

The night's got a chill that cuts right to the bone, the kind that makes you wanna do something warm or someone who is. I'm layered in black from head to toe, gear strapped tight against my body, weapons hidden but within easy reach. Spike's got enough knives on him to stock a goddamn cutlery store, and he looks like he's ready to sink a blade into any bastard who even blinks wrong.

"Come on, Boss, let's go," Spike urges with that shit-eating grin.

"Fuck off, Cunt. Stop looking at me like I'm a fucking fairy," I snap, feeling every inch of my skin crawl under this outfit. Recon isn't exactly my style—I prefer the direct approach—but tonight's about Eleanor, and I'd walk through hell in gasoline drawers for her.

"If the shoes fit, Boss," Spike teases, ducking just intime as Angel's hand whizzes past where his head was seconds ago.

"Leave the Boss alone, Fuck Face; his vagina is out; let him be a fucking girl," Angel chimes in, smirking at both of us.

"You're both fucking fired," I growl, my voice low and dangerous as I shoulder-barge past them, leading the way to the lift. The tension between us is thick, a blend of adrenaline and loyalty, sharp as the blades we carry.

Angel arranges our exit, and a sleek car awaits us when we step off the private airstrip. We're dropped across from the museum, the building looming like a fortress

against the London skyline. But we aren't here for the art but for the hunt.

"Let's head in there," Angel suggests, nodding toward the casino with its warm glow spilling onto the cold street. "There's a window seat we can sit at and watch them come in and out."

The casino's din hits us the second we step inside, a cacophony of clinking glasses and the desperate murmurs of gamblers praying for luck that ain't coming. We go to the window seat Angel mentioned, the perfect spot to play a waiting game I'm already sick of.

"Keep your eyes peeled," I mutter, scanning the crowd for any sign of the Patrick fucker. If he so much as breathed on Eleanor, I'd make him wish he'd never been born. Tonight, London's shadows are mine, and the darkness feels like an old friend whispering bloody promises.

I watch the frosted breaths of those outside, their figures distorted through the glass. Spike's back at our table in no time, a tray of drinks balanced in his hand like he's done this a thousand times before.

"Angel," I growl, my voice low and rough, "show me a photo of that Patrick cunt so I know what to look out for, will ya?" He doesn't hesitate, shoving his phone in my direction with an image that ignites a firestorm in my chest.

There he is. The black Irish bastard with hair slick as oil spills and eyes like shards of sky. Towering over most, he'd be hard to miss. A protector type, the sort Eleanor would gravitate towards for safety. My fingers twitch, itching to wrap around his throat. Has he dared lay a finger on her? It's enough to churn my stomach; the bile rises, hot and acidic.

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"Boss, you gotta keep your shit together," Angel's voice cuts through the haze of my murderous thoughts. "I've never seen you like this; you're all pale, looking like you're about to hurl into the nearest pot plant."

He's fucking right. I'm up, lurching towards the greenery, and then it's all spilling out—my guts betraying me, spewing into the leaves and dirt. The world spins, but not just from the sickness. It's rage, it's fear, it's the desperate need for control slipping through my fingers like sand. Damn it all.

Chapter Five

Eleanor Wang

We arrive at the fundraiser bang on 7 pm, me in a dress that clings to every curve and Patrick in his tailored suit that costs more than a small car. The air's thick with expensive cologne and the kind of perfume that leaves a taste on your tongue. I can't stand it—the wastefulness, the fucking pageantry of it all. People here they're like vultures dressed in silk, circling a carcass of cash.

"Let's get this over with," I mutter under my breath, clutching the invitation like it's a lifeline—or maybe a death sentence.

The second we step into the room, it's like walking into a pit of snakes. Eyes latch onto us, sizing Patrick like prime meat at an auction. They'd claw at him if not for the veneer of civility that these shindigs plaster over their greed. It's enough to make you sick.

"Christ, look at them," I whisper to Patrick, who merely offers a wry smile. He's used to it, the attention, the faux admiration.

"Part of the charm," he replies, voice dripping with sarcasm. I snort. Charm, my ass.

Patrick would be top of Britain's most-wanted bachelor list if his heart weren't already locked down tight. Aela did a number on him—the good kind. Ever since she came into the picture, he's been wearing blinders. Can't say I blame him; she's a force of nature. But it doesn't stop the hordes from trying. Moneyed folk and their goddamn side pieces—it's almost tradition. But not for Patrick, and certainly not for Aela.

I feel a pang somewhere deep inside when I think about it. That devotion, that absolute certainty—I've seen it once before, etched on a face I try to push out of my mind. Matteo's face. His eyes that held promises and secrets and things better left unspoken.

"Focus, El," I chide myself silently.

"Always the cynic," Patrick teases, gently elbowing me as we navigate the crowd. "You know you love these events."

"Love" is a stretch. I'm here because it's part of the game, part of the dance we do to keep up appearances, to maintain control. In this world, power is everything, and you hang onto it with both hands, or you get crushed.

"Like a root canal," I shoot back, my lips twisting into a smirk.

"Ah, but necessary," Patrick quips, raising a glass of champagne to his lips.

"Like a bullet to the brain," I retort, my gaze lingering on the throngs of people pretending to give a damn about anything other than their bank accounts.

"Exactly," he says, and we laugh, dark and knowing. It's afucked-up world we live in, but at least we're clear-eyed about it.

I'm elbowing through the sea of silk and diamonds, Patrick's arm a steel band around mine, when Mrs. Brunswick, the night's empress of charity and hypocrisy, zeroes in on us like a vulture to a carcass. Her voice is all honeyed poison as she corners us under the ostentatious crystal chandelier.

"El and Patrick, so nice you could make it, where is Aela?" She bats her lashes at Patrick, who's already slapping on his best bullshit grin.

"At home, unfortunately, we had some paperwork that needed to be finished today so she offered to stay back and get it done," he says, voice dripping with more sweetness than the champagne flutes they're offering on silver platters.

Mrs. Brunswick claps her hands together, looking like she's about to swoon from the sheer nobility of it all. "Oh, isn't she just a gem! Well, she will be missed. Thankfully El is here to take her place for this evening," she turns her grin on me, teeth like knives hidden behind red lips.

My face pulls into what I hope passes for gracious as I lie through my fucking teeth, "Oh, it's such a pleasure to be here, Mrs Brunswick." The words taste like ash.

Patrick, ever the escape artist, waves vaguely across the room. "If you would excuse us," he says, and it's the only lifeline I need.

We break away from her talon grip, slipping through clusters of suits and gowns. My heart's racing, not from nerves, but from the thrill of the game. It's all about power and control; we're pulling the strings right now.

"Let's find a corner with fewer bloodsuckers," I mutter to Patrick, scanning the room

for an exit or at least a less crowded spot where I can breathe without smelling someone else's greed.

When Patrick nudges me forward, my blood's already boiling hotter than the Aussie sun. "Fuck that woman needs a throat punch!" The words slip out, venomous and vicious, before I can rein them in.

"Shhhh El, your green-eyed monster is showing," Patrick chortles, a touch too loud in the hush of faux civility around us. But there's truth in jest; I'm seething, all right.

I shoot him a glare sharp enough to slice through his amusement. "I can't be the only one who wants to give it to her."

Patrick grins, his irritation masked by a layer of charm as polished as his cufflinks. "Oh, I'm sure there are plenty, like me for example, but a gentleman never hits a lady." His accent thickens, wrapping around the words like smoke, a clear signal he's ready for a stiff drink.

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The irony's not lost on me—us talking about being gentlefolk while our pasts are anything but gentle. London's been home for a decade, yet every word from my mouth betrays my roots. My tongue rolls out curses with an Aussie twang that clings to me like the scent of eucalyptus. Grew up with silver spoons and satin sheets, but you can hear the bogan in my voice, rough as sandpaper, ready to strike a match on propriety.

The glint of crystal and the rustle of silk fill the air as I push through the throng, my heels clicking sharply on the marble. Every step in this gilded cage, a reminder of a world I don't belong to. My thoughts stray, unbidden, spinning back to him—to Matteo. The man who pulled me from the fringes into a maelstrom of dark suits and darker deeds.

"Black sheep," I mutter under my breath, the words tasting like irony on my tongue. Yeah, that's me. Always was. I can still hear my parents' voices, their tones laced with expectations they draped around my neck like a noose. They never knew about the world Matteo dragged me into—a world where power is whispered through the barrels of guns and promises bleed out in back alleys.

"Focus, El," I scold myself, shaking off memories best left untouched. But they cling, persistent as shadows at dusk. The four seats. Sydney's twisted version of a royal court where Matteo sits, his throne carved by blood and bullet casings. The rules were simple—obey or die. And God help those who thought there was a third option.

I sidestep a cluster of women, their laughter like the clinking of champagne flutes, hollow and expensive. Their world, this world of charity balls and polite conversation, starkly contrasts the one I grew up in. Dad teaching science with a

passion most reserved for religion, Mum caring for sick kids with hands gentle enough to cradle a heartbeat. Their life was one of quiet dignity, old money whispering through the walls of our Chatswood house, its voice too soft for the roar of the underworld.

"An artist," I scoff, the dream feels like a joke now. A time when my biggest worry was paint stains on my fingers, not the lingering scent of gunpowder. My aspirations got tangled up with Matteo's ambitions—the kind that came with a price on your head and a target on your back.

"Get outta your head, Eleanor," I hiss to myself. There's no room for weakness here, not in the chokehold of the past. You gotta stay sharp, stay alive. That's the only art that matters now.

Ink needles dance across my wrist, a relentless sting that's gonna mark me for life. The symbol of my family legacy, Wang, etches into my skin—a mix of pride and rebellion in every black line. This declaration is my stamp on the world that screams that I am more than just my parents' daughter. I'm creating art on my canvas, my own damn story.

The buzz of conversation fades as he strides in—a storm dressed in Armani. Matteo Ricci, all slicked-back hair and dangerous edges. He's the kind of man that makes girls cross their legs tighter and guys check their pockets. A living sin with a smirk that could turn saints into addicts.

"Fuck me," I mutter under my breath, watching those tailored pants work his stride like it's a catwalk made for predators. His arms, Jesus, are like sculpted marble wrapped in silk—ink hidden underneath, telling tales of power and darkness.

He owns this space, every inch of it, and as he approaches the till, I see the way cash flows from hand to hand, his grip firm, unyielding—the currency of control. It's a

ballet of silent threats and understood promises, the dance of the damned.

Then, our gazes lock—a crash of blue against gold, an ocean meeting the sun in a cataclysmic moment. Fuck, there's heat in that look, a fire that speaks of bedsheets and back alleys, of whispers that claw down your spine and leave you gasping for air.

"Hi, I'm Matteo," those words roll off his tongue, easy as sin, his left hand outstretched like he's offering me the keys to the kingdom—or maybe just the handcuffs.

"Matteo," I breathe out, barely a whisper, my name for him a secret I want to keep between my lips and his skin. My heart's pounding a rhythm that beats 'take me, break me, make me yours.'

"Own this place," he adds, and it's not just the shop he's talking about. I know it. He's staking claim, and I'm already signing the deed over with every racing pulse in my veins.

I clench my jaw, trying to keep my cool while my brain's firing off a thousand dirty thoughts per second. Fuck propriety, this isn't Chatswood and he's no teacher or nurse. He's trouble, pure and simple, and I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame that promises to burn me alive.

My brain's short-circuiting, synapses frying as I stare into Matteo's cerulean gaze. Those eyes are like twin skies at noon, cloudless and blindingly blue. The world tilts a bit, my heartbeat thumping loud enough to drown out the buzz of the tattoo needle.

"Hi, I'm Matteo," he says again, voice low, pulling me back from whatever edge I was teetering on.

"Hi, Matteo," I croak, tongue finally remembering its job. He straightens up—a tower

of inked sin—and addresses the tattoo artist with a casual authority that seems to fill the room.

"Don't charge her, just make sure she fills out the forms," Matteo commands, eyes never leaving mine until the last syllable falls from those full lips.

He pivots, suit hugging him like a second skin, and strides out. My mouth's still hanging open, likely catching flies or whatever bullshit they say about gaping idiots.

"You can wipe your mouth now, Miss," the tattooist snickers, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Shit. Fuck, am I drooling?" I fumble for composure, hand swiping at my lips, but it's too late for dignity.

"Nope, but if your mouth stayed open any longer you would have," he laughs, and I'm pretty sure my cheeks are aflame with more than just the sting from the needle.

"Damn." My voice is a hoarse whisper, but inside, a storm's brewing—hot, fierce, and reckless. Matteo Ricci just walked in and turned my world on its head. And the crazy part? I'm ready to dive headfirst into the chaos he promises.

The elbow jabs into my ribs, sharp and sudden—a fuckin' wakeup call. "Hey, Earth to El!" Patrick's voice slices through the hum of the room.

"Fuck, shit, sorry." My gaze snaps to him, away from the glittering gowns and smarmy smiles that crowd the fundraiser like vultures on a carcass.

"What's up with you these days?" He frowns, all concern and creased brows. The kind of look that says he's seen too much, knows too much.

I shrug, staring at the polished floor as if it's got the damn answers. "I don't know. Been thinking of the past a lot lately," I mutter, half-hoping the ground will swallow me whole.

Patrick's smile is a crack in his perfect facade. "It's been ten years, love. You're going to be okay. If he hasn't found you yet, he isn't going to."

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"Probably right," I sigh, but my heart's not in it—more hollow than a drum. Maybe it's time to move on, Love. His words wrap around me like chains.

"Maybe it's time to move on, Love. I can think of many men in this room right now that would ride your bus," he grins, eyes darting around the sea of tailored suits and fake tans.

"Did you just call my vagina a bus, Patrick?" I can't help it—the laugh that bursts out is bitter as tonic without the gin.

"Well, it did house a child and move with said child inside it. I say that's a bus," he fires back, grin undeterred by my glare.

"Fuck, your dad's jokes are so lame!" But the laugh comes easier now, slipping out as we weave through the crowd.

He beams, all teeth and twinkling eyes. "Well, one of us has to be the lame one, and we all know Aela ain't it, so I nominate myself."

"Christ, Patrick," I smirk, but there's warmth there, a spark amidst the dark. "This is why you'll be stuck with me as your PA for life. I cannot live without your inspirational words of wisdom."

"Come on, let's see what table they have us at today." He claps a hand on my shoulder, guiding me like I'm one step shy of a breakdown—which ain't far off the mark.

We trudge over to the assigned seats, chairs scraping against marble floors, every sound echoing in this hall of lies. Charity, my ass—this is an auction where the currency is power, and everyone here is buying.

I slouch in the damn chair; every course they bring out is tinier than the last. My stomach growls—it's a betrayal, echoing off the walls like a plea for more than these pretentious crumbs. The speeches drone on, a cacophony of self-congratulation that grates against my nerves. Forty thousand pounds donated, they say, but who's counting the cuts of ego and backdoor deals in this tally?

"Cheers to fucking charity," I mutter under my breath, swirling around what's left of some red wine that probably costs more than my apartment.

Patrick catches my eye, his gaze saying it's time to cut through the bullshit. We're up, sidestepping empty congratulations and air kisses smeared with greed. It's 9:45 pm when we escape into the more relaxed London night. The museum fades behind us—a temple of wealth where gods count their blessings in banknotes.

"Come on, Love, let's get the fuck outta here," Patrick's already flagging down our ride, the black car pulling up like a chariot, ready to whisk us away from this farce.

"Cheers for the lift home," I quip, sliding into the leather seat and letting the city lights blur past.

"Darling, I've been dropping you home for ten years now; when are you gonna stop saying thank you?" He's all mock exasperation, but the smirk's there—can't miss it.

"When the—" I start, but he's got it memorized, the ritual of our exits.

"Weeds stop growing, yeah yeah, I know." That familiar smirk. Comfortable silence wraps us up as London's night swallows the car whole.

The city's pulse throbs through the window, alive with secrets and sins. They resonate with me, a symphony of the same dark cravings that once lured me into Matteo's bed, into his world—a world where control is currency and power is the only law that matters.

We pull up to my place, that high-rise fortress of solitude. Patrick's out first, gentleman to the bone, or so he plays the part. Never fails to walk me to my door.

"Ever the gentle fellow, Patrick," I can't hold back the snark, and why would I?

"Ha ha, I'll be walking you to your door till I find you a man to take you off my hands, but until then, you are stuck with my chiseled butt," he retorts, and I swear the moonlight bounces off his teeth when he grins.

"Thanks to you and your chiseled butt." I mock salute him, the silliness contrasting the night's heavy cloak.

The key card hits the sensor, and the lock clicks—freedom, or something like it. "See you in the morning, Patrick," I call out before stepping into the void of my apartment entrance. The darkness is a welcome embrace, just me and the ghosts of a life drenched in ink and blood.

Chapter Six

Matteo Ricci

"Angel, get us something to eat," I growl, my voice barely more than a snarl as I survey the room. My gaze lands on the demolished foliage – that pot plant never stood a chance against my fury. Spike's already taken care of the evidence, shifting it out of sight like the reliable cleaner he is.

We hunker down in the shadows, two predators in wait, tearing into the sandwiches Angel procures. He hands me a Coke; the fizz contrasts the bitterness pooling in my mouth. I'm wired tight, every second stretching out like an eternity. Dad used to say patience was a virtue. Fuck virtues. They never got me anything but more time stewing in my hell.

Waiting isn't just painful—it's excruciating. Ten goddamn years of it, and what do I have to show for it? A throne built on blood and bones and a heart that's been hollowed out, empty except for her. Eleanor. But she's here now, within reach, and there's no way in hell I'm letting another minute slip by.

"Two blasted hours!" I curse under my breath, watching through the window as Patrick finally leads Eleanor out of that swanky fundraiser. The sight of them together ignites a firestorm in my chest. Not Aela, his wife. No, he's with my Eleanor.

The world tilts as they descend the steps. I'm on my feet before I can process the movement, the remnants of our meal clawing up my throat. "It's her," slips from my lips, a venomous whisper betraying the storm inside.

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Spike cocks an eyebrow, his skepticism palpable even in the dim light. "How can you tell from here?"

"Trust me, I just fucking can." My words are clipped, a command more than an explanation. "Angel, the car. Now."

"Already on it, Boss," comes the swift reply—Angel's always one step ahead.

"Fuck, Angel, where is the car?!" My voice cuts through the night like a serrated blade.

"Right there, Boss!" Angel's already at the sleek black sedan, the door swung wide as if by magic. We dive into its shadowy confines—no time to waste.

"Follow that fucking car," Angel instructs the driver, pointing to the taillights ahead just as they're caught in the amber glow of a traffic light. The gentle hum of the city around us barely masks the pounding of my heart.

"Shit, Boss, what you wanna do?" Spike's eagerness is practically dripping from his words.

"We stick with Eleanor. Patrick's a problem for another day." I need to see her, to breathe the same air she's poisoning with her absence from my life.

"Alright, Boss." Spike's grunt tells me he's disappointed, itching for action. He wanted bloodshed tonight—I can feel it.

We tail them through the city's veins and arteries, past neon signs and shadowed alleys until their car pulls up to a nondescript apartment block that stands like a silent sentinel in the night.

Patrick steps out, all suave and composed, escorting Eleanor to the entrance. Rage bubbles up inside me—hot, volatile. That's my woman, not his to touch or protect. I want to end him right here, right now.

"It's okay, Boss, he's just walking her inside," Angel murmurs, trying to douse the flames of my anger with his calm demeanor.

But as Eleanor's hand touches the door, opening it to her sanctuary, Patrick does something unexpected—he leaves. No lingering touch, no stolen kiss. Fuck him for playing the gentleman. My fists clench, nails biting into my palms.

"Ten. Fucking. Years." I grind out each word, a manifesto of pent-up rage and longing. My mind's a storm, swirling with thoughts of vengeance and possession. She's mine. Only mine. And I'm close enough to reclaim what's been ripped away.

Spike's out of the car like a shot, his frame silhouetted against the dim light of the apartment block. I'm right on his heels, my heart beating in my chest. He scans the buzzers, fingers itching to press for entrance when an old blonde lady shuffles out. Spike's charm is on full display, a predator's smile as he holds the door open. The lady thanks him with a nod and hobbles into her rusted Honda, engine coughing to life before disappearing into the night.

"Chivalry ain't dead after all," Angel drawls, sarcasm dripping from every syllable like blood from a wound—his southern twang grates on my nerves.

"Shut up. What apartment is she in?" My voice is a growl, impatience clawing inside me.

"Apartment 3's a blank slate, Boss. No name." Spike's eyes are shut, concentration creasing his brow.

"The others?" My fists clench at my sides, eager for answers.

"Taylor, Jones, Wicket..." he recites like a mantra, eyes still closed.

"Wicket, which one's that?" My pulse hammers, hope to surge like a drug through my veins.

"Number 4." His answer is instant.

"That's it," I say, certainty locking in place. "She's in 4."

"How you figure?" Spike's eyes snap open, confusion clouding his face.

"Star Wars spin-off shit. Ewoks. Wicket was her favorite." My lips twitch into a rare smirk, the memory bittersweet.

"Okay, Boss, but that doesn't mean—" Spike starts.

"City apartment had the same damn nameplate. It's our thing." Satisfaction uncoils within me. She remembered.

We take the stairs two at a time, feet pounding the steps like a countdown timer. Each step brings me closer to her, to the end of this decade-long agony. Two flights up, and we're at her door—her sanctuary, soon to be her cage.

"Boss, we sure 'bout this?" Angel's voice is a whisper of doubt.

"Never been surer." And with that, we stand there, poised on the precipice, ready to

reclaim what's always been mine.

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The door rattles under Spike's knock, a thud that echoes up the stairwell with a promise. "Coming," her voice—fucking finally. The wait's a blade twisting in my gut.

The door swings wide, and there she is—Eleanor—in silk that clings to her like a second skin. "What did you forget, Yvonne?" Confusion paints her tone, oblivious to the storm on her doorstep.

"O—" Her lips part, forming that perfect little circle as recognition dawns. Those eyes lock on mine, the same fire burning in their depths. I'm back in time in ten years, standing before my queen.

"Eleanor," I rasp out, stepping into her world, uninvited, unstoppable. She stumbles back, pure shock etched across her face. I can't help the smugness that curls my lip—"I found you, Princess."

"Matteo..." she breathes, and the sound of my name on her tongue's like a hit of the hard stuff straight to my veins. Every instinct screams to grab her, claim her, drag her from this shit-hole back to where she belongs—with me.

Her skin goes ashen, a stark contrast against the rich, red silk hugging her frame. She's falling, and I lunge forward, my arms outstretched to break her descent. "Shit," I mutter as her body slumps into my grasp. Light as a fucking feather, but every inch of her screams power, even unconscious.

"Fuck! Angel, find me somewhere to lay her down!" My voice booms through the cramped space. Angel doesn't skip a beat; he is already scouting ahead like the pathfinder.

"There's a couch just down the hall," he yells from somewhere in the depths of the apartment.

I hoist Eleanor against my chest, her head lolling against my shoulder. The tattoos on her arms brush against my skin, whispering tales of survival, strength, and defiance. I stride down the hallway, guided by Angel's call.

"Shit, how long does it take for people to wake back up?" Anxiety knifes through me—this isn't part of the plan. I'm used to controlling outcomes, not waiting on them.

Laying her down on the grey cushions, I notice the first signs of life—a flutter beneath her eyelids, a twitch in her delicate fingers. That's my girl. I was always fighting, even in the grip of darkness.

Eleanor's lashes flutter, those dark curtains lifting to reveal the storm in her eyes. Her fingers graze my cheek—cool silk against my stubble. "I've missed you," she breathes out, voices a ghost of the past.

"I've missed you too, Princess," I rasp, the words clawing up my throat. She shifts, trying to rise, but fear blooms in her gaze as she spots Angel and Spike flanking us. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, what are you doing here?" she stammers, panic-edging each word.

"I've come to take you home, Princess," I assert, feeling the old possessive pull, the need to reclaim what's mine.

"Nope. Not gonna happen; you need to leave. I don't know how you found me, but you've gotta go!" Defiance sparks in her, the same fire I remember.

"What? Why? Who else is here?" My voice drops an octave, darkness creeping into the edges of my vision.

Spike's already moving, a predator on the hunt, and her protest slices through the tension. "No, no, no, no, Spike, stop. No, you cannot go down there... Shit!" Desperation claws at her voice, and she struggles against my hold, futile against my iron grip.

Minutes crawl by, and then Spike returns, dragging a revelation with him—a half-asleep kid looking like he's been torn from a dream. Black hair and light blue eyes that punch the breath from my lungs. "Mum, what's going on?" The boy's confusion is a slap across my face.

"Eleanor, who the f-f-fuck is that?" My words stumble, trip over themselves, shock chaining them together.

"That's... your son," she says with a weight that crushes worlds, her eyes never leaving the boy.

"Son..." The word feels foreign in my tongue, like a bomb detonated in silence.

"Boss," Angel's snapping his fingers, jolting me back to a reality where my heart thunders like gunshots.

"What's his name?" My voice is gravel, dragged through broken glass.

"Niko," she whispers, a sacred confession.

"Niko... as in Niko Ricci?" Every syllable pounds into my skull.

"Yes, I honoured the bloodline rules for naming your children," she admits loyalty to tradition, a knife twisting in my chest.

In the dim light of Eleanor's living room stands a legacy I never knew existed—a son.

And not just any son. Niko Ricci is named for the blood that runs through our veins, the blood that's been spilled on streets and soaked into the soil of this unforgiving underworld.

I shove off the couch, my frame rigid with turmoil that's got no place to go. "Hold on, hold on, I need a minute," I grunt, voice raw like gravel. My legs carry me—half stumbling, half marching—towards her balcony. Hand on the handle, I yank the door, and it swings open to the night's cold embrace.

A slap of freezing wind greets me, stinging my face, a welcome distraction from the chaos inside my head. I have a son. My son. The thought echoes, a chant amidst the howling gusts. Why the fuck did she leave? How the hell has she kept him shielded from the life I bleed?

Hands trembling, I fumble in my pocket for a smoke. Nothing. A bitter laugh escapes me. That's right. I quit the sticks. But why? Why would I quit anything?

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"Thought you might need this Boss," Spike's voice breaks through the tempest, his hand outstretched, offering salvation—a cigarette and a flicker of fire.

"Thanks," is all I can muster, voice barely above the wind's wail. I huddle under my shirt, shielding the flame as I light up, inhaling deep, letting the nicotine hit me like a punch to the gut.

"I have a fucking son," I mutter into the void that stretches out beyond the balcony. No one hears. No one answers.

"He looks exactly like you," Spike says, standing beside me now, his gaze fixed into the darkness. He doesn't need to look at me; he sees what's in my soul.

I glance back through the window, catching sight of Niko curled into Eleanor, her arms a fortress around him. The kid's safe in a way I've never known—safe from me.

"Fuck, no wonder she ran," I rasp, smoke curling from my lips, carried away by the wind.

"She was keeping the kid safe," Spike adds, steady as ever. His words are a blade slicing open the truth I've avoided.

"Fuck, what do I do from here?" The question's a grenade in my mouth, ready to explode. "Do I leave and pretend we never found them, or do I take them home?"

Home. The word's a loaded gun, safety off, pointed straight at my heart.

My boot connects with the chair, skittering across the balcony like a puck on ice. "FUCK!" The word rips from my throat, raw and ugly.

"We could just kill Enzo...?" I spit out the idea like bad liquor. It's tempting, a quick fix to a complex problem. My hands itch for the violence that comes as naturally to me as breathing.

Spike leans against the railing, his eyes hard as diamonds. "And start another war? I'm starting to think she left because of the last war." His voice is a calm contrast to the storm raging inside me.

"Fuck," I mutter again, the word tasting of defeat this time. The smoke from my cigarette blends with the night air, indistinguishable now from the cold mist.

"Take them home, Boss," Spike presses on relentlessly. "Enzo knows about her already, and she is already unsafe. Even if Enzo doesn't know about the boy, he knows about her, and that's one too many people who know her location."

He's right. I know it's down to my goddamn bones. But the thought of dragging Eleanor and Niko back into myworld, where every smile is a prelude to a knife in the back, makes my stomach churn.

"Every move we make, there are pieces that fall," I say, flicking the cigarette over the railing and watching it disappear into the night.

"Better our pieces than theirs, Boss," Spike says quietly. He's not just talking about chess pieces. He's talking about lives—survival in this cutthroat world that devours weakness whole.

"Fuckin' hell," I growl, all the fight draining out of me. I can't leave them out here, dangling like bait for every hungry shark in the water.

"Alright," I finally concede, the decision feeling like a lead weight in my chest. "We take them home."

"Good call," Spike says, but we both know 'good' is just a relative term in our line of work. There's no good here, only less bad—and sometimes, that's the best you can do.

Chapter Seven

Eleanor Wang

"Shit, Niko, come here," I hiss, my voice low and tinged with an edge of urgency. Patting the couch with a shaky hand, I beckon him closer while shooting Spike, one of those looks that could kill a man at ten paces.

Niko sidles up beside me, his young eyes wide and curious as he thumbs towards the balcony. "That's him?" There's a tremble in his voice, one I've tried to iron out with talks of bravery and toughening up. This world we're tangled in—it's no place for softness.

"Yep, that's him, Baby." I hug him tightly, holding back the storm of emotions threatening to crack my façade. "Don't be scared; we talked about this," I murmur into his hair, the scent of innocence yet to be tainted by gunpowder and blood.

His small frame presses against mine, and his heartbeat is a rapid drum in his chest. "Does this mean we need to move to Sydney now?" His words are muffled against my top, the fabric soaking up the fear and confusion that shouldn't be part of his childhood.

I swallow hard, the weight of the decision heavy on my shoulders. My gaze drifts back to Matteo, the magnetic pull undeniable even after all these years. Just beyond the glass, he's there a dark silhouette against the dying light. The kingpin who once

held my heart in his iron fist and never really let go.

"Let's wait to see what happens when Matteo comes back inside," I whisper, more to myself than Niko. I need to believe we still have time, a chance to brace ourselves for whatever hell he's about to drag us back into.

The moment is shattered as Matteo, with that same unnerving grace that belies his power, flicks his cigarette butt carelessly off the balcony, the ember tracing a fiery arc into the twilight. He turns, our eyes locking in a silent battle across the void between us as he steps back inside.

"Ever heard of saving the environment?" Niko's brave attempt at normalcy slices through the tension like a switchblade.

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Matteo's reaction is immediate, his face contorting—not with anger, but a flash of something akin to regret. "Sorry, Son, I won't do it again," he replies, the frown etching deeper lines into his already-weathered face.

"Right, you both need to pack a bag; we're flying back to Sydney tonight," he declares, almost nonchalantly, as if dictating terms to underlings rather than uprooting lives.

"No." The word slips from my lips before I can stop it. It's not just defiance; it's the roar of a lioness protecting her cub.

"What?" Matteo's eyes narrow, the cold glint of a predator reflecting in them.

"I said no." I stand, facing him fully, every muscle tensed for the fight. His presence looms over me, oppressive and unyielding, but I'll be damned if I bow down without a fight.

I straighten up, steel in my spine, resolve to harden like ice. "I won't just pack a bag and leave right now. I have responsibilities and a life here." My voice is a whip-crack in the tense air. "You're welcome to return to Sydney; you don't need us to come."

The silence stretches thin, ready to snap. "Do you honestly think you have a choice here, Eleanor?" Matteo's voice is a smooth and cold blade sliding out of its sheath.

"Yes, yes, I do have a choice. I'm a person with choices." I draw myself up to my full height, feeling every inch the warrior queen facing down her conqueror. "I chose to leave you ten years ago, and now I'm choosing to stay here without you."

His face shifts, the storm clouds of his emotions clearing into a blank, terrifying calm. "Go pack a bag now, Eleanor, before I throw you over my shoulder and walk you out of here." The threat slices through the air, chilling me to the bone.

"Fuck you," I spit at him, venom and defiance my only armor.

"You haven't changed," he murmurs, his footsteps a predator's prowl. The distance between us evaporates with every step he takes toward me.

Each footfall is a drumbeat in the symphony of our twisted past—a rhythm echoing the chaos we're about to drag ourselves back into.

"Keep it up, Eleanor, and I'll spank that ass of yours back into submission." His threat drips with a dark promise, one I know he's not bluffing about.

"Fuck." The word is a bullet, shot through the tension.

"Mum, just do what he says," comes the soft plea from Niko, tugging at my top with small, insistent fingers. My heart clenches tight, caught in a vice of maternal instinct and raging fury.

I whirl around, yanking him close, my arms a steel band of protection. "I'm sorry," I breathe out, a whisper meant only for his ears. My vision blurs, the room's edges melting away until it's just me and him—the eye of the storm.

"It's okay, Mum; you said this would happen one day," Niko murmurs, his voice a thread of innocence in this den of vipers.

"I did." The confession scrapes against my ribs. "I just didn't think it would be today." The words are muffled as I bury my face in his hair, breathing in the scent of home, of safety—a lie now shattered.

Turning to face Matteo, I stand tall, summoning every ounce of defiance left in my marrow. "I cannot just go back. I got here illegally, and Niko has no records whatsoever." The words are a gambit thrown at his feet, a desperate play in our high-stakes game.

But even as I speak, I can feel the ground shifting beneath us, the inexorable pull of Matteo's gravity dragging us back into his orbit—a world where choices are illusions, and freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.

"All good, Eleanor; I've already arranged for documents for you," he states flatly, pulling me back to the present moment. "I'll just simply add Niko to them." He doesn't wait for an answer before closing the distance between us.

"Smile," he commands, and the flash from his phone blinds us for a fraction of a second. There's no warmth in the gesture—just cold, hard necessity. We're screwed. I look back at Matteo, needing to see that familiar fire in his eyes, that telltale sign of his madness.

But he isn't there. Where the hell did he go?

My heart hammers against my ribs, each beat echoing the sense of dread creeping up my spine. The air feels charged and electric, and I know better than to think he's backed down. Matteo Ricci doesn't retreat—he lurks, waits, and strikes when you least expect it.

The sound of wheels rolling against hardwood floors cuts through the tension. Matteo appears in the doorway with the suitcase in tow. His face is a mask of indifference, but his eyes are alive with the dark thrill of control. A cold sweat breaks out on my neck.

Well, that's shit.

"Fuck," I mutter, my words heavy with a defeat I refuse to accept fully. Inside, I'm seething, but I've got to keep it together for Niko. I'll have to call my boss from the road and tell him I won't be coming in tomorrow—or ever, if Matteo has his way.

My mind races, searching for an angle, any angle, to play this. But deep down, I know Matteo Ricci always plays to win, and right now, he's holding all the cards.

Chapter Eight

Matteo Ricci

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"Angel, get all of Eleanor's shit packed and shipped back to Sydney," I command without taking my eyes off her. She's a broken doll; those defiant sparks in her eyes are flickering out. She knows the score—she's lost this round. My son and she are mine, and they're coming home with me today.

I pivot on my heel, catching Spike striding towards the door, a bag stuffed like a corpse in his grip. Kid's toys, most likely. "Come on then, Princess, let's go," I bark. Her lips press against the kid's cheek—a mother's kiss steeped in defeat. "Come on, Honey, follow the big bad wolf." Her voice is laced with sarcasm, but the undertone of surrender has me smirking.

Niko toddles toward the door, pushed gently by Eleanor's hand. Angel's right behind us, flicking switches, killing lights. We move like a shadow over her life, ready to swallow her whole. The door clicks shut, a final note to this pitiful chapter.

Outside, Spike's holding the car door open, playing doorman in this fucked-up farce we're staging. Eleanor slips in after Niko, hoisting him onto her lap instead of mine. There was a sharp twist in my gut; I had plans for a different setup. Close, with her body pressed to mine, there was no room to breathe or defy.

"Damn," I mutter under my breath. The game's still on—it's just her move. And mate, she's got no idea how relentless I can be.

"Get comfy, Princess," I sneer as I slide into the seat beside them. "It's a long ride home."

The silence in the car claws at my nerves like a rusty blade. I'm caged in my suit,

every thread straining against the tension. Eleanor, an ice sculpture of defiance, sits there with Niko dozing on her lap. She knows this godforsaken quiet eats at me, gnawing away like a rat to a wire.

I catch her eye, that sharp glint of satisfaction. She savors the power she wields with nothing but silence. I grit my teeth. This is a war of wills, and I don't lose—not to the law, not to rivals, and sure as hell not to the woman who's been both my salvation and damnation.

We pull up to the airstrip, and the sight of the sleek private jet waiting feels like a lungful of fresh air. Angel's already there, coordinating like the maestro of chaos he is. I nod at him, and he smirks back, eyes scanning the perimeter like a hawk hunting prey.

"Come on, Darling," Eleanor coos, nudging Niko awake with a soft voice that doesn't reach her eyes. "Let's get on the Mystery Machine. I hope they have Scooby snacks!" Her quip cuts through the silence, and Spike's schuckle grates on my control. I miss her fire as much as I hate it.

"Very funny, Princess," I growl, but the corner of my mouth twitches despite myself.

We board the plane, and Eleanor makes a beeline for the seat at the far end, as if a few extra feet of plush leather and cabin space could put any accurate distance between us. I watch her buckle in the kid, her movements precise and deliberate. She's playing a game she thinks she can win.

"Nice try," I mutter, stalking down the aisle after her. She looks up, that wild spark in her amber eyes flaring momentarily before she masks it with a smirk.

"Space is a premium these days," she says, all mock innocence and bullshit.

"Keep dreaming, doll," I snap, watching the muscles in her jaw tense. "You're in my world again."

She leans back, feigning relaxation, but the pulse fluttering in her neck betrays her. She's mine—always has been, always will be—and I'll drag her through hell to ensure she never forgets it.

The leather of the jet seat groans under my weight as I settle in, my gaze fixated on Eleanor. The kid's already strapped in, clueless to the storm brewing around him. I lean forward, elbows on my knees, closing the distance between us. She's got nowhere to run up here, thirty thousand feet above any semblance of her so-called independence. I make her marry me the second we land if I have to.

The sigh that slips from Eleanor is laced with defeat and resignation; music to my fucking ears. "You cannot avoid me forever, Eleanor."

"So it seems," she concedes, a trace of that fiery spirit still burning behind those guarded eyes.

I press on, relentless. "Why don't you start with why you left?"

She meets my stare, unflinching. "This is not the time or the place for this conversation, Matteo."

"I disagree." I'm a fucking wall, immovable, demanding answers.

"Disagree all you want," she snaps back, the hint of venom in her voice making my blood sing. "I'm not having this conversation with you right now." She snatches the blanket from the neighboring seat, draping it over Niko's legs with a protective ferocity.

"Get some sleep, Honey. Hopefully, Matteo will feed us in the morning." Her words are barbed, aimed straight at my pride.

I roll my eyes but can't help watching them—a mother lioness and her cub, wrapped up in each other. The sight gnaws at something primal inside me. I'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was, even when she's spitting fire and defiance. Age hasn't dimmed her, only sharpened her edges, made her more intoxicating.

But she won't slip through my fingers again. No fucking chance. A wild thought crosses my mind, dark and twisted. Chip her like a goddamn dog, I think silently. Make sure she never strays too far.

"Already on it Boss," Angel murmurs from across the aisle. His voice is quiet, but the implication is as loud as a gunshot.

Can he read my thoughts, or has he just learned to dance to the tune of my madness? Doesn't matter. Either way, he's got my back.

Eleanor's breath evens out, and I watch her chest rise and fall in peaceful rhythm. My heart hammers against my ribs, a reminder that everything I want is within arm's reach, asleep and vulnerable.

She's mine—always has been. And I'll brand her soul with my name if that's what it takes to keep her.

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I flick my gaze away from Angel's knowing eyes and back to Eleanor. She's a picture of defiance even in sleep, curled protectively around Niko. Her silk pyjama top sleeve has crept up, revealing ink-stained skin—my design etched into her flesh. It's a silent claim that runs deeper than words, branding her as mine in a way that can't be erased.

The first tattoo I gave Eleanor was like sealing my vow to her. Watching the needle dance over her skin, the way she bit her lip to keep from moaning—it was more intimate than any fuck I've ever had. Each line, each curve I drew, was a testament to the hold she unknowingly had on me.

I lean against the plush leather of the private jet's seat, my thoughts clawing back to the day our paths first crossed. She was sitting in the shop, all fire and spirit, the late afternoon sun catching those wild eyes. Fuck, those eyes. Like molten gold, they seared through me, and I knew—I was utterly fucked.

She was a force, a goddamn siren luring me into uncharted waters. And I dove headfirst, with no life jacket or second thoughts. It was her or nothing; it's always been her.

Eleanor's chest rises and falls steadily, hypnotic under the soft cabin lights. There's an ache in my gut—a raw, gnawing hunger that has nothing to do with food. She's so close yet miles away in her dreams, and it burns me that I can't reach into her mind and see myself there.

"Mine," I mutter under my breath, the word a prayer and a curse. I'll drag her back into my world, kicking and screaming if I have to. She's the queen of my fucked-up kingdom, whether she wears the crown willingly or not.

"Mine," I say again, a growl this time. Because in this life, you take what you want, claim it, brand it, or lose it. And Matteo Ricci doesn't lose. Not ever. Not when it comes to Eleanor Wang.

I snatch the crumpled form from the clutter of the shop counter, the ink barely dry. Eleanor's handwriting is a scrawl of defiance, each letter a piece of her I'm claiming. The address on Bridge Rd is etched in my brain, burning hot and urgent. I have no plan, no second thoughts, just the primal need to have her.

The city swallows me whole as I drive through the concrete jungle of Sydney, but her apartment block stands out like a sore thumb—a relic, old and vulnerable. One fucking door between her and the rest of the world. Not safe, not nearly enough for what she's worth.

Apartment 5. My boots thump up the stairs, echoing the thunder of my heart. 'Wicket'—the nameplate's got some cheek, considering it's Wang I came for. It's a shitty shield, a laughable attempt to hide from the world.

My knuckles rap against the wood, a sharp, commanding sound. Gotta keep it together; don't let the nerves show. Dad always said, "Matteo, don't you puke your guts out when there's work to be done." Ten bodies deep before my stomach got the memo.

The door swings open, and fuck me, there she is. A vision of sass and spirit, with those eyes that fucking haunt me. "Fuck," slips out, crude and raw.

"Matteo?" Her voice does things to me, things that claw at my insides with desperate fingers.

"Hello, Princess," I can't help the smirk that curls my lips; it's all part of the game.

"Umm, what are you doing at my front door?" She's a mix of confusion and fear, a cocktail I'm too eager to drink.

"Came to claim what is mine." The words are a growl, a promise of things to come. She's mine, and it has been since I laid eyes on those amber flames dancing in her gaze.

"Um, ok, I'm a little confused. We only met three hours ago in a tattoo shop. That doesn't make me yours," she tries to close the door, but hell no, not on my watch.

My foot wedges firm and unyielding against the door. "It's okay, Princess—you're not mine yet, but you will be." And I mean every goddamn word.

"Okay, you're starting to freak me out now. I would appreciate it if you left before I call the police," she hisses, her delicate hands shoving at my boot. It's a futile gesture; she knows it, I know it.

"Princess, you can try, but they don't usually come running for a Ricci." The words drip like acid from my tongue, and I watch the blood drain from her face as realization hits her like a sucker punch. She knows the reach of my name—feared, respected... or whatever the fuck people feel when they hear it.

"Shit," she breathes out, eyes wide and fixed on mine, a deer caught in the headlights of my unyielding gaze.

"Are you going to let me in, Princess?" There's no question in my voice—only expectation. She falters, then parts the door wider, giving me an entry I'd take with or without her blessing.

She turns, showing me her back—a canvas of smooth skin I intend to mark as mine. "In the future, Eleanor, don't show anyone your back; you don't know what they will

do," I warn, darkness lacing my words as the door thuds shut behind us, sealing her fate with mine.

In that dim hallway, I surrendered my heart to her. She stood, all defiance and beauty wrapped in a package made just for me. Fucking perfect. Submissive yet strong enough to keep me on my toes. Mine. All fucking mine.

Possession is second nature to me, handed down with the billion-dollar empire I was born into. Toys were never shared, and neither were women. But Eleanor, she wasn't just another trinket—I'd be damned if I'd ever let another man touch her.

Monogamy, a word alien to a twenty-year-old bloke in Sydney with more money than sense, now clings to me like a second skin. Eleanor was the only one who felt my touch, tasted my kisses, and bore my ink for two years. And ten years later? I haven't sunk into any other cunt—haven't wanted to. But has she kept herself just for me?

The thought sends a spiral of rage and jealousy through me, clawing up my throat. I need to know. Now.

I lean forward, my fingers tapping against the softness of her leg, jolting her awake. My voice is a low command, brooking no argument, "Come with me. NOW."

Her eyes snap open, alert and fiery, meeting mine. There's a storm brewing there, and fuck, do I want to dive into its eye. She knows better than to argue—when I say jump, she'll ask how high. This won't be any different. Not now, not ever.

Chapter Nine

Eleanor Wang

"Come with me. NOW." Matteo's voice slices through the cabin's hum, a command that brooks no argument. His eyes are voids of pitch black, the tempestuous sea I'd navigated a thousand times before. The demon within him has resurfaced, obliterating the calm light blue I used to find solace in. A shiver careens down my spine—not from fear, but from the twisted anticipation of what's to come. "Okay," I rasp, pushing off the plush seat and trailing after him like some wayward shadow.

The bedroom is an insult to modesty, decked out in obscene luxury that only these fucking rich cunts can afford. My disdain for this world slips out, a venomous whisper under my breath. "Fucking rich cunts."

"Nice to see you haven't lost that potty mouth, Princess," Matteo smirks, a brief flicker of amusement lighting up his features before the shadows reclaim them. His eyes, those windows to his chaotic soul, have softened, if only by a shade. In this game of darkness and danger, it's as close to relief as I'll get.

We're in his domain now, our silence heavy with unspoken words. He prowls, caged energy in a tailored suit, while I perch on the edge of the bed, bracing for the storm about to break.

"We need to talk, Eleanor. My mind is going a thousand miles an hour, and I can't make it stop. I need answers, and I need them now." His plea comes out strangled like he's fighting demons and losing.

"I'll answer what I can," I offer, though my heart hammers against my ribs, betraying

my calm exterior.

"Have you touched any other man since you left me?" His words are cloaked in darkness, his gaze sharpening into razors. The possessive fucker hasn't changed a bit—still laying claim to me as if I'm territory to be marked.

"Matteo, I left you ten years ago. What I have done between now and then isn't your business." The defiance rolls off my tongue, but it does nothing to quell the swirling madness in his eyes.

And then he's doubling over, rummaging through his pocket like a man possessed before bringing a bag to his lips. Vomit fills the plastic in one violent heave. The tyrant before me has always had a sickly stomach for certain truths. He knots the bag swiftly and tosses it into the bin—a fixture somehow immune to the laws of physics during takeoff.

The balance between us teeters on a knife's edge, our shared history a tangled mess of love and loathing, power and surrender. Welcome to our dark waltz, where every step could be a prelude to destruction—or ecstasy.

The air in the room thickens, "You belong to me, Princess. Don't you get that? No one else is allowed to touch what is mine," he growls, his words slicing through the space between us like daggers.

"Like you didn't touch anyone after I left?" My voice comes out a loud whisper, challenging the beast before me. "So don't get up in my face all high and mighty. Take a look in the mirror before coming at me, cunt."

Matteo's glare could cut glass; his jaw clenched so tight I could almost hear his teeth grind. "I didn't touch another single cunt while you were gone," he spits back, each word a bullet.

"Wait... what?" Disbelief paints my features because the man who stands before me, the king of vice, claiming celibacy? That's a hard pill to swallow. But then his arm snapped out, fingers clamping onto my chin with an ownership that sent shivers down my spine.

"I said... I didn't touch another cunt the whole time you were gone, Princess, not a single one." His form hovers over me, crouching like a predator poised to strike. "Yes, I got blow jobs, but even then, I stuck a condom on top. I promised you that my cum would belong to you only, and I meant it. Riccis keep their promises."

"Really?" The word falls from my lips, hardly more than a breath.

"Princess. I told you, you belong to me, and I belong to you." His declaration is fierce, an oath etched in the blood of our twisted love story.

My confession comes as a surprise even to me. "I haven't touched anyone since I left. Not even a damn kiss. I've beentoo busy being a mum and staying under the radar." The admission tastes like vulnerability, a flavor I've long forgotten.

Before I can brace myself, Matteo leans in, his mouth meeting mine with a gentleness that belies the chaos within him. It's a collision of past and present, his lips a searing brand upon mine, reigniting a fire I thought long extinguished. My heart does more than a pound—it detonates, shrapnel piercing through the armor I've built around it.

In this darkened chamber, aboard a plane soaring above any law but his own, we are no longer just Eleanor and Matteo. We are the eye of the storm—the silent epicenter of passion and power where every rule is rewritten with each stolen breath.

He jerks away so fast, it's like we're magnets with the same poles. "That's enough for now, Princess," Matteo rasps, his voice gravelly and raw from what he'd hurled out of his guts. "I just vomited; I don't want to turn you off just yet." He stands, towering

over me even as his silhouette retreats through the door, leaving me in a swirl of arousal and confusion.

A heatwave crashes through my body, the kind that scorches everything in its path. I'm practically soaked with need, damn it. Can't believe one peck, one goddamn peck leaves me like this. I push off the bed, legs wobbly, and shuffle back into the cabin, feeling the telltale dampness against my thighs.

"How far away are we?" I toss the question into the stale air of the plane, trying to anchor myself to something mundane, something normal.

"We have been in the air for five hours, Buffy," Angel quips from across the aisle. The sarcasm drips from his words like venom.

I whip around and flash him my middle finger. "For fuck's sake—how am I back here again?"

"Leave her alone, Angel." Matteo's voice is a low growl, protective but threaded with steel.

Angel snorts, not missing a beat. "Oh, great, we're back to 'Princess' being the favorite again."

Matteo locks eyes with him, his shoulders lifting in a careless shrug. "She never stopped."

"Great to see you still bicker like the old ladies at bingo on Thursdays," I mutter, collapsing back into my seat.

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"Oh, Princess, you have no idea," Spike chimes in, his voice carrying from his dark corner at the back. I'd assumed he was knocked out, but the man's always got one eye open, forever playing the part of the silent watcher.

"Shhh, dickheads, the kid is sleeping," Matteo hisses with a volume that's anything but hushed.

My gaze flickers to the slumbering form of my son, oblivious to the chaos around him. Little angel doesn't know he's caught in a den of wolves, or maybe he does, and doesn't care. I lean back, closing my eyes, trying to will away the turbulence inside me. But with every breath, I feel Matteo's phantom kiss lingering on my lips, branding me, claiming me like I never left his side.

I slump into the leather seat, my heart still a wild thing in my chest. "The kid has a name, and Niko can sleep through a tornado, so don't stress," I snap, but my voice's a hint of pride.

Matteo stands over us, his presence engulfing the space. "He gets that from you," he says, a rare warmth softening the edges of his voice. His gaze lingers on the boy, a smile playing on his lips.

"Well, he didn't get his looks from me, so he had to get something," I mutter, not quite ready to let Matteo see the full extent of my affection.

"He does look like me." He sounds pleased, the bastard.

My eyes narrow as I scrutinize Niko's peaceful face. "He is you. Walks, talks, and

acts just like you. The DNA was strong." It's not admiration in my tone—it's an accusation.

"You say it like it's a bad thing." Matteo cocks his head, eyes probing.

"Because it is." My words are like bullets. "I spent ten years making sure he was different, and it didn't work."

Matteo's frown carves deep lines into his face. "Why would you not want him to be like me?" His question slices through the tension between us.

"Because I don't ever want my son to be a killer, let alone a four-seat holder, Mafia leader." My glare could set the plane ablaze. "I might return to Sydney with you, but you will not be inducting my son into your world. I ran to escape that shit, and the last thing I want is for you to ruin that."

Matteo studies me, his expression unreadable. Then, a twisted smirk twists his lips. "No sugar coating with you now, is there?"

"Never have and never will, Matteo, you just don't like the truth." The words slice out of me, sharp as a shiv.

He leans back, that smirk curling up like smoke from a gun barrel. "You'd be surprised what I like coming out of your mouth, Eleanor." His voice is dark chocolate laced with razor blades.

I roll my eyes so hard they could knock out a hitman at ten paces. Curling protectively around Niko, I feel his small breaths against my chest—a rhythm in the madness. "Goodnight, Matteo," I whisper, the fight draining out of me for now, replaced by the pull of sleep's dark embrace.

The cabin dims to shadows and murmurs, but the darkness is no stranger—I wear it like a second skin. I edge into sleep's clutches, my last thought a silent vow: over my dead body will he claim my son.

Chapter Ten

Matteo Ricci

The plane's wheels kiss the tarmac, and I can't shake the feeling of eternity that clung to that flight. Eleanor, she's a fucking angel or something, dozing like we ain't cruising miles high in a tin can. Only rouses herself for a nibble or to lose her gaze into some digital novel on her phone. Niko's thumbs assault a handheld console, blissfully ignorant to the world. The hangar greets us with its gaping mouth at 7 am sharp, spitting us out into the furnace that is an Australian summer morning.

"Fuck me," I mutter under my breath as the heat slaps my face with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. England's drab skies ain't got nothin' on this blaze.

I swivel and catch Eleanor basking in the sun's embrace, face tilted skyward, soaking it all in like it's salvation. "You look beautiful like that," I tell her, voice barely above gravelly whisper. She shuts her eyes tighter for a heartbeat, then brings her gaze down, worry gnawing on her bottom lip. She quickly shifts her attention to Niko, guiding him down the steps to the runway with a tenderness that could crack the hardest of hearts. "Come on, Darling, I'm sure Matteo has a car ready for us," she tosses over her shoulder, breezing past me without a second glance.

Eleanor's playing the 'ignore Matteo game,' thinking it'll rile me up. But I don't bite—my place's forty minutes out, and distance means jackshit when you're already under my skin. And yeah, the ride's sorted, not by my hand but Angel's. He knows his shit, knows what I need before I do.

"Let's roll out," I say to myself, tailing after the woman with more fire than this sun-scorched land.

The silk of her pajamas flutters as Eleanor strides toward the black sedan that's purring just for us. I shuffle behind, my gaze snagging on how the fabric clings and billows with each step she takes—like it's taunting me. Niko's shadow in miniature form mimics her every move silently, his small hand dwarfed in hers.

"Got all the shit loaded?" Angel grunts at Spike as they heave our bags into the trunk. The car's a hulking beast, spacious enough to fit the family we hardly are.

"Every last piece," Spike confirms, slamming the trunk shut with a satisfying thud.

Cars are just metal coffins on wheels to me, but this one's built like a fortress. As long as it outruns bullets and gets me where I need to go, I couldn't care about what's under the hood.

We're locked into an hour of snail-paced traffic. I lean back, the leather seat creaking under my weight. At the same time, cars crawl around us like ants under a magnifying glass—every one of them scurrying nowhere fast.

"I did not miss this traffic," Eleanor mutters, her eyes tracking the chaos beyond the tinted window. She's always had a sharp tongue for things that piss her off.

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"Only gotten worse since you left," Spike pipes up from the front, tapping impatient fingers on the steering wheel.

"Half the roads in the city are fucked now," Angel chimes in, his lips twisting into a grimace. "Miss one turn-off, and you're circling the globe to get back."

Eleanor's head pivots, her eyes cutting through the rearview mirror. "Still holed up in Potts Point?"

"Sold the folks' place," I reply, watching her reaction. "Now we're set up in Double Bay. Thought of you when I bought it."

Her eyebrows arch like I've just laid the red carpet beneath her feet. I lean closer, heat radiating between us, and let my breath brush her ear. "Not one cunt has ever stepped foot inside our house."

Her look is worth a thousand words—sharp, intense. It's a stare that could cut through steel or hearts, doesn't matter which. And right then, I know she's eating up every word.

The car swerves, tires biting hard into the turn onto our street. I watch her face, the way it lights up as the house comes into view—a spark of recognition that blazes in those sharp eyes. That's the one, I recall her saying years ago, a dream wrapped in brick and mortar, pointing at this mansion as we drove by. "That's it, that's the one. We can retire and live out our lives in that house right there!"

She doesn't realize I remember every fucking word she says, treat them like gospel.

The past echoes loud in my skull as if it was yesterday, not a lifetime ago when I was just a brute doing pick-ups, her beside me dreaming out loud.

"Nice, isn't it?" I prod, craving to see that flash of desire on her face.

"Matteo, you didn't..." Her voice trails off, disbelief mixing with that fierce independence I've always hungered for.

"Did and done," I say, a smirk tugging at my lips. When I showed up with a briefcase full of dirty bills, the owner's face is etched in my mind—greedy eyes bulging as I offered triple what his pile of stones was worth. He couldn't sign it over fast enough.

"Jesus, Matteo." She shakes her head, a cascade of black silk, but I see it—the awe, the want. Mine flares in response.

"Only the best for you, Eleanor," I growl low, because it's true. Every cent poured into the restoration, every choice from marble countertops to the iron-wrought gates, it's all for her. A temple built for the queen of my twisted little kingdom.

"Overpriced, I bet," she murmurs, but she's lost in it now, in the grandeur of the facade, the manicured gardens. I've bankrolled a fortune into making this place worthy of her, scrubbed the darkness of my world away with luxury, trying to create something untainted.

"Fuck the cost," I say. Because what's money compared to the look on her face? Priceless—that's what she is. And I'll burn every bill I have to own that amazement, to control the rise and fall of her chest as she takes it all in.

"Welcome home, Eleanor." The words feel like a vow, one I'm determined to keep, no matter what hell I have to unleash.

The gates groan open, wrought iron masterpieces that cost a bastard's ransom. Eleanor's face is a picture, her jaw slack as the mansion bares its teeth in welcome. I drink in that look of hers, pure shock and awe, like she's been hit by a fuckin' lightning bolt. It's all for her—every brick, every shingle.

"Christ," she whispers, barely audible over the hum of the engine.

Niko's eyes are wide too, glued to the window, his tiny hands pressed against the glass. The kid's quiet, but he's got Eleanor's intelligent eyes; he knows this is something big. Shit. A kid's room. How'd I miss that?

I flick a glance at Angel, who's already smirking at me, that 'I've got your back' look plastered on his face. Without a word, he's telling me he's sorted it. That sly son of a bitch.

"Whatever payment you're thinking of, Boss, don't," Angel's voice cuts through my thoughts, cocksure as ever. He's not one to mince words or kiss arse.

"Whatever you want, Angel, just say it." My reply comes out gruff, the weight of what he's managed in the last few days heavy on my conscience.

He chuckles, a sound that's more threat than mirth. "Won't be saying it in the car, Boss, but thanks, I'll just charge it to the card." He's out before I can argue, slamming the door with a finality that echoes my own resolve.

Fucker's definitely calling Candy. I can see it play out in my head, him lounging back, phone in hand, smug smile as he racks up my bill. Let him have his fun. That part of my life—Candy, the distractions—it's done. Eleanor's here now, and she's all I need.

"Let's get inside," I mutter, more to myself than anyone else, the king ready to show

off his castle, the queen about to take her throne.

"Come on you lot, let's go inside and I'll give you the tour," I bark out as my boots hit the sun-baked concrete. Eleanor unfolds from the car, a graceful origami figure coming to life, with Niko shadowing her every move. Her eyes are still glued to the mansion; jaw slacks with awe or shock, she can't tell which.

I close in on her, reach up and gently hoist her chin skyward, shutting that gape. "Close that mouth, Princess, before I fill it with something else." It's crude, but it wipes the daze right off her face. Her cheeks flare crimson, a silent spitfire of emotions that she tries to smother by casting her gaze to the ground.

"Jesus, Matteo..." she murmurs under her breath, her words laced with that sharp edge, always ready to cut through bullshit.

A low chuckle rumbles in my chest. "Come on, you two, let's go inside." The command is simple, short, leaving no room for debate. It's how things are done in my world—direct, uncompromising. Power isn't just held, it's displayed, used, asserted every damn second.

We stride towards the front door, the three of us—a makeshift family carted straight from the depths of chaos into luxury bought with blood money and a stubborn heart. The door swings open, the cool interior of the house swallowing the oppressive heat outside, promising secrets tucked away in its shadows. This is more than a house; it's a fortress, a sanctuary, and maybe, just maybe, a home now that Eleanor is in it.

Chapter Eleven

Eleanor Wang

What the ever-loving fuck? He actually went and did it. Bought the house. The one with the iron-wrought gates and the looming shadow of danger behind its walls—the one I dreamt of in a past life, the one meant for us. For a future that once flickered uncertain like a candle in the wind.

I'm trailing after Matteo, my feet thumping on the concrete, struggling to keep up with his long, determined strides. His back is a rigid line of authority, the cut of his ninja suit unable to hide the lethal force beneath. "Normally, I use the garage door to get in, but seeing as you haven't seen it before, let's use the front door and give you the proper tour," he says, a casualness to his tone that belies the surreal reality of the moment.

His finger meets the cold surface of the front door panel, pressing into the scanner with a confidence born from ownership. There's a click, an electronic sigh, and the door yields to him, as everything does. "I'll get Angel to add youboth to the lock panels on the house; all you have to do is touch the panels with your fingerprint, and it will unlock for you. Every single door that leads inside and outside has to be unlocked with a fingerprint," he informs me, voice flat—a fact, not an invitation.

"Bloody Fort Knox" escapes from me in a murmur, the words bouncing off the high walls and echoing back like a challenge.

"Yes, Eleanor, it is. And you will do well to remember that this is OUR safe haven.

No one can touch you within these walls," Matteo returns sharply, his glare slicing through me. It's a look that could command legions or make men weep—merciless and all-consuming.

"Sorry," I toss back at him, mustering my own defiance. It's rusty, dulled by years of distance, but I still know how to wield it.

"That's okay, Princess, it's been ten years. I'm sure we all need to remember a few things," he says, eyes narrowing into slits that hold dark secrets and darker promises.

Oh, I remember alright. Remember how every sweet word dripped with venom, how every tender touch concealed a bruise. Matteo Ricci, the man who loves like a strangling vine—suffocating, relentless, all-consuming. Underneath that polished exterior thrums the heart of a madman, chaos wrapped in silk ties and bespoke suits.

He's a storm dressed like a gentleman—the kind of insanity that's whispered about in the shadows of this city's underbelly. A dangerous enigma who rules with an iron fist sheathed in velvet gloves.

And here I stand, on the precipice of our twisted fairytale, wondering if this fortress will be my sanctuary or my tomb.

The door swings open to a shadowed realm that Matteo has conjured from the depths of my darkest fantasies. I step inside, the cool air whispering secrets across my skin, and for a moment—just one goddamn heartbeat—I'm ensnared by the past. A time when fire licked at my heels and I danced in its embers with reckless abandon.

"Jesus, Matteo," I breathe, the words catching in my throat as I take in the swathes of black paint that cloak the walls, hungry like the night sky. It's a macabre gallery, each painting a silent scream framed in darkness. The furniture—bold, unyielding antiques—stands guard like sentinels of a forgotten era, each piece chosen with

meticulous care, a shrine to bygone decadence.

The floors are a contradiction—a rich, dark stain mirroring the ceiling, grounding me even as my head spins from the dizzying heights of Matteo's madness. Black and white cowhides sprawl beneath my feet, a twisted homage to innocence tainted.

My fingers ghost over the smooth back of a leather chair; it's cold and unyielding under my touch, much like the man watching me. A tear betrays me, slipping free, tracing a path down my cheek. I swipe it away, curse my own weakness.

Matteo's eyes lock onto mine, finding victory in that single, shining track. "I'm going to take that tear as a win and assume you love it Eleanor," he drawls, his voice a dangerous purr that vibrates through the cavernous space between us.

"Love?" The word tastes bitter on my tongue, a cruel joke. "Yeah, sure," I say, but the half-hearted quip dies in the air, suffocated by the enormity of what stands before me.

This was the dream, the godforsaken vision that once fueled our lust-filled nights—the promise of 'us' wrapped in a gilded nightmare. And now, here it stands, a monument to a love that was never meant to survive the bloody grips of the Ricci legacy.

"Welcome home, Princess," he murmurs, and the room seems to close in around us, a loving embrace or a chokehold—I can't decide which. But hell, isn't that just the way with us? Always dancing on the blade's edge, where love and insanity blur into one.

"Home," I echo, tasting the lie, knowing this place is nothing but a beautiful cage, tailor-made for a bird with clipped wings. And yet, despite it all, part of me yearns to surrender to the seduction of this darkness—to sink into the abyss and let the house of Ricci claim me once more.

The forest green of the kitchen walls slithers into my senses, a dark, living thing that pulses with an opulence so intense it's almost suffocating. Black cupboards and appliances gleam with a predatory sheen under the dim lights, promising culinary delights and whispered secrets in the same breath. "It's very beautiful, Matteo," I say, but the words feel like ash in my mouth, a stark contrast to the vibrant room that's every inch a manifestation of my darkest dreams.

"Only the start, Eleanor." Matteo's voice is a velvet threat as he leads me through the house. Everywhere I look, art battles for wall space, each piece a silent sentinel in this shrine of excess and shadows. The furniture, scarce as it is, stands like dark sentinels against the black walls, their forms minimalistic yet imposing—a perfect reflection of the man who brought them here.

"Come on now, let's move on to the rest of the house." His hand grips mine, calloused fingers a vise that says I'm his, whether I like it or not.

We reach the end of the hallway, where a massive door swings open at Matteo's touch to reveal a void. An empty room, vast and waiting, like an unspoken promise or a veiled threat. "This will be Niko's room," he announces, the darkness in his tone leaving no room for argument. "Angel will deck it out. It'll be ready before you know it. Otherwise I have others you can choose from?"

"Can I see the others too?" Niko's voice cuts through the heavy air, more statement than question. Kid's got guts; I'll give him that.

"Of course, you would," Matteo chuckles, the sound more akin to the growl of a beast amused by its prey's bravado. "Come on, let's go."

The bay glitters beyond the balcony, a slice of tranquility amidst the chaos. But it's a lie, just like everything else in this house—a beautiful illusion to mask the blood-stained foundations beneath. Matteo talks of rooms and renovations, but all I hear is

the clinking of chains as the Ricci empire tightens its grip around my throat, around my son's future.

"Angel will make it cool," Matteo assures, but the chill that runs down my spine has nothing to do with comfort. This isn't a home; it's a gilded cage, a fortress with walls thick enough to keep out danger—or keep it in. And standing here, caught in the web of Matteo Ricci's making, I wonder if we'll ever indeed be free again.

Descending the shadow-veiled staircase behind Matteo, I trail into a more void space than a room. Void of furniture, void of warmth, a hollow echo of what might have been. "I never come down here," he mutters with a dismissive shrug, his eyes scanning the barren expanse.

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The right door swings open to an empty box of a room, its emptiness mirroring my pounding heart. To the left, a bathroom door stands ajar, revealing gleaming tiles and fixtures untouched by personal history. It's all too sterile, too new—like a mausoleum waiting for its first corpse.

"Yep, I'll take it downstairs, thanks," Niko declares, his voice slicing through the thick silence.

"Of course, Honey." My laughter is a nervous titter in this vast, dead space. Matteo's gaze lingers on Niko's small frame, calculating, always calculating. "Well, it is big enough to have a school desk and a computer system down here too, plus the door down here opens up to the pool," Niko adds, his grin defiant against the gravity of our situation.

"School desk? Computer System?" Matteo's brow quirks, a flash of incredulity in his darkened eyes. "You sure this is my kid?"

"Niko has been homeschooled his whole life; he feels the most comfortable behind a high computer system," I retort, locking eyes with him, challenging him to question this piece of our world he wasn't part of.

"Homeschooled, his whole life?"

"Yep." I let out a breath that carries the weight of years spent hiding in shadows. "How was I meant to enroll him into a school without documentation proving that he even existed?" I shrug, a gesture that raises more questions than answers.

"Okay, that makes sense," Matteo concedes after a beat, the cogs in his mind turning with possibilities. "But now that you're home, we will get him his documents, which I'm sure Angel has already arranged, and get him into a great school."

"Nope, no, thank you, I like being homeschooled. I don't want that to change. Can't you just get me a teacher that will come to me?" Niko demands, his voice steadfast, unyielding.

A laugh erupts from Matteo, low and guttural—it vibrates with a wildness that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Yep, you were right, he is mine. Sure thing, Buddy, we'll get you a teacher." His amusement is a thunderous sound in the stillness as he turns back towards the stairs.

Angel appears then, descending the steps like some harbinger of unseen fates. "Hey, Niko, stay down here with me, and we'll go through some ideas of what you will need and want down here, yeah?" His voice is smooth, practiced—too practiced.

Niko's gaze flickers at me, seeking permission within this den of wolves. "Is that okay, Mum?"

"Sure, Darling, just come and find me when you're done." The words are ash on my tongue, but I force them out, meeting Angel's stare with a challenge of my own.

As I watch my son stay behind with Angel, the darkness swells around us, a living entity.

My feet thump against the marble as I follow the echo of Niko's laughter fading into the bowels of this fortress. Matteo waits at the foot of the grand staircase, his hand extended like some kind of dark prince offering salvation—or damnation. My heart hammers a warning, but it's too late. "Come on, Princess. Let me show you our room."

"Our room?" The words catch in my throat, rough as if I've swallowed glass. His smirk tells me he relishes the control, the way he can still make me squirm.

"Thought you'd be sleeping alone?" His voice is velvet-laced with steel. "Not a chance." I'm in over my head, drowning in memories and what-ifs.

I take his hand because what choice do I have? His grip is firm and possessive as he guides me up the stairs. Each step we ascend tightens the knot in my gut. We're going higher, into the unknown, and I can't help but think of Icarus flying too close to the sun.

At the top, the library sprawls before us, a cathedral of shadows and whispers. It's everything I ever wanted—intimate yet expansive, a shrine to written words and unspoken promises. Black paint devours the light, giving the room an thrilling and terrifying edge. The skylight above is like an eye peering into my very soul.

Matteo watches me, his gaze intense, searching. "Built you a library, Princess," he says, pride flickering across his features. It took ten years of dreams distilled into timber and ink. My vision blurs, tears betraying me once more.

"Thank you," slips from my lips, a whisper lost among the tomes.

His laugh cuts through the silence. "Don't thank me yet." He's enjoying this, watching me unravel thread by precious thread. This man, this enigma, is a wildfire that promises destruction even as it mesmerizes. And I'm standing here, ready to burn.

I follow Matteo, my heart thumping against my ribcage like it's trying to break free. We pass a door on the right—his storage for the tools of his bloody trade, I presume—but he guides me left instead. The door swings open with a soft creak that seems too gentle for what lies beyond.

"Fuck me," I mutter under my breath as we step into the room. It's drenched in deep red like we're inside the beating heart of some beast. The bed is a fortress, with four massive posts clawing toward the ceiling and dark curtains cascading down. Carved nightstands flank it like loyal soldiers, dark timber etched with secrets I can't decipher.

To the right, doors beckon—open promises and hidden stories. One leads to a wardrobe, his gear lined up like soldiers ready for battle, the other side barren and waiting for my belongings. The other door reveals a bathroom straight from a noir fantasy: a clawfoot tub sits like a throne, an open shower promising no refuge from prying eyes, twin sinks marking territory—one littered with Matteo's arsenal of grooming supplies, the other untouched, patient.

"Matteo... I... I don't know what to say..." My voice gets lost in the grandeur, a whisper swallowed by shadows.

He steps closer, the air charged with his presence. "You don't need to say anything, Princess," he murmurs, wrapping his arms around me. His body is a familiar danger, a harbor in the storm of my life.

His scent floods my senses—cedar and pine, a forest after rainfall. It's him, all him, unchanged by time or distance. That aroma wraps around me, a sensory reminder of nightsspent tangled in silk sheets and lust, days cloaked in the illusion of safety. My walls crumble, tears carving hot paths down my cheeks.

"Shhh, Princess, it's ok, you're home now, where you belong," Matteo breathes into my hair, his voice a warm blade slicing through the chill of the room.

I wrench away from his embrace, my eyes locking onto his—a storm of onyx and intent. "That's the thing, Matteo, I don't belong here, my son isn't safe here."

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His jaw clenches, that familiar fire of possession igniting in his gaze. "There is nothing I won't do to keep you both safe." His words are granite, unyielding, as if spoken by the goddamn devil himself.

"I know, and that's the issue." My own voice is a hiss, threading between us like barbed wire.

"Come on, I'll grab your bag so you can shower and change. You bloody stink you know," he chuckles, the sound grating against the tense air as he strides out, leaving me with the echo of madness that always trails in his wake.

I'm rooted to the spot for a heartbeat, then two, before the reality of my situation claws at my resolve. I shed my clothes right there, each piece discarded like a layer of past mistakes, until I'm bare, vulnerable. I step into the shower without hesitation, turn the knob, and let the icy cascade envelop me.

Fuck, the cold bites, but it's nothing compared to the dread coiling in my gut. A shiver racks my body, not from the chill, but from the sheer fucked-up realization that Matteo Ricci—mafia boss, lover, madman—has just laid out my gilded cage.

The water sluices over me, a pathetic attempt to wash away the filth of fear and regret. But it's no use; I'm inked with the stain of his world, our world, a tapestry of power plays and violence spun across Melbourne's grimy underbelly.

My thoughts scatter like rats in an alleyway. We will all be dead in a week. The mantra pounds in my skull, a drumbeat heralding doom.

So fucking screwed.

Chapter Twelve

Matteo Ricci

I stride out of the bathroom, my mind racing as much as my heart. I'm on a damn mission now—find Eleanor's bag. The leather thing is dumped on the library floor like it's nothing. Spike must've hauled it up here for her. Clever bastard.

I grip the strap and pivot back toward the bathroom, the sound of rushing water hitting me hard. The door's wide open, like a goddamn invitation. Or is it? My body tightens, caught between raging lust and a gnawing need for answers. Can I walk in there and face her naked truth? My cock's been twitching with anticipation since London, but my chest feels like it's caged in barbed wire. I don't just want her body—I want her secrets, the ones she bolted with to protect our kid. Could've done that together, right here in Sydney.

But fuck it, before I can piece it all together, my legs betray me, carrying me toward the steam and the siren call of her skin. "Holy shit!" The words rip from my throat as she whirls around, hands clutching at herself.

"What?" That sharp tongue snaps, eyes wide, defensive.

"Turn back around, Princess," I growl, and she obeys. My gaze devours the ink sprawling across her back—a fucking masterpiece. Castle, dragon, the final showdown of some wizard war she's obsessed with—Hogwarts, they call it. Ten years ago, I etched the dark mark on her, but this... this is something else. Quotes, symbols, tiny stories wrapping around her like armor.

"They are all from the books I love," she says, voice soft but fierce. "Every quote,

every symbol is from a book that stole a part of my soul."

"It's beautiful," I admit, voice rough like gravel. I'm not one for fairy tales, but this... this is her soul laid bare.

"Turn around," I command again, and she does, dropping her hands. Her tits are perfect, but I ain't looking at them. It's the raw emotion flooding me, my vision blurring as I see her, really see her, for the first time in a decade.

"Fuck," I whisper, tears traitorous bastards streaking down my face. Never thought I'd be this guy, but here I am, undone by ink and skin and the fucking past that's clawed its way back.

I trace the ink on her skin, my finger skimming over the heart nestled between her breasts. Quotes and symbols snake along her ribs, a map of stories inked into her flesh, but the words within the heart seize my breath. "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same." Her voice in my head, the echo of the past, fucking haunts me.

"Still got a piece of me, huh?" I mutter, my voice raw with emotion. The need to show her, to prove that we're cut from the same cloth, overwhelms me. Clothes—my armor against the world—fall away like they're nothing. My chest bare, I stand before her, vulnerable yet fierce.

Her gaze drops, a gasp slipping from those lips, and her eyes lock onto my heart. There it is, the exact goddamn quote, etched into my skin under a crown with her name. A permanent mark of what she means to me.

"You remembered..." Her whisper is a feather across my soul.

"Princess, I remember every fucking word you ever said," I growl, my voice thick

with unspoken promises.

No more waiting, no more distance. I close the gap, yanking her into my arms, her wet skin against mine ignites a fire no shower can douse. "You belong here," I say, fingers gripping her chin, tilting her face to mine. "Right here with me." And then my lips crash down on hers, claiming, consuming, as though I can drink in her very essence.

She melts into me, her tongue tangling with mine, hungry and desperate. Her arms wind around my neck, pulling me closer, her body a beacon of heat against the chill of my soul. My hands roam, possessive, owning every curve and dip of her flesh, reacquainting myself with the territory that's always been mine.

"Fuck, Eleanor," I grunt as I scoop her up. Her legs circle my waist, her heat branding me. I carry her out of the steam, our bed a siren call we can't ignore. I lay her down, my hands worshiping every inch of her, teasing nipples until they peak, hard and begging for more.

A gasp, sharp and sweet, escapes her as I trail lower. My hand finds her, neatly trimmed, the promise of what's to come. This isn't just lust; it's a fucking reclaiming. I graze her clit, drawing out a moan that could raise the dead. Urgent need courses through me, but I fight it back. Not yet. Not until she's shattering beneath me, screaming my name like a prayer.

"Matteo," she whimpers, and it's all the permission I need to reduce her to the quivering mess I know she loves to be. The dance of our bodies, a familiar rhythm, a song only we know the tune to. And I play her like the virtuoso I am, eliciting cries of pleasure that ring in the air, a symphony of desire that's music to my fucking ears.

"Shit, Princess, I need to close the door," I bark out as realization punches me in the gut. A kid's in the house now—our fucking kid. I stalk over and slam the door shut,

the click of the lock a sharp note in the heated silence. When I spin back around, Eleanor's sprawled on the bed like sin waiting to be devoured. Her legs are parted, her fingers teasing herself, a clear fuck-me-now invitation. My blood roars.

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"Who said you could touch what is mine?" The growl rips from my throat, raw and possessive. Mafia boss or not, she's always been the one able to unravel me.

She looks up, eyes glinting with challenge and heat. "Well, hurry up and touch me before I explode," she whimpers, words edged with desperation.

I pounce back onto the bed, swatting her hand away, claiming her flesh as my territory. My fingers circle her clit, coaxing it into a swollen bead of pleasure. With my otherhand, I slip two digits deep inside her, and she's so damn tight and wet, it's like coming home after a decade in the desert. "Fuck, Baby," I hiss as her slick heat coats my hand. I pull out, bringing my fingers to my mouth, tasting her. Honey-sweet and addictive. "Look how creamy you are." And then those fingers are back, plunging into her, stretching her, while I offer her a taste of herself.

"I'm not gonna last more than two mins in that hole," I warn, voice laced with the promise of imminent release. "You're gonna have to cum for me now, Princess."

Her body is a live wire under me, writhing, begging for release. My fingers pump into her, targeting that spot that turns her moans into symphonies. Slow, torturous circles on her clit, each one a whispered promise of ecstasy.

And then her face transforms—a portrait of divine pleasure. Legs quiver, hands grip the doona like it's a lifeline. I feel her tighten around me, muscles clamping down hard. It's like she's trying to keep me there, make me part of her.

"Fuck, yes..." The command is a rumble from deep within me. "Cum all over my hand, Princess."

She detonates, a cascade of pleasure washing over her features. Her scream is pure bliss, music to my ears, the sound of a woman possessed.

"Good girl," I breathe out, feeling the aftershocks tremble through her.

Heat coils in my veins, my need clawing at me with sharpened nails. I free my throbbing dick, lining myself up with her still-quivering entrance. Slowly, I sink in, inch by agonizing inch, until I'm consumed by her, enveloped in the warmth and tightness that's haunted every fucking dream for ten goddamn years.

The heat between us is a living thing, fierce and untamed. "Oh, Fuck, Princess, this is gonna be the quickest fuck in history," I groan as I pull back, only to drive into her with all the force of my pent-up desire. "You're so wet and so tight!"

"Fuck, I've missed this sweet cunt." The words tear from me as I set a pace that's nothing short of savage. My world narrows to the slap of skin on skin, the tightening of her around me, the slick heat that welcomes me home.

I'm lost in it—this primal dance. This is my happy place. This is where I belong. Her cries filled the room, raw and unrestrained. "Fuck Matteo!" Eleanor's voice shatters against the walls, and I feel her body clenching, squeezing, pulling another orgasm from deep within her.

Her pleasure triggers my undoing. Her pussy tightens to the point of pain, wringing me dry. I explode with a ferocity, lighting up every dark corner of my soul. "Fuck, Princess, I love you," I rasp out, locking onto her eyes, those depths that have haunted me for years.

"I love you too, Matteo," she gasps, her voice a broken whisper. "I never stopped."

"Never stopped either, Princess," I respond, bending over her, our breaths mingling.

My lips crash onto hers, a desperate seal over a vow ten years in the making.

"Get that ass back into the shower," I command once the kiss breaks, a smirk playing on my lips despite the emotional storm inside. Power surges through me again, raw and undeniable. "Let's go find our son."

I watch as she rises, the sway of her hips a siren call I'll always heed, no matter how deep into darkness my life drags me. In this chaotic world of crime, where power is taken and held by bloodied hands, she's the one constant. The queen to my king. And together, we'll face whatever comes next.

Chapter Thirteen

Eleanor Wang

The water from the showerhead pelts my skin like a reprimand for forgetting Niko. I scramble back into the steam, grabbing at the shampoo with slippery fingers—no time for conditioner, just scrub the grime out. Matteo's silhouette fills the doorway, and then he's there behind me, firing up the other nozzle.

"Rich folks and their fancy showers," I say, eyeing the second stream of water. Fighting over hot water is not my style—I'm the queen of this tiny kingdom, and I don't share my throne. Matteo chuckles, shaking droplets from his dark hair like some kind of playful beast.

"Added it just for you," he says, the corners of his mouth tugging up. "I know you hog the heat."

"Smart man," I reply, stepping out and snatching a towel. Water drips down my tattoos, pooling on the tiled floor as I dry off quickly.

I rifle through my bag, hoping Matteo has done his part. "Hopefully you grabbed my toothbrush and beautyproducts," I grumble, searching for the essentials that make me feel less feral.

"Drawer, your side," Matteo calls from the mist, pointing to the bathroom vanity. "Toothbrush is there. As for the rest, give Angel a list, and he'll sort it." His tone is all casual-like, but that's Matteo—underneath the nonchalance, he's got the world on a string.

"Is there anything Angel can't get?" I ask, half-joking, half-serious. It's insane, the reach these people have.

"Angel's a tech wizard," Matteo says, stepping out himself, beads of water tracing lines down his inked chest. "He'll get you whatever you need."

"Great," I sigh, thinking of the monstrous list Niko's probably conjured up in his head. "That's not a relief because I can't cover whatever million-dollar dreams he's cooking up."

"Princess," Matteo starts, and I can almost see the invisible crown he places on my head with that word, "I'm a billionaire. Whatever you or Niko need, it's yours."

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He offers a bow, like we're players on a stage rather than two people wrapped in a twisted love in the heart of Australia's criminal underbelly. Power and money ripple around him, but I've never been one to be caught in their currents—not without my say.

"Matteo, I'd take your word more seriously if you weren't naked," I quip, my arm sweeping out to highlight the ridiculousness of his bare legs. He's all mafia boss and power upstairs, but he's just a man trying to find his pants down south.

"Pants or no pants," he retorts, fishing for his slacks, "you've got carte blanche with my bankroll." His voice is even, but his eyes are anything but.

"Seriously?" My hand shoots up like a traffic cop, halting any more madness spilling from his mouth. "I don't need your money, Matteo. I've got my own, and I'm not above earning my keep."

His movements halt, the air between us electrifies. The darkness seeps into his gaze, a storm brewing over still waters. "Eleanor," he begins, his steps deliberate as he closes the gap, "you left me once. That gate might as well be a damn fortress wall because you're not leaving without me. Got it?"

"Matteo, listen," I start, my voice steady despite the quake in my gut. "I get that you're Mr. Big Bad Mafia Man, but you don't own me. If I want to work, I'll work. If I want to step outside that gate solo, I will. Sure as hell can't run, but you try clamping down on me? You'll lose me. Permanently."

The words hit him like bullets. His body jolts, taken by a tremor that chills me to the

bone. Eyes vacant, a void where the fierce man used to be.

"Shit. SHIT!" Panic claws up my throat as I backpedal, inching toward the door without breaking eye contact. Old survival instincts scream at me—never show your back to the beast.

"Angel! Spike!" I holler, my voice cutting through the thick tension. A shift in the shadows, and Spike is there, silent as death itself.

"Easy, Boss," he murmurs, stepping forward, a barrier between me and whatever abyss Matteo's staring into. I slip through the door, heart hammering against my ribs, every instinct screaming to bolt. But I don't run, not this time. I stand my ground, a defiant mouse under the lion's paw, daring fate to make its move.

"Boss," Spike's voice cuts through the heavy air, his presence commanding even in the silent standoff.

"Downstairs, Eleanor. Niko and Angel need you," he says without breaking gaze with Matteo. His eyes are steel traps, a clear signal that I'm to leave, now.

"Fine," I mutter, my heart racing as I back away slowly. The moment Matteo's out of sight, I book it, feet slapping against marble, each step echoing like rapid gunfire down the grand staircase.

Hitting the bottom floor, I skid to a stop. All innocent and focused, Niko sits cross-legged with Angel, hunched over a laptop. "Hey Eleanor, check this out," Angel calls without looking up, immersed in whatever tech wizardry they're conjuring up.

"Angel, upstairs," I say, urgency lacing my voice. "Spike needs an assist."

"Fuck already?" He's on his feet in a flash, concern furrowing his brow. "What set

him off?"

"Me wanting a life," I whisper back, guilt gnawing in my gut. "Said I wasn't some puppet he could control."

"Damn, girl," Angel grunts before taking the stairs two at a time, leaving me with the weight of my words.

Niko's dark eyes flick up to mine, a storm brewing in their depths. "What's wrong with Dad?" he asks, his voice small but carrying every bit of the fear I feel.

"Your dad..." I pause; how do I explain the monster lurking beneath the man? "He has these episodes. Goes blank. Sometimes stands there, other times..." I trail off, but I'm not sure how much to reveal.

"Has he hurt you, Mum?" Niko's voice trembles; there it is—the same fear I've danced with for years.

"Never," I say more firmly than I feel. "But he doesn't know you, Niko. And that scares me."

"Wh-what do I do if he...if I'm there when it happens?"

"Nothing." The word is a command I hope he'll never have to follow. "You stay still like a statue. Don't move, don't even breathe too loud. He reacts to movement."

"Okay," Niko nods, though the terror hasn't left his eyes.

"Let's focus on this, yeah?" I gesture to the laptop, desperate to redirect his thoughts from the violence that shadows our lives.

"Sure," he murmurs, but I can tell that the innocence we both clung to is shattered and lying in pieces at our feet.

"Is Dad a killer?" Niko's voice cuts through the silence, his question hanging heavy in the air.

"Fuck, kid," I exhale sharply. "Yeah, he is. And damn good at it." My words are blunt, no sugarcoating the truth.

"Because he's head of the Mafia?" His eyes are wide, searching for understanding.

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"Right," I reply, my throat tightening. "But he's also just a lethal man. Keeps that shit under wraps, only shows it when it's business."

"So, you don't even know how dangerous he is?" Niko's following up with questions I wish he didn't have to ask.

"Shit, no." I ruffle his hair, forcing a smile. "And I don't fucking care to. The man I sleep next to, the one who laughs and loves, that's the Matteo I hold onto."

"Wow, okay." He turns back to the laptop, eager to shift topics. "Check this out!" he beams.

I lean in, peering at the screen. It's lit with schematics and tech-fantasy coming alive. "This is badass," I admit, genuinely impressed.

"Angel taught me to draft rooms and code stuff for the designs!" His pride is infectious.

"Maybe he'll show you more tech tricks," I suggest, grinning. "Doubt you'll be hacking the Pentagon, but who knows?"

"Really?!" He practically vibrates with excitement.

"Easy, tiger," I chuckle, nudging him gently. Then, a sound from above snags my attention. Matteo's on the stairs, quiet as death, listening.

"Hey," I call, my voice steady despite the tension.

"Hey," he echoes, his gaze fixed on his hands, almost ashamed.

"Everything cool now?" I can't help but question.

"Wouldn't hurt you, Eleanor," he murmurs, conviction laced with sorrow.

"Matteo," I start, steeling myself against his broken expression, "it's been ten years. Thought maybe your demons had changed."

"More frequent, that's all," he admits, those hauntingly dark eyes meeting mine.

"Never let them touch you or Niko," he says, each word a vow.

"Okay," I agree, because what else can you do when faced with a man so twisted by love and violence?

The air's thick with tension, like a storm cloud ready to burst. Matteo's gaze flickers over to Niko, and there's something raw in his eyes, something that makes my stomach twist.

"Niko, has your mother explained what happens if I blank out?" His voice is gravelly, rough around the edges.

"Yes, Sir," Niko says, stiff as a board.

"Sir?" Matteo's taken aback, flinching as if he's been slapped.

"Sorry, what did you want me to say?" Niko's fidgeting, looking to me for some kind of lifeline.

There's a long pause, heavy as lead. "You could call me, dad?" Matteo's suggestion

hangs in the air, a desperate hope clinging to the words.

"Um, okay..." Niko mumbles, uncertainty laced in his tone.

Matteo's hands are shaking now, betraying the iron-clad control he always parades around. "I don't mean all the time, but maybe every now and then? I know I've only just met you, but I would love to get to know you."

Christ, the vulnerability in his voice could shatter glass. It's like watching a predator turn into prey, and it's fucking unsettling.

"I know your mother ran away to keep you safe. But you're back now and it's my job now to keep you both safe. Please just give me the chance to do that." The words are barely above a whisper, each one sounding like it costs him a piece of his soul.

Niko glances up at me, his eyes searching for an answer. "Okay, Dad, we can try. Can't we, Mum?"

"Yep, we can try," I reply, my voice steadier than I feel. Inside, I'm a mess of nerves and fear, but for Niko's sake, I force calmness like I'm wearing a goddamn mask.

Matteo lets out a deep breath, the sound heavy with relief. He claps his hands together, the sharp noise echoing around the room like a gunshot. "Okay, let's see this list you have for your little spot down here and see what we can get done today!"

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His words spark something in Niko, and for a moment, the kid lights up like Christmas morning. But my gut knows better. Matteo's layers are darker than the bottom of the ocean, and no matter how much he tries, the shadows never stay hidden for long.

Chapter Fourteen

Eleanor Wang

I'm standing there, staring at the chaos that's unfolded in a mere handful of hours. The painter's laid out a fan of colors like a deck of cards, each one darker and more brooding than the last—shades that'll turn Niko's room into some cozy den. The bed they're assembling is solid, the kind that won't squeak no matter what nightmares toss Niko around on it.

"Remember to thank Matteo," I tell him, my voice a mix of gratitude and a warning. "For all this."

Niko's sprawled on the floor, thumbing through the samples, his eyes wide with that innocent excitement kids have before the world claws it away from them. "Mum, Matteo said it's your money too."

"Did he now?" My blood simmers. That man's always playing games with words, twisting them into knots I'm supposed to unravel. "Either way, we're not blowing it all, right?"

"Okay, Mum." He's distracted, already lost in visions of his new room. "When's

dinner? I'm starving." His stomach growls in agreement, a low rumble that echoes off the walls.

"Christ, kid, you're a bottomless pit." I shake my head. It's barely been twenty minutes since lunch, but he's acting like he's been stranded in the outback for weeks.

"Hey, Niko," Angel calls down from halfway up the staircase, his voice a casual drawl. "Hungry? Got some pizzas coming. Twenty minutes out."

"Really?" Now Niko's up, energy sparking off him as if Angel's words fuel his fire. "Heck yeah!" And he's off after Angel like a shot, leaving me alone in the soon-to-be-painted fortress.

"Eleanor," Angel throws over his shoulder, "Matteo's hunting for you. He's in his office."

"Thanks." I frown at the maze of halls and doors. "Where's his bloody office again?"

"First door on the right. Can't miss it." His shout echoes down the stairs, bouncing off the walls.

I head for the door, the house's opulence pressing in on me, smelling like money and secrets. This place could swallow you whole if you're not careful. I knock a quick rap of knuckles against dark wood and wait for the grunt that means enter.

"Come in," comes the muffled call, and I push the door open.

"Um, Matteo, what the fuck?" The words slip out before I can stop them. There he is, king of his cluttered little domain, surrounded by stacks of paper and cardboard that teeter precariously on the edge of order and chaos.

"Princess..." His smile flickers across his face, all teeth and dark glee. "You wanted a job. Here it is."

"Ummm, yeah, sure, but what's all this?" I wave a hand at the mess, feeling a headache brewing.

"This, my sweet, is my life in paperwork form." He looks almost apologetic—the bastard. "An admin usually sorts it, but I've been... preoccupied."

"Clearly." I step closer, taking in its sheer volume. "So, what, I'm your PA now?"

"Seeing as you're so good at being a PA, I thought you could perhaps be mine. That solves the need for a job issue, helps me out, and keeps you safe," he says with that same smirk that tells me he thinks he's won.

"Safe," I echo, tasting the word like it's laced with poison. "This isn't your main office, is it?" I already know the answer but want to hear him say it.

"Nope, I have a high-rise down on Elizabeth St," he admits nonchalantly as if it's nothing to shuttle mountains of paperwork from there to here to keep me tethered to his side.

"And why can't I just do the paperwork at the office in the city?" I challenge him, even though I know the game he's playing.

"You can, but only when I'm there. Otherwise, here it is," he states plainly, dropping the gauntlet.

"Let me guess—" I start, feeling the walls close in even as I play into his hands, "—I tell Angel what I need, and he'll have it delivered to the house?"

"Yep! That!" He snickers, and something dark curls in my chest. He knows too damn well I prefer to stay put, keepwatch over Niko rather than rub shoulders with the other power-hungry vultures circling his throne.

"Princess," Matteo murmurs, and suddenly, he's right in front of me, arms caging me in a gentle yet immovable embrace. I didn't hear him move, a shadow slipping through the light. "You need to tell me what's going on. There's only so much I can do with my limited information."

"Later," I breathe in, his scent of cedar and pine anchoring me in the storm. "We'll talk later. Today, I want to breathe."

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"Okay, Princess," he concedes, pressing a kiss onto my hair, a softness in his touch that belies the iron in his tone. "But next time I ask, you will answer me."

"Next time," I agree, letting myself melt into him for a moment longer. But there's a part of me itching for escape, the need for freedom gnawing at my bones. With Matteo, it's always about control, but today, I'll let him think he has it.

My stomach's twisting into knots, the kind that only hunger—or dread—can weave. Niko's voice cuts through the thick tension like a knife. "Mum, I'm starving."

"Again?" I arch an eyebrow, but a smile tugs at my lips despite the sinking feeling in my gut. Kids and their damn bottomless pits for bellies.

Angel's already on us like a hawk, circling his prey. "What are we thinking for dinner?" His eyes flicker to me, expectant.

"Carbs," I grunt, stifling a yawn. "Pasta, noodles, whatever." My mind drifts to a place with red-checkered tablecloths and the scent of garlic in the air. "Is Fratellis still kickin'? After the 'rona shitstorm, who knows what's left standing."

Matteo's laughter rumbles through the room before he even steps in. The sound sends shivers down my spine. "Fratellis? Baby, we own that joint. Been cleaning our dirty cash there for years. It's as alive as ever." He flashes that wolfish grin, all teeth, and no remorse.

My eyebrows shoot up—the audacity. "Since when do we chat so openly about the family biz?"

"Princess," Matteo's smirk could cut glass. You're not going anywhere. You're mine, remember?" He looms closer, his presence all-consuming. And now you're my PA. You learned the ropes, including how to launder our money."

"Fuck, Matteo." My gaze darts to Niko, hoping he's too young, too innocent to grasp the gravity of those words. "Keep him outta this."

"Relax." Matteo's voice is silky and steely. He'll work with Angel. Be our tech wiz, not my successor." We stride out, leaving the conversation—and my unease—behind us.

"Longest fucking day of my life," I mutter, dragging my hands down my face as if I could wipe away the weariness and the weight of this new world I'm trapped in. Power and control are all a game to Matteo, one he plays with a master's hand. But even masters can lose, and I've got a few cards up my sleeve he hasn't seen yet.

I announce my dinner choice to the void of the living room, my voice echoing off the high ceilings. "Prawn linguine." My words hang in the air as I trudge upstairs, each step declaring exhaustion. Matteo's bedroom awaits, a sanctuary with strings attached.

Opening the bathroom door, it hits me—the need to wash away the grime of the day, the filth of the life I'm shackled to. Cupboards fly open under my frantic search, and then, jackpot. Epsom salts and body wash—manly scents that promise to scrub clean more than just skin. I chuckle—a dark, humorless sound. "That'll do."

The tub groans as I twist the tap, water gushing like a waterfall. Time ticks by, a slow drip of moments waiting to be drowned. I slip into his wardrobe, a sea of organized chaos, where grey sweats line the shelves—uniforms for the hot and damned. Snatching a pair, I can't help but wonder about his obsession with tens. It's a compulsion, a need for control so deeply ingrained.

I reach for an oversized tee, another set of ten. Fucking typical. And there he is—Matteo, looming in the doorway, arms barred like the gates of hell. His smile is a razor's edge, slicing through the tension.

"Shit, Fuck Matteo," I yelp, hands flying to my skirt as a trickle of betrayal dampens my thighs. "Don't sneak up on me! My bladder is shot after having Niko."

"Sorry, Princess," he drawls, not sorry at all. "Just admiring your pillaging skills."

"Fuck off," I snap back, but my heartbeat betrays a different kind of flutter. I storm past him, leaving the scent of borrowed masculinity on my skin.

The bath is nearly spilling over in the safety of steam and tile. A good tap, or maybe just another way for Matteo to show how everything he owns works better than you had before. I shed the layers of the day, stepping naked into the near-scalding embrace of the water. Red blooms across my skin, a map of heat that soothes aching muscles and inflamed thoughts.

Heavier's footsteps this time were a deliberate intrusion. "Did you stomp so that I'd hear you?" I don't turn, eyes closed, as I let the water seep into every pore.

The glass hits my hand with a clink that echoes off the tile—Matteo's offering, liquid gold swirling in crystal. "Yes, Princess, I didn't want to scare you and have you leaking again," he says, the low rumble of his chuckle stirring the steam around us.

"Thank fuck for whiskey," I mutter, wrapping my fingers tight around the calm surface. The burn as it slides down my throat is a welcome flare of warmth against the bath's heat. "Dinner soon?"

"Ten minutes out," he replies, leaning against the doorframe, all casual arrogance and tailored suit. "Need it upstairs?"

I shake my head, droplets of water flinging from my hair. "Nah, I'll come down. But Niko—" I pause, catching the shift in Matteo's expression, something like concern creasing his brow. "Can you make sure he showers and gets into his PJs?"

"Me?" His voice is a mix of surprise and something else, something softer. "You're trusting me with that?"

"Shocked?" I smirk up at him through the haze. "I figure you can handle a kid's bedtime routine."

"Thank you," he whispers, bending to press his lips to my damp forehead. The kiss is a brand of ownership that still sends shivers down my spine.

"Trust doesn't mean shit in our world, Matteo," I say as he retreats, but inside, I'm wondering if maybe, just maybe, it could. Could I let this dangerous man inch closer to my son, step by cautious step?

"Ten minutes," he calls back before disappearing, leaving me alone with the weight of decisions I never wanted to make.

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"Fuck," I exhale, resting my head against the porcelain, letting the water steal the tension just for a moment longer.

The room's chill slaps me awake, a rude contrast to the bathwater's embrace. Blinking against the harsh light, I see Matteo hovering over me, his inked arms reaching down. He's got that look in his eye, part concern, part something darker, more possessive.

"Come on, Princess, you've turned into a prune. Let's get you dressed and reheat this pasta," he growls, his hands firm under my arms as he lifts me from the water.

"Shit, sorry," I slur, consciousness still tangled in sleep's heavy curtains. My mind's a scrambled mess, and my limbs feel like they're made of fucking lead.

"Nothing to be sorry for," Matteo says, setting me down with a smirk playing on his lips. He's amused, the bastard. "Can you stand enough for me to get your clothes on?"

I swat at him, annoyed, not needing his goddamn help. "I can get dressed myself; I'm not that old yet."

"Could've fooled me," he chuckles, backing off. "We could hear your snoring from downstairs."

"Fuck off, I don't snore," I snap, but my voice lacks heat. I know it's true; I just never thought I'd let my guard down enough around him.

"Bullshit," he fires back, grinning now. "Niko heard it, and I quote and say, 'That would be Mum asleep in the bath again,' so clearly, this is a regular thing for you. He

even offered to come up and help get you out."

"Shit, cat's outta the bag," I mutter, feeling the flush creep up my neck. Niko and his innocent observations. And Matteo? He loves this, seeing me as less than perfect.

"Big time," he agrees, that familiar dangerous glint in his eyes. "Now come on, Angel's just heating up your pasta for you."

I grab a towel and wrap it around myself, refusing to look at Matteo as he leans against the doorframe, watching me with a predator's patience. Everything about him screams power.

Dragging my feet, I follow him out, already missing the seclusion of the bath, the brief respite from this life I'm trapped in. But the hunger gnawing at my belly won't let me linger, and neither will Matteo's presence, pulling me back into the chaos I've woken up to.

Chapter Fifteen

Matteo Ricci

Watching Eleanor snore in that oversized bath, it's almost comical. The dame is damn close to divine, all elegance and sharp edges, but here she is—mouth agape, drool glistening on her chin like she's some angel knocked off a pedestal. It's fucking adorable.

The evening trudges on, exhaustion has painted dark circles under her eyes. She's fighting jet-lag, forcing herself through motions and mouthfuls of pasta. Niko's yawning too, practically asleep on his feet, and Eleanor's got that determined tilt to her jaw as she marches him off to bed.

"Bedtime, bubs," she says, nudging him gently towards his room.

She doesn't linger in the kid's room. There's a storm brewing behind those tired eyes as she shuffles past me and the lads, grunting a weary goodnight. Fuck, even with that scowl, she's something else.

I'm about to follow her when Spike sidles up, lowering his voice. "Now that we got her back here, Boss, what are we going to do about Enzo?"

Shit. Enzo. That snake's been wriggling through my thoughts since he dropped the dime on Eleanor's location. How'd he find her? Why now? Angel's tech is top-notch; his software should've caught her ages ago.

"I don't know, Mate," I confess, raking a hand through my hair. "He's gonna want something for the info he supplied. I can bloody feel it." I scowl, thinking about how that bastard outmaneuvered us all. "And I wanna know how he found her in the first place when Angel was unable to. Even with his facial recognition software."

Spike's nodding along, eyes narrow, calculating.

I'm pacing the dimly lit room like a caged animal, every muscle tense, my mind racing faster than my footsteps on the cold floor. The shadows cling to the walls like specters, whispering secrets and deceit.

"Considering how often she was photographed with Patrick you would think the software would have picked her up," Angel huffs, frustration lacing his tone.

"Something's off." I snarl, turning to face him. "Our tech doesn't just glitch out, especially not in the fucking UK."

Spike leans against the doorway, arms crossed, his eyes sharp as knives. "I feel like

Enzo might know the answer to that one," he says, and it chills me to the bone because he's probably fucking right.

"Enzo's been playing us." The words taste like poison on my tongue. "What if he knew where she was this whole time?" My voice is a low growl, dangerous, and filled with a predator's intent.

Spike nods, his expression darkening. "Waiting for the perfect time to dangle the info when he needed something."

"Exactly what we don't need," I huff, slamming my fist against the wall, feeling the plaster crack beneath the impact. Not now, not when I've finally got her back.

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"Boss," Spike starts, cautious, "you reckon he knew about Niko?"

"Fuck no," I say, the very thought sent a surge of protective fury through me.

"Eleanor... she kept our boy under wraps, away from the filth of our world."

"Damn good job too," Spike mutters.

"Yeah," I mutter back, the pride and fear warring.

There's silence for a heartbeat, two, then Spike breaks it with a question that's been eating at everyone since she walked back into my life. "You okay, Boss? With her being back?"

I stop dead in my tracks, my chest tight. "I am bloody ecstatic," I admit, but there's a 'but' - always a fucking 'but.' "She won't talk, won't spill why she bolted, why she didn't trust me to protect her and Niko." Our son. I can barely wrap my head around it.

"Give her time," Spike advises, downing the last of his whiskey, the liquid amber reflecting the dim light. "We yanked her out of her life, mate. Gotta be a shock."

"Time." The word tastes like ash. She had a decade. I want answers, but I know he's right. I can't force her hand. Not when I've already forced so much.

I knock back the last dregs of whiskey, the burn doing fuck all to scorch away the frustration gnawing at my insides. The glass hits the counter with a thud that mirrors the drumming in my head. "Fuck, I know you're right, Mate," I spit out, "but

it's like swallowing glass, this waiting game."

He chuckles, that annoying sound of 'told-you-so' without the words. "One step at a time, Boss. She's back, ain't she? And the kid..." His grin widens. "Spitting image of you."

"Fuck," I laugh despite myself, the tension breaking for just a moment. "That's something, yeah." I glance toward the floor where my boy—our boy—is probably dreaming up ways to hack the Pentagon. "Speaking of Niko," I continue, "I want you to load him up with everything tech. Kid's got a knack."

"Sure thing, Boss." Angel rolls his eyes, but I catch the pride he tries to hide. "Kid'll probably be schooling me before long."

"Need me on watch, Boss?" Spike's already half-standing, itching for permission to bail.

"Nah, you're right. Fuck off home." I slapped his back, and a brotherly shoved out the door. "Six sharp."

The room's a fucking mess—takeaway containers breeding on the table like vermin. I wouldn't say I like disorder, and chaos in my space reflects the chaos in my head. Sleeves rolled, I get to work, clearing, cleaning, casting each piece of trash into the bin like it's a piece of the past I'm desperate to forget. The hum of the dishwasher is the only company I keep as I scrub away the remnants of the day.

Thirty minutes bleed away before I make the climb upstairs. The bedroom door creaks open, revealing her, Eleanor, curled up and vulnerable on the bed. Seeing her there is like a punch to the gut and a balm to the soul all at once. She's here, in my den, my world. And she's mine.

I peel the clothes off my skin, letting them drop in silence. I'm raw, exposed, but it's nothing compared to the exposure of my heart. Crawling behind Eleanor, the cool sheets starkly contrast the heat brewing in me. I slide my arm beneath her pillow and wrap the other around her waist. She's a fucking fit against me—her ass a perfect curve to my front, her head nestled under my chin as if she was made to be there. Her scent is soap and my cologne, my brand on her skin. A deep, primal part of me stirs—she's mine, and fuck if she doesn't know it.

My hand traces the path down her stomach, fingertips itching to find out if she's as ready for me as I am for her. The thought alone has my cock twitching with possessive need. She's usually fucking drenched for me, always has been. My fingers slip past the waistband of my sweats, delving into the warmth between her thighs. The hair there's not to my liking—a reminder to run to Woollies come morning. But then, my finger slides through, finding her slick, wet, just like goddamn always. She never could hide how much she wanted me.

A tug, a lift, and her sweats are history. She's stirring now, the beast of consciousness waking in her, but I'm relentless. I want her bare, vulnerable, open. My lips press to the column of her neck, breathing her in. My arm scoops under her leg, drawing her open to me. That's when I feel it—the searing heat of her greeting me, inviting me in. One of her hands reaches my head, urging me closer. The kiss she gives me tastes of peppermint, fresh and sharp—fuck, it's like a shot of adrenaline straight to my veins.

"Matteo," she breathes out, a whisper that shoots through me.

"Shh," I hush her, lining myself up. There's a slight resistance, but she's arching back, giving me the needed angle. I push in, slow, controlled, savoring every goddamn inch as I fill her. It's home. It's where I belong. It's everything.

"Fuck, Princess, I've missed this, I've missed you," the words growled into her mouth, a tangle of need and raw emotion. Her response is muffled against my lips, a

sound that's half sigh, half moan, "Oh, geez," as I bury myself deep inside her.

"That's it, you remember how my dick used to feel? You remember how much your pussy craves me?" The question is rhetorical, a filthy whisper, but she answers a breathless "Yes" that punches straight through me. That's all the fucking permission I need to pick up the pace, to start moving within her with rapid thrusts, each one a claim, a reclamation of what's mine. I can feel every inch of her wet heat coating me, driving me insane.

"Fuck, Princess, I can't hold it any longer. I need you to cum for me," I demand, fingers finding her clit, circling with a precision born of memory and desire. She's always been responsive, and tonight's no exception—her legs tremble, her breath catches in sharp intakes that sync with my movements.

"Oh, fuck Matteo." Her voice is strained, edged with that sweet precipice of release. I pinch her clit, just right, and she detonates around me, her orgasm ripping through her body in waves, clenching around me so fucking tight. And I'm right there with her, my control shattering as her velvet walls milk me dry.

"Fuck, Princess, that's it, strangle my cock; this cum is yours, and only yours." It's a guttural declaration as I spill into her, hot and relentless. I want to mark her inside out, to brand her with my seed, to fill her womb until it swells with another piece of us. I've got to figure out her game with birth control and make sure nothing stops the natural order of my claim.

"Princess, I need you to marry me. I want you to carry my last name. I cannot lose you again," I whisper fiercely into her ear, the words laced with a possessive edge that brooks no argument. Her voice is soft, still laced with the afterglow of our joining. "Okay," she says, simply surrendering.

"Really?" Confusion laces my voice because I expected a fight, resistance. But she's

acquiescing like she's been waiting for me to stake my claim, "Really, Matteo, I'm not going to fight you over it; I've wanted to be yours for twelve years. Just don't break my heart." Her words hit me harder than a bullet, a mix of vulnerability and an undercurrent of steel.

"Baby, we'll talk more about me breaking your heart another time, but you gotta get up and clean up; I don't want you getting a UTI," I say, already uncoiling from around her, even as part of me screams to keep her close forever. Her body moves reluctantly, and she grumbles about my bossiness, but I know she secretly loves it. The darkness hides my grin, but I can't contain the sense of satisfaction spreading through me like wildfire. My Princess. My future wife. My fucking world.

I smirk in the shadows, the darkness like a cloak around us. "I thought that you like me bossy." Her body tenses against mine, her breath hitching.

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"Tomato, tomato," she grumbles, her voice raspy with fatigue. I can almost see her rolling her eyes, even in the pitch-black room. The exhaustion is scraping away the sweetness from her tongue, leaving sharp edges I've come to love and fear.

"Eleanor, what are you using for birth control at the moment?" I watch, feeling more than seeing her stiffen, her movements halting as she half-climbs back into our bed.

"Fuck, shit, goddamnit!" The curses fly from her lips, unfiltered and raw. She's panicked, I can tell.

"I don't use anything and didn't even think of it. Shit, sorry Matteo, I'll get Angel to take me to the docs tomorrow and grab the pill," she rambles, climbing back under the sheets, her voice tremulous with the sudden twist of fate.

"No need," I say, pulling her back against my chest, my hand possessive over her abdomen. "I want you pregnant again." I feel her muscles tense, her resolve hardening like concrete.

"Not a chance, Matteo; one and done, this shop is closed. I'm not going through that again," she states firm as a fucking bulletproof vest.

Her words sting, but they're not enough to douse the fire she's ignited in me—one that's been burning since she left, since before I knew about Niko. It's an inferno that her stubbornness or fears won't snuff out.

We've got unfinished business, Eleanor and I. And no matter how much she resists, I know this dance of ours—it's far from over.

I chuckle, low and dark—a sound that rumbles through the quiet room like a threat dressed as amusement. "Okay, Princess, let's shelve this conversation for later." It's a promise wrapped in velvet, but we both know there's steel beneath it.

She thinks she can shut down the prospect of another kid and seal it off like some condemned part of her past, but I'm not a man who takes no for an answer. Not when it comes to Eleanor. Not when it comes to anything that's mine. The shop might be closed in her mind, but I've got the master key and plan to use it.

"Go to sleep," I whisper against the soft silk of her hair, my lips brushing the top of her head. "We'll talk more tomorrow."

It's all the tenderness I can afford right now. We'll battle it out tomorrow, trade barbs and maybe bodies, but tonight, I let her believe she's won this round.

The room's darkness feels thick and heavy with unsaid words and unmade decisions. But for now, I let the silence take over, breathing in her familiar scent and letting the shadows cloak us both.

Chapter Sixteen

Eleanor Wang

The sun hasn't even cracked the horizon, and I'm already up, the taste of espresso bitter on my tongue as I rifle through the latest stack of papers: same shit, different day. Matteo left a ghostly impression on the bed; the sheets were still warm where his body had been. It's like living with a phantom, one that fucks you senseless in the dead of night and then vanishes come morning.

Every click of the keyboard is a calculated risk. Patrick's on the other end of these emails, his threats to involve the cops hanging heavy over my head. But it's Matteo's

wrath I fear more - the man's possessiveness knows no bounds, and if he catches wind of this, someone's blood will paint the walls.

Matteo's been scarce since returning to his empire of crime and concrete. He comes home to remind me I'm his, with rough hands and insatiable hunger. But there are no words, no tender kisses—just carnal claiming and then the silence of his absence. I'm not just some doll to be played with, only to be shelved when the game's done.

Tonight's the night. I'll wait for him and force the confrontation. There's a story curled tight in my chest, one about running and fear and life growing inside me. Niko needs safety and a father who understands the shadows we're wrapped in. And Matteo... he needs the truth, raw and cutting.

I check the clock. Hours until he returns, hours to fortify my resolve. My heart's a drumbeat, rapid and panicked, but I push it down. Nothing gets done on knees weak with worry. I'm the queen of this darkened chessboard, and it's time to move.

The leather of the library chair creases under me as I jolt awake, the scent of ink and old paper replaced by the musky tang of Matteo's cologne. His arms are a vice around me, lifting me from my makeshift vigil with an ease that speaks of his strength and control—the room swims, disoriented from sleep. I blink back the fog.

"Hey, Princess, let's get you into bed," he murmurs, voices a soft growl that vibrates through me.

"Matteo?" My voice is a croak, dry and sleepy.

"Yes, Princess?"

"Are you avoiding me?" I can barely get the words past my yawn, but they feel like knives, sharp and necessary.

"Why do you think that?" His face is shadowed, unreadable.

"Because you get home when you know I'm asleep, and you're gone when I wake up." My accusation hangs in the air as he lowers me onto the bed; our sanctuary turned battleground.

"Princess, if I were avoiding you, I wouldn't come home at night." He sheds his suit jacket, movements precise and deliberate. "I got some drama with the four seats going on, and I've been trying to deal with it. I only come home 'cause you're here; otherwise, I would stay at the office."

His confession slices through the silence. Every word he says is laced with that darkness he commands, the kind that seeps into the very walls of this house, into the marrow of my bones.

"I tried to stay awake so I could talk to you," I admit, pouting up at him, the frustration gnawing at my insides. Since Niko, since coming back, every part of me feels like it's betraying me, even my goddamn stamina. "But I can never seem to make it past 9 pm anymore. I'm only thirty, for Christ's sake, but 9 pm seems to be the magical number."

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He's peeling off his clothes, piece by piece, revealing the ink-stained canvas of his skin. Each tattoo tells a story, and each scar is a battle won. But he's not just undressing; he's stripping away the day's armor, showing me the man beneath the mafia kingpin who still comes home to me.

And here I am, powerless against the pull of sleep, a queen brought low by the curse of early slumber, fighting to reclaim her throne one conversation at a time. Tonight, I'll make sure my voice is heard.

Matteo's chuckle rumbles through the dimly lit room, a low sound that makes the shadows dance. "Princess, you were never a night owl," he says, his voice threaded with amusement as he recalls my younger days. "You used to fall asleep in the taxi on the way home from the club when you were nineteen. So I'm not surprised that you're a nanna now."

"Fuck off! I'm not a nanna. I like my sleep," I snap back, the words rough and jagged as they leave my lips. My hand finds his chest—a barrier—and I push him slightly, a weak attempt to keep the space between us clear of distractions. Matteo climbs into bed next to me, the mattress dipping with the weight of this man who is both my sanctuary and my storm.

"What did you wanna talk about?" he asks, his tone casual, but there's a hungry edge to it as his hand begins its familiar path up my leg, inching towards my center. There's a promise in that touch that could so easily pull me under.

"Enough of that," I command, sitting up abruptly, drawing my legs up to my chest like a shield. My heart thumps against my ribcage, trying to outrun the heat of his

proximity. "I want to talk about a few things."

"O.K." He spells out each syllable as if testing my resolve, breaking the word into separate notes of challenge. His fingers are still, but the air between us is thick with unspoken desires and lethal secrets. He sits up, reaches over, and flicks on the bedside table lamp, bathing us in a soft glow that does nothing to soften the hard lines of his face or the dangerous glint in his eyes.

With light framing his dark form and illuminating our nocturnal cocoon, we're poised on the edge of revelations that might shatter the fragile peace we've carved out in this twisted world. In his gaze, I see the reflection of every sin we've committed, every line we've crossed together. And yet, I'm about to draw a new line that could bind or sever us tighter.

My pulse hammers, the truth a grenade in my hand, pin pulled, waiting to see if Matteo will be the one to blow. "Ok," I rasp out, voice barely above a whisper. I have two things I need to address."

He tilts his head, those shark eyes assessing me. "Well, now, don't you sound all professional; all the PA work must have rubbed off on you."

"Fuck off, cunt." The words tumble out, as natural as breathing, and his lips twitch with the ghost of a smirk.

"Argh, there she is, my little gutter mouth; I wondered where it went."

"Seriously, Matteo, you're the only person I know who doesn't seem to mind my house voice," I shake my head, trying to derail the dread twisting in my gut.

"Okay, enough of that." I hold up a hand, needing to stem the tide of his taunting. "First, I need you to get fake paperwork for Niko's schooling in the UK so I can get

him a teacher."

His reply comes quickly, with no hesitation. "I have Angel already working on it."

"Thank you." I nod, the slightest wave of relief cresting before it crashes into the shore of the next confession. I glance down at my hands, knotted together like they could strangle the fear in my throat.

"And I want to tell you why I left," I start, the words scraping against my vocal cords. "I know you said you would look after us, keep us safe, and we have been fine since we've been back, but I know once I step one foot out of that gate, it's a whole different ballgame."

I suck in a breath that feels like glass shards in my lungs. "I cannot stay locked up here forever; I know that, and you know that. So, you need to know the threat before I do."

Matteo's hand, calloused and commanding, slides under my chin, lifting my face to meet his stare. "Princess, no matter what it is, I'll deal with it, okay."

"Okay," I whisper, leaning into him, my lips pressing against his in a kiss that isn't sweet or soft—it's steel borrowed from his spine, just enough to keep me upright.

The room's chill seeps into my bones, but it's nothing compared to the ice flooding my veins as I begin. "You know the war you were in the middle of when I left?" Matteo nods, his eyes shadowed with memories best left buried. "Yes."

"One of the four seats murdered my parents." The words tumble out, raw and jagged. "The day before I ran away, I got a letter slipped under my door with photos of their bodies; the four seats symbol stamped on the back."

Matteo goes rigid beside me, every muscle tensing as if ready for battle. His fury is almost tangible, a dark energy that fills the space between us. "There was a note attached that said I was next if I didn't disappear."

His voice explodes in the silence. "Why didn't ya tell me? I could've kept you safe!" He's up now, pacing like a caged animal, his hands clenched into fists.

"There is more," I force out, my heart pounding against my chest, threatening to break through skin and bone. My resolve wavers, but this secret has festered too long. "I ignored the photos and just threw them in the bin. They haddied over six months before, so I thought it was just someone messing with me; plus, this wasn't the first time I'd gotten threats sent to me." My throat tightens around the confession, "The truth was I got a lot."

Matteo halts, his eyes drilling into mine, searching for lies I don't have. "They started the second I met you. Notes left in my car or slipped into my mailbox." I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "At first, I thought it was just a jealous ex or someone you fucked once." A bitter laugh escapes me, devoid of humor. "I just threw them away every time I got one; I didn't even read half of them anymore."

"Princess, I don't understand why you didn't tell me." His voice is a low growl, and frustration is etched deep into the frown marring his handsome face.

"Because you were in the middle of a war," I whisper, reaching out to trace the hard line of his jaw, feeling the thrum of his pulse beneath my fingertips. "I didn't want to add to your burden. And I just thought... it was part of being with you." I shrug, trying to seem nonchalant, though my insides are shaking. "I never took them seriously until that day."

"Fuck, Matteo, this is hard to say," the words catch, and a single tear betrays me, streaking down my cheek. His hand is there instantly, wiping it away with

unexpected gentleness. His touch lifts my chin, forcing me to meet the storm in his eyes.

"Princess, it's okay," he murmurs, a slight grin fighting its way onto his lips despite the darkness swirling around us. His eyes burn with unwavering determination as he slides back onto the bed beside me. "I'm not going anywhere. Nothing on this planet you could do or say to make me leave you."

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His assurance should comfort me and should feel like a lifeline, but all I can think about is the cost of our love—a tally of blood and violence that never seems to end.

I let out the breath I've been holding, and my words rush out with it. "After tossin' the photos in the trash, I didn't think twice. But shit, Matteo, at that point, I was carryin' Niko and hadn't yet found the balls to tell you." My shrug feels like a confession of my cowardice. "You know me, always chicken shit with the heavy talks."

My hand floats between us, a bridge I'm too scared to cross. "Then, the day after your car pulls away from my place, there's a knock. Thought it'd be Angel or Spike 'cause who else has the guts to show up unannounced?"

I can still hear the ominous creak of the door and feel the chill as my safe space gets invaded by shadows. "But no, it's three goons I've never seen, but their suits screamed Italian high-class thugs."

They manhandled me into a chair, their grips bruising, marking me like cattle. And in those moments, my apartment—the one place that should've been sacred—turned into a goddamn slaughterhouse.

Tears carve tracks down my face, each one a testament to fear and betrayal. "These fucks, they did their dirty work. It left me shaken, stirred, not fucking stirred enough to miss the threat. 'Disappear, or you're next.' So, I ran like hell. For our kid. For me."

The silence is a living thing that is suffocating and heavy with Matteo's stillness. He's a statue carved from ice and darkness, and I swear even his heart has stopped beating.

“I ain't gonna look up,” I whisper to myself, 'cause I don't need to see the void where his soul used to dance. Not again.

Instead, I nestle my head in his lap, my sobs a silent storm. Steadin' my breath, I brace for the hurricane I've just unleashed. He wanted me here—I'll be his fuckin' anchor.

Chapter Seventeen

Matteo Ricci

Eleanor's voice is a goddamn bullet in my head, ricocheting off the insides of my skull. "They did their dirty work...", she said, and those fucking words are like a mantra from hell. I'm spiraling, the rage boiling in my veins like molten lead, itching to tear this city apart brick by bloody brick.

But I'm stuck in the past, a whole decade lost, and those three bastards are ghosts, shadows I can't grasp in the here and now. It's a dead end, a fucking labyrinth with no way out. The haze wants to take over, wants me to let it swallow me whole until there's nothing left but the fury.

Then there's a touch, light as a feather, on my cheek. Soft sobbing cuts through the black mist, threatening to cloud my vision. Her touch vanishes, and I find myself staring into eyes the color of autumn leaves after rain—light gold, not yellow, filled with a sadness that wrenches at my gut.

I know what I'm supposed to do. My hands should reach for and comfort her, but they're like cinder blocks at my sides. Useless. Then her lips press against mine, tender, pulling me back from the brink. It's a fucking anchor in the storm, her kiss. And suddenly, my body remembers its purpose. Her touch sends signals firing through every nerve, banishing the numbness and filling me with something other

than blind rage.

My arms lift, heavy but mine and I cradle her face between calloused hands, returning the kiss with everything that's been coiling tight inside me. She's the light in the dark, the calm in the chaos. My forever. All I gotta do is show her, make her feel it down to her bones.

"Eleanor," I mutter against her lips, the word more of a prayer than a curse because if anything can save me from myself, it's Eleanor. It always has been and always will be. No amount of time or distance could ever change that. With her, I can almost believe in redemption—if not for my sins, then at least for my sanity.

Eleanor's name slips from my lips like a sacred incantation, whispered into the quiet space between us. Her response is a hushed echo, a fragile thread binding me to reality. "Matteo."

"Ti amo," I rasp, words heavy with a longing that's festered deep in my blood for too damn long. The declaration crashes through the remnants of my rage, leaving only this raw need to claim her as mine.

My arms act on instinct, coiling around her waist, yanking her into my lap. She's the anchor in this storm, the force capable of pulling me back from the brink. Skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, we're entangled in an unspoken promise of forever.

I seize the hem of my t-shirt that hangs on her like a shroud of my possession, wrenching it over her head. Bare before me, she's art in its purest form, a masterpiece scarred and beautiful. It's a sight that fucks with my control, making me desperate to feel her wrapped around me, to drown in her.

Impatience gnaws at me, urging my hands to tear away the last barriers. Boxers shoved down just enough to liberate my cock, standing rapt and ready. No more

waiting. No more fucking games. Just Eleanor and I stripped down to our most primal selves.

"Christ, you're perfect," I grunt as I guide myself to her entrance, holding my length steady. She descends onto me, a slow burn of pleasure that sears through my veins. Her moan is a symphony in the dark, a sound that brands itself onto my soul. "Oh, Matteo..."

Time halts, breaths mingle, and hearts synchronize. We're motionless, two halves of a whole brought together by fate or fucking chance—it doesn't matter which. Her eyes lock with mine, and I see it all there—the chaos, the love, the relentless drive to belong to each other.

Then she moves. Goddamn, does she move. Eleanor rolls her hips, igniting a fire, licking every nerve ending. This isn't a quick fuck, a release of pent-up aggression. No, this is something else entirely. This is Eleanor claiming me just as much as I'm claiming her.

"Fuck Matteo, this is it!" Her voice fractures, raw with the crest of her climax. And it's enough to nearly undo me, to make me come undone at the seams, because this is what it means to be truly alive—to feel every goddamn thing with no holds barred.

In the underbelly of Australia's criminal world, where power and control are the currency we trade in, this—right here, right now—is the only thing I'll ever bow down to. Her, Eleanor, my beginning and my end.

Her grip on me is like a vice—tight and unyielding. Eleanor's climax wrings every last drop from me, and I swear there's nothing holier than this, right here in the dark where only sinners tread. "Prendilo tutto, piccola, ogni cosa che ho è tua, tutto ti appartiene," the words rumble from deep within my chest, half-growl, half-plea, as I pour myself into her. "Take it all, baby, everything I have, it all belongs to you."

Pulse slowing, breath evening out, we're just two souls stripped bare, raw with each other. My arms snake around her, pulling her so damn close our sweat mingles. Her skin against mine is the only truth I know in the chaos of my world. No orders were barked, and she didn't move to clean up. Tonight, I'm not the boss, not the don. I'm just a man holding onto his woman, anchored by the beat of her heart against my chest.

Eleanor's breaths deepen, steady and soft. She's out cold and peaceful in a way that makes me envy her ability to slip away so easily. I sit there, still inside her, feeling my own body betray me as it succumbs to the calm. But there's work to be done, plans to forge in the shadows.

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They're Italian, those bastards who did this to her. It could be my men, or it could be Enzo's. Doesn't fucking matter. Blood will be answered with blood; it's the code we live and die by. Ten years have passed, but time doesn't erase debts and doesn't dull the need for retribution.

I'll find them. If they're breathing, they'll wish they weren't. And if they're dead, I'll spit on their graves. The night wraps around us, a shroud of secrets and silent vows. This is my world of darkness and vengeance—and I am its relentless master.

Chapter Eighteen

Eleanor Wang

I wake to the cold emptiness of the bed and a sticky mess between my thighs. Shit. I didn't wash up last night, lost in the haze of Matteo's arms. The bastard should've stayed. Waking up alone is a cruelty I don't deserve.

The water hits me in the shower, but it's not enough. My romance novels never got this right—the next day's residue. Cum doesn't just rinse off; it turns into a stubborn paste. I scrub with soap until it stings, cursing under my breath. If I get thrush or a UTI from this, someone's gonna pay.

Dressed and half-dry, I glance at the clock. It's nearly 10 fucking am. This isn't me. I'm the girl who battles with the snooze button, not the one who sleeps through alarms. And where the hell is Niko? He's usually on my case by now.

Racing downstairs, I stop short. There's Matteo at the kitchen table, sipping his coffee

like he owns time itself. Niko and Angel huddle over some tech crap, whispering conspiracies into their screens. And Spike—of all things—is perched by the window nursing a teacup with a saucer. Real proper-like. I almost laugh. The world's gone mad, and outside, the sky agrees, heavy with clouds ready to burst.

"Morning," I mutter, still grappling with the disarray before me. Matteo glances up, a predator's smile playing on his lips. Everything about him screams danger, from his inked skin to those tailored clothes that cling to him like sin.

"Sleep well, Princess?" he asks, voice smooth as the silk sheets I've just left.

"Would've been better with the company," I shoot back, eyeing the space beside him. Control. Power. It's all part of this twisted game we play.

He smirks, the king of his concrete jungle, while I stand here, trying to remember if I'm more pissed about the unwashed stickiness or his absence. Maybe both. But then again, this is our dance—one step forward, two steps back into the darkness we call love.

My voice rasps with confusion. "Um, what's going on here? I thought you would have been at work," I say, my gaze fixed on Matteo.

He doesn't miss a beat, his eyes locking onto mine with that manic intensity that both thrills and terrifies. "Princess, every time I leave the house from now on, you will be with me. I'm not leaving here anymore without you by my side." His declaration slams into me like a freight train. "If that means I have to wait every morning till you wake up, then so be it."

I frown, my mind racing to understand his sudden shift. "I'm confused; why do I have to come?" The question hangs between us, thick as the tension.

Matteo leans back in his chair, a king surveying his empire, and his voice is absolute, brooking no argument. "After last night, I realised if I had kept you with me at all times, none of this would have happened, so I'm not leaving you alone from now on." His words are simple, but they cut through the air, sharp as a blade.

"Christ," I mutter under my breath. "Well, I think that might be a little bit impractical, and I don't think it is something that can be established for a long period of time, but hey, I do need to get out of the house before I get cabin fever, so fuck it, why not?" It's half-hearted, the defiance diluted by the reality of his presence, the inevitability of his will.

A chuckle escapes me, edged with self-deprecation. "Lemme me go get changed; I can't be seen wearing sweats and a t-shirt," I say, trying to inject some levity into the charged atmosphere.

Matteo's laughter is a rich, dark sound that fills the room. "Of course, you can't. I cannot imagine you in anything less than a power suit out of the house." It's a challenge wrapped in a compliment, and I rise to it effortlessly.

"Matteo, you think you're whipped now? Just wait till you see me in the power suit," I shoot back, a grin tugging at my lips despite the insanity of it all. There's a dance here, one of danger and desire, and we both know the steps by heart.

His smile widens, and there's pride in his eyes—pride and something fiercer. He sees me not just as a lover but as an equal adversary in this game of shadows and power plays. And, God help me; it turns me on more than it should.

Muscles protesting, I contort into the power suit—a second skin that screams business and bullshit in equal measure. The mirror reflects a woman ready to wage war in boardrooms or back alleys. A quick smear of lipstick and a dash of mascara, and I'm as armed as I'll ever be.

New heels are traitorous bastards, their pinch promising an afternoon of agony. I'll need Band-Aids before I can play Matteo's twisted game of mob queen and consort. My reflection gives a nod—let's do this, it says, even if it means hobbling on blades disguised as stilettos.

I stride back into the kitchen, every step a declaration of my reluctant readiness, but the sight before me is a fucking curveball. Matteo, Mr. Dark-and-Dangerous himself, is down on one knee. His inked hand cradles an open box, its contents glinting with a promise as binding as handcuffs.

"I told you I was going to marry you, Princess. So, I think it's about time to adorn that ring," he smirks, his voice threaded with a possessive lilt that both irks and ignites me.

"Shit!" The word slips out like a bullet from a silenced gun. My facade cracks, surprise etched across my face. "Alright, give it here." My fingers curl in a 'give me, give me' gesture, impatience overruling romance.

His grin splits wider, all shark-like charm and lethal intent. He snatches up my hand. "Hay, at least let me do the honors, Princess," he chides, his laugh a low rumble that resonates through the charged air between us.

The ring—an unyielding band of cool metal—slips onto my finger with an ease that feels like destiny. Or a trap. "Let me guess—you magically knew the right size to buy?" I arch an eyebrow, more in challenge than curiosity.

Matteo taps his nose, still wearing that self-satisfied smirk. "Nope. I put a string around your finger while you were sleeping." It's invasive, intimate, so fucking Matteo.

"It was my idea," Niko chimes in without glancing away from his tech toys. "Matteo

was wondering how to get it right, so I googled. And Google always has the answer."

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"Right, well, okay then." I shift my gaze to the floor, suddenly yearning for normalcy in this madhouse. "Did someone make me a coffee while I was gone? I think today is a coffee day!"

"Nope, we'll grab one on the way," Matteo announces, already plotting the route. "And some food, you're too skinny." His concern is genuine, but it grates like gravel in my gut.

"Mum doesn't eat breakfast, Pa. If you feed her before you give her coffee, you might as well sign your death certificate," Niko mutters, his words an echo of my thoughts.

"Pa? What's this 'Pa' business?" Matteo frowns, the word souring in his mouth.

"You're making me feel like an old man."

Niko shrugs, attention still half on his screens. "You are old, but I'm playing around with names till one feels right."

"Well, 'Pa' doesn't feel right; try another!" Matteo laughs, but there's a flicker of something else there—pride or maybe fear—at the thought of time slipping by, even for a man who deals in death.

Every exchange, a power play, every word loaded. And me? I'm caught in the crossfire, wearing a ring that's as much a shackle as a symbol of love. Welcome to the family, Eleanor. Welcome to the fucking mafia.

"Come on, Princess, let's go," Matteo beckons with a flourish of his arm, the heavy

gold watch on his wrist glinting ominously in the dim light.

"Okay, okay, let's go," I grumbled, pushing past the weight of luxury that clings to the air. I go to Niko, who's lost in a sea of screens. I plant a kiss on top of his head, leaving a lipstick mark like a brand. "Love you, Niko, give Angel hell for me."

"Wash your hair today, too; it smells," I wrinkle my nose at him, playful but serious.

"I washed it yesterday," he shoots back, voice flat.

"Then rewash it. You did it wrong," I retort without missing a beat, sauntering towards Matteo, who holds the front door open like the gatekeeper to our twisted kingdom.

"Drive-through or cafe coffee?" Matteo's question cuts through the morning haze. He looks every bit the mafia kingpin—dark suit, darker eyes, and an aura of danger that wraps around him like a second skin.

"Starbucks. They've got Pumpkin Spice Lattes now, and they're bloody addictive," I reply, feeling the pull of that sweet caffeine already.

"Ask, and you shall receive," he quips, and I can't help but smirk at the eagerness in his tone. He opens the car door for me, and the gesture ignites a familiar heat within me.

"Keep this shit up, and I'll end up sucking your dick to say thank you," I whisper, half-threat, half-promise. His laugh is a low rumble as I slide into the leather seat, legs crossed, ready to conquer the world—or at least endure another day.

Matteo rounds the car with a predator's grace, slipping behind the wheel. Then Spike appears out of nowhere, sliding into the backseat with the silence of a ghost. Where

the fuck does that ninja come from?

"Spike?" I call out, twisting to face him. "Wanna teach me how to be stealthy like you?"

"Nope," he replies, voice dripping sarcasm, the 'p' popping sharply.

"Why not?" I frown, feigning offence.

"Matteo was the one who taught me. So, he can teach you," Spike says, nodding at the man in question.

"Wait, what? Really?" I twist in my seat, giving Matteo a skeptical glance. The idea that he's the maestro of stealth is laughable. "I feel like Spike is much stealthier than you, but..." I trail off, catching the glint of amusement in Matteo's dark eyes.

He chuckles, a deep sound that vibrates through the car. "Well, thanks, Princess. Is this your way of saying I need to update my skills?" His laughter softens the edges of the threat he always seems to carry with him.

"You asked me to stop being so quiet, but now I'm not stealthy enough 'cause you can hear me?" He raises an eyebrow, and I almost regret poking fun at his pride. "When I'm purposely making noise, so you know I'm coming?"

My lips curl into a pout. "Well, when you put it that way..."

"Will you teach me?" I ask, my words laced with a mix of genuine curiosity and the desire to appease his ego.

"Princess, as I said before," Matteo grins, a wicked spark lighting up his gaze, "ask, and you shall receive." He extends the promise like a king granting favors, and damn

if it doesn't make me feel like taking advantage of every royal decree.

"Thank you," I say, smiling back, though the thought of learning anything from Matteo carries a thrill laced with danger. The man is a walking contradiction—charming yet lethal, civilized yet savage.

Fifty minutes later, we're pulling into the underground parking of a skyscraper that scrapes the dreary Sydney skyline. My hand wraps around the super-sized pumpkin spiced latte, the sweet spice in stark contrast to the grit and steel of our surroundings. We exit the car and step into the lift, its mirrored walls reflecting the power couple of the underworld: him in his tailored suit and me, dressed to kill in more ways than one.

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The lift surges upward, and I lean back against the cool metal wall, sipping my latte. Matteo stands close, exuding control and commanding space even in this confined box, hurtling us towards the twentieth floor. There's a tension between us, a silent acknowledgment of the ring on my finger, the symbol of ownership and protection in our twisted world.

"Give me that coffee," Matteo demands, his voice a low rumble in the confines of the lift. I clutch the paper cup closer to my chest, a wicked grin tugging at my lips. "Nope," I retort, the 'p' popping with playful defiance.

He swivels towards me, dark brows raised in challenge, full lips curving into a pout that would have lesser women swooning. It's almost comical to see the underworld's feared boss reduced to this child-like plea. His reflection bounces off the mirrored walls, doubling my view of his ridiculous yet adorable expression. "Please?" he implores, and damn it all, he looks cute right now.

"Fuck," I mutter, unable to resist, and hand him the cup. Matteo takes a hearty gulp, then immediately recoils as if struck. "What the ever-loving fuck is that?" Disgust paints his rugged features, a stark contrast to the smooth caramel of his skin.

"Pumpkin Spice Latte with two sugars," I declare, snatching back my precious cargo and taking a defiant sip. The warmth of the spiced drink slides down my throat, a little bit of heaven amidst the tumult of our lives.

Matteo shakes his head, still grimacing. "No, I know what you ordered, but that is gross." He waves a dismissive hand as if banishing the taste from his palate. "It smelt amazing from over here, but that tastes horrible."

"Good," I crow triumphantly. "Means I don't have to share it with you ever!" My tongue sticks out in mock taunt as I spin on my heel, exiting the lift into the grandeur of Ricci headquarters. The space stretches before us, open-plan and opulent, all white and glass-like some modern-day palace.

The receptionist's desk looms ahead, massive and foreboding. Three girls crew the station, their fingers flying over keyboards, headsets in place like they're ready for battle rather than simple phone calls. They don't need to glance up to know who's entered their domain. "Good morning, Mr Ricci," their voices chime together, a well-rehearsed choir of subservience. Then, just like that, they're back to their screens, the momentary acknowledgment of their boss's presence gone as quickly as it arrived.

I bite the inside of my cheek, laughter threatening to burst free at the absurdity of it all. Spike, ever the instigator, nudges me with an elbow, leaning in close. "Good morning, Angels," he mimics, a devilish glint in his eye. He shifts to my other ear, barely containing his mirth. "Good morning, Charlie." That does it; giggles erupt from me, uncontrollable and infectious.

Matteo throws a questioning look over his shoulder, eyes narrowed in suspicion and amusement. "What are you two laughing about?"

"Nothing!" I shoot back, too quick, too breathless with laughter. Spike's chuckle rumbles through the air, a clear indication he's not done stirring shit.

With a shake of his head but a smirk playing on his lips, Matteo strides ahead, commanding his territory with the ease of a predator ruling its kingdom. I trail after him, still sipping on my latte, the bitter taste of pumpkin spice mingling with the sweet victory of having one over on Matteo Ricci, if only for a fleeting moment.

The door groans on its hinges, a low, ominous sound that heralds our entry into the heart of Matteo Ricci's dominion. Dark mahogany bookshelves loom like sentinels

against stark white walls, and the scent of leather and power hangs heavy in the air. But it's the giant photograph behind his desk that sucks the breath from my lungs.

It's us—frozen in grayscale, a moment trapped in time. The Wollongong lighthouse stands stoic in the background, oblivious to the reckless joy of two souls defiantly dancing in the rain. I can almost feel the cold droplets on my skin, hear the squelch of wet grass beneath my feet, and taste the saltytang of ocean spray mixed with the soggy fish and chips batter.

"Fuck," I whisper, the memory sharp as a blade.

"What have I gotten myself into?" Matteo's voice is a soft mutter, barely audible. Yet, it cuts through the silence, dragging me back to the present, where only ghosts of the past remain.

A sudden splash jolts me, water stinging my face. Spike, the bastard, flicks the last remnants from his fingers at me, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Thought you might want the full experience," he chortles, eyes alight with mischief and malice.

"What the fuck was that for, dickhead?" I snarl, fury flaring hot and quick. My words are venom, but they can't touch Spike's amusement.

"Can you believe this cunt?" I appeal to Matteo, who's trying—and failing—to mask his laughter behind a hand that's supposed to be stern.

"Both of you," I growl, seizing control of the moment, "are complete dickheads."

I stake my claim on Matteo's chair, sinking into the supple leather before he can take his rightful place. It's bold, asserting dominance in a world ruled by men like him. But there's a fire within me, a blaze fueled by old photographs and unwanted nostalgia—a desire to reclaim what was once mine, even if it's just the throne of a

kingpin for a fleeting second.

"Princess in the boss's seat," I say, a smirk curling my lips. "Feels fucking right."

"Princess, what are you doing?" Matteo's voice slices through the air, a mix of bemusement and that ever-present command he weaves into every syllable.

I swivel in his leather and power chair and flick my gaze up to him. "Oh, Matteo, sorry I didn't see you there," I say with a grin sharp as a shiv, gesturing to the seat across from me. "Please, take a seat. I'm glad you can join me."

He studies me for a heartbeat, those dark eyes trying to read the play before strolling over to sit where I dictate. "Why, thank you," he says, the edges of his mouth twitching in a smirk that matches my own.

"Seeing as you're in my seat today," Matteo starts, settling into the role reversal with an ease that's unsettling. Would you mind starting up my computer and pulling up the calendar so I know what is planned?"

"Sure." The word rolls off my tongue like a loaded dice as I lean forward, fingers dancing across the keyboard. "What's the password?" This is new territory; his inner sanctum is permanently locked away.

Matteo doesn't hesitate, doesn't even blink. "Wicket," he throws down, all cards face-up on the table.

I type it in; my fingers pause, waiting for him to yank back control, but nothing comes. The screen blinks to life, and there it is, another punch to the gut—us, immortalized in ink and pixels.

The wallpaper is a ghost of a different time, a snapshot of Matteo etching his mark

onto my skin in that tattoo shop where it all began. Passion and pain intertwined, just like us. The image hasn't seen the light of day in ten years, locked away like all the other memories I left behind when I bolted.

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Every pixel screams betrayal and abandonment. Yet here he sits, giving me the keys to the past, no hesitation, no locks. It's a game of power and possession, and he's playing his hand close to his chest. But the look in his eyes tells me he's not bluffing—he's all in, betting everything on this twisted reunion.

The cursor blinks on the screen, a silent challenge. "Matteo, what happened to the stuff in my apartment?" My voice doesn't waver, but hell, my insides are a goddamn rollercoaster.

He shifts in his seat; those piercing blue eyes don't miss a beat. "It's in storage," he says, voice as soft as I've ever heard. "Packed it all up after you vanished. Thought I'd find a clue to where you were." His words hang heavy, tinged with a hope long lost.

"Did you want me to have it brought to the house?" Matteo's question snaps me out of the silence.

"Fuck yes," I breathe out, smirking at the thought of sifting through a past life. "I wanna see what ghosts we dig up."

"Matteo..." I lean into his name, tasting its power over him. He tilts his head, that half-grin playing on his lips like a devil's promise. "You still got that tattoo kit?"

"Always," he replies, pride swelling in his chest.

"Then ink me again," I demand, eyes locked on the laptop before they drag back to his. "M with a crown, ring finger."

Spike chortles from the doorway, "That's my cue." He knows when the storm's rolling in.

"Ask, and you shall receive," Matteo murmurs, clearly moved by the request. Fucking sentimentality might just be the death of him.

"Thank you," I whisper, more to the ghosts in the machine than to the man beside me. There's a weight in those two words, a history drenched in blood and love.

"Thank you for what, Princess?" Matteo's voice rumbles as he stands and prowls toward me like a panther eyeing its prey. The distance between us shrinks with each deliberate step he takes, his presence engulfing the room in a tangible aura of power.

"Thank you for not giving up on us," I start, my voice barely above a whisper while defiance courses through my veins, "and for not falling out of love with me." My chest tightens, remembering the miles and years that stretched between us, a chasm filled with regrets and what-ifs. I ran to escape the darkness, only to find it etched deeper within me, away from him.

Matteo's hand, rough from fights and caresses alike, cups my chin firmly, coercing my gaze upward to meet his stormy eyes. There's an ocean in them, deep and raging with emotions unspoken. "I know I ran away and didn't want to be found. But the whole time I was gone, I always felt like I was missing a piece of myself, and since I've been back, I feel like I've found it again."

"Princess," he growls, his thumb tracing my jawline with possessive intent, "you're mine. Told you that day on your doorstep, I had come to claim what is mine." His words are a brand against my skin, searing and undeniable. "And I did. Nothing has changed since that day."

With an ease born of a life commanding others, Matteo leans over me, his shadow

casting a dark blanket over my seated form. He reaches out and presses a button on the intercom, his other hand never leaving its claim on my face.

"Becky," he barks into the device, and a sultry voice slithers through the speaker like a snake in tall grass.

"What can I do for you, Mr Ricci?" she purrs, her tone dripping with more than a hint of longing.

"Hold all my calls and appointments till I say otherwise. Do not disturb me in my office," his command slices through the air, severing any hope she might have harbored.

"Of course, Mr Ricci," comes the honeyed reply, soaked with disappointment.

"Desperation oozes from that one!" I mutter under my breath, unable to hold back a snarl. The thought of her pining after him, after everything we've been through, ignites a fire in my belly.

"Princess," Matteo says, his voice low and dangerous, turning back to face me fully. "She can pine all she wants." His eyes lock onto mine, fierce and feral. "I've never touched my employees, and I never will." A promise or a threat, it's hard to tell with him. But Matteo's gaze doesn't waver, and in that moment, I believe him.

"Plus," he murmurs, his lips curling into a sardonic smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, "they are about to hear why." His thumb brushes over my lower lip, a possessive and achingly tender touch. It's a stark contrast to the ruthless man who commands respect and fear in equal measure—a contradiction that defines Matteo Ricci's complexity.

The silence stretches, charged with unspoken words and memories that cling to us

like shadows. At this moment, within these four walls, we're not just a mafia boss and his runaway love. We're two halves of a twisted whole, bound by a past that refuses to let go.

As he leans closer, his breath hot against my skin, I realize that Matteo's claim on me is unwavering no matter how dark or dangerous our world gets. It's a tether that keeps me grounded in the chaos, a constant reminder that he loves me fiercely in his twisted way.

"Never doubted you," I whisper, my voice barely audible. But he hears it; I know he does because there's a softening in his eyes, a rare glimpse of the man behind the monster.

"Good," he rasps, his thumb leaving my lip to trace the line of my jaw. "Because, Princess, you're about to be reminded exactly who you belong to."

"Stand up," Matteo's voice slices through the stillness of his office, a command that brooks no argument. I rise to my feet, my heart hammering in my chest. There's something about the way he commands me, an edge of danger and a promise of pleasure, that makes my body respond without hesitation.

"Sit on the desk." He doesn't wait for me to move; his hand clears the mahogany surface with a swift, careless swipe. Laptops, papers, and expensive pens crashed to the floor in chaos. His world, his rules. And I—God help me—I revel in it. Even momentarily, the thrill of being the center of this powerful man's universe sends a shiver down my spine.

I perch on the edge, the excellent wood pressing against the backs of my thighs. The room feels charged, the heavy silence punctuated by our breathing. Outside, the city murmurs, a distant soundtrack to our tension.

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"Spread those legs, and let me look at what is mine." His growl reverberates deep in my core, and I obey, spreading myself open for his hungry gaze. I've left myself bare beneath the skirt, a little secret, a tease just for him. A smirk curls his lips as he drops to his knees, his eyes darkening with lust and possession. "Fuck me, I forgot you like to tease."

The first lick is a streak of fire from my ass to my clit, igniting every nerve ending. My fingers find his hair, gripping tight as a lifeline as a moan tears from my throat. "I wanna hear you scream," he breathes against my wetness, "show everyone who you belong to."

I can only nod, dumbstruck, as he devours me with a voraciousness that leaves no room for doubt. Matteo plays my body like his personal instrument, his fingers and tongue a symphony of sin. Each stroke sends waves crashing through me, building higher and higher until I'm teetering on the edge of oblivion.

The pressure of his pinky circling my back entrance adds another layer to the sensation, a delicious taboo that has me writhing under his touch. Pleasure coils tight, a serpent ready to strike, and I'm lost in the dark depths of his world, where only power and raw desire reign.

"Fuck yes," I gasp out, and Matteo's little finger breaches me again, a forbidden thrill that has my body singing. But then, cruelly, he withdraws, leaving an aching void where his touch once scorched. My head lifts in protest, eyes locking onto his smoldering gaze, a whimper bubbling from my lips.

"Don't worry, I'm not done with you yet." His words are a dark promise as his hand

finds my breasts, squeezing them until pleasure borders on pain. I'm aching for release, but he's fixated on the prize beneath my skirt. With a swift yank, my skirt bunches around my waist, my bare ass now perched on the cold edge of his desk.

His tongue is merciless, lapping at me with a hunger that borders on savage. "Please, Matteo," spills from me, though I can't articulate the craving that gnaws at my core. He doesn't need my words. His fingers plunge back into me, slick with his saliva, while that devious pinky pushes deeper into my rear, stretching me to the limits of ecstasy.

"Fuck, that feels good," I groan, the coarse words barely recognizable as my own. Matteo's onslaught is relentless—fingers pumping, tongue flicking—and when another finger joins the first, invading that most private place, it's the spark to my powder keg.

I reach up, mauling at my breasts as he pinches my clit between his teeth. It's too much. I shatter, orgasm ripping through me like a hurricane, my cum gushing forth in a torrential release. Matteo's mouth clamps over me, drinking down my essence with a voraciousness that mirrors the parched earth's welcoming rain.

As my world steadies from its cataclysmic quake, Matteo rises above me, power emanating from him like heat from the sun. One hand grips my face, prying my mouth open before dripping my release back onto my tongue. Then his lips crash against mine, our tastes melding in a depraved kiss that brands me to my soul.

"God, Baby, that was freakin' amazing," he breathes against my lips once we part, his voice rough like gravel, laced with a madness unique to him.

He spins me like I'm nothing but a doll, an object in his powerful hands. The cool wood of the desk presses into my stomach as I'm bent over it, ass presented to him like an offering. "Princess, I'm gonna fuck your ass now, and you're gonna cum all

over me and my desk so I can smell you in here for days," Matteo growls, his voice a dark promise that sends shivers down my spine.

His firm grip aligns him with my dripping cunt, and he thrusts inside, claiming me with a possessive urgency that leaves no room for doubt—I am his. He uses me to coat his cock with my slickness before pulling out, leaving a void that's immediately filled with anticipation.

"Fuck me, please," spills from my lips just as he pushes into my ass, stretching, filling me completely. I push back against him, embracing the delicious burn, "Oh God, Matteo."

"That's it, push back onto me like the whore I know you are," he snarls, sinking deeper until there's no more of him left to take. His hands, those instruments of both pleasure and pain, grab my hips, branding me with their heat.

The room is thick with the scent of sex; every breath is laced with lust. Matteo sets a brutal rhythm, each thrust a stroke of mastery. My moans crescendo with the sound of flesh slapping against flesh. I want them to hear—the whole goddamn office—his dominance over me, the echo of our primal dance.

"Harder," I beg, desperate, and Matteo complies. He fucks me with a ferocity that borders on violence, and it's glorious. Power reverberates through his frame and into mine. "You like that, like feeling my dick in your ass? Scream so they can all hear you out here, claiming your man."

I'm teetering on the edge, so fucking close. His words are the final nudge, and I detonate, pleasure obliterating everything else. I gush, a wet, filthy testament to the intensity between us. It coats my thighs, drips onto Matteo's floor, marking his territory in the most carnal way possible.

"Fuck, yes!" I cry out, not caring who hears or what they think. This is our world, our rules. We are the king and queen, and I want everyone to know it. My body shudders with aftershocks, and I revel in the thought of his office reeking of our sin. I'm already fantasizing about grinding my release into the carpet, a permanent reminder of our liaison.

"Good girl," Matteo grunts behind me, satisfaction evident in his strained voice.

I slam back against Matteo, taking him deep, feeling him pulse. The room's spinning, but I anchor myself on the solid heat of him buried in me. "Shit Princess, that's it," he growls, voice strained—a raw sound that signifies the end. His grip on my hips is bruising, sure to leave a mark. He empties into me with a guttural groan, and his body shudders with release.

"God, Baby, that was freakin' amazing," he pants as he collapses onto my sweat-drenched back, the weight of him pressing me into the desk. His breath is hot on my neck, his heart hammering against my spine.

The world outside our lust-fueled bubble intrudes with the sharp rap of knuckles on wood. "Boss, Enzo just arrived at the desk downstairs," Spike's voice cuts through the post-orgasmic haze. Urgent, laced with the unspoken tension of the streets.

"Motherfucker." The curse slides from Matteo's lips, a dark promise all its own. He withdraws, leaving a hollow ache where he'd just been. "Okay, give me five."

I straighten up, feeling his cum start to trickle down my thigh. "Princess, there is a bathroom behind that door just there, go clean up. You're about to meet the man who sits in the second seat."

I catch the grimace that twists his lips, the warning clear in the tight set of his jaw. Enzo. Lunatic doesn't begin to cover it. I've heard stories—blood-soaked tales

whispered with reverence and fear. But I'm no stranger to monsters; after all, I'm with one right now.

"Got it," I reply, my voice steady despite the tremors still coursing through my legs. Matteo holds my gaze for a moment longer, his eyes smoldering coals in the dim light, then nods sharply. He's slipping back into his role—the Don, the man who commands respect through terror.

I slide off the desk, my movements languid and unsteady, and make my way to the bathroom. Matteo watches me go, the intensity in his gaze a tangible force. I'm his queen in this chess game of power, and by God, I'll wear that crown—even if it's lined with thorns.

I stride into the bathroom, a mix of Matteo's heat and mine seeping from me. I've got five minutes to go from debauched to decent. No small feat.

The mirror shows a flushed face, eyes still dark with lust, hair a mess of tangles. Fuck, I look thoroughly used. A smirk tugs at my lips. I do love the afterglow of sin.

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Cold water from the tap, I splash it on my face, scrubbing away the sheen of sex. Water runs in rivulets down my arms, mingling with ink—a story etched onto my skin for all to see.

"Get it together, Eleanor," I mutter to my reflection, a pep talk as I hike up my skirt and sit on the toilet. The sensation is crude as I push out Matteo's essence, a stark reminder of his claim. He marks territory like a goddamn beast.

Hands wash again, harsh and quick. Can't have traces of him when shaking hands with the devil's right-hand man. I pat dry, fix my hair, apply lipstick like armor. Red, the color of warning signs and blood oaths.

There's no room for weakness in this game. Matteo's got his kinks; I've got mine. Power plays are my aphrodisiac, and I'm about to walk into a viper's nest of them.

"Mobster politics 101," I scoff at the irony, checking myself once more. Looking good as new—or as close to it as one can get after being royally fucked on a mafia boss's desk.

Chapter Nineteen

Matteo Ricci

Why the fuck is Enzo even here? We usually have a system. A civilised fucking process of appointments or at least a goddamn courtesy call—like normal people. But no, this cunt has to just pop up unannounced, like a relentless weed sprouting between the cracks in the pavement, useless and bloody annoying.

I stride into the bathroom on Eleanor's heels, turning on the cold tap. Water splashes over my skin as I wash off remnants of our earlier escapades, feeling a smug sense of satisfaction when I glance down and notice how wet my pants are. "Looks like you've marked me good, Princess," I say, holding out my foot to show her the evidence.

"Are you complaining?" she shoots back with that fiery tone that drives me wild.

"Complaining? Hell no." I give her one of those looks that says I'm thinking about a whole lot more than what meets the eye. "Might have you lick it off my shoes later," I deadpan. I'm only half-joking.

Her eyes narrow in that challenging way I can't resist. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, but I would, Princess. You know it," I retort, soaking a hand towel and attacking the stains on my pants. They'll be a daily reminder of what we did and how she tastes. "And let's get one thing straight—if you think teasing me by going commando isn't gonna end in punishment, then you don't know me very well."

I watch her reflection in the mirror while she straightens her skirt, fixes her hair, and readies herself for whatever fucked-up day awaits us. With a smile that could light up the darkest alley in Sydney, she turns and saunters toward me. "If multiple orgasms are punishment, Matteo, I can guarantee I'll never wear undies again."

She leans up, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss that sends a signal straight to my dick. It twitches in response, already eager for the next round with her. This woman, this dangerous, intoxicating vixen, has me wrapped around her little finger—and I'm twisted enough to love every minute of it.

"Be careful what you wish for, Eleanor," I growl, my hand landing a firm slap on her ass as she struts out the bathroom door. She throws me a look over her shoulder, that mix of defiance and desire in her eyes. I can't help but grin at her bravado.

"Come here." I jerk my head towards my seat, pulling it around so we can both park our asses behind my desk. She slides into it, her skirt hitching up just enough to keep my mind racing. I couldn't care less about how absurd we might look, side by side like some twisted power couple. I flick open my laptop, and Spider Solitaire pops up. "Here, Princess. Pretend you're doing something productive while I deal with Enzo Morelli."

Her brows knot in confusion, cute as hell, but she nods. "Sure, no worries, Matteo."

That's when a knock rattles the door, Spike's voice slipping through. "Boss, Enzo is in the waiting area."

"Cunt," I mutter under my breath before calling out louder, "It's alright, Spike, come in."

"Want me to bring him in, Boss?" Spike's burly frame fills the doorway, his eyes flicking between me and Eleanor.

"Yeah, mate, drag his ass in here." I swivel towards Eleanor, locking eyes with her. "You—just sit tight and sort through this shit, yeah? And only speak when spoken to. Got it?"

Her lips twist into a sly smirk, and fuck me if it doesn't light a spark in my veins. "When spoken to, huh?" she retorts, playful yet piercing.

I lean in close, my voice dropping to a warning growl. "I'm serious, Princess. You hate taking orders, I know, but today's not the day to push me." Her expression hardens, that bitchy streak flaring up.

"Okay, Matteo." Her tone is flat and resigned, but her eyes are still throwing daggers as she returns to the screen.

"Good girl," I whisper, but it's more for me than for her. Because every fiber in me knows that Eleanor Wang is anything but tame, and as I wait for Enzo to slither into my office, I can't shake the feeling that today is gonna be one hell of a ride.

My fingers find Eleanor's chin, tilting her face up to mine; those defiant eyes always spark fires I'm too eager to stoke. "Hey, Firecracker, I love you."

"I love you too, Cocksucker." Her words are honey-laced with venom, which soothes and burns.

The moment shatters with Enzo's braying laughter as he barges into my office like he owns the fucking place. "Nice to see my information paid off, and you got Eleanor back," he jeers, nodding towards her as if she's some stray mutt I've retrieved from the streets.

"Cheers for that," I snap back, slipping on the mobster mask like a second skin. The world's split into two—the chaos of my heart and the cold command of the throne I sit upon.

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Enzo's here uninvited; again, his disregard for protocols grates my last nerve. "What do you need, Enzo? I'm clocked full today, but appointments are below you, aren't they?" My arms cross over my chest, a barrier against the bullshit I know he's about to spew.

"We all have a business to run, Matteo," he chuckles, dismissing my sarcasm. "But I came to chat about the girls I want to bring through the city."

"Christ, we're circling this drain again?" I drill him with a glare sharp enough to slice through his smug grin. "We talked. I said no. What part didn't sink in?"

"Sure, this is a conversation to have in front of your lady," he sneers, eyeing Eleanor, who remains oblivious, her fingers dancing across the laptop keys.

"Eleanor's more than you'll ever understand," I spit back, pride swelling as I speak of her new role. "She's my assistant now. She stays."

"Fine by me," he shrugs, yet there's a glint in his eye that I don't trust. "Anyways, I wanna move women through the cross, hold auctions at the velvet underground."

"Jesus, Enzo, you deaf or just dumb?" I growl. "Not happening. Gallos can deal with that crap. We've got our hands full with the clubs. No need to add trafficking to the mix."

The irritation bubbles, a caustic mix of disdain and anger. I won't let this city become a cesspit for his twisted fantasies—not under my watch.

Enzo leans in, his voice laced with greed and the sharp tang of desperation. "I know you think that way, Matteo, but we can get up to 500K per piece, and we only need to hold one to two auctions a year and walk away with millions! I'm fucking over peddling drugs and pussy," he spits out, his words seething with the bitterness of a man tired of playing small-time.

"Enzo, what happens to the girls who visit your side of town? I'm not stupid." My voice is steady, but my insides churn with disgust. The girls all talk. They whisper horror tales that cling to our streets' shadows like filthy cobwebs. "I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. So no, no way am I going to vote yes on pushing unwilling girls into this town."

There's a pause, a moment where Enzo's eyes narrow and his lips curl into a sneer. "We shall see about that," he quips, flicking his wrist as if calling a dog to heel. "Tino!" The name cuts through the air and a bald brute parts from the group of goons outside my office door. He's another one of Enzo's lapdogs, eager to please for scraps from the master's table.

Eleanor tenses beside me, her gaze lifting from the laptop screen just as Tino marches in to hand Enzo a yellow envelope. I catch the flicker of fear in her eyes, the slight tremble of her hands she's trying to hide.

"Take a look at these and get back to me soon, Fratello," Enzo says with that snake-like charm, slipping out the door as smoothly as he came in, leaving behind a silence that screams danger.

"Fuckin' cunt," I spit out the words like venom as my eyes dart to Eleanor. She's sheet-white, her usual fire snuffed out by something cold and shadowy lurking behind those wide eyes. "It's okay, Princess. That complete fuck tard ain't gonna get a yes outta me for pushing girls through."

"He isn't the issue," she whispers, so faint I barely catch it.

"Princess, what's wrong?" The question rips from my throat, rough with concern. I've seen her fierce, I've seen her cutthroat, but this ghostly pallor? It's new, it's alarming.

"Who uses the office two doors down?" Her voice is a thread, almost lost in the heavy silence surrounding us.

"Um, no one at the moment; it's empty. Think the girls have turned it into a lunch room or some shit," I say, confusion gnawing at my gut.

"Why?"

"One of the three men just walked out of the room." Her words are a sucker punch, jolting me to my feet.

"What?!" My heart's hammering, blood roaring in my ears. I yank my gun from its place at the small of my back. "Stay inside my office, Eleanor. Lock the door, and don't open it for anyone but me."

I barrel down the hallway, fury and fear a toxic mix pumping through my veins. Spike's there, his face all sharp angles and shadows as he comes back from playing doorman to that slimy fuck Enzo.

"What's up, Boss?" He's instantly alert, and a knife appears in his hand like a deadly magic trick.

"Eleanor saw one of the three guys slip out of office three." There is no need to explain further; Spike's been on the same page since dawn when I confided in him and Angel.

"Shit," is all he says before he moves, lightning-fast, mobile clutched to his ear to rope Angel into this mess.

I backtrack, my steps echoing too loud in the corridor. Office three gapes open, barren and mocking me with its emptiness. Nothing. No hint, no clue, no goddamn anything.

Stacy's just a blur of colors and shapes as I stride up to the front desk, the marble counter cold and solid under my palms. "Can anyone tell me why office number three is empty and what it is currently being used for? And who was last in it—they walked out of it about ten minutes ago?" My voice is like gravel, and my eyes bore into them, demanding answers.

"We asked if we could turn it into a lunch room for just the girls, remember?" Becky doesn't look up from her screen, fingers still dancing over the keys.

"Boss, we asked you about it last week," Lisa chimes in, swiveling in her chair with that innocent look plastered on her face.

"Okay, but why is it empty then?" My patience is wearing thinner than the blade I keep in my boot.

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"The furniture got moved to office four for Peter touse," Stacy cuts in, pulling up something on her screen. She squints at the monitor. "And the man who went down there was... Mr. Venchetti, Toni Venchetti." She's reading off the name like it means shit to me.

"He's a contractor we hired for the lunch room fit-out." Her voice trails off as she scribbles on a pink Post-it.

"Contact details for Mr. Venchetti?" I snap, not in the mood for this circling-around bullshit.

"Right here, Boss." She hands over the paper, her hand shaking slightly.

"Thank you, girls." I snatch the note, already plotting my next move. "I'd appreciate it if you'd hold off any more renovations for the room until I say so," I say, my tone leaving no room for arguments as I back away.

"Got it, Boss," Becky's husky reply hits my ears and grates on every nerve. I spin on my heel. I can't let her disrespect slide, but not now.

"Oh, and girls," I lock eyes with each one, saving Becky for last, "Ms. Wang will be joining us as my assistant. She'll also join me as my wife, so I expect you to show her the respect she deserves." The words are like bullets, warning shots fired across their neatly arranged desk space.

"Congratulations, Boss!" Lisa's enthusiasm bounces off the walls.

"Congrats, Boss," Stacy echoes, a genuine smile touching her lips.

Becky, though, has a different story. She glares daggers at me before turning back to her computer, acting like I dropped a fucking bomb instead of good news. That glare seals her fate in my mind, but the execution order? That's Eleanor's call. And something tells me Becky won't last long under Eleanor's reign.

Walking down the hall to my office, I rap my knuckles against the heavy oak, a rhythmic thud that cuts through the silence like a warning shot. I growl, my voice low and steady, "It's me opening up."

The door swings open, and there she is—Eleanor, my Eleanor—her arm outstretched, a sleek pistol aimed straight between my eyes. Every muscle in my body tenses, ready for anything. But it's not fear that grips me—it's something primal, something fierce.

"Shit, sorry, I'm a bit jumpy," she says, her voice laced with steel and silk, as deadly as the gun she wields. Her finger slides off the trigger, safety clicking into place. She steps back, retreating to my world of shadows and secrets. My gaze follows her every move, like a predator locked on its prey.

"Princess," I begin, voice rough as gravel, my hand casually adjusting the growing bulge at my front, "as much as that image made my dick so hard it's going to bust out of my pants like the Hulk does to his clothes, I wanna know where you got the gun from?"

"Bottom draw," she tosses back without missing a beat, pointing to the desk that's seen more than its share of blood and bargaining.

I arch an eyebrow, part amusement, part challenge. "How did you know I had one there?" The question hangs in the air, testing her knowledge of my darkest corners.

“You always kept a second in the bottom drawer of everything, and it’s safe to say the habit has kept up,” she replies, her eyes rolling like thunderclouds, stormy and unpredictable.

"Nice to see you pay attention," I snort, a laugh erupting from deep within my chest. It's a sound as dark as the ink that marks my skin, a testament to a life carved out in the criminal underbelly of this godforsaken city.

"Yes, I haven't touched one since I left Sydney, but it's like riding a bike." Eleanor's voice is edged with a hardness that mirrors the steel of the gun she's just set aside—a reminder of the life she left behind and the one she's stepped back into.

She stands in my office, a queen in a den of thieves, a beacon of light in the darkness of our world. And as I watch her now, with the taste of danger still lingering in the air, I know she belongs nowhere else but right here—with me.

“To which I’m glad,” I growl, my arm snaking around her delicate neck, pulling her taut body flush against mine. The gun, still warm from her grip, slides easily from her hand to the desk with a clatter that echoes in the charged silence. My free hand finds the nape of her neck, fingers entwining in her dark hair as I tilt her head up, demanding her gaze meet mine.

Eleanor's eyes, golden and fathom deep, lock onto mine, and in that instant, we're the only two people in this fucked-up world. I press my lips to hers, soft, deliberate kisses contrasting our lives' hard lines. Every brush of my mouth against hers is a promise laced with danger and desire in equal measure.

"Are you okay, Princess?" My words are barely a whisper, spoken in her mouth's warmth. Her breath mingles with mine, a silent testament to the chaos that follows us like a shadow.

Her lips part, a silent gasp inviting me deeper, even as she answers, "Yes, I am now." Her voice is a velvet caress wrapping around my soul. She melts against me, her resolve dissolving like smoke in the night.

Chapter Twenty

Eleanor Wang

I slide the deadbolt into place, a metallic click whispering false promises of safety. It's laughable, really—how I've come to triple-check the locks on doors that are already wrapped in a suffocating embrace of security. My fingers trace the cold steel, a shiver snaking up my spine. The city of Sydney, once a playground of sun-soaked memories, now feels like a concrete trap set by ghosts from a life I wish I could forget.

"Everything alright, Princess?" Matteo's voice cuts through the silence, a low rumble carrying the weight of his world—a world I'm now tethered to.

I turn, forcing a smile. "Perfect," I lie, my voice steady but my heart a goddamn traitor, thundering against my ribcage. He doesn't need to know that the sight of his guards patrolling like silent sentinels does nothing but scream danger at me in deafening volumes. I can almost taste the tension in the air, thick and bitter as burnt coffee.

"Good." His eyes linger, an unspoken question, but he lets it go for now.

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It's been just over a week since Toni Venchetti vanished into whatever hole Matteo's men crawl into when shit's about to hit the fan. Since then, Matteo's shadow looms larger, his presence a constant reminder that we're perched on the edge of something dark and inevitable.

"Enzo hasn't been around," I point out casually, watching as Matteo's jaw clenches, a tell so subtle only someone who's stared into the abyss with him would notice.

"He's busy," Matteo replies, his tone clipped. "No more surprise visits."

I nod, the upcoming four-seat gathering a ticking time bomb. Every three months, they shuffle cities, hosting a game of Russian roulette disguised as a board meeting. This time, Sydney is the stage, and I'm the unwilling audience to go to a show for which I never bought tickets.

"Thankfully," I say dryly, leaning back against the door. I don't have to see outside to know that the guards are there, their sharp eyes scanning for threats invisible to me but all too real to them.

Matteo steps closer, his hand brushing mine, sending a jolt up my arm. "You're safe here, Eleanor. With me." His voice is velvet wrapped around steel, comforting yet chilling.

"Safe," I echo, tasting the irony. Safe in a gilded cage is still caged. Since spilling my guts to him, since admitting the fear that gnaws at my insides, the guard detail has doubled. Because that's what Matteo does—he controls, protects, and possesses. And I, whether I like it or not, am his to protect.

"London was different," I admit, remembering the deceptive peace of locked doors without the looming threat of retribution lurking in the shadows. "I didn't feel the walls closing in."

Matteo's gaze hardens, the darkness behind his eyes swirling like storm clouds ready to burst. "London wasn't home. This is where you belong, Eleanor, with me."

And I can't argue with that because, despite the dread that clings to me like a second skin, there's no place I'd rather be than here, caught in the eye of the storm that is Matteo Ricci. Here, every heartbeat is a drumbeat of power and control, where love and madness dance a razor's edge waltz.

"Home," I whisper, and I let myself believe it for a moment. But even as the word lingers between us, I feel it—the calm before the storm—and somewhere beneath the layers of muscle and menace, Matteo feels it, too.

The door slams shut with a thunderous clap that sends a shiver down my spine. Niko's scowl could sour milk as he trudges out of the study, his new teacher standing in the doorway like an iron pillar.

"Language, Niko," she snaps, her voice a whip crack echoing in the high-ceilinged hallway. "And remember your assignment."

I stifle a smirk from where I lean against the wall, hidden by shadows. Mrs. De Luca is a formidable force. Her steely gaze and ruler-straight posture belong to an era of rigid discipline—the kind that forges leaders or breaks spirits.

"Stupid old hag," Niko mutters under his breath—too low for her to hear, but not for me.

"Respect," I snap, stepping into the light. His head whips up, eyes wide, caught.

Niko's lips purse, rebellion simmering in his dark eyes. It's like staring at a younger Matteo. But this kid doesn't know half of what his father had to endure.

"Whatever," he spits out, stomping away, his footsteps pounding like a drumbeat of adolescent fury.

"Don't be too tough on him," I tell Mrs. De Luca, who nods, her face an unreadable mask.

"Only a little," she assures before disappearing back into the room, her determination as palpable as the tension that lingers in her wake.

Turning away, I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt pierce my chest—like a splinter working its way under my skin. This isn't the life I ever wanted for Niko, but Matteo's world doesn't care about wants. It's about survival, power, control.

Angel and Spike are hunched over a mess of papers and screens in the adjacent room, their faces grim as gravestones. They're hunting ghosts, digging through a decade of dirt and secrets while I drown in invoices and ledgers.

"Anything?" I ask, crossing the threshold into their territory of technology and whispers.

"Shadows, mostly," Spike grumbles, scratching at his chin. "But shadows can bleed if you stab them right."

"Keep stabbing," I say, voice flat, thumbing through a stack of papers, the edges biting into my skin. Hard evidence is a bastard to find, slippery as an eel, and twice as ugly when you finally get a grip on it.

"Never stop," Angel replies, his fingers flying across the keyboard, a maestro playing

a symphony of search and seize.

"Good." I nod, my heart thudding in my chest. Every keystroke, every page turned, is another step deeper into the abyss, the dark heart of the Ricci legacy.

If only we could rewrite the past, unspill the blood, unbreak the broken. But this life isn't about what-ifs or regrets. It's about facing the storm, teeth bared, fists clenched.

This is my life, forged in shadow and silence. And I'll be damned if I let it take me without a fight.

As I rifle through the tattered documents, the scent of ink and old leather wraps around me like a shroud. Matteo's world, this empire of shadows, is drowning in paper—a decade's worth of secrets piled high on every surface. The dim light from the desk lamp casts long, sinister shadows across the room, making the numbers and words dance like specters on the walls.

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"Fuckin' hell," I mutter under my breath, the papers crinkling in my fist. Every file I open spills forth more evidence of chaos, a testament to Matteo's disdain for bureaucracy. Receipts, invoices, contracts—a tangled web that even the most skilled spider would struggle to navigate.

A tax audit looms on the horizon like a bloody guillotine, ready to sever us from any semblance of safety we've clawed together. My fingers work with fervor, sorting through the years, trying to bring order to the anarchy Matteo left in his wake.

I don't hear him approach, but his presence alters the room's atmosphere. "Hungry, Princess?" Matteo's voice slices through the silence, rough and edged with amusement.

My gaze snaps up to meet his, and there he stands, all dark charm and lethal grace, leaning against the door frame. A smirk plays on his lips, one that doesn't quite reach the storm brewing in his eyes. He's set up his command center in the kitchen, where he can keep an eye on everything while pretending he's not suffocating in the clutter of his own making.

"Yes, actually I am. Please tell me it's late enough that I can have pasta from Fratellis?" My voice is hopeful, desperate for a taste of normalcy.

"Sorry, Princess, it's only 3 p.m.; it doesn't open for another two hours. Do you want to hold on until then, or do you want me to cook something for you?" The offer hangs in the air, laced with an intimacy that sends shivers down my spine.

"Cook? For me?" I blink, thrown off by the domesticity in his tone. It's so at odds

with the man who commands with iron fists and a heart encased in ice; I know he can cook, but that was before he was the Don.

"If you keep frowning at me, you're gonna end up with wrinkles," he counters, a devilish grin on his lips.

I scoff, even as heat rises to my cheeks. "Matteo, they created Botox for a reason, you know." My eyes dip back to the disarray of documents splayed across the floor, the tangible proof of our lives entangled in ink and blood.

"Didn't think you were into that stuff, Princess," he chuckles. The sound is dark and rich, like aged whiskey.

"Please," I shoot back, raising my eyebrows in mocksurprise. "If you think there isn't Botox in my face and filler in my lips, Matteo, then maybe you don't remember how I looked before." I let the challenge hang between us, a thin thread waiting to be cut.

"Come to think of it, I'm due for more..." I murmur under my breath, mentally slapping a reminder in my brain to hunt down a cosmetic fix in this godforsaken city.

Matteo shakes his head at me, a bemused smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. He's like a cat playing with a mouse—amused by my domestic demands. "Anyway, Princess, as I said, do you want to wait, or do you want me to cook?"

You can cook, but I want pasta, please, something super rich and full of goodness," I tell him, offering a tentative smile that feels out of place in our twisted world.

"Got it," he says, all business now as he pivots on his heel, heading for the kitchen. The way he moves—fluid, certain—it's like watching a predator claim its territory. And right now, that domain includes saucepans and spaghetti. Christ, I could get used to this.

"Can you feed Niko, please?" I yell after he retreats, my voice bouncing down the marble corridor.

"I fed him two hours ago, Princess. His room's packed with enough snacks to survive a siege," he calls over his shoulder, not missing a beat.

"Thank you!" My voice is louder than necessary, gratitude swelling in my chest. This shared parenting gig? It's a wild ride—one I never saw coming.

"I can feed my son, you know. But you're welcome." Histone is playful, undercut with that steel edge that never entirely leaves him.

Thirty minutes crawl by, the silence in the room thick enough to choke on. Then, like a siren's call, a scent so damn intoxicating slices through the air. My nose twitches, betraying me as it leads my senses on a hunt for the source. "Ohhhhhhhh sweet baby Jesus, what is that smell?" I groan, my insides twisting with hunger.

The door creaks open, revealing Matteo, dark and looming in the doorway. He's holding a bowl, the steam curling up like fingers trying to pull me in. "Tagliatelle al Giardino," he announces, his voice smooth, each syllable wrapped in silk and danger. It's casual, but nothing about Matteo is ever really casual.

"Gimme, gimme!" I nearly lunge from my seat, desperate hands reaching out like I could snatch the bowl straight from his grasp. But he pauses, eyes dropping to the minefield below.

"Fuck." Matteo's gaze flickers from the floor to me, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, the devil himself amused by my disarray. "I'm not sure how I'm meant to walk this over to you?"

My eyes follow his, seeing the mess for the first time—papers scattered like

casualties across the floor. Shit.

"Careful now," I tease, my tone light but my heart hammering against my ribs.
"Wouldn't want you to trip into the abyss."

He hesitates, calculating the risk like he would a hit. Then, with the grace of a predator, he steps forward, each movement precise and deliberate. The dangerous dance of the mafia boss navigating the littered floor.

"Should've known this was your kind of ballet," I quip, jabbing a finger at his careful steps. He arches an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching up into that devilish grin that infuriates and ignites me.

"Princess, you might regret unleashing my inner ninja," he teases. Then, with a flare only Matteo could pull off, he hands over the steaming bowl, brushes a kiss to my temple, and spins away, arms raised like he's mocking the notion of grace.

"Fuck," I mutter. The man is a walking paradox—a sculpted statue come to life, all power and lethal poise wrapped in a tailored suit.

"Reminds me, can you teach me your ninja skills?" I ask, admiring his graceful ballet movements. He meets my gaze and replies, "We can start whenever you're ready." I nod, suggesting we begin the following day, which elicits a chuckle from him.

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He leans against the doorframe, watching me with eyes darker than the ink on his skin. "Sure, Prince," he replies, voicing a low rumble. "Could drag your ass out of bed at dawn to train. Or hit the gym before bed." He pauses, a shadow crossing his face. "Maybe drag Niko along. Kid's got the stealth of a fucking elephant."

"Gym?" My confusion must be as clear as day because Matteo lets out a chuckle deep enough to resonate through the room.

"Princess, the gym. We have one. It's attached to the garage," he says, like he's revealing the secret entrance to his mafia lair.

"Since when?" I'm floored. I thought I knew every inch of this place, but clearly, the house has secrets wrapped in shadows, just like the man before me.

"Since always," he laughs, shaking his head as he strides away. "Eat up. I'll come for you soon."

I swear under my breath. Deceiving house for a deceiving life. I make a mental note to hound him for a full tour later; can't stand not knowing every corner of my own cage.

Memories flood back as I finish the pasta, memories of Matteo storming into my life with the force of an unrelenting storm. I remember the first time he cooked for me, swaggering into my tiny kitchen, declaring himself boyfriend and chef for the evening. His confidence was a live wire, sparking and untouchable.

"Boyfriend now?" I had challenged, incredulity painting my words. But Matteo, oh,

he had just laughed, a sound that made my heart hammer against my ribs.

"Princess, I told you, you were mine. So yes, boyfriend, and if you need a ring to hammer it home, I'll give you that too." His arrogance was a force of nature, and I was caught in its eye.

I couldn't help it; he was heat and danger wrapped in one, a man where I'd only known boys.

"Show me where you keep everything," he had said, and I had followed, led by the intoxicating blend of fear and desire. Brittney's warnings echoed in my mind, but what did she know about men like Matteo? Men who promised the stars with a knife hidden behind their backs?

That night, he didn't just feed me—he marked me, claimed me with every bite of Tagliatelle al Giardino so expertly crafted it could've been art. And when he stayed, wrapped around me in the darkness of my dingy apartment, it wasn't just warmth I sought—it was possession. I was the spider ensnared, and I longed for the devouring.

The silverware clinks against the fine china, a delicate symphony in stark contrast to the tension thickening the air. I chew slowly, my eyes trained on Matteo's, searching for lies in the ocean of blue that is his gaze.

"Matteo, why do you keep turning up on my doorstep?" I demand, setting down my fork with a finality that echoes throughout the dimly lit dining room.

"I thought I made that part pretty clear, Princess," he says, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards, his eyebrow arching like he's privy to a joke I'm not. He lifts his glass of wine casually, the red liquid swaying gently with his movements.

"You're mine; it can't be any more simple than that."

"But why? And how?" I press, incredulous. The memory of our first encounter at the tattoo shop plays behind my eyelids—his sudden appearance there was like a match struck in darkness. "I mean I meet you in a tattoo shop, then bam, you turn up here every single day since?"

"Love at first sight," he declares with an easy shrug of one shoulder, as if he's discussing the weather and not stalking.

"But I don't believe in love at first sight," I retort, my skepticism as sharp as the knife by my plate.

"That's okay, Princess, I do." His voice doesn't waver; conviction poured into every syllable, as if his belief alone could rewrite reality.

"You have a very twisted way of looking at things Matteo," I say, shaking my head, trying not to get pulled under by his intensity.

"That might be true," he concedes, standing so suddenly the chair scrapes back like a growl. He walks over, his presence engulfing the space next to me, a dark cloud with silver linings. "But when you grow up in my world, you think and act differently to everyone else."

He grabs my hand, his fingers warm and unyielding, and pulls me to my feet. "You're 2 years younger than me and have not experienced what I have, so believe me when I tell you this." His voice drops, a dangerous whisper meant only for us.

"The second my eyes met yours in the shop, my heart actually skipped a fucking beat. My stomach felt like I was going to vomit, and my hands were instantly clammy." His confession slices through the air, raw and jagged.

"I've killed men before, and I've had a gun held to my head, yet not once have I ever

felt scared. Until that moment." His eyes are twin storms, swirling with emotions I can't begin to understand. "What if I died and never got a chance to talk to you? What if someone else got to you before I did, and I never got the chance to kiss you?" His lips descend towards mine, a predator closing in on its prey.

And he is right. A shiver of fear trails down my spine, but it's laced with the sweet poison of desire. What if I never got a chance to taste this man?

His kiss lands, ghostly soft, and all thoughts of resistance melt away. I lean in, deepening the kiss, claiming him as much as he claims me. His taste is intoxicating, a cocktail of power and danger that I've become addicted to.

"You're it for me, Eleanor," he murmurs, his smile felt rather than seen. "You have me hooked and sunk; there will never be another - there will only ever be you."

The words wrap around me, a binding oath sealed with the pressure of his hand against my skull. This kiss, this connection—it's terrifying and electrifying, and I'm too far gone to care about the consequences.

He was right, I did feel the connection, the invisible rope that now ties us together. The fear that this could all burn down around us somehow makes the moment sweeter, more urgent.

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That night Matteo cradles me till sleep claims us both, and when daylight tries to steal me away, I find myself still ensnared in his arms, our fates irrevocably intertwined.

I'm lost in the haze of recollection, the ghost of Matteo's kiss still burning on my lips, when his voice slices through the fog. "You okay there, Princess?"

Startled, I snap back to now. My gaze lifts to find him leaning against the doorframe, a knowing smirk playing across his chiseled features. The air between us crackles with the same tension that's always simmering just beneath our skin.

The aroma of Tagliatelle al Giardino still hangs heavy, a fragrant trap that lures me straight back to the night that changed everything. And he knows it—the bastard. He's got that look, eyes glinting with dark amusement because he's aware precisely what that dish does to me. It's a time machine, pulling me back to the first taste of true love.

"I bet if I walked over there and kissed you, you would taste the same as you did twelve years ago," he says, and damn him, his voice is velvet draped over steel.

My cheeks flare up like they've been slapped, heat crawling up my neck. "I think you would be right," I murmur, cursing myself for going red. But it's involuntary—Matteo's effect on me is as certain as a bullet to the heart.

"Nice to see I still bring that color to your cheeks," he drawls, his tone dripping with satisfaction. But then he straightens, the playfulness fading into something more commanding. "But it's almost time for the gym."

He turns, leaving me adrift in a sea of papers and smoldering thoughts. I watch the retreating lines of his suit, the broad set of shoulders that speaks of a life borne from brutality and control. Dark charm and danger rolled into one lethal package—that's Matteo Ricci.

"Okay, let me get changed; this dress is as uncomfortable as fuck," I grumble, maneuvering around mountains of receipts and contracts that litter the floor. The chaos of paper crunches under my feet as I make my way to the sanctity of our room.

Chapter Twenty-One

Matteo Ricci

I'm behind the wall, eyes narrowed as I watch Niko lumber across the gym floor. It's like he's got lead in his boots, each step booming like a goddamn gavel. I rub my temples, feeling the onset of a headache that's bound to be a bitch.

"Stealth, Niko. Light on your feet, for fuck's sake," I mutter under my breath, but it's no use.

Eleanor's next to him, tiptoeing with more grace, but Christ, her breathing's so loud it could wake the dead. She pants and gasps like she's run a marathon, not just crossed a room.

"Easy, Eleanor. Breathe through your nose," I instruct, voice low. But it's like telling a fish to climb a tree. Panic flares in her eyes, chest heaving fast enough to create a bloody breeze. Yeah, no Zen master shit for her. No quiet calm or inner peace. Just raw, unfiltered panic.

"Boss..." Spike's whisper is practically a hiss in my ear, and I nearly shoot the ceiling from the shock.

"Fucker," I snap, heart racing as my hand grips the cold metal of my gun before I realize it's him. "Jesus, you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Sorry, boss," he chuckles without an ounce of regret, "you were too busy watching those two dipshits being elephants."

My scowl deepens as I shove the gun back into place. "You're not fucking wrong there." I glance at Spike, taking in his smug grin.

"Want Angel and myself to take over the kids' training?" He nods towards Niko, who's now attempting – and failing – to meld with the shadows like some oversized, clumsy panda.

The sight is so ridiculous, so utterly hopeless, that laughter bursts out of me, bitter and sharp. "I was just thinking that," I concede with a heavy sigh, finally turning to face him.

Spike's already grinning, clearly relishing the thought of knocking some stealth into the pair. Fine by me. Let them deal with this circus act. I've got more giant demons to wrestle than teaching these two how to move like they're not about to bring the whole damn building down on our heads.

"So," Spike's voice cuts through the shadows. "Got some intel."

I lean back against the cold wall, arms folded across my chest. "Spill it."

"Chatter's up about Toni." He shifts his weight, hands in his pockets. "Gonna head out, sniff around for details."

"Take those two dipshits at the gate with you. It's a changeover. Make 'em sweat over time," I say, a cruel twist to my lips. The bastards had it coming.

Spike smirks, a glint of shared sadism in his eyes. "What'd they screw up?"

"Late for shift two days back," I tell him, eyebrow cocked. We both know the cost of slacking.

"Fucking dickheads," he mutters, shaking his head as we stride toward the front door. A silent command and our footsteps sync; a dance of death we've perfected over the years.

"Keep me posted. Every damn detail," I order.

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"Will do, boss," Spike whispers too close again, and I'm airborne, heart slamming against my ribs. "Fucking fuck! You're a cocksucker!" I bark out, fury lacing my words.

"Keeping you sharp, boss," he laughs, a sound that reverberates in the stillness of the room he just vacated.

"Enough!" I call out to the room, my voice echoing off the walls. "We're done here. Dinner time."

Niko pipes up from behind, a smirk tugging at his lips. "What's cooking, ol man?"

"Cut the crap," I snarl, though there's an edge of affection I can't mask. "Plain old dad work for you?"

"Really? I like ol man," he says, the shit-eating grin plastered on his face tells me all I need to know.

"Kid, don't push it," I warn, but inwardly, I'm chuckling. The little bastard's got spunk; reminds me of myself at his age. But he doesn't need to know that.

"Alright, let's rustle up something that doesn't taste like cardboard," I grumble, throwing a knowing glance back at Eleanor.

The stainless steel of the kitchen blade glints under the harsh light as I slice through the raw chicken, each cut clean and precise. My mind's a jumble of strategies and survival—cooking's just another battlefield.

"What for dinner?" Niko's voice cuts through my focus, as random as ever. Kid's got timing like a grenade with a faulty pin.

I glance over at him, eyes narrowed. "I'm so hungry I could eat an elephant," he declares, oblivious to the irony.

"Yeah, I'm sure we can arrange that with those feet of yours," I mumble under my breath, barely audible over the chop of the knife.

"What?" He cocks his head, brows furrowed. The kid's hearing is too sharp for his own good.

"Nothing, kid." I shake my head, tossing the chicken into a hot pan where it sizzles like rain on hot pavement. "Come on, let's get dinner started. I'm thinking chicken and mushroom risotto." I throw an arm around his shoulders, giving them a squeeze. Can't have the boy thinking the old man's gone soft.

"Ew, mushrooms!" He recoils as if I'd suggested we dine on rat poison.

"Hang on, you sure you're my kid?" I frown, turning to look at Eleanor over my shoulder. She meets my gaze with that half-amused, half-apologetic look that always manages to twist me up inside.

"Sorry Matteo, he hates them," she says, her shoulder lifting in a half shrug that somehow speaks volumes.

"Chicken and spinach risotto, then," I grunt, staring down at Niko with suspicion brewing in my gut. Kids these days don't know how good they've got it. If I had dared crunch my nose at my mamma's cooking, she'd have made sure I dreamt of nothing but the dish I despised until I learned to love it—or at least pretend to.

"See, you do like it, you ate it!" That would be her victory cry. And now, the thought of putting Niko through the same culinary boot camp tempts me something fierce.

The kitchen fills with the earthy scent of herbs and the sharp tang of garlic as I begin to craft the risotto, letting the familiar motions pull me back from the edge of those darker thoughts. Control—it's not just about power; it's about knowing when to wield it, and when to let the pot simmer.

"Matteo, I see that glint in your eye," Eleanor's whisper is like a blade sliding against the grain of my conscience. She's seen through me; she always does. I turn, catching the tail end of her retreat towards the dining room. The memory of my mother's culinary tyranny remains unspoken between us. How the hell did she know?

Minutes drag their feet before she reappears, two glasses of whiskey balanced in her hands, amber liquid promising the fire I need to simmer down. I'm fumbling with the freezer, cursing under my breath as I hunt for the spinach. "Here," I grunt, shoving the ice tray at her.

"Thanks." That single syllable from her is sharper than the edge of a knife, clean and precise.

"I hope one of them is mine," I say, dropping the ingredients on the counter with a thud before snatching the nearest glass. The whiskey smell hits me, raw and biting.

"Yep," she confirms, popping that 'p' like a gun going off in the quiet of our kitchen. Then she's turning on her heel, leaving me with the empty ice tray and the taste of spirits burning down my throat.

"I'm starting to feel like the bitch in this relationship," I mutter into the glass, the words bitter on my tongue.

"Well, one of us has to be," her voice floats back, taunting, trailing laughter from the stairs leading to our room.

"Dinner is in thirty minutes; will I need to wake you up?" My call chases her up the staircase, a challenge thrown into the space she's left behind.

"Nope, I'm showering," comes the clipped reply, and I imagine the steam rising around her, the water tracing the lines of her tattoos.

"Niko, go shower too; that way dinner will be ready for both of you when you get out," I bark over my shoulder, shifting into boss mode even in the comfort of my own home.

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"On it, Da," he chirps, and I can hear the smirk in his voice without even looking.

"Da is Irish, Niko..." I grumble, but I'm talking to the boy's back now as he scampers off, eager as a pup.

"I know, felt strange to say it too," he admits, and there's something in those words that catches in my chest, something warm and dangerous like a live wire.

I watch him disappear, and it strikes me—I don't mind this 'dad' gig. Not one fucking bit.

The clink of dirty dishes mocks me, a goddamn symphony of domesticity. I'm elbow-deep in suds, scrubbing away at the remnants of tonight's feast, and I can't help but wonder how the hell I ended up here. The kingpin of Sydney's underbelly playing house like some aproned matriarch. Fucking unbelievable.

Eleanor and Niko, they've got a knack for vanishing when shit needs doing. Convenient, that. And me? I'm left contemplating the emasculating reality of becoming the mob's answer to a Stepford wife. Pathetic. But the thing is, I don't even bristle at the thought like I should. Maybe it's the way Eleanor's laughter cuts through the silence or how Niko looks up to me more than he fears me. It softens a man. Or maybe it just fucks with his head.

My phone buzzes against my thigh, a violent reminder of the world beyond these four walls. I yank it out, pressing it to my ear without hesitation. "Matteo," I grunt, voice laced with irritation and ready for war.

"Boss, I got him." The voice on the other end is Spike, and his words are sweet as sin.

"Office or warehouse?"

"Warehouse, boss."

"Good." I shove the plate I'm holding back into the sink, water splashing in protest.

"On my way." Those dishes can rot for all I care. Duty calls, and the devil doesn't do dishes.

I storm upstairs, stripping off the domestic façade and sliding into the skin of who I really am. In minutes, I'm encased in black—tailored to intimidation. No jacket tonight, not with the heat clinging to Sydney like a second skin.

I find her in the library, lost in pages like she's searching for salvation between the lines. Eleanor. She's oblivious until I'm practically breathing down her neck, a ghost haunting her tranquil moment. "Good book?" I ask, voice dripping with a mixture of amusement and accusation.

Her cheeks flush, betraying her thoughts before she even speaks. "Um yes, it is, thank you." Her fingers twitch, pulling at her shirt as if she could hide behind cotton and modesty.

"Is my Princess reading a dirty book?" The tease rolls off my tongue, a familiar dance between us.

"It's the only kind I read," she retorts, throat working to swallow her embarrassment. She's adorable when she's flustered, downright irresistible.

"Listen," I start, my tone hardening with the gravity of what's to come. "I hate to rip you from your fantasy land, but there's trouble. Get dressed, bring your smut with

you. You're gonna need the escape."

Her eyes widen slightly, a flicker of concern before she masks it with that ironclad poise she wears so well. "I understand," she says, rising to her feet, the book clutched in her hand like a lifeline.

"Good girl." The words slip out, a blend of pride and something darker, something that revels in her obedience. It's fucked up, this power dynamic we dance around, but it's our dance, and we know the steps by heart.

"Give me ten minutes," she says, already moving towards our bedroom with a purpose in her step.

I snatch the smutty novel from her hands, thumb fanning through the pages. "Don't lose my page," Eleanor warns.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I murmur.

Ten minutes drag by, my eyes skimming over words that'd make a whore blush, and I'm no prude. But this shit—three men bending to one woman's will—it's a far cry from the life I lead. It wraps its fingers around my gut, tugs with an odd sort of envy. "Do women really get off on this?" The question hangs heavy as Eleanor reappears, all long legs and lethal looks, hair bound high like she's ready for war rather than whatever twisted fantasy that book promises.

"Hey, I said don't lose my page," she snaps, reclaiming her book with a quick, practiced move. There's a challenge in her eye, a mischief that says she knows exactly where that page was heating up, and so do I now, my body reacting traitorously beneath my pants.

"Come on, I thought we had somewhere to be," she teases, slipping her hand down,

palm pressing just enough to draw a stifled groan from my lips. "Nice to see someone enjoyed the book."

"Fuck," I hiss, adjusting myself while she tosses me a wicked grin over her shoulder before descending the stairs. What else can I do but follow?

"Seriously, we need to talk about that book," I grumble, trailing after her like some lovesick goon when I'm anything but. She pauses at the door, turns, and I'm struck by how the streetlights cast her in a halo of danger.

"Matteo, why are you all dressed to kill at 7 pm?" Her voice slices through the bullshit, brings me back to the brink of reality.

"Right, in the car," I deflect, scratching at my neck where the collar feels too damn tight.

"Is Angel here?" Her gaze searches past me, seeking reassurance in the form of our most trusted ally.

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"Yeah, he's downstairs with Niko, doing tech stuff. He'll handle bedtime for the kid."

"Okay good, let's go then," she says, swinging her arms towards the door like she's wading into battle instead of stepping out into the night.

"Fuck, okay, yes, I'm getting distracted." Gritting my teeth, I shove open the front door, leading us into the cool air that does nothing to chill the heat curling inside me. I slide into the driver's seat, engine roaring to life under my command. Everything else fades away; it's just the road, the mission, the woman beside me.

"Okay, Princess," I start, voice low, every word measured. "We need to talk before we get there." I steal a glance her way, bracing for impact because if there's one thing I know about Eleanor, it's that she's full of surprises, and none of them play nice.

The car eats up the road, its growl a feral undercurrent to the silence stretching out between us. Streetlights flicker by, casting Eleanor's face in a staccato of light and shadow. She's a statue beside me, all cool lines and unreadable intentions.

"Hit me with it, Matteo," she murmurs, eyes glued to the bleak tapestry of the road unfurling ahead.

"Tonight, I need you obedient," I start, my grip on the wheel turning my knuckles white. "No fucking around, Princess. You do what I tell you. Please." The last word scrapes out of me like it's clawing its way through gravel.

"Okay." Just that one word, flat and final, and suddenly I'm the one off-kilter.

"Okay?" I echo, as if saying it again could fill the cavernous space her single syllable left behind.

"Okay." She doesn't look at me, doesn't need to. Her agreement is a silent slap to my face, snapping me back into boss mode.

"Right, well, I'm not joking about this," I warn, each word bitten off, tasting like blood. "Spike has Toni," I confess, the words barely more than a whispered curse.

"I gathered," she replies, and there's steel beneath the velvet of her voice. It's a cold comfort, knowing she's with me but not flinching from the darkness.

"Are you going to be okay watching us question him?" I ask, because even though I can't shield her from the shitstorm, I still want to wrap her in bulletproof glass.

"As long as you kill him when you're done, I don't mind," she answers, dry as the desert wind that howls outside our bubble of calm before the storm.

"Mobster life is rubbing off on you nicely, Princess," I offer with a crooked smile, finding twisted pride in her adaptation to my fucked-up world.

"Let's hope not," she shoots back, but there's no real bite to her words, just resignation laced with a hint of dark humor.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eleanor Wang

The warehouse looms before us, a beast of concrete and steel with shadows that swallow light whole. My pulse hammers against my throat, a desperate thrumming that begs me to turn back. I don't want this. I don't want to see his face—the face of a

monster masquerading as a man.

"Come on, Princess," Matteo's voice slices through the dread, low and commanding. His hand is on my door before I even register he's left the car. Shit. I'm slipping, losing focus when I can't afford to let my guard down. Not here, not in the belly of the beast.

I slide out of the car, my legs feeling like they're made of something softer than flesh—something fragile and ready to break. Matteo extends his hand, and for a moment, I almost laugh. We could be headed to a dance, him in his dark, tailored menace and me in... well, whatever scraps of courage I've stitched together for armour.

"Can't I just stay in the car?" The words tumble out, weak and hopeful.

"No." It's a finality, a statement that allows no argument. "I don't trust anyone here enough with your safety than me. I'm sorry, Princess, but you will be sitting in the room with me."

His hand doesn't waver, steady and sure, waiting for mine. I place my palm in his, a silent concession, and immediately his grip tightens. We move in tandem toward the warehouse doors, each step a march into hell.

Why? The question gnaws at me, a rabid beast with sharp teeth. Why did they choose me? It was a blow meant for Matteo, sure, but to them, I was nothing more than a pawn. A means to an end that didn't change the final play. They lost their damn war, but still, they came for me. Why?

My legs betray me, a slight stumble in my stride, but Matteo is there, arm slung around my waist, pulling me close. "You're safe with me, Princess," he murmurs, lips grazing my temple—a kiss that's meant to comfort but feels more like a brand. He's

all heat and power, the kind of dangerous that makes people cross the street to avoid him.

"Ready, Princess?" His voice is a blade, cutting through any illusion of gentleness he might have offered moments before.

As ready as I'll ever be, I think but don't say. Instead, I nod, bracing myself for what's to come. With Matteo, it's always a gamble—will he be the shield or the sword today?

And as we step into the darkness of the warehouse, I know it's time to find out.

The stench hits me like a punch to the gut, a rancid mix of decay and bleach. I gag, my body recoiling against the invisible assault. "Doesn't this smell make you wanna vomit?" I choke out, glaring at Matteo.

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He's unfazed, his dark eyes scanning the shadows that cling to the high ceilings. "It used to," he admits, almost wistful. "But I've gotten used to it now."

I frown, disbelief etching lines into my forehead. "Gotten used to it?" The very idea seems ludicrous. How does one get accustomed to the scent of death?

"Yep." He nods as if recalling a fond memory. "Dad bought this warehouse back in the '80s. Spent enough time in here to build up a tolerance, I reckon."

I press a hand over my nose, trying to ward off the olfactory offence. "I don't think any number of years would get me used to this smell," I mutter, voice muffled behind my fingers.

"Breathing through your mouth helps," he suggests, and I oblige.

I drop my hand, taking in a careful breath. The foulness still invades, but it's dulled, muted. A very fucking small comfort. But I'm not here to be comfortable. I'm here to show them—the men who thought they could use me as a pawn—that they failed. I will stand in front of one of those bastards with a smile on my face.

"Ready, Princess?" Matteo's tone is low, a rumble of thunder before a storm.

"As I'll ever be," I reply, steel lacing my words. His hand gives a reassuring squeeze, a reminder that he's here, solid as the concrete under our feet.

"Remember what I said in the car?" His voice holds an edge, sharp enough to cut through bone. It contrasts starkly with the tenderness he'd shown me just moments

before.

I nod, because we both know the drill. I'll either heed his warning or throw it to the wind. Depends on how deep we wade into this bloody mess.

Matteo's grip on the door is firm, decisive. The hinges groan as we step into a place of nightmares—a torture room so stark and grim it could freeze the blood in your veins. My gaze trails from the rusty hooks on the walls to the lone blow torch resting on a table, its very presence a silent promise of pain.

The floor slopes down towards the center where a metal grate awaits like the gaping maw of some mechanical monster, ready to swallow the remnants of humanity. It's that fucking grate that does me in. My legs give out, betraying me with a suddenness that leaves my heart stuttering in my chest. Matteo's arm bands around my waist, pulling me back from collapse.

"Easy, Princess," he murmurs, his voice a dark melody against the backdrop of this hellish orchestra.

"Thanks," I manage to get out, as Spike, quick on his feet, slides a chair beneath me. I drop onto it like a marionette with cut strings.

Spike throws Matteo a glare sharp enough to slice through steel. "She shouldn't be in here boss."

"Give her a sec," Matteo's retort slices the tension hanging thick in the air. His confidence is an anchor I need.

I lift my head, and there he is—Toni. A spectre from my darkest dreams, brought to life, dangling from chains, toes grazing the cold floor. Blood mars his face, but not enough to hide his identity. The sight of him, weak and at our mercy, ignites

something feral within me.

"Nice of you to drop in, Toni," Matteo taunts with a cruel chuckle, approaching the man who's been the fuel for endless nightmares. He rolls up his sleeves casually, revealing inked skin that tells tales of violence and power. As he moves, I catch sight of the outline of a bag in his back pocket—a sick kind of lifeline.

It's fucked up, isn't it? That this... this assurance that even Matteo, the kingpin of our twisted world, carries something as mundane as a vomit bag, is what grounds me. It's a reminder that even monsters have their Achilles' heel. And somehow, that's humbling—endearing, almost.

"Ready to sing for us, Toni?" Matteo's voice is deceptively calm, but his eyes, those pools of darkness, they're alight with a fire that could scorch souls.

"Let's get this fucking show started."

Toni's voice is all acid and defiance, dripping with a venom that makes my blood ice over. "I don't know what you want from me."

Matteo stands there, the epitome of unflappable, a chilling calmness in his demeanour that belies the storm I know is raging just beneath the surface. "Well let's start with the names of the other two who accompanied you to Eleanor's apartment ten years ago," he says, his voice a lull before the inevitable storm.

This isn't the man I love. This is something else, something darker—a force that even the shadows fear. He's the Mafia leader now, wearing a mask of icy composure that I can't peelback.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Toni spits back, but it's like throwing sparks on gasoline.

"Ten years ago, you forced your way into Eleanor's apartment, raped her along with two other cunts, then left her with a note to disappear," Matteo recites the horrors like he's reading off a dinner menu, arms crossed, leaning against cold metal that seems to absorb his chill.

He plucks the blow torch from the table, giving the knob an experimental twist. It's not a question anymore—it's a sentence. "I'll ask some questions; you'll answer them. Every lie? Spike will chop a piece off you, and I'll cauterise the wound. Got it?"

"But I don't—" Toni starts, desperation creeping into his tone.

"Shut it, Toni. I wasn't finished." The torch roars to life in Matteo's hand, flames dancing like devils at a black mass. "You will die tonight. How many pieces you're in—that's on you. What are their names?"

"No." That single syllable hangs heavy between them, a challenge.

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"No what?" Matteo's brow arches in mock curiosity. But there's no real question in his eyes—just a dark promise.

"I'm not going to talk; kill me, but I'll die with my secrets," Toni growls, but there's an edge of panic there now.

The strike is swift—a punch to the gut that sucks the breath right out of Toni. "Think so? I always get what I need," Matteo snarls, grabbing Toni's foot in an iron grip as Spike steps forward, blade gleaming wickedly in his hand.

It's a fucking nightmare made flesh as Spike slices through toes like they're nothing more than rotten fruit. The torch hisses, searing flesh and bone, stopping the bleeding, filling the air with the sickening scent of charred meat. My stomach churns, bile rising in my throat.

"Christ," I whisper, squeezing my eyes shut, willing away the stench of cooked human that's clawing its way into my mouth, threatening to spill over.

A gentle touch on my cheek pulls me back from the edge, and Matteo's hushed voice is in my ear, "It's okay, Princess. I brought extra bags tonight." His finger trails down my face, leaving a trail of warmth, and the rustling of plastic signals the lifeline he's offering—a simple bag that feels like salvation in this moment.

Breathing through my mouth to keep from retching, I grasp the bag tightly, finding solace in the twisted tenderness of Matteo's foresight. Even here, even now, he thinks of me, protects me in his own warped way.

Matteo's back is a rigid line of authority as he strides back over to Toni. Muscle and menace in every step, the man's like a goddamn executioner returning to his altar. My eyes flick to the bag in my hand, its crinkly sides mocking me. It's a toss-up—do I suffocate on the horror or just let it all out? The contents of my stomach decide for me.

I glance up just in time to see Spike finish with Toni's other foot, each toe dropping to the ground with a sickening thud. Then comes the right hand, fingers snipped off like they're nothing. Fucking hell. It's a scene you can't unsee, no matter how hard you try. And the stench—God, it's like I'm trapped in some twisted barbecue from hell.

The first heave hits me hard, risotto spewing into the bag like vile confetti. It gets everywhere, sticking in places it's got no right to be. I'm hacking, retching, spitting out grains that cling to my lips. There's nothing ladylike about this chaos, and yet I'm stuck here, watching the savagery unfold like some grotesque show.

Spike's grinning like a loon, slicing through flesh with a zealot's fervour. His eyes are alight, finding joy in the carnage. It sends a shiver down my spine. Niko should never see this side of him—the side that takes pleasure in another's pain. It's a brand of madness that's too raw, too feral. Spike's not just a soldier; he's a fucking maestro of misery.

I swallow down the bile rising again, gripping the bag like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to sanity.

Time drags on, a relentless parade of horror. The stench clings to the inside of my nostrils, a sickening mix of charred human remains and bodily waste. It's suffocating. The air in this godforsaken warehouse is thick with it, every breath a reminder of what's unfolding before my eyes.

"Matteo?" My voice is a whisper, barely audible over the symphony of Toni's

muffled cries and Spike's eager snipping.

Matteo whirls around, his dark gaze meeting mine, and for a second, I see something flicker there—an apology, maybe. He strides over, all raw power and predatory grace, wiping his bloodstained hands on a rag as if he can erase the last two hours just like that.

"Fuck, Princess, I'm sorry." His voice is rough, carrying the weight of a storm about to break.

"You want to go home?" He reaches out, offering escape, but I have one more demon to face.

"Yes, but I wanna shoot him first," I say, my finger pointing at Toni's broken form, dangling like some grotesque marionette from his chains.

"Are you sure 'bout that? We don't have who sent him yet?" Matteo's hand hovers over the gun at his waist, questioning me with those tumultuous blue eyes that burn with an intensity that both terrifies and captivates me.

"He isn't going to give it, Matteo." My hand is steady as I take the gun, feeling its cold weight grounding me.

I raise the barrel, aiming at the shattered man across the room. Toni's a husk, his eyes pleading for an end that I'm all too willing to give.

Spike stands by, impassive now, watching the scene unfold with detached curiosity. How many times has he watched this dance, I wonder?

The gun trembles in my grip, a cold extension of my fury. I square my shoulders, breathe out slow, and find that serene place where the world narrows to just me, the

weapon, and the target.

"Sorry, Toni," I whisper, but there's no mercy in my voice.

I pull the trigger twice—the first bullet rips through his groin, a spray of crimson painting the grimy floor. His scream slices the silence before the second shot crashes into his head, silencing him forever. It's a sharp crack, an echo that reverberates off the warehouse walls and within the darkest corners of my soul.

"Can we go home now please?" My voice breaks, raw from the smoke and screams. Dropping Matteo's gun into his waiting hand, I shiver, feeling the finality of what I've done settle like ash on my skin. The need to escape this stench of death claws at me, desperate for fresh air, for the safety of distance.

"Of course, Princess." Matteo's voice is a soft growl, wrapping around me in a promise of protection. He guides me with a firm hand on my back, leading me away from the carnage, away from the monster I've become.

Outside, the night swallows us, the chill a stark contrast to the heat of hell we leave behind. Matteo opens the car door, and I slide into the dark interior, the leather seat cradling my exhausted body.

Blood splatters his tanned skin, dark against the light, like some horrific abstract art. He's a masterpiece of violence—sinew and muscle shifting under inked flesh as he peels off the stained shirt. I watch, transfixed, as Matteo Ricci, kingpin draped in brutality, wipes the remnants of vengeance from his face.

"Keep looking at me like that Princess and I'll end up fucking you on the bonnet of this car," he says, voice rough like gravel.

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"Who says I don't want that?" The words spill out, thick with desire. My body throbs for him, craving his touch—even slick with the blood of my tormentor.

Matteo, the man who turns murder into an act of devotion. And here I am, twisted enough to find it arousing.

Most Mafia brides are kept in the dark, shielded from the gore and the guilt. Not me. Enzo's shocked expression lingers in my mind—his eyes wide as I sat at the table, privy to their blood-soaked plans. It's clear, Matteo wants me all in, chained to the throne beside him in this underworld kingdom.

The warm Australian night does nothing to cool my skin, flames licking inside, fuelled by the power radiating from the man before me. As Matteo slides into the driver's seat, the engine roars to life, mirroring the wild, reckless beating of my heart. This is our world, cruel and beautiful—and I'm too far gone to ever climb out.

"Matteo?" My voice cuts through the heavy silence, a blade poised at the edge of darkness.

"Yes, Princess," he answers, his fingers curling around the ignition. The engine purrs to life beneath us, growling like some feral beast as we pull away. Street lamps flicker above, casting light on Matteo's inked skin, making the art etched into his flesh dance in the shadows—each one a story of violence and survival.

"I've been thinking about the proposal that Enzo came to you with." I watch him, muscles tense under my scrutiny.

"What part of it?" His words come out as a low growl, protective instincts flaring to life.

"The trafficking women part." I brace myself for his fury, but there's a strategy playing out in my head—a dangerous gamble.

"It's never going to happen, Princess," he declares, vehement and final. His blood-stained hand reaches out, claiming my thigh with an iron grip. "I'll never allow him to do that in my city. You don't have to worry."

But I'm already tumbling down the rabbit hole, my voicesteady, "I was thinking we should allow it. To an extent." I pitch the idea like a gambit, knowing full well the stakes.

"Hang on..." He holds up a hand, commanding me to pause. Shock paints his features raw. "You want to traffic innocent underage women through Sydney?!"

"No," I clarify, fixing my gaze on his dark eyes. "If we hold auctions for women who agree to be sold with contracts to said buyers, then we can control what happens to them." My heart pounds, not just from the adrenaline of murder but from stepping into the role of his equal in this twisted game.

"Like a mail-order bride, but with contracts and a get-out-of-jail-free card to go with it?" He ponders my words, the cogs turning in his mind as he navigates this new territory I've laid before him.

"Exactly." I shrug nonchalantly, as if we're discussing stocks, not souls. "We could make it a business on the books?"

"I'll think about it," he concedes, and I can tell the idea tempts him. It's a solution that could appease Enzo without staining our hands more than necessary. "Could be win-

win."

I lean back, letting the leather embrace me, and my eyes devour Matteo's form. The streetlights play over his tattoos, revealing secrets in the ink I've yet to learn. "I don't think I've ever seen a man as beautiful as you, Matteo..."

"Are you checkin' me out from over there, Mrs Ricci?" He teases, a smirk playing on his lips, tainted red with someone else's lifeblood.

"I sure am," I shoot back, laughter lacing my voice, "but it's not Mrs Ricci yet. You might own this city but even you have to wait the six-week grace period to sign a marriage certificate."

He chuckles, a sound that vibrates through the car and into my bones, wrapping around my heart like the chains we willingly forge together. This dance of power and possession, it's intoxicating—and I'm drunk on Matteo Ricci.

"Only three more weeks, Princess," Matteo muses, his voice a low rumble as he shifts gears. The streetlights cast an intermittent glow on his face, revealing the blood that still stains his jawline—a crimson mark of vengeance. "Although I'm thinking of just having Angel marry us today and sending in the paperwork now. It won't be stamped for three weeks, but it will be sitting in the court office waiting."

I laugh, the sound sharp and a little hysterical. "Of course, Angel is a celebrant!" It's so absurdly fitting, the thought of Angel presiding over our nuptials. "He did an online course when he got the flight from London," Matteo adds, as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

The car takes a sharp turn, throwing me against the side. My breath catches, and for a moment, I'm weightless, suspended in this life we've carved out of darkness and desire.

"Well, that guy is full of surprises. But a bit presumptuous don't you think?" I challenge, arching an eyebrow. "What if I had said no?"

Matteo's laugh is a dark chuckle, one that sends shivers down my spine. "You and I both know that would have never happened!" He looks at me then, his gaze fierce and unyielding, as if he can see straight into the marrow of my bones.

It could have, I think, even as my body betrays me, leaning closer to his magnetic pull. Why does this fucker know me better than I know myself?

"Nope," Matteo says, popping the 'p' with a surety that seals my fate as much as any vow could.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Matteo Ricci

I'm staring at Eleanor's peaceful face, her chest rising and falling with a rhythm that's infuriatingly calm given the night we've had. She's fucking asleep, like she hasn't got a care in the world. And why should she? Because she trusts me to keep the demons at bay. I can still feel the warm blood coating my hands, the metallic smell of it mixing with the leather interior of the car as we drive through the dark streets.

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"Should've never brought you into this," I mutter under my breath, my grip tightening on the steering wheel. But fuck, what was I supposed to do? Leave her alone, unprotected? Not a chance.

We pull up to our fortress of a home, and I glance over at her again. She doesn't stir, even when I kill the engine. The silence is deafening; only the sound of my own ragged breathing fills the space. It's a stark contrast to the chaos of earlier, the screams, the begging. Christ, I can still hear it ringing in my ears.

"Time to get up, Princess," I say, but there's no movement from her. I slip out of the car, walk around to her side, and open the door. With more tenderness than I ever thought I could possess, I scoop her up into my arms. Her head rests against my chest, and for a moment, I allow myself the illusion that we're just a normal couple coming home from a late-night date.

As I carry her through the threshold, I can't shake the feeling that I've crossed a line tonight. There's no going back now. She's seen the beast in full glory, watched as I carved up a man without a second thought. She didn't flinch after that first wave of shock passed—fuck, she's stronger than I gave her credit for. Stronger than me, even.

In our bedroom, I lay her down gently, the moonlight casting shadows over her delicate features. But there's nothing delicate about what she witnessed tonight. About what she did. My gut twists with guilt, but protective instincts drown it out. I need her close, always.

"Angel needs to clean the car," I remind myself, tapping out a quick message before stripping off my blood-stained clothes—they'll burn tonight, along with any trace of

what happened.

The shower hisses to life, steam curling into the air. Now for the hard part. "Eleanor," I shake her shoulder, hating to disturb her, "we gotta wash this night off us."

"Fuck off," she groans, swatting at me, her eyes still closed.

"Come on, love. Up you get." I help her sit up, watching as reality slowly seeps back into her gaze. There's a darkness there now, one that mirrors my own. We're both stained, marked by the violence of this life.

"Shower," I say again, firmer this time. She nods, pushing herself to stand. We undress in silence, the gravity of what we've shared hanging between us. Every piece of clothing that drops to the floor feels like shedding another layer of our old lives, lives that are slipping further away with each passing second.

"Let's get you cleaned up," I say, guiding her into the steam, the water cascading over us both. She's prickly, yeah, but right now, she's also mine to protect, mine to cleanse.

"Come here, Princess," I mutter, the gruffness of my voice echoing off the tiled walls. I reel her in close, my arms a steel band around her waist. She's shivering, but not from cold—she's seen too much, done too much tonight. I snag the shower puff, the floral scent a stark contrast to the copper tang still lingering in the air. I lather it up with her sweet-smelling gel and start scrubbing her skin, trying to erase the night's transgressions.

"Baby, I know you mean well, but if you shove any more shampoo into my hair it's going to start squeaking," she protests with a weary half-laugh, prising the bottle from my hand. Her delicate fingers work the conditioner into her locks, taming the chaos I've caused.

My turn. The water washes away the evidence, the red sin swirling down the drain. It should've been enough, but the guilt clings tighter than blood. Eleanor's gaze catches mine, a small hand lifting my chin. "You okay there, Matteo?"

I ain't. But I nod because she needs me to be strong, unbreakable.

"I shouldn't have taken you with me tonight." My admission hangs heavy between us, steam curling like ghosts around our bodies.

"Yes, you should have," she insists, a smile playing on her lips that doesn't reach those dark eyes. "I needed the closure..." Her words trail off, each one laden with a pain that mirrors my own twisted soul.

"Fuck, Princess," I curse under my breath, choking on the reality of her beside me in this violent world I've dragged her into. "I can't leave you at home without me."

She understands the madness that fuels me, always has. With gentle hands, she starts washing my hair, her touch soothing the beast roaring in my chest. "Lean back, let me rinse it out," she commands softly.

I comply, letting the water cascade over my head, chasing away the grime and the guilt for a fleeting moment. "Nice and squeaky!" She teases, light in the darkness we've woven around ourselves.

She's the light; hell, she's the fucking flare that burns through the shadows of my existence. Love at first sight? That's for fairy tales. But the moment I saw her, something clicked into place—an unholy recognition. And ever since, I've been caught in her gravity, relentlessly pulled toward her.

"Whatever our souls are made of; hers and mine are the same," I murmur into her ear, the words of some dead author who knew what it was to find your equal in another. A

perfect match in imperfection.

"You knew it before I did," she whispers back, acknowledging the truth we both live—the inevitable pull between us that neither heaven nor hell could sever.

"Yes, I did, but that's the game, Princess," I growl before capturing her lips in a fierce kiss. Her throaty moan ignites a primal hunger within me, my body responding eagerly to her nearness. With a playful smirk, she teases, "Alright, alright, let's conserve some water for the damn whales." Stepping out of the shower, she drapes a towel around her curves. As she leans over to twist her hair into a wrap on top of her head, every line of her body speaks of effortless grace and seduction. "Keep tempting fate like that, Princess," I warn lowly as desire coils in my gut. She straightens up with a sly smile and challenges back, "And what if that's exactly what I'm after?"

"Game on, Princess," I say with a predatory grin, my voice a low rumble of anticipation. I scoop her up with ease, her slight frame no match for the strength that life in the shadows has carved into my muscles. She laughs, a sound that's music and madness wrapped in silk, as I carry her through to the bedroom. The plush carpet mutes our steps, but nothing can soften the hunger that roars through me.

I lay her down face first onto the mattress, the softness of it an insulting contrast to the hardness that's building within me. "Don't move," I growl, my lips brushing against the shell of her ear, my breath hot against her skin. I peel away the towel that clings to her body, revealing the canvas of her flesh, still slick from the shower. The water droplets are like diamonds against her skin, and I'm about to claim every fucking one of them.

My hands trail fire up her thighs, igniting every nerve ending along the way until they come to rest on the twin peaks of her ass. I savour the moment, then bring my hand down hard. The slap echoes in the room, a declaration of intent, and her flesh blooms with the flush of pink that follows. It's a sight that fuels my desire, and I do it again,

watching the colour deepen, listening to the whimpers that spill from her lips.

"I love the colour pink on you, Princess." My words are husky with lust as I survey my handiwork. I can almost feel the sting myself—can almost taste the sweet pain that's threaded with pleasure.

"Are you wet yet?" My voice is taunting, knowing full well the effect I have on her. I slide my fingers between those perfect cheeks, seeking the heat of her. She's wet, but not enough—not for what I have planned. I want her dripping, want her desperate.

I yank her hips upward, exposing her further to my gaze, to my touch. She gasps, a sound caught between surprise and need, as I rain down more blows upon her now tender flesh. Each smack is a symphony, each whimper a verse in the song of our twisted love.

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Her response is visceral, primal, the wetness between her thighs growing with every strike. After ten more, she's there—dripping onto her thighs, ready for me. Just the way I like it.

I'm on my knees now, the scent of her arousal thick in the air, and I can't help but lean down to savor the taste. "Fuck princess, I need to lick that up," I murmur before my tongue sweeps over her slick folds, lapping up every drop. She's sweet and musky, a flavor that's fucking addictive. I shove two fingers into her dripping cunt, feeling her tight walls clench at the intrusion.

"Fuck Matteo, that feels so good..." Her voice is a ragged moan that spirals my desire even higher.

My left hand finds her clit, rubbing circles into it as I pump my right-hand fingers in and out, setting a relentless rhythm. I drag my tongue over her again, then trail it upwards, giving her back hole the same worship I bestowed upon her clit. The ring of muscle trembles beneath my tongue's caress.

"I'm gonna cum," Eleanor gasps, her body tensing as the wave crashes over her. Her pussy clenches around my fingers, milking them with the force of her release. I don't let up, pushing her through the orgasm until she's begging me, pleading, "Stop, stop... I can't take anymore!"

I pull my fingers from her cunt, leaving her gasping, and circle the bud above. Slowly, I push in, claiming her other hole. "Oh Matteo," she moans, and the sound is music to my ears.

"Let me stretch you wide Princess," I growl, working my fingers inside her slowly, scissoring them to widen her for me. My cock throbs with the need to be inside her, but patience—patience is key.

I reach for the nightstand, pulling out the lube and the new vibrator—a little gift for nights just like this. "I bought us a present," I say, a wicked grin spreading across my face. I douse her puckered hole with lube, watching as it glistens on her skin.

I press the vibrator against her, easing it into her cunt, and position the tickle bit against her swollen clit. She shivers, anticipation building, and then I'm there, lining myself up.

"Oh, fuck Matteo, that's it," Eleanor cries out as I push into her ass, slow and steady. I watch, entranced, as she swallows every inch of me. Once I'm balls deep, I give her a moment, let her adjust to the fullness before I click the button on the dildo.

The first vibration hits, and she jumps, a sharp intake of breath telling me everything I need to know. "Oh my God, Matteo," she writhes, and I feel the vibrations against my cock, adding another layer to the already intense sensation.

"I feel so full." Her words are strained, breathy, and I can sense her teetering on the edge once more.

"Stay still, Princess," I instruct, though every instinct screams to move, to take her hard and fast.

"Take it," I grunt, my free hand coming down hard on her ass, the sound echoing off the walls of our bedroom. Eleanor's body jerks beneath me, her pussy clenching tight around the vibrator that's buried deep inside her.

"Oh, you like that, Princess," I snicker, feeling a savage satisfaction at the way her

moans fill the room. I smack her again, and she cries out, "Fuck Matteo, I'm gonna cum so quick."

"Good girl," I hiss, beginning to move. My hips pull back, dragging out the sensation before I slam into her once more. I grip the base of the dildo, keeping it locked in place so each thrust sends vibrations rippling through us both. "Oh shit, don't stop, Fuck, Matteo," she gasps, and I can hear the desperation lacing every word.

I'm not gentle, never have been – it's not the world I live in, not the soul I own. But with Eleanor... with her, there's this fierce need to claim, to possess in a way that's mine alone. It's dark and heady, the way she submits, the way she takes what I give and begs for more.

"Harder?" I taunt, already knowing the answer. She doesn't disappoint.

"Please, Matteo..."

That's all the permission I need. My pace quickens, animalistic groans ripping from my throat as the sensations build. The damn vibrator presses against me through the thin wall of her ass, and I swear it's going to be the death of me. My cock is steel, every nerve alight as if I've got electricity coursing through my veins.

"Fuck, Eleanor..." I pant, barely recognising my voice, rough and raw with lust. I feel my balls tighten, the vibrations from the handle making them draw up close to my body. It's too much, all-consuming, and I can't hold back any longer.

"Matteo!" she screams, her inner muscles clamping down on the toy as her orgasm tears through her.

And that's it – the clamp of her around me, the pulse of her pleasure – it undoes me. I grip her hips, fingers digging into flesh, and I thrust harder, faster, chasing my own

release. I'm teetering on the edge, every muscle coiled, every sense heightened until it happens.

Her ass squeezes impossibly tight around me, and the world narrows down to the raw, primal rhythm of our bodies. There's no holding back the roar that escapes me as I come, my vision blurring to nothing but the ink stains of darkness on the edge of my sight. Her name is a mantra on my lips, a vow, a fucking salvation as I spill myself into her.

"Christ..." I exhale, my breath ragged. The lingering tremors of my release continue to shudder through me, echoes of the storm that just raged between us. We're a mess of sweat and sin, and as I collapse beside her, I know we're exactly where we belong.

My heart hammers against my chest, each beat echoing the carnal rhythm we've set. This is it—the most earth-shattering orgasm I've ever had, and it's all because of her. The thought of doing this every damn day sends another jolt through my spent cock, twitching with the promise of more.

Eleanor's laughter, light and unburdened, cuts through the darkness. "I guess we need another shower," she says, the humor in her voice a stark contrast to the depravity of what we've just shared.

"Guess so," I grunt, still reeling. I help her up, my movements heavy with satisfaction. Before she can steady herself, I smack her ass—a sharp, possessive slap that paints her skin the perfect shade of pink. "Your pink ass is my favourite thing to see."

She blushes, that sweet rose color creeping along her delicate cheekbones, and walks backward toward the bathroom. Even now, she's got that defiant spark, challenging me with every step. But it doesn't matter—she's mine, and I'm hers, twisted together in this fucked-up dance of power and desire. It's dark, it's dangerous, but in the end,

it's the only thing that feels like home.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

Eleanor Wang

My eyes scan over the pages spread out before me, but they're just blurs—blots of black on white that mean shit all to me right now. I can't shake the memory; the recoil of the gun still thrums through my veins like a second pulse.

I thought I wanted nothing to do with the Riccis' world, to keep my hands clean and my conscience clear. But fuck, was I naive. Watching Matteo, seeing the lengths he'd go for me... it's twisted, but it's got me feeling more alive than I've been in years. The sidelines were never gonna be enough.

Matteo isn't insane—no, he's calculated, cold as ice when he needs to be. But to me? He's something else entirely. He's fire and fury, sure, but also whispers and warmth. When his world bleeds into ours—at home—he's still mine. Still soft, even if his hands have done things that would make most stomachs churn.

"Princess?" His voice cuts through the fog in my head. There's a click of fingers, a snap close to my face, pulling me back.

"Shit sorry, what's up?" My voice doesn't match the pounding of my heart. I'm not scared, not exactly. It's more like awe, maybe respect. Or something darker, something that whispers that I'm just like him.

"I called you three times Eleanor, you sure you're okay?" His frown digs deep lines into otherwise youthful skin, concern shadowing those sharp, dangerous features.

He's worried about me—worried I'll see him as a monster. Little does he know, I'm

starting to think we're cut from the same cloth. A killer's cloth. I killed a man and slept soundly, wrapped in dreams soaked in vengeance. Am I fucked up for that? Maybe. But Matteo, he gets it. He always has.

I want to laugh, to tell him he's got nothing to worry about, that I don't fear him. I respect the hell out of him. And despite—or maybe because of—the blood on his hands, I feel safe. Protected. Because I know, without a doubt, there's not a fucking thing in this world he wouldn't do for me.

"Fine, baby, just daydreaming," I assure him, forcing a smile. It's half true. Daydreams and nightmares are getting hard to tell apart these days. But this? This raw, violent life? It's our reality. And as fucked up as it is, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Maybe I should've stayed ten years ago, I think, tracing the cold wood of the desk with a fingertip. But then the ghosts of those betrayers flicker through my mind. No, safety was never guaranteed, not even within the gilded cage of Matteo Ricci's world.

He arches an eyebrow, then he leans down, lips brushing mine—a gentle storm, a tender tempest. "I hope it's a nice daydream," he murmurs against my mouth.

"Baby, any daydream that consists of you is nice," I answer, tasting the truth in my words. His chuckle rumbles like distant gunfire, sending shivers down my spine. "Well, thank you, Mrs. Ricci."

"Still not your Mrs yet; stop counting your chickens before they've hatched," I tease back, half-hearted, because goddamn if the idea doesn't thrill me to the core.

"Just over two weeks left, Princess; close enough!" His voice holds a promise, one sealed in blood and whispered vows.

I mimic chicken wings with my arms, a playful threat in the midst of our dangerous ballet. "Don't make me turn your ass pink again!"

"As appealing as that sounds, Matteo, I have a mountain of paperwork to do thanks to you and your paperwork allergies," I retort, cocking an eyebrow in challenge.

"That shit gives me hives," he groans, scratching his arm in mock agony. It's almost endearing—almost.

"Thankfully, you're rich enough to pay me double to do it. I need mental health pay too for the amount of stress you're putting me through." My voice is half-joking, but the edge is real.

"Sorry, Princess, I've never been good at the whole paperwork side of it all; I prefer to be out on my feet than in here on my ass," he admits with a shrug that speaks volumes of his restlessness.

"Plus, you're a billionaire now, I think that's good enough compensation for mental health pay." His gaze holds mine, both challenge and jest.

"Fuck off, cunt." I lob a pen at him, an ineffectual weapon that bounces harmlessly off his chest as he takes his seat by my side. Chairs matching, like some twisted domestic fantasy—courtesy of Angel, no doubt.

"Should've asked for my own desk," I mutter under my breath, remembering how Matteo shot down the idea, claiming we'd just end up knocking elbows all day long. The thought irks me—his constant nearness a smothering heat.

The chair creaks as I shift, trying to carve out a sliver of personal space between us. His presence is an enveloping shadow, his warmth a constant pressure against my side. Fucking annoying.

"Need room to breathe, Matteo," I mutter, nudging him with my elbow. He just grins that maddening grin and taps away on his laptop, oblivious to the claustrophobia creeping up my throat.

"I have a few things I need to set up for the four-seat meeting next week," he announces, eyes not leaving the screen. "And I need to find a new receptionist as well."

My brow arches involuntarily. "Why a new receptionist? Is one of the girls leaving?"

He pops the 'p' like a gunshot. "Nope. I want to fire Becky."

"Fire her?" I frown, puzzled and a tad annoyed—another thing to deal with. "Why?"

"Since she found out about you, her advances have gotten worse," he sighs heavily, a rare note of weariness threading his voice. "I don't like the way she acts towards me."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

I roll my eyes. "Well, she pisses me off too, Matteo," I admit, crossing my arms over my chest. "But she's good at her job, isn't she? And I trust you enough to know nothing will happen. So I'm not fussed if she stays or goes." I shrug, trying to mask the twinge of jealousy.

Matteo leans back in his chair, lips curling into a smirk that's all dark promise and danger. "Oh, I know Princess, but she pisses me off," he growls, the words heavy with unspoken threats. "Most people who piss me off get a bullet between their eyes. And she is heading that way if she doesn't back off, hence why I need to fire her."

"Okay, but maybe we can put it off for another couple of weeks? Maybe after this meeting?" I say, trying to sound reasonable amidst the chaos that seems to follow him like a shadow. "I have enough paperwork to keep me employed for the next six years so I can't really help you just yet anyway. And you have enough work and the meeting. Let's just worry about it after?"

He frowns, the gesture foreign on his usually impassive face. "Yeah, I think that's actually a good idea." But his eyes darken, and I know he's imagining Becky's face when he tells her she's done. "But it doesn't make seeing her face every day any easier."

I let out a belly laugh that ricochets off the walls. "And this is why I love you," I tell him. "Any other man would love the attention, yet you're acting like she has COVID!" My heart thrums, not just from the adrenaline that comes with being near him, but from something deeper, more dangerous.

"Princess, even after you left, I still didn't see any other women." His voice has

dropped to a whisper now, the confession slipping out like a silver blade glinting in the dark. "You broke that part of me."

"Broke that part?" I echo, my pulse racing.

"Yep, you came in and smashed it. Every time I looked at other women, all I could see was how different they were from you." He admits it sheepishly, and it's so fucking endearing I can barely stand it.

Fuck, this guy makes my knees weak and my mouth water. I wanna suck his dick for those sweet words. "Dude, you can't say shit like that," I scold him, pointing a finger at him, then jabbing it toward the laptop screen piled with digital mayhem. "I'm never going to get any work done if you keep making my undies wet and wanting to jump your bones," I sigh, frustration knotting in my throat.

"I can always hire an admin lady," he teases with a wink that's pure sin.

"Then what would happen to my job?" I snap back, the challenge clear in my tone.

He wiggles his eyebrows, a wolfish grin splitting his face. "I can pay you to sit there and look pretty."

"Fuck off, cunt," I bark, chucking another pen at him—it sails past his head and clatters against the wall. I'm running low on ammo here. "This is why I need my own desk. You're too distracting!"

He leans over, presses a kiss to my cheek that sizzles against my skin. "Get back to work before I have to fire you," he murmurs, the threat playful but edged with steel.

As he stands and strides toward the door, confidence rolling off him in waves, I can't help but call out, "Where are you going?"

"To make sure the office is empty and ready for the date I need," he throws back over his shoulder, his voice trailing off like the tail end of a storm.

The door clicks shut behind Matteo, his presence lingering like the echo of a gunshot. My chest tightens; freedom tastes bittersweet on my tongue. I need space like I need air, yet the silence without him screams too loud. Fucking paradox.

I slump deeper in my chair, alone in the sprawling office that's more a battlefield than a sanctuary. My gaze flits to the laptop, where the blinking notification light mocks me. Two new emails. Aela and Patrick, their names weaving through my thoughts like ghosts.

"Fuck it," I mutter and click open the first email. "Miss you" stares back at me. My heart does a traitorous leap—damn emotions.

"Hey sexy lady," the email starts, and I can practically hear Aela's laughter ringing through the words. Her concern bleeds through the screen, asking if they can visit. Patrick chimes in with his own brand of affectionate grumbling. They miss me. The thought warms and stings all at once.

"Miss you too, you crazy fucks," I whisper, feeling the pull of old ties, memories tugging like chains.

Dragging my thoughts back from London, I shake my head. It's been only four weeks since I left, but each day has stretched, contorted into an eternity of change.

My belongings are adrift somewhere on the ocean, heading this way. I picture the crates, wondering if they're crammed with more than just clothes and books. Knowing my luck, I'll be drowning in furniture too. As if I don't have enough shit to sift through. Old life, new life—all cluttered together in storage units I've yet to see.

"Get your head in the game, Eleanor," I scold myself. The past is a distraction, a siren call to a ship already wrecked on these rugged shores.

The second email glares up at me, "Visiting" demanding attention. Matteo would have a field day with this. Hell, he'd probably set the docks on fire just to keep unwanted guests at bay.

"Too much drama, not enough booze," I groan. Alone with my swirling thoughts and the whispers of emails unanswered, I feel the void Matteo left behind. The man's like a fucking drug—addictive, dangerous, and impossible to quit.

"Stockholm Syndrome," I mutter under my breath, the words tasting like iron on my tongue. This isn't love; it's a goddamn hostage situation, and I'm both captor and captive. Welcome to the family, Eleanor. Welcome to the goddamn Ricci madness.

My fingers hover over the keyboard, a deep breath steadying my nerves. The cursor blinks, relentless. Patrick's words glare up at me from the screen, a demand hidden beneath the veneer of concern. A visit. I can't have that—not yet. Too many pieces still in play, too much blood still fresh on the floor.

"Fuck," I mutter, typing out a response with more force than necessary. The keys click like gunshots in the silence of Matteo's absence.

Subject: Cannot wait

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

Aela, I cannot wait to see you guys! We're flat out with work right now though; I'm Matteo's PA now. Matteo is even worse with his paperwork than Patrick was. Can you imagine? I'll check a date with Matteo and let you know. Love and miss you both,

Eleanor xox0

"Shit," I hiss. My heart thumps—a caged bird desperate for the sky—as I hit 'send.' The echo of my pulse drowns out the quiet of the office. I drag a hand through my hair, tugging at the ends as if I could pull the stress straight out of my skull.

"Matteo won't like this," I whisper to the empty room. His world's one where control isn't just desired, it's bloody well demanded. And visitors? They're variables he can't fucking stand.

I owe them—Aela, Patrick—my life. For ten years, they were my shield against the chaos. But Matteo... He's not just chaos; he's the goddamn storm that swallows it whole.

"Blow job first, then ask," I decide, a sardonic laugh bubbling up. It's twisted, this dance we do—pleasure and power wrapped tight in silken sheets. He's always softer, pliant almost, when lust clouds his judgment.

"Food for thought," I scoff, rising from the chair. My legs are stiff, coiled tension begging for release. Maybe after I've worked Matteo over, he'll say yes. Maybe he'll understand why they need to see me, why they can't just take my word that I'm alive and kicking.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Matteo Ricci

"Eleanor, dinner ready!" I bellow up the stairs, the clink of cutlery against porcelain a symphony to my ears. It's the one thing that's pure in this twisted life—a home-cooked meal for my makeshift family. Angel and Spike have stuck to me like shadows, long before Eleanor and Niko walked back into my chaos. They aren't just fixtures—they're fucking necessities.

The house hums with the warmth of loyalty and the scent of bubbling sauce. I'm obsessive, compulsive—my need for them is non-negotiable. Without their daily presence, I'd unravel faster than a bullet tears through flesh.

"Niko, can you set the table please?" My voice carries from the kitchen where I'm king of the castle.

"Already done, Pappy." The pride in his voice grates on me—wrong title again.

"Nope, try again!" I chuckle, shaking my head as I stir the pot. Kid's got a way of testing names like he's trying on shoes. But deep down, I crave that simple three-letter word—Dad. It's foreign, yet it's all I fucking want.

Dad. That label hangs in the air, unfamiliar and enticing. It's not just about the word; it's about being her man, putting another baby in Eleanor's belly. The thought alone gets me hard—wrapped around her, protecting what's mine.

"Need help?" Eleanor's voice slices through my longing, standing there, all queenly in the doorway.

"Princess, I don't need help cooking, only cleaning up after," I shoot back, the corners

of my mouth betraying a smirk. She's got this habit of vanishing when it's time to scrub the sins off the plates.

"Poof!" And she's gone, laughter trailing behind her like a ghost.

"Come and grab your plates Fuck Faces! I might cook it, but I don't bus tables too!" I call out, doling out portions of lasagna like I'm dealing cards—a hand everyone wants in on.

"Coming!" The chorus echoes through the house, each voice a testament to this twisted domestic bliss we've carved out in the dark heart of Australia's underworld.

The phone's ring slices through the domestic hum, a harbinger of chaos. Spike's on it like a hawk, his eyes narrowing as he listens to the other end. He turns to me, nodding once—our signal. It's go-time.

"Princess!" My voice booms up the staircase, a commanding echo in the cavernous house. "We gotta go out."

"Really?" Eleanor's voice drifts down, laced with annoyance. "I was just about to have a eat."

"Sorry! And wear something black please," I call back, my words chasing her disappearing footsteps. Silence hangs, a noose of uncertainty. Is she tired of this life? Of me?

I hear her before I see her; those heavy steps betraying her non ninja-like descent. She lands with a flourish, missing the last two steps—a shadow dancer in her element.

"Hiya," she quips, hands darting through the air in fake martial arts chops. That laugh escapes me—it's involuntary, watching her juggle innocence and lethality.

"Come on, Master Splinter, let's go." I can't keep the amusement from my voice, but there's an edge to it, steel beneath velvet.

"Splinter?!" Mock shock paints her delicate features. "It's Michelangelo!" She twirls, hands mimicking the deadly dance of nun chucks.

"Really?" I laugh, grinning despite the urgency.

"We're lean, we're mean and we're green," she declares, hand pressed to her chest in mock solemnity. Bloody hell, she's a riot.

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I arch an eyebrow at her. "Didn't realize you were such a devoted fan."

"I'm not; it was Niko's favourite movie when he was little." Her eyes glaze over with reminiscence. "Thousands of hours, Matteo. It's etched into my soul."

"Then, Michelangelo," I say, extending my arm in old-world courtesy, a dark smile playing on my lips, "may I have this honour?"

Her hand slips into the crook of my elbow, a silent pact sealed between us.

"We got two bodies to extinguish," I tell her, voice cheerful as a kid on Christmas morning.

"Oh, really?" The way her eyes light up, you'd think I'd promised her diamonds, not bloodshed.

"The blood lust has taken over there, Princess," I chuckle, but there's pride in that sound. She's mine—fierce and fearless.

"Absolutely," she says, the thrill of the hunt sparking within her. And with that, we stride together towards the night, ready to unleash hell upon anyone who dares cross the Ricci family.

"Okay, okay, let's go kill the past!" Eleanor's voice rings out, fierce and determined, but I'm not fooled. There's a hint of pallor beneath her usual fire, a subtle drain of color that tells me she's not as unaffected as she seems.

"Princess," I start, my voice low and steady, "we're just gonna get the intel on who's pullin' these strings, then we're out. Spike can handle the clean-up." My eyes lock onto hers, willing her to see the truth in my words. I shrug nonchalantly. "Unless you're itchin' to show off those sharpshooter skills again?"

A smirk dances on her lips, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. I wrap an arm around her, guiding her with a gentle nudge towards what awaits us outside. "Spike's got the wheels ready. Let's do this quick and get back to our boy."

"Okaaaay, you're right," she breathes out, more to herself than to me. We stride out together, the cool night air a slap of reality. The car sits idling, a beast waiting to devour the road. Spike's silhouette is barely visible behind the wheel, but his presence fills the space like a silent promise of violence.

"Boss!" he greets, nodding as we slip into the leather seats.

I fasten my seatbelt, the click sounding like the chamber of a gun locking into place. "Spike, what's the low down?" I demand, every muscle tensed and ready for what's coming.

"Dean and Jeffrey spotted 'em holed up in Redfern," he says, his voice as gruff as gravel. "Just got word they nabbed 'em both. They're hauling ass to the warehouse now."

"Good." The one word is a growl, satisfaction mixed with a hunger for retribution. The engine roars to life, echoing my dark anticipation, and we pull away from the curb, leaving behind the illusion of normalcy, plunging headfirst into the abyss.

The streetlights blur past us, painting Spike's set jaw in strobes of orange and white. "So, we're gonna head over to the warehouse," he says, the car devouring the road beneath us, "and hopefully they'll have 'em tied up and waiting for us."

"Good!" My voice is a snarl, the sound of it raw with the promise of violence. "I wanna know who is behind this." The craving for retribution gnaws at my gut, an animalistic hunger for blood and answers.

"We'll be there in twenty, boss." Spike's words slice through the tension like a blade.

I can't sit still, can't fucking wait to tear into whoever dared cross us. I turn to Eleanor, her profile carved from shadows and moonlight, every line of her face screaming she's made for this life as much as I am. I grab her chin, rough but needing her to feel me, to understand that this world, our world, won't swallow us whole.

"It's okay, Princess. The big bad wolf will deal with it," I promise her, my lips brushing softly against hers. It's a kiss meant to reassure, to claim, to remind her and me both who the fuck we are in this dark city's food chain.

But then her eyes—those sharp, clever windows to her fierce soul—widen. Shock ripples across her features, and I feel it. The prelude to chaos. A split second where everything slows down, and I know, I fucking know?—

Impact.

Metal screeches, glass shatters, and the world tilts on its axis. Instinct kicks in; I throw my arms around Eleanor, yanking her close as the car lifts off the ground. We're airborne, a brutal dance with gravity and fate, and then?—

Darkness swallows us whole.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eleanor Wang

Time slows, the world flips—once, twice—an eternity of chaos. I'm a rag-doll in a tin can, thrown side to side, every bone-jarring impact a drumbeat to the ringing in my ears. My head's pounding like it's got its own heartbeat. We skid to a halt, and reality snaps back. The car's upright, but the roof is smothering us, so damn close it presses me into the crushed leather of the back seat.

"Eleanor?" Spike's voice cuts through the dissonance, muffled, like he's shouting from beneath the water. "Eleanor?" Louder now, urgent.

"Here..." I groan, my voice a raspy whisper lost in the wreckage. My hand flails, seeking something solid. "Boss?" He's not calling for me now; his concern's for Matteo. I twist, a sharp stab of pain shooting through me as I reach toward the right where Matteo should be. Nothing but empty space and twisted metal where he should be.

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"What happened?" Panic laces Spike's voice. "Boss!" Desperation now, a raw edge that chills me more than the cold creeping in.

"I can't see him!" The realisation slams into me, a punch to the gut. Matteo isn't here. He's gone.

"Fuck!" Spike's curse is a snarl of fury and fear. "We need to get out, can you move?"

I try, god, I try, but my body's a lead weight, pinned down. "I don't think so, I'm pretty much laying on the seat back here," I admit through gritted teeth.

"Can you reach or see your door at all?" Spike's trying to keep it together, but his voice is tight, strained.

"I can't even see you," I rasp out, the effort to speak sending spikes of pain radiating through me.

Footsteps. Running towards us—a rapid cadence over gravel. "Help! Help!" I scream into the void, hoping against hope it's someone who gives a damn.

Metal grinds on metal, the distinct sound of our tomb being pried open. "Help!" I cry again, louder, desperate.

"Eleanor stop!" Spike's shout is a jolt of electricity. "There is no way the authorities got here that quick."

Fear, ice-cold, seeps into my veins. If it's not the cops... then who the hell is it?

"Who is it?" The words slip out, a whisper lost in the chaos. Then pain, sharp and unyielding—someone's got my ankle. Light floods the crumpled space where metal used to be, blinding me as they wrench me from my steel cocoon. "Argh!" The scream tears from my throat, raw and desperate. My leg's on fire, each tug a new circle of hell.

"Fuck! Stop!" It's pointless, the plea drowned by the grinding of twisted car parts and my own ragged breaths.

"Fuck, Eleanor!" Spike's voice is distant thunder, filled with panic and fury. I hear the sounds of his struggle, boots against dash, a futile attempt to reach me.

Cold air slaps my face, a cruel reminder that I'm no longer trapped. But freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. And I've lost... so much.

"Matteo..." The name is a prayer, a curse. My eyes search frantically, and there, a shadow sprawled on the unforgiving ground. "No, no, no, no, no!" Desperation claws at my chest, a wild animal refusing its cage.

"Matteo, wake up!" My screams are a siren's call, unanswered, unheard. The truth is a blade twisting in my gut—he's too still, too silent.

"Stop." The command is like gravel, chillingly close. "He's dead." A dark voice, not Spike's, seeps into my ear, carrying the finality of a grave.

My heart hammers, then halts. Matteo can't be gone; this can't be how our story ends. But black spots dance before my eyes, a macabre ballet to the rhythm of my disjointed breaths. The darkness comes, greedy, consuming everything until there's nothing left but the void.

"Are you sure he's dead?" The voice slices through the murky haze of consciousness, sharp and cold. I try to rise, to confront the reality of that question, but my body is a slab of concrete, unyielding, heavy with dread. My eyes, they're shuttered windows refusing to open, keeping me in the dark.

"One hundred percent I checked." Those words seal it—Matteo, sprawled on unforgiving asphalt, life bleeding out. No, no, no. This can't be. My heart claws at the inside of my chest, desperate to escape the truth. Where am I? The surface beneath me is firm, steady—a stark contrast to the throbbing chaos of my leg. It's broken, has to be. The pain is its own entity, gnawing, biting at my senses.

"She's waking up," someone murmurs close by, their voice laced with a quiet urgency that sets my nerves on edge.

Eyelids heavy as iron curtains finally lift after an agonizing struggle. Blinding white assaults me, a sterile blaze of lights glaring from every direction. Fuck, it's too much. With a groan, I attempt to shield my eyes, but something halts my arm mid-air. Chains. Cold metal encircling my wrist, chaining me to the hospital bed. But this... this isn't a hospital. It's a room drowned in white, walls lined with bookcases crammed full, spilling over with books—a silent audience to my captivity.

"Fuck." The word is a whisper of dust, a futile rebellion against the bindings that hold me down, against the blinding light, against the stark, empty reality that unfolds before me.

My gaze flits across the room, landing on a figure beside me. A sense of surreal calm floats through my mind, like I'm caught in some twisted daydream. Books upon books, their spines a kaleidoscope of muted colours and faded gold letters, surround us in this sterile white tomb. But no, this can't be heaven—not with the stench of betrayal souring the air.

"Patrick?" My voice barely breaks the silence, a hoarse whisper betraying my confusion.

"El." His reply is soft, almost tender, but there's something cold lurking beneath it.

"What the hell, Patrick? What are you doing here?" I demand, fighting against the restraints that hold me captive.

His smile doesn't reach his eyes as he leans closer. "I've come to take you back home," he says, as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Home?" The word tastes like ash on my tongue. "I don't understand?"

"Home, El." His smile widens, a predator baring its teeth. "You belong to me."

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"Belong?" I snort, despite the fear coiling in my gut. "Did you just say that I belong to you?"

"Exactly." He tilts his head, amusement flickering in his gaze. "You didn't think I did everything I did for you for no reason? Come on, El, you're not that stupid, are you?"

My heart hammers against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat echoing Matteo's name. "I don't understand. Why? I thought you were my friend?"

"Friend, yes." He shrugs, dismissing my confusion like it's nothing. "But I also own you. I've owned you longer than you think."

Panic claws at me, a feral beast trapped in a cage. This is all wrong. Patrick—the one I love, the one I trusted—now claims me like I'm property. A possession.

"Where is Matteo?" The words scrape out, raw and desperate.

"Dead," he says, casual as if discussing the weather, indifferent to the way my world crumbles.

"And Aela? Where is she?" My voice trembles; my world narrows to the pounding in my head.

"In London. She doesn't know about any of this." He watches me, gauging my reaction.

A spike of pain shoots from my leg to my hip as I attempt to sit up, a scream

strangled in my throat. "Fuck," I gasp out. Childbirth was a fucking breeze compared to this agony.

"Easy, El." Patrick's voice holds no comfort, only a command to submit.

The pain's a bitch, gnawing at my insides, making every breath a battle. I shift, trying to find some fraction of relief, but Patrick's hand is firm on my shoulder.

"Stop moving you silly lass; you broke your leg and cracked a few ribs," he snarls, shoving me back against the pillows. His eyes never leave the screen of his phone, like I'm just another item on his bloody to-do list. "The doctor will be here in five minutes to give you some more painkillers. Just lay down and be patient; we can't fly till we get your bones set."

My gaze drifts, heavy and half-lidded, and lands on the other man in the room—the one I've ignored until now. It clicks. Tino, from Matteo's office, with that slick grin and shark eyes. He stands there, leering, like he's got secrets too dark for daylight.

"Tino?" My voice cracks, sounding foreign even to myself.

"Was wondering if you remembered my handsome face," he beams, smug satisfaction oozing from every syllable.

His face might be chiseled from stone, but it's his loyalty to Enzo that's unbreakable—or so I thought. "Don't you work for Enzo?" The frown etches deeper into my forehead, confusion mixing with the throbbing ache of betrayal.

"Yes," he says, his smirk stretching wider, baring teeth like a predator scenting blood.

Patrick's patience snaps like a frayed rope. "Shut up, you two." He barks the order, authority radiating from him with the ease of a man used to being obeyed. "Tino, go

see what's taking the doctor so long; I need this leg dealt with so I can go home."

"Right away, boss," Tino mutters, spinning on his heel and striding out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Matteo Ricci

Beeping. That incessant beeping drills into my skull like a jackhammer, shattering the void I've been lost in. Eyelids weigh a ton each, refusing to cooperate. Every muscle screams in protest, rebellion against movement.

"He's waking up," a voice, soft and unfamiliar, slices through the fog wrapping around my consciousness.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, boss," another, this one gruff and edged with concern, from the other side.

Confusion reigns in my head. My mind's a scrambled mess, trying to piece together the fragmented snapshots that are my last memories. The weight on my chest is crushing—physical and mental—a heavy, leaden blanket smothering me.

"Princess..." It's all I can manage, a croak more desperate than audible. My tongue feels swollen, dry as the barren outback that stretches across this godforsaken continent.

"Boss," the urgent tone from my right snaps at me, demanding. "Boss, you need to wake up, mate."

Gritting my teeth, I fight against the heaviness of my own body, forcing my eyes open to a slit. Blurred shapes swim into view, slowly sharpening into focus. The

stark, sterile walls of the makeshift hospital room claw at my senses. Cold, hard reality bites down. Warehouse... our warehouse. The place where we patch up bullet wounds and broken bones away from prying eyes.

"Princess!" I try for a shout, but it's nothing more than a ragged whisper, a weak call that wouldn't scare a rat. She should be here. Where the hell is she? Panic claws up my throat, a wild animal caged in my ribcage. Fear isn't something I'm accustomed to, an unwelcome stranger in my house of power and control. But it's there now, gnawing at my insides like a feral beast.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

"Where the fuck is Eleanor?!" The words scratch their way out of my throat, raw and desperate. My gaze darts around the sterile gloom of the warehouse hospital room. No sign of her. Only shadows and silence answer back.

"She isn't here, boss, she was taken," Spike's voice cuts through the fog in my brain, sharp as a switchblade.

The room spins, my heart hammers against my chest like it's trying to break free. I can feel the darkness slithering up from the depths, threatening to drag me under. No. Not now.

"Boss, god dammit, don't you dare; I need you here to help me." Spike's grip on my arm is ironclad, hauling me back from the edge of oblivion. His snarl is inches from my face, hot breath searing my skin.

"Who took her?" I demand, each word a bullet fired point-blank.

"I don't know, they turned up seconds after the crash, used the jaws of life on the car, grabbed her and left." He exhales long and hard, his frustration a tangible thing in the air between us. "I was pinned by the steering wheel; I couldn't get out to help her. I'm sorry, boss."

"Fuck, we gotta go get her." I try to rise, but pain lances through every inch of my body, a brutal reminder of my own mortality. It's no use; I'm as weak as a newborn fawn, limbs trembling with the effort.

"Sorry boss, you're not moving till the doctor has finished with the x-rays and tests,"

Spike's plea is laced with worry, his eyes begging me to understand.

"Fuck!" The scream tears from me, a primal sound of anguish and self-loathing. Tears carve tracks through the grime on my face. "I fucking didn't keep her safe! I promised her I would keep her safe. I kept her with me at all times to keep her safe, but by keeping her close I got her kidnapped!"

Every confession feels like a nail driven into my flesh, an indictment of my failure. "This is all my fault; she was safer in bloody London!"

"Boss," Spike's hand is heavy on my shoulder, grounding me, a lifeline in the tempest. "I honestly don't think she was safe anywhere."

His eyes hold mine, and in them, I see the echo of my own torment. Regret flickers there, a ghostly flame in the dark. But beneath it, there's something else—something unyielding.

Eleanor might be quick-witted and sharp, her tongue aweapon that could cut through steel, but right now she needs me, and I'll be damned if I let her down again. No matter what it takes, I will find her. I will bring her home. Because without Eleanor, this twisted empire I've built is nothing but a house of cards, ready to collapse at the slightest breath.

"Alright, Spike, what are you not telling me?" My voice is a gravelly growl, the edge of command still there despite the pain that laces every word. I can feel the weight of his hesitation before he even speaks.

Spike drags a chair across the concrete floor, its screech a bitter harmony to my thrumming pulse. He collapses into it like his bones are lead, running a hand over his stubbled face as if to wipe away the fatigue and fear etched into his skin. "Angel found out some info after we left," he begins, voice thick with unease. "All that

digging he did into the camera footage, and the people living in the apartment building Eleanor lived in ten years ago pulled up a name we didn't realize was important until now."

"Whose?" The frown on my face feels like it's carved from stone.

"Patrick Murphy." The name hits the air like a bullet, and suddenly the room's too tight, too hot.

"Patrick fucking Murphy? The London snake?" I spit out the words, venom coating my tongue. "The one who helped to hide her and kept Niko a secret?" My volume's cranking up, heat rising in my chest, a beast awakening. "How the fuck did that cunt's name come up?"

Spike won't meet my eyes; they're glued to the cracked floor, guilt written in the lines of his slumped posture. "Well, he owned the apartment building. In fact, he even owned the apartment building Eleanor first lived in; the one over in Glebe. I don't know what it all means, but he's been tied to her for as long as you have..."

"What the fuck?" I snarl, my brain trying to piece together this twisted puzzle, each revelation another jab to my gut. "This makes no sense."

"Angel's been smashing his head against it too," Spike says, his voice strained thin. "He's been scouring through his Australian bank statements and finances, but there's nothing out of place. Just rent from properties and money from sales of buildings...all clean. All after she left Australia."

"So, he bailed the same time she did, tailing her scent like a bloodhound?" The words tumble out, laced with confusion and a rising tide of fury. "You don't think he's the bastard who had her raped?"

"Fuck knows," Spike mutters, looking about as lost as I feel. "He isn't tied to any mob down under, or so Angel reckons. No strings, no connections."

"Christ." I press my palms into my eyes, willing away the darkness that threatens to swallow me whole. Who the hell is Patrick Murphy, really?

"Boss, we'll figure this shit out," Spike assures with a grim determination that mirrors my own. But deep down, the question gnaws at my insides: Who the fuck has my Eleanor?

Pain jolts through me as I shove the sheets away, every breath a goddamn knife in my side. "He isn't Irish Mafia, is he?" The question claws out of my throat, raw and ragged.

Spike's eyes are hard, his jaw set tight. "Not that Angel can find." He's got that look, the one that says we're wading into deeper shit than we thought.

"Christ." My hand scrapes over my face, dragging along stubble that feels like sandpaper. "This isn't happening. Who the fuck is Patrick Murphy?"

"Still piecing it together," Spike huffs, frustration lining his face.

The door swings open with a creak that grates on my last nerve, and the doc strides in, all business and bullshit bedside manners. "Doc, I need to get this sorted out now," I growl at him, feeling like a caged animal.

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"Okay, got it." He's flipping through papers clipped to a board, not looking at me. "I have your x-rays here. You have three cracked ribs, a fractured collarbone and cheekbone, you also had dislocated fingers, and you have a concussion."

Every injury cataloged is another reminder of how she's out there, alone. Vulnerable.

"Fuck's sake." It slips out, a hiss between clenched teeth.

"Given your condition, we should—" he starts, but I'm not having any of it.

"Skip the damn formalities," I cut him off. "MRI, now. Then I'm off to find Eleanor."

"Mr. Ricci, your injuries?—"

"Are nothing compared to what'll happen if I don't get her back." There's a promise in my voice, one laced with all the violence I've meted out before and will unleash again.

The doc's verdict finally comes after an eternity. "No bleeding inside," he says, like it's a fucking consolation prize for the agony lacing my collarbone. My arm's been up under my chin for hours now, numbed by pills that make my extremities feel like they're floating somewhere in the room but not attached to me.

I push through my front door, each step a jab of pain—or what I can still feel of it. Stairs creak under my boots as I head straight for my room. No way I'm letting this brace imprison me any longer than necessary.

With a grunt, I peel it off, freedom and a sharp twinge greeting me together. Gotta be careful now, only use it when there's no other choice. I slide into stretch jeans, pull a black top over my head—tight against my skin—and shove the pain back where it belongs.

Two floors down, the Niko's lounge is a mess of tech and wires, whiteboards screaming with notes. A regular crime scene, minus the body bags. Niko's planted on the floor amidst it all, his eyes light up like flares when he spots me.

"Dad!" He launches himself at me, nearly crushing my already bruised ribs. His face buries in my chest, voice muffled. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"Easy, tiger," I chuckle, wincing as his grip tightens. I cup his face, guide him back an inch. "Let's not snap me in half, huh?"

"Shit, sorry, Dad." His apology comes out quick, eyes dancing with mischief.

"Watch the language," I scold, tapping the back of his skull lightly.

He grins, all cheek. "Mum said I can swear as long as it's inside the house and not out in public."

I shake my head, trying not to smile. Kid's got guts, I'll give him that.

"Your mother..." My words stall in the thick air, lodged deep in my throat. Niko's eyes are shimmering pools, brimming with unshed tears that tug at something primal inside me. I swipe a hand over the tightness in my chest, the ache there nothing to do with broken bones. "She's got her own style," I manage, voice rough like gravel. "If she gives you the green light on swearing, then hell, it's gospel."

"Boss." Angel's voice cuts through the tension, stern as a slap across the face. He's

standing—a sentinel by the pool table turned command center—eyebrows knitted like he's holding back a storm. "Sit the fuck down before you fall down!"

I can't sit; every fibre screams to keep moving, to tear the city apart brick by bloody brick until I find her. "I can't sit, I need to find her." The words are a growl, a challenge.

"Seriously cunt, put your fucking ass in a seat now before I make you," Angel snaps back, no hint of jest in his tone. His concern is as stifling as a chokehold, suffocating in its intensity. "We're on it, but you crashing to the floor won't help anyone."

Defiance simmers in my blood, but reason—or whatever twisted version of it I operate on—prevails. I slump into the nearest chair, the movement sending a jolt of pain shooting through my fractured collarbone. Gritting my teeth against the hurt, I lock eyes with Angel, who's all focus and fingers flying over his laptop keys.

"What have we got?" I demand, voice slicing through the hum of electronics and the scribble of markers on whiteboard.

Angel doesn't look up, but I can hear the click-clack of his determination, the hunt laid out in keystrokes. There's a war raging silent in this room, and we're right on the front lines, strategy our weapon of choice.

"Talk to me, Angel." It's not a request—it's an order, barked from a throat lined with desperation and the metallic taste of fear for Eleanor. Without her, the world's just shades of grey, and I'm a beast clawing through shadows.

Angel's fingers pause, hover above his keyboard like birds of prey ready to dive. "Okay," he starts, his voice rough as gravel, "we've been combing for everything to do with Patrick. All his properties, possible flight details..."

"Spit it out," I growl, my patience thinning like ice under a blowtorch.

He huffs, eyes still fixed on the screen. "Three in Sydney, two in Melbourne, one in Perth that he still owns. Used to be thirteen before he bailed ten years ago. Been selling them off..." His voice trails, but I'm already piecing the puzzle together, feeling that sick twist in my gut tightening with every word.

"Those renovations... always the same contractors, Murphys Contractors," Niko adds, looking up at me with Eleanor's sharp eyes. The kid's a genius, too damn smart for his own good—and mine. Eleanor's touch is all over him, her wit, her brains. Goddamn it, where is she?

"The last six properties are untouched, primo for flipping," Niko continues, snapping me back from the edge of my own spiraling thoughts.

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Angel finally tears his gaze from the laptop and faces me, dragging his hand down his face. "That leaves us with three here in Sydney."

"Where?" The word comes out strained, almost a snarl.

Niko's on it, rattling off addresses like he's reading from a grocery list, not potential lifelines to Eleanor. "Warehouse in Campsie, house in Botany, strip of shops in Blacktown."

"Details," I demand, needing more, always more.

"The shops are dead, haven't seen life in twelve years. Warehouse leased to some clothing joint. And the house... rented to a Mrs Tinsdale, seventy if she's a day. She owned it before Murphy swooped in, now pays a pittance to stay."

"Hasn't changed the rent in ten years..." He frowns, that crease between his brows deepening. Something's not right.

"Angel," I bark, a fresh surge of adrenaline kicking through my veins. "Mrs Tinsdale. Dig up what dirt you can. Now."

"Already on it, Boss." Angel's back to his laptop, fingers a blur.

The room spins, a carousel of chaos and possibility, each detail another potential lead to Eleanor. That woman, Mrs Tinsdale—she could hold the damn key. Where are you, Princess?

Angels head pops back up and says, "She's been a widow since she was twenty-six, her husband meeting his end in a brutal car wreck."

"Real accident or does it look like a hit?" I spit out the words, feeling that familiar itch of suspicion crawling up my spine.

"Accident, a car ran a red light, and he was killed on impact," Angel mutters, his eyes never leaving the screen.

"Work?" My voice cuts through the tension hanging in the air.

"Hold on, just hacking the ATO," Niko's fingers dance across the keyboard like he's playing a damn concerto. Kid's got skills, but this shit? It's next level.

"Hacking the what?!" My temples pound, head spinning with the cocktail of pain meds and adrenaline.

"Okay, I'm in..." The kid's all focus, concentration etched into his young face. "Right, so it seems she hasn't worked once in the last ten years."

Angel leans back, squinting at his own screen. "She's on disability due to breaking her back at work. Took a tumble down some stairs, got a payout, but needs the pension to survive."

"Um Dad....." Niko's voice trembles, and when I snap my gaze to him, his face is as white as bone.

"The owner of the company was Conner - Conner Murphy."

"For fuck's sake!" Fury explodes inside me, and the chair I'm perched on becomes a missile that crashes into the TV, shattering the screen. The sharp crack echoes my

rage. "What the fuck is going on?!"

"Watch your collarbone Boss," Angel huffs, not even flinching at my outburst.

"Spike!" My shout ricochets up the staircase. "Get the car ready, and strap on!"

"Angel, we're going to pay a visit to Mrs Tinsdale." The words are a growl, a promise of hell to anyone who stands in my way.

"Niko, you're going in the storage room." I turn to my son, locking eyes with him.

"The storage room?" He blinks, confusion written all over his face.

"Yep, I'm not taking the chances of having you with us, but I'm also not taking the chances of leaving you unprotected." I tilt my head up toward the ceiling where our fortress of solitude hides behind cold steel.

"Take your laptops with you." Angel's voice is firm, brokering no argument. "They work inside the room. You can keep an eye on us and help feed me information as I need it."

"Okay..." Niko's reply is soft, unsure, but there's no room for debate.

"Come on kid, I'll take you up." Angel gestures toward the stairs, already moving, ready for whatever hell we're about to unleash.

"Niko," I grasp his shoulder, squeezing tight. "I love you." Three little words that mean more than any empire I could ever build.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

"Love you too, Dad," Niko's voice cuts through the tension like a knife, his words quick and sure. That hits me harder than any bullet could. There's no damn way I thought I could stay standing without Eleanor by my side, but looking at him—my boy—it's clear he's the anchor that's keeping my feet planted on this blood-stained earth right now.

He hasn't been mine for long, but shit, the love I've got for him is wild, fierce, like an inferno in my chest. A perfect blend of me and Eleanor, he's the best goddamn thing I've ever had a hand in making. I stare at him, my heart hammering behind my ribs, wondering if my own folks ever felt a shred of what I feel for Niko. Doubt it. They weren't in the business of coddling—I was moulded to be a king of shadows, not a kid dreaming of sunshine.

My old man's brand of love was cold steel and whispered threats. But Eleanor, she's something else. She treats Niko with a kindness that's foreign in our world, raises him to be human, not just another pawn in the game. And fuck me if that isn't something I respect more than anything.

"Go on, get to the room," I grunt, pushing past the ache in my collarbone to give him a shove toward safety. "We've got a war to wage."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eleanor Wang

The bastard doctor's fingers twist and prod at my shattered leg, grinding bone against bone. Sweat beads on my forehead as I fight back curses, the painkillers barely

dulling the agony coursing through me.

"Nearly all done, just adding the last layers. Then it needs one to two days to set. She cannot be moved till then," he says, flashing a conspiratorial wink that sends my insides into a tailspin. Is this quack actually in my corner, or is he getting his kicks from my misery?

Patrick's voice cuts through the haze of pain like a knife. "One to two days?!" he bellows, the veins in his neck bulging with impatience. "For fucks sake."

Desperation creeps across Patrick's face, but the doc is already moving on to the next issue, pointing to the Endone on the counter with a grimace. "These will make her stomach turn. I'll go and collect something that is a lot gentler on her stomach; we cannot have her vomiting all over the new cast and setting you back further," he warns.

"Fine, do whatever is needed," Patrick snaps, raking a hand through his dark hair. His eyes linger on me for a fraction too long, revealing a glint of something like concern before it's quickly shuttered away. "But I want to be back in London as soon as possible."

"Understood," replies the doctor, already shrugging into his coat. "Do I need a driver?"

Patrick's response is ice-cold, his glare enough to freeze hell over. "No, take my car, but be back in forty minutes."

"Of course. I'll wash my hands and be on my way." The doc exits, leaving the stench of antiseptic and unspoken threats hanging heavy in the air.

I'm left there, a broken doll in the clutches of a man whose obsession runs as deep as

the criminal empire he controls. And I can't shake the feeling that time is running out—every second ticking away is another moment lost, another inch I drift from the life I once knew. Matteo, are you alive?

Patrick's gaze pierces through me like a sharpened blade, his question hanging in the air as I struggle to find even footing in this twisted reality. "How are you feeling?" he probes.

"Like my whole life is a lie, and no one is telling me a thing!" The words claw their way out of my throat, anger seething with every syllable.

"Right," Patrick mutters, rising from the chair beside my bed. "Hold on, I'll get us some tea and food if we're about to talk shop." He strides out, the door clicking shut behind him, leaving me alone with the thumping of my own heart.

The minutes drag, each one a lifetime as I stew in my own tangled thoughts. When Patrick returns, it's with the domesticity of a hot bowl of soup and two cups of tea.

"Okay El, what did you want to know first?" His voice is casual, as if we're discussing the weather rather than my captive existence.

"Can you please explain to me how exactly I belong to you?" I demand, the urgency gnawing at my insides. There's an escape plan brewing, a desperate need to flee before Matteo's absence becomes permanent. He has to be alive. He must be.

Patrick sets down the tray, his eyes locking onto mine. "Do you remember your first apartment in Glebe? The one next to the park?"

A chill runs down my spine. "Yes, of course, I do; it was the first apartment I lived in after I moved out of home."

He leans forward, his smile cold and calculating. "Well, I owned that building. Bought it when I heard you moved into it." His confession sends my mind reeling deeper into the abyss.

"But why?" My voice is barely above a whisper, dread laced with every word.

"Mrs Tinsdale," he says, and I feel the trap snapping shut. "Remember her?"

The memory of my childhood nanny surfaces reluctantly. "Yes, she was my nanny for about two years when I was little."

"Mine too. But for a lot longer than yours," he confesses, warmth in his expression that doesn't reach his eyes. "She showed me a photo of you in the Sydney Telegraph. It was love at first sight for me. I knew you would be mine."

I recoil, my hands flailing as if they could bat away his sickening revelation. "I was ten when i was in that, my mum won the award for the children's hospital! You would have been, what, 18?" Disbelief wraps around my voice, holding it hostage as I confront the monster masquerading as a man.

Patrick just watches me, his twisted sense of possession laid bare beneath the fluorescent lights. And in that moment, I understand the depths of his darkness, the lengths he'd go to claim what he believes is his.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

The room feels like it's closing in, the walls smeared with shadows that seem to mock my predicament. The air is thick, laced with the scent of antiseptic and something metallic—fear, perhaps, or blood.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, trying to piece together Patrick's revelations. "So, you're telling me this whole time?—"

"Easy, El." His voice cuts through my thoughts, sharp as a knife. "I've been around much longer than you think."

Patrick stands tall, arms spread wide, as if he owns not just the room but the very air I breathe. "This is Mrs Tinsdale's house," he says, his tone casual, as if he's discussing the weather, not flipping my world upside down.

"Mrs. Tinsdale?" The name feels foreign on my tongue, and I press my hand against my throbbing head. "Jesus, these drugs are fucking with me."

He sighs, the sound heavy with feigned concern. "You're sharper than this, El. Focus."

"Sorry." I grit my teeth, frustration boiling beneath my skin. "My mind is playing catch-up with your twisted game."

"Understandable," he concedes with a half-smile that doesn't reach his eyes. He picks up the bowl of soup, steaming gently in the dim light. "Eat your soup; you need strength."

My stomach churns at the thought, acid bubbling up like a toxic brew. But Patrick doesn't care. He scoops up a spoonful, bringing it to my lips with a tenderness that belies the iron grip he has on everything else.

"I can feed myself," I snap, recoiling from his touch.

"Of course, you can." He leans in close, his breath hot on my face. "But I want to take care of you, El."

The proximity is suffocating, his presence a cage I can't escape. "Why? After all this time, why now?"

"Because I've waited two decades for you," he confesses, his voice a low growl. "We've had our distractions—Aela, Niko... But it's always been you, El. Only you."

His admission sends a cold shiver down my spine. I'm a possession, a prize he's claimed without my consent.

"Let me go, Patrick," I plead softly, the words tasting like defeat.

But he just smiles, feeding me another spoonful of soup as if we're simply two lovers sharing a meal, not a captor and his unwilling captive in a dark dance of power and obsession.

I shove Patrick's hand away, the spoon clattering against the bowl. "I can't eat anymore. Please, just stop." My voice is a raspy whisper; I'm barely hanging on to consciousness.

"You really need to eat more," he insists, frowning down at me like I'm a stubborn child refusing her medicine.

"Patrick, I—" The words choke off as a wave of nausea crashes over me, and I feel my stomach revolt.

"I think I'm going to vomit," I gasp out, panic edging into my voice as my body heaves.

In an instant, he's thrusting that old white plastic ice cream container under my chin, and I retch, the contents of my stomach spilling out in violent waves. The few mouthfuls of soup I'd managed come up in lurching spasms, my body shaking from the effort.

"Where the fuck is that doctor?" Patrick growls, his dark eyes scanning the room, his face contorting with anger and impatience. He stands abruptly, leaving me hunched over, the foul stench of bile filling my senses, and strides out of the room, his heavy steps echoing down the hallway.

The door slams shut behind him, and I'm left alone, trembling, the ice cream container still clutched in my hands. Control—it's all about control with him. And right now, I've lost mine completely.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Matteo Ricci

"Shit," I mutter under my breath, the tightness in my chest clawing its way up my throat. It's like that goddamn line from Titanic, Its been 84 years or some shit—yeah, you know the one. Feels like a godforsaken eternity since I last saw Eleanor, and every tick of the clock is a hammer to my skull. The city lights blur past us, mocking me with their indifference. The streets choke with cars even at this ungodly hour, and we're inching through like snails in a death march.

"There has to be a faster way through this traffic!" I growl, desperation edging out reason. My leg bounces uncontrollably, a physical echo of the chaos writhing inside me.

Spike manoeuvres the car with the finesse of a beast slinking through the urban jungle, his eyes cold and focused. "I'm going the fastest way, boss," he snaps back, flipping the bird at some asshole who's too close for comfort. We swerve, narrowly missing the jerk's bumper as Spike accelerates through the light.

That's when the ringtone slices through the tension—a sharp, jarring note that has me fumbling for the phone. Night security. They'd only call if hell was breaking loose.

"Ricci," I bark into the device, voice like gravel, no room for bullshit.

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"Boss, it's Nick here from night security," comes the hasty reply, words tripping over themselves in urgency. "I have a doctor here who desperately needs to talk to you. Says it's about Eleanor."

My heart clenches, and I feel the blood in my veins turn to ice. "Put him on the line."

"Mr. Ricci, Sir," stammers the voice, thick with fear and something else—hope, maybe, or just the relief of a man unburdening his soul to the devil himself.

"Tell me where Eleanor is," I demand, the command laced with a threat that could freeze fire.

"If you can promise me the safety of my family, I will," he rushes out, nearly tripping over his own words.

"Give Nick the details of your family and I'll send a team to them the second I hang up," I say, the words coming out like a vow carved in stone. Protection in exchange for information—it's the currency of our world.

"Thank you, Sir," he says, and I can hear the quiver of tears in his voice as he recites names and an address to Nick.

The doc's words hitch in his throat, gasping like he's running from the devil himself. "Patrick Murphy has her holed up in his old nanny place down in Botany. She has a broken leg and broken ribs," he spills out in a rush that tastes like desperation.

My fists clench so tight I feel my nails biting into my palms. "I placed a cast on her

leg that takes longer than one day to set with the hope that you can get there before he moves her." His voice is a shaky mess, the fear palpable even through the fucking phone line. "You will need to hurry. I won't be back in the allocated time. And I think the car that he gave me has a tracker."

"Fuck!" The curse slices through the tension in the car, sharp as a switchblade. "Wouldn't surprise me if he already knows where I am. You need to get there now," he says, panic edging every word.

"What's the address?" My heart hammers against my chest, blood roaring in my ears like it's ready for war.

"58 Serpentine Street in Botany. It's a little red brick house with a brick fence." There's a tremble in his thank you, like he knows he just sold his soul for a lifeline.

"Thank you," I grit out, each word a promise of retribution. "I owe you."

"Just so you know, she cannot be moved. She has a nasty break in her leg. The moment you pick her up the leg will no longer be set in place, and she will be in immense pain." His voice is like a hammer to my skull, pounding home the reality of Eleanor's agony.

"Fuck, how do we get her out, then?" I snarl, throwing a glance to Angel and Spike who are all business, eyes hard, ready to rain hell.

"She can be wheeled out on the bed she is in," the doctor's quick to offer a solution, some semblance of hope in this fucked-up scenario. "It's one of those hospital beds that is used in nursing homes."

"Boss, I'll arrange a van to come to the house so we can wheel her out," Angel says, fingers already dancing over his phone, orchestrating our next move.

"How long have you worked for Patrick?" I ask, needing to know the measure of the man who dares cross me.

"I don't work for Patrick; I work for Enzo Morelli," he replies, and the car plunges into a silence that's louder than a fucking bomb blast. Enzo Morelli—the name rings like a death knell, a reminder that this game is bigger than one rat in a nest of vipers.

Chapter Thirty

Eleanor Wang

The door slams open with a force that sends a shiver down my spine. Patrick storms in, eyes wild with urgency, clutching a small key like it's salvation itself. "We gotta go, El," he barks, striding toward me with purpose etched into every line of his weathered face.

"What? Where? What happened?" My words tumble out in a frantic mess, the pain in my leg throbbing in time with my pounding heart. "The doctor said I can't move!"

"I don't care what the doctor said, the doctor is gone. We gotta go, love," he snaps, fingers deftly undoing the cuffs that bind my wrist to the bed—cold metal clinking against cold metal.

"Patrick, we can't. The doctor said I cannot move!" Desperation laces my voice as I gesture helplessly to the damaged limb, feeling every bit the trapped animal I am in this godforsaken place.

"I don't give a shit what the doctor said," he growls, his arms sliding under my legs and around my back—a prelude to agony. "Fuck, Patrick!" The scream rips from my throat, raw and ragged, as even his gentlest touch feels like knives dancing across my skin.

"I'm sorry El, but this is going to hurt." There's a twisted apology in his eyes before he hoists me up into his arms. Holy fuck tards baking in the summer sun! That hurts! My mind screams obscenities as the room spins, black dots encroaching on my vision like vultures circling their dying prey.

"Argh!" It's all I can manage as the pain crescendos, a symphony of suffering conducted by the cruel maestro that is my shattered leg. "Patrick, stop!" But my pleas are swept away by the tide of necessity—he's not stopping, and neither is the relentless grip of darkness threatening to claim me.

The room blurs into a nightmare as Patrick drags me from the bed. His hand now, ironclad around my mouth, stifles the screams clawing their way up my throat. "Seriously El, shut the fuck up," he snarls, breath hot and heavy against my ear. The TV's drone slices through the tension in the hall—some crime show playing judge and jury, as my legs hit the ground so Patrick and keep a hand over my mouth.

A thunderous crash echoes from the front door, splintering wood, shattering calm. Matteo. My heart leaps, fierce and frantic as his voice barrels down the hallway. "Eleanor!"

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"Matteo!" I scream back muffled by the hand covering me, every fiber reaching for him.

"I said, shut the fuck up, El!" He's all brute force and boiling anger, dragging me backward. White-hot pain lances through my leg, a vicious serpent sinking venom deep. Nausea swarms, threatening to choke me, but I fight it, fight him, with everything left.

"Matteo!" It's a muffled battle cry behind Patrick's hand. My good leg thrashes out, desperate to find his shin, anything. We're retreating, slinking like cowards toward the house's shadowed rear. "Eleanor!" Matteo's closer now—a promise, a threat, a salvation.

Every inch we move, every second that ticks by, Matteo's calls become the drumbeat of my pulse. Closer. Louder. Unstoppable.

I'm a fucking statue, frozen by the pain, as my teeth snap uselessly behind swollen lips. Patrick's hand is a fleshy fortress I can't breach, and I curse the day vanity got the better of me and I put too much filler in them. We glide past doorways, one glowing dimly—Mrs. Tinsdale's sanctum, probably.

He halts, suddenly, and his arm slips from my waist. He's fumbling for something behind him. My legs scream under my weight, a chorus of agony that blurs my vision. Blackness nibbles at the edges, creeping closer, ready to swallow me whole.

"El—Eleanor!" Matteo's voice slashes through the haze, raw with desperation.

"Let her go, now!" His command is a thunderclap in this tense silence.

Patrick's retort is a viper's hiss. "She isn't yours!"

Metallic cold kisses my temple; the gun—a promise of oblivion. Matteo's eyes, twin storms of horror and fury, lock onto mine just as darkness claims me, dragging me down into its depths.

Chapter Thirty-One

Matteo Ricci

The night clings to Mrs Tinsdale's house like a shroud, silent and foreboding. But nothing, not even hell itself, could keep me from Eleanor.

"Fuck!" I curse under my breath, my boots pounding the gravel driveway. I take the front door with one well-aimed kick, splintering wood flying like shrapnel. "Eleanor!" My voice doesn't sound like my own; it's a desperate roar tearing through the stillness.

Darkness swallows me whole, save for that mocking sliver of light up ahead. That's where she'll be. It has to be.

Spike and Angel are right there with me, the familiar click-clack of their guns a deadly chorus to my racing heart. We storm the lit room—empty. Just a hospital bed, cold and mocking, with cuffs dangling like some sick joke.

"Shit." I spin on my heel, back into the void, shouting her name until my throat burns. She's here. She must be. This godforsaken place reeks of her fear, her pain.

I barrel down the hallway, the darkness clawing at me, trying to slow me down. And

then—a glimpse of movement, a muffled whimper.

There. The back door cracks open, moonlight slicing the gloom and there's Eleanor, in Patrick's grasp, his hand pressed against her lips silencing her cries.

"Eleanor!" It rips from me, a gasp laced with fury and terror.

"Let her go!" I snarl, muscles coiled tight.

"She isn't yours!" Patrick's scream bounces off the walls, mania glinting in his eyes. He's lost to the madness, but he doesn't know who he's fucking with.

I'm Matteo Ricci, and hell will freeze over before I let him take what's mine.

The steel of the barrel presses cold and unyielding against my spine, but it's the gun at Eleanor's temple that has every muscle in my body seizing with dread.

"Take another step and you will never see her again." Patrick's voice is a razor blade sliding through the tension-soaked air. I don't need to see his face to know it's twisted into a sick grin.

"No!" It rips from my throat, raw and desperate. Eleanor's body goes limp, her knees buckling as she crumples into his arms like a marionette with its strings cut.

"Take another step, and I'll shoot, Matteo." The voice behind me is poison wrapped in velvet. "Tino?" The bastard who's Enzo's right hand man.

"Good guess," he sneers, a mockery of camaraderie lacing his tone.

"So, Enzo really is in on this..." I spit out, hoping to keep him talking, stalling for time.

"A little bit of yes and a little bit of no," Tino whispers, sending a chill down my already ice-cold spine. That's when it happens—a hot splash of blood against my head, the scent thick and metallic, filling my nostrils.

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Spike's laughter cuts through the chaos, unhinged and chilling. "That fucker talks too much." He's not wrong.

I whirl around, coming face-to-face with Tino's last gurgling breaths, a knife jutting from his neck like a grotesque growth. His blood is a river pouring onto the floor, a dark tide taking him under.

My eyes snap back to Eleanor, to Patrick bending over her like a vulture ready to feast. I launch myself forward, all instinct, no finesse. My shoulder smashes into him, and we're flying—through the doorway, into the night.

The ground hits hard, and pain explodes through me, a white-hot starburst of agony. Collarbone's fucked, but that doesn't matter now.

I barely register the pain before my instincts kick in, a jagged pulse of adrenaline dulling the throb to a distant echo. Patrick's fist connects with my cheek, a hard, meaty crack that rattles my skull. His breath reeks as he hisses close, the stink of madness and obsession. "You can't have her, she's mine," he snarls.

"Fuck you," I grunt, spitting blood onto the grass, the taste metallic and sharp on my tongue. Rage surges through me, dark and turbulent as the stormy sea. I launch myself at him, our bodies colliding with the force of our mutual hatred. My fists fly, each blow a promise, a curse. His face gives under my knuckles, again and again. Not a bloody chance.

But then, a searing white-hot agony explodes in my shoulder. A gunshot shatters the night's silence, echoing off the night like a taunt. The bullet tears through flesh and

bone, a brutal intruder ravaging its way through. Pain, raw and unmerciful, wraps around me, squeezing the breath from my lungs.

"Boss!" The call is distant, a voice from another world. I'm falling, collapsing forward, gravity pulling me down onto Patrick's twisted form. Blood spills between us, hot and slick, a grim testament to the violence we've wrought. My vision swims, the edges of consciousness fraying as darkness creeps in, whispering sweet oblivion.

A boot kicks me off, sudden and hard. Rain of bullets, one after another—pop, pop, pop, pop—Angel's making sure Patrick won't ever stand again. Blood sprays like a vile fountain, painting the night with death.

"Fuck, boss!" Angel's at my side, his grip iron on my shoulder. "We gotta get out of here before someone calls the cops!"

My head spins, and the ground tilts. "I don't think I can walk..." The world's a hazy, throbbing mess of pain and shadows.

"Fuck off, cunt. Stand the fuck up, let's go!" No gentleness in Angel's voice, no fucking mercy. He hauls me upright, and the pain is a monster, clawing its way through my flesh.

Spike's ahead of us, cradling Eleanor like she's made of glass, her face deathly pale in the dim light. She's alive. That's all that matters. We move down the hallway, a procession of the damned.

"The van should be out the front, go get Eleanor inside," Angel barks at Spike's retreating back.

"On it," Spike grunts without looking back.

"Come on cunt, walk faster, we need to get some pressure on you before you bleed out on us," Angel's voice is rough, pushing me along.

Through the front door, fresh air hits like a slap. Spike's at the ambulance now, loading Eleanor into its belly. Her tattoos, those intricate stories etched into her skin, are hidden under the sterile white of the bedsheet.

And then it hits me—we're climbing into a fucking ambulance. "Angel, why the fuck is there an ambulance here?" Confusion cuts through the fog in my brain, sharper than the pain wracking my body.

"It's okay, they are under our employ. They will drop you guys off at the warehouse where the doctor is waiting," he says, matter-of-fact amidst the chaos.

"Since when did we have an ambulance on our bloody payroll?" I grunt through clenched teeth, the pain in my shoulder spreading like wildfire.

Angel chuckles, a sound that's too light for the darkness suffocating us. "Since your son employed seven of them last week thinking it would be a good investment," he says, dodging the pools of blood as if it's just spilled wine.

"Turns out the kid was right; might wanna give him a pay rise, boss!"

"Kid can have anything in this damn world he wants," I spit out, barely recognising my own voice. Pain has a way of distorting things – sounds, sights, even the goddamn soul.

"Thanks, Dad, I've been eyeing off a new TV seeing as I need a new one now," Niko's voice crackles through the ambulance radio, and I swear I can hear his smug grin from here.

"Where the fuck are you?" My growl is a mixture of relief and raw fury. "You're meant to be in the safe room."

"Oh, don't worry I am. I just hacked the ambulance radio," he laughs, that little shit. The thought of throttling him is momentarily as tempting as the thought of safety.

"Fucking kids," I grumble, slumping against the cold metal interior of the ambulance. Angel's hand is a vice grip on my arm, pulling me up.

"Stay with me, Matteo. We're almost there." His words are like anchors, trying to keep me in the land of the living.

The engine roars to life, a beast tearing through the night, ready to swallow us whole. The siren's wail is silent, our escape quiet but just as desperate. Shadows flicker past, the city's underbelly exposed in the harsh glare of passing streetlights.

"Stay awake, boss," Angel's voice cuts through the haze again. "For her."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

Eleanor's still form is the only thing in focus, a beacon in the storm. For her, I'd walk through hell barefoot, let alone hang onto consciousness.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Eleanor Wang

Waking up in strange places is becoming a fucking habit. First, some random library, now this. My eyes snap open to dim light, casting shadows over peeling paint and rusted equipment. It's a hospital room straight out of a horror flick. I turn my head, and there he is—Matteo, still as death on a bed that mirrors mine. Panic claws at my chest.

"Matteo!" My voice cracks like a whip through the stale air. No response. "Matteo!" Adrenaline surges, and I try to bolt upright, but agony rips through my leg, chaining me down. Desperation takes over. "Help!" I hurl the word at the open door, hoping it carries enough weight to bring someone, anyone.

Footsteps thunder toward me, and two familiar faces crash into the room. Angel and Spike—my lifelines in this fucked-up world. Relief slams into me hard enough to make my knees weak—if I could stand.

"Matteo," I gasp, pointing feebly at his motionless form.

"Easy," Spike says, all controlled calm as he engulfs me in a hug that's too tight, too warm. "He's sedated. Took a bullet. Doc fixed him up."

His embrace is a vice, his words meant to comfort, but they're a reminder that we're always one step from the grave in this godforsaken life. "You scared the fucking shit out of me," he grumbles, frowning like I've personally offended him.

"Move out of the way," Angel snaps from behind him, all rough affection and simmering violence. Spike steps aside, and then Angel's arms are around me, a different kind of prison. "Do that again and I'll fucking you myself," he jokes, or maybe half-jokes—it's hard to tell with us.

Tears burn hot trails down my cheeks, each drop a silent testament to the chaos that's become my norm. Angel's looking at me with those eyes that have seen too much death and not enough daylight. "What happened?" he asks, voice rough like gravel.

"Fuck if I know," I snap back, my voice a cracked whisper. The image of Patrick's twisted grin is seared into my mind. "Woke up, and there he was... Jesus Christ, Patrick!" My head jerks around, half-expecting his shadow to loom over us, knife ready.

"Shhhh, it's okay," Angel soothes, pulling me in for another hug. His arms are bands of steel wrapped in velvet—comfort with a promise of violence. "I unloaded on him. Chest turned to Swiss cheese. He's gone."

A sob rips from my throat, raw and jagged. "Fuck! Whatam I gonna say to Aela?" I'm a mess, emotions tangled like barbed wire.

Spike's stare bores into me, incredulity etched all over his face. "Seriously, that's what you're worried about right now?" Disbelief colours his tone, a sharp contrast to the sterile chill of the room.

I shrug, a pathetic attempt at indifference. "Suppose so; my brain's a fucking blender right now." Truth is, my thoughts are a hailstorm of bullets—no beginning, no end,

just relentless impact.

The gruffness of Matteo's voice slices through the haze of my panic, a raspy demand that yanks me back to the now. "I think you should stop hugging Angel and hug me instead," he growls, pain lacing his tone like poison in a fine wine.

"Matteo..." Relief floods me, hot and wild, as my eyes lock onto his form. He's eye half lidded, all dark hair and inked skin—a beautiful disaster. A devil with angel's eyes.

"Fuck off boss, this is my hug; get your own," Angel retorts without missing a beat, laughter bubbling up from his chest, raw and real. There's something disarming about seeing him like this—guard down, smile playing on his lips.

"That's what I'm trying to do!" Matteo shoots back, a smirk twisting his features. Even half-dead, he's got fire enough to scorch the world.

Spike's chuckle rolls across the room, and then there's movement—an orchestra of mechanical whirs and clicks. "Hang on, boss." The beds groan as they're forced into an awkward waltz, the scrape of metal against the floor jarring in the quiet.

"Hey, Princess," Matteo murmurs once the commotion settles. His hand, scarred and steady, stretches out towards me, bridging the gap Spike's just closed between the beds.

"Hey yourself," I rasp, voice thick, as I take his hand. It's a lifeline thrown across stormy seas—the touch of madness wrapped in a promise of sanctuary. His grip tightens, and for a moment, the chaos fades to a whisper.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Matteo Ricci

Eleanor's voice cuts through the grogginess, a lifeline drawing me back to the land of the living. My lids are heavy bastards, fighting me, but her sound—the fucking sweetest symphony—makes it worth the battle.

"Angel... Spike..." Her words float around, a soothing balm. I lie there, still as death, focusing on that voice while pain hammers my chest and back—a dull, relentless reminder of the bullet's kiss. The doc's cocktail must be top-shelf shit for me to be this numb. Lucky me, I'm not pushing up daisies yet.

Finally, my body heeds the call, and I wrench my eyes open to a glare that's akin to a damn interrogation room. Who the hell needs this many lights? They're trying to blind me or what?

My gaze snags on Eleanor, her face buried in Angel's chest, his hand on her back. It's a tender moment that grates on something deep inside me. Her hair's a mess, wild and free, nothing like the sleek curtain she always bitches about. Dead straight, my ass. I wanna tell her how good this chaos looks on her—wonder if she'd see the humor in it.

"Seriously that's what you worried about right now?" Spike's voice is laced with disbelief, directed at her.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:51 am

"Hey," I rasp, my voice full of gravel, "I think you should stop hugging Angel and hug me instead." My attempt at levity feels like dragging a blade across my own throat, rough and painful.

Eleanor's head snaps toward me, her eyes wide, a sigh escaping her lips like she's been holding her breath waiting for me to speak. "Matteo..."

"Fuck off, boss, this is my hug, get your own," Angel throws back at me, a smirk in his voice.

I want to laugh, but it feels like I've got a chest full of broken glass. "That's what I'm trying to do." My heart's pounding, half from the effort of speaking, half from the need to have her close, to replace Angel's warmth with mine. Control—that's what it comes down to, and lying here, watching another man comfort Eleanor, it's slipping through my fingers like blood in water.

Spike's calloused hands grip the bed frame, wheels squealing like rats as he shoves my world closer to Eleanor. I stretch out a hand—every muscle screaming in protest—and our fingers lace together, a lifeline in this sterile hell. "Hey, Princess," I grunt, holding onto her like she's the only thing keeping me anchored.

"Hey, yourself," she shoots back, her voice steady but her eyes betraying the storm beneath. She glances down at the bandage swathing my chest, then back up to meet my gaze with that defiant spark I know all too well.

"You feeling okay?"

"I'll be fine; I wasn't the one shot," she quips, a smirk dancing on her lips even as her fingers tighten around mine.

"Seeing as I'm awake, I'm gonna assume I'll be just fine too," I reply, mustering every ounce of bravado left in my battered body. My eyelid drops in an attempt at a wink, but it's more of a twitch—painful and pathetic. It's the thought that counts, right?

"Um, did you just try to wink, boss?" Spike's voice is full of mirth, his eyebrows shooting up like he's seen a ghost.

"Yep!" The word snaps out of me, the 'p' cracking like a whip.

"Ummm, well that wasn't a wink," he chuckles, shaking his head at my sorry state.

"Fuck off, cunt." The words are automatic, a reflex from a mouth that's used to spitting venom.

"You two need to rest," Angel's voice cuts through the banter, all business now, reminding us there's a world beyond these walls—a world that won't pause for our pain. "We have a lot to do."

"Please feel free to elaborate, Angel." I challenge him, needing to remember I'm still the one calling the shots, even flat on my back.

"It can all wait, boss," he counters, nodding towards Eleanor, his face etched with concern.

"You might wanna allow Eleanor some time to recover and let the new cast set on her leg." His tone brooks no argument, but it's not like I'd give him one—not when it's about her.

I exhale a cloud of frustration, each breath a reminder of the bullet's kiss—a dull ache in my chest. "Did the doctor put the correct cast on this time?"

Eleanor cocks an eyebrow, her confusion a perfect match for mine. "What do you mean 'correct cast'?"

Angel leans in, his voice steady despite the shitstorm we're living. "The doc slapped on a plaster last round, took ages to set—bought us time." He's got that look, the one that tells me he's holding back a cyclone of curses.

"Really?" Eleanor's voice sharpens, a blade ready to cut through lies. "I was begging the bastard while he worked on my leg. Not a damn peep from him."

Spike flicks his gaze away, shrugging like it's just another day in hell. "Patrick had a gun to his family's heads," he says, as if explaining why the sky's blue. "Made his SOS call to us only after securing their ticket outta Enzo's crosshairs."

"Worked for Enzo," Angel mutters, thumbing through his phone like it's a rosary.

Eleanor's smile is a twisted sonnet, all dark notes and deep chords. "He works for Matteo now?" Her eyes find mine, searching for a truth only I can spit.

"He works for us, Princess." My grip tightens on her hand, chains of iron will binding us. "Make no mistake—you're the queen of this fucked-up kingdom."

"Right, for us." Her grin is a streak of light in the murk, and her fingers thread through the bed bars, seeking the warmth of my own again.

"Angel, these rails—" My growl is low, impatient. "Get them the fuck down."

With a grunt, Angel yanks at the pins, sending the metal crashing down. Freedom, or

some twisted version of it, never sounded so sweet.

With the clatter of metal behind us, freedom tastes like morphine and rebellion. Eleanor shuffles closer, her body a mix of soft curves and hard edges—like she's sculpted from both heaven and hell. She grips my hand, her touch searing through the haze of painkillers.

"Thanks," she murmurs to Angel, her voice laced with a venom that could make a lesser man weep. "Now fuck off so I can nap."

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Spike and Angel chuckle, their laughter echoing off sterile walls—a sound too alive for this place of healing and hurt. "Anything you say, boss," they chorus, and the mockery in their tone is clear as day. A good sign—they're not walking on eggshells around her. They get her humor; they respect her command, even if it's cloaked in a drugged-up demand.

"Sure you're alright, Princess?" My voice rumbles against her scalp, her hair brushing against my skin—soft, chaotic strands that defy her usual sleek look. It tickles, but it's the kind of irritation that reminds me she's real, she's here, and she's mine.

Her head tilts up, those golden eyes heavy but sharp as ever. "I'll be okay," she assures me, though her voice is a ghost of its usual fire. "But god, Matteo, I need sleep." Her words are slurred but fierce, like she's fighting through a fog made of lead.

"Love you," I whisper, laughter bubbling up despite the shitstorm we're in. Her spirit's a fucking beacon—even doped up and broken, she's got more fight than half the blokes I know.

"Love you too," she breathes out, her words fluttering over my chest, light as feathers and just as fragile.

As her breathing steadies into the rhythm of sleep, I let the darkness claim us both—for now. Rest, my queen. The world can wait.

Matteo Ricci

Igrunt, shifting in the goddamn chair that's become my temporary bed. Swear it's a medieval torture device masquerading as furniture. My shoulder's throbbing like a bastard, collarbone screaming every time I bloody well breathe. A lazy-boy, they call it. Must've been named by some sadistic prick who never took a bullet.

Eleanor's asleep, thank fuck, her chest rising and falling with that steady rhythm that keeps the darkness at bay. She's a tough one, but these days even she's got limits. Crutches stand sentinel by the bed, a reminder of battles still being fought.

The warehouse stint was a clusterfuck of stitches and antiseptics, but Angel hauled our asses back home—said it'd do us good. Seven days to unravel this mess before we're face-to-face with the other bosses. Enzo's dirty hands are all over this shit, just gotta prove it. And the two goons we nabbed might sing, given the right... persuasion.

Eleanor wanted to grill them herself, fire in her eyes eventhrough the pain. But three days of hell softened her resolve, and Spike's now playing interrogator. Five hours and counting, radio-fucking-silence from him. Angel, with his gadgets and wires, assures us he's on top of it. Says he'll feed us the intel soon. The waiting's like a blade twisting in my gut, patience never my virtue.

I glance over at Eleanor again, watching for any sign of discomfort. The thought of her in pain twists something fierce inside me. I'm used to control, to power, but this—a fight where I can't just snap my fingers and fix everything—it chafes worse than the damn sling cutting into my skin.

Niko had taken to sleeping in our bed next to Eleanor every night, his little frame a protective shield around her delicate form. The fear of almost losing her had etched deep lines of worry on his face, his usually stoic expression now softened by the need to keep her within arm's reach. His once private dungeon downstairs now stood

abandoned, he now hovered over Eleanor's every move, as if afraid she might vanish if he looked away for a moment.

Eleanor, on the other hand, seemed to bask in Niko's constant presence, her laughter ringing through the house whenever he was near. She welcomed his affection with open arms, finding solace in his unwavering devotion. Their bond was palpable, a tangible force that seemed to wrap around them both like a protective cloak. It was as though they were two halves of the same whole, inseparable and intertwined in a dance of love and loyalty.

As I observed them together, I couldn't help but feel like an outsider peering into their intimate world. The way they gravitated towards each other spoke volumes about the depth of their connection, leaving me feeling like I was witnessing a rare and beautiful phenomenon unfold before my eyes.

"Spike is heading home now," Angel's voice cuts through the silence, gravelly and sure. He's hunched over his tech fortress at the dining table, screens giving his face an eerie glow.

Eleanor frowns, the crease in her brow deep enough to hide secrets in. "I always forget that man has a house of his own. Matteo, I wanna buy the neighbour's houses and have Angel and Spike live closer," she declares, conviction lacing her voice despite the painkillers swimming in her system.

I can't help but smirk at her audacity, my heart a twisted mess of adoration and concern. "You planning to start a mafia commune?" I tease, trying to ignore the throb in my shoulder.

Then Angel laughs, a sound rich and full-bodied, echoing off the walls. Eleanor scowls at him. "What is so damn funny?"

"You do not want me living next door, Eleanor," he chortles, shaking his head.

"Why not?" She's got that look, arms crossed, ready to take on the world from her propped-up throne of pillows.

"It would make it easier to get to and from work, and I could keep an eye on you!" Her tone brooks no argument, but she's missing the point, as usual.

"That right there is exactly why!" Angel's still laughing, the bastard.

Eleanor's frown deepens, confusion playing across her features. "I'm confused..."

Angel leans back in his chair, the picture of self-assured sin. "You know how you love a form of voyeurism?" His grin's sharp, all cat and canary.

My chest rumbles with a suppressed chuckle.

"Well, it's one of my favorite pastimes," Angel chuckles.

"Fuck," Eleanor drawls, dragging the word out like it's got barbs on it. Her voice is a slow pour of honey over the tension in the room. "You're into that sort of shit too, Angel?"

Angel's grin goes wide, all teeth and no remorse. "More than you." He leans back, arms spread across the back of his chair, owning the space around him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:52 am

Eleanor's eyes nearly pop out of her skull, and I can see the wheels turning in her head, adding up two and two to get a five she never saw coming. "You do not."

Angel chuckles, low and throaty. "Oh, Eleanor, the last thing you want is to be out hanging the washing in the morning and looking up at my balcony." That grin hasn't left his face, not even for a second.

"Ooh, my God!" The words explode from her, and she slaps her hands over Niko's ears as if it'll scrub clean what he's already heard. "You dirty, dirty man," she accuses, but the laughter bubbling up from her belly tells another story.

"Dirty" doesn't even start to cover it. In our line of work, filth clings to your skin and seeps into your soul. Angel knows it, revels in it, and makes it his own brand of art.

"Look at this," Angel says, motioning toward the window with a dramatic sweep of his hand. "I think the view of the bay is all you need."

Eleanor turns, looking at the endless blue water, calm as a lie. A soft smile ghosts her lips. "I think you're right about that one." She looks over at me; cheeks tinged pink like the sky at dawn after a night spent spilling secrets and blood.

"I don't mind buying the neighbor's houses," I throw in with a wink. You might as well stir the pot; keep things simmering.

She hurls the pen she's been fidgeting with straight at me. "Oh, shut up." It bounces off my chest, harmless as a moth. "You're all a bunch of dirty men."

I can't argue with that. Not when we've built empires on dirt and graft. Every one of us here, bound by sinew and secrecy, knows just how filthy we are.

And not a damn one of us is looking to get clean.

The door swings open with that familiar creak, the one I've meant to oil for weeks now. Spike strides in, the scent of soap clinging to him like a badge of cleanliness in an otherwise stained world. He's all crisp lines and fresh fabric, starkly contrasting the grit and grime of our daily dealings.

"What took you so long?" Eleanor's voice cuts through the room, sharp as a blade. She's perched on her usual throne of cushions, a queen in her own right, not having budged since the sun first clawed its way into the sky.

"Had to go home and clean up," Spike says with a nonchalant shrug, but there's something tight about his shoulders, a coil ready to spring.

"That's a long fucking shower!" Eleanor's glare could start fires. "Where do you live? Fucking Campbelltown?"

"No, I have an apartment in Paddington," he shoots back, his frown mirroring hers. "What's with the interrogation?"

"She wants to buy the neighbor's houses and have us move in," Angel announces. He saunters in, popcorn in hand, like we're here to binge some daytime drama, not unravel the knots of the city's seedy underbelly.

"She does know you're into voyeurism, right?" Spike's gaze lands on Eleanor, a mix of amusement and challenge dancing in his eyes.

"She does now," Angel chuckles, tossing a kernel into his mouth, crunching the

tension between bites.

"So, not keen to buy the neighbor's pads anymore?" Spike arches an eyebrow, his grin spreading wide across his face.

"Nah, yeah, I changed my mind," Eleanor's laughter is a light flicker in the dark canvas of our world. It's rare and beautiful, even if it's laced with sarcasm. "But seriously, what took you so long? I was a bit worried."

"I usually like to blow off some steam after I've spent some time doing what I did," Spike explains, his fingers sketching quotes in the air, painting invisible words that we all can read loud and clear.

"Oh," Eleanor's cheeks bloom with a flush of red, a rare show of embarrassment from a woman who's seen the darkest corners of our lives. "Sorry," she mumbles, and it's almost comical how this single word seems to struggle out of her mouth like it's foreign to her tongue.

I lean back, watching the exchange, a smirk on my lips. We're a fucked-up family, sure.

Spike strides across the room, a predator in his own right. He leans down over Eleanor, his lips brushing the crown of her head in a tender gesture that clashes with the darkness clinging to our souls. "Thank you for caring, but..." His voice drops to a whisper meant only for her ears.

I watch, something like warmth flickering in my chest. These moments are rare. They're the tiny sparks in an endless night. The Buffy clan's got its hooks in Eleanor, and she's one of us now—claws, fangs, and all. This is family.

"So, what did you find out?" I ask, my voice slicing through the softness of Spike's

moment. He slides into a seat next to Eleanor, his eyes meeting mine with that look that says shit's about to get real.

"A lot, actually," Spike starts, his gaze shifting to Angel. "And I'm sure Angel has done some digging while he got the information, too."

"Yep!" Angel punctuates the air with that sound like he's having the time of his life. The bastard loves this game, even when it's soaked in blood and secrets.

"Umm, are we gonna talk with mini-me in the room?" Angel jerks his thumb toward Niko, sitting there as quietly as the grave, soaking everything in.

Eleanor lets out a sigh that sounds like defeat wrapped in resignation. "Even though I would love to say no, I think it's time for Niko to understand the issues; he is a Ricci, after all."

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"You say that with such reverence!" My laugh is more bark than anything else, the sound echoing off the walls of our gilded cage.

She points at me, her finger accusing. "Well, his father is the underworld king, is he not?"

"And his mother is the queen." The words are a retort, sharp enough to cut. I'm both those things and neither—a king on a throne built of bones, a queen draped in shadows.

"Are we gonna stay on topic today, children?" Spike chimes in, hands raised like he's balancing the scales of justice.

Angel's there, smirking over his popcorn, the crunch of kernels like the tick-tock of a time bomb we're all waiting to go off. Maybe I should have gotten some fucking popcorn too...

"Yes, sorry," Eleanor's voice draws me back, apologetic but edged with that steel I know all too well. She's no damsel; she's a warrior queen.

This is the moment when we peel back the layers of deceit that have shrouded our world in shadow.

"Okay, well, for all intents and purposes, Fuckwit No.1 told me he was hired by a man named Tino to do the job," Spike says, his voice slicing through the silence. "He had been on Ricci's payroll for years and wasn't fully okay with what he was asked to do, but the money was substantial."

I lean forward, my elbows digging into my knees. "He was paid 50k in cash up front for the job." Spike continues, recounting the details with the precision of a blade. "He was assured no one would find out and the hotel security cameras would be removed the day before."

"Fuck's sake." I rub a hand over my face. "So, I'm gonna take a guess and say Tino was the Tino- Enzo's righthand man?"

Spike nods, his expression grim. "Yes, the the same."

Angel chimes in from his perch by the window. "This makes sense, as the apartment building paperwork shows there was some security camera maintenance in the building the same week it went down."

"Right, well, that's it for Fuckwit No.1," Spike declares, then his gaze shifts, dark and knowing. "As for Fuckwit No.2, things get interesting."

He pauses, biting his bottom lip—a tell that the news isn't pretty. "So, Fuckwit No.2 was the one who had the most amount of contact with Tino; he said Tino approached him on a building site where he was working and offered him the same deal as the rest."

My knuckles whiten as I grip the chair, leaning in. "The only difference was he was to scoop out of the building, arrange the day and time that worked best, and arrange everyone to execute their plan."

Spike exhales slowly, and the room holds its breath with him. "They were meant to go in, rough you up, and get you to leave. That's it," he admits, the weight of the betrayal hanging between us.

I feel the rage simmering beneath my skin, ready to boil over. "They did because he

told them that was the plan; he changed it to suit himself."

Angel, ever the fucking detective, adds his two cents. "I ran his record; he had priors for rape and stalking."

"Was he on my payroll too?" My voice is a growl, the threat of violence never far from the surface.

"No, he wasn't, but he was on the payroll of a company your family used for building," Angel meets my gaze squarely, his eyes like flint.

"Remember when your dad had the club in the Cross refurbished into a strip club—'The gentleman's only one?'" I ask, the memory bitter in my mouth.

"Yes," Spike confirms, and it feels like the final piece of a puzzle snapping into place, a picture of treachery revealing itself.

The air in the room is thick with tension, a tangible pressure that seems to squeeze around my chest. My knuckles are white as they grip the edge of my chair, every muscle coiled tight.

"That's the building site he was approached on," Angel cuts in, his voice the scrape of a switchblade against a stone. "Enzo wanted it to be some kind of fucking pleasure palace, right?"

I rake a hand through my hair, yanking at the roots. Memories crowd into my mind, dark and slippery as oil. "Council shot it down. Dad wasn't having any of it either." I can still hear their heated arguments and feel the vibrations of slammed doors.

Spike leans forward, elbows on knees, his gaze briefly flickering to Niko, who's playing the part of an innocent bystander—poor kid's anything but. "When Tino

confirmed the job, he nearly blew a gasket after hearing what happened. He was ready to put a bullet in the guy."

Eleanor, her arms folded defensively across her chest, chews on her bottom lip. Her frown is a shadow that darkens her delicate features. "I still don't get how Patrick and Enzo tie together. They're up to their necks in this shit, but why?"

"Has to be something personal," I grumble. The game's always personal in our world.

Niko pipes up, his youthful voice slicing through the murk of theories. "Patrick could be more to Enzo than we think." His eyes are too old for his face; he has seen too much already.

Eleanor's brow knits, her mind turning over possibilities like tumblers in a lock. "But how? Enzo's old enough to be..."

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"His dad," Niko finishes for her. A chill runs down my spine at the implication. "Dude's the same age as your old man would've been."

"Enzo never had kids, didn't even fucking marry." I glance at Angel for backup.

"Nothing on record," he confirms, tapping keys on his laptop to punctuate the sentence. The silence that follows echoes with unspoken fears and questions.

I stand abruptly, the movement sharp, a knife thrust into the quiet. "I need something solid. You can't walk into the lion's den unarmed. If I go in blind to meet Enzo..." My fists clench and unclench, aching for the satisfaction of Enzo's blood on my hands.

"Matteo," Eleanor's voice is a tightrope, stretched thin with worry, "we'll figure this out."

"Better be bloody fast." The words are a growl, torn from somewhere deep inside where the darkness lives. "Because if I don't kill him, one way or another, he's going to kill us."

I pace the room like a caged animal, my thoughts racing faster than my feet over the cold tile. The tension's thick enough to choke on. I can almost taste the iron tang of blood in the air, anticipation of violence simmering under my skin.

Niko breaks into my circling, "How old is Patrick?"

"Thirty-eight this year." Eleanor's voice cuts through, sharp as a shiv. I wouldn't say I like the surety in her words, the closeness they imply.

"Teenage dad then, was he?" Spike's trying to lighten the mood, but his humor lands dead as a body in the river.

"Patrick claimed Irish soil birthed him," Eleanor pipes up, flipping her hair back with a flick of her wrist. "But that's worth shit all now."

I stop pacing; fists knotted at my sides. My mind conjures up images of Patrick, smug and breathing, and the urge to tear him apart blooms hot and vicious. "If only I could kill that bastard twice."

Angel's fingers fly over keys, the rapid-fire clicking a staccato beat to our fucked-up symphony. He's hunting ghosts in the wires, digital specters that might give us the edge we need.

"Wasn't his old man Conner Murphy?" Spike's question hangs heavy, a lead balloon in the stifling room.

"Yeah, Conner and Caitlin," Eleanor confirms, face lit by the blue glow of Angel's screen. "Kicked it in a building collapse, left their golden boy a nice stash."

"Convenient," I mutter, sarcasm dripping like acid from my tongue.

"Too bloody convenient," Eleanor agrees, eyes flinty and sharp.

"Okay, so Enzo has never left Australia," Angel grumbles, frustration lacing his voice.

"You joking!" Spike's laughter is like a bark, a quick, disbelieving sound that echoes off the walls.

Eleanor leans forward, tattoos shifting with the grace of a panther. "What about

Patrick's parents?" she asks, voice cutting through the bullshit.

Angel gives her a look that could curdle milk. "What about them?"

"Have they been to Australia? And when and what date?" Her fingers tap an impatient rhythm on the arm of her chair.

"Meaning, if the bastards planted roots here before Patrick popped out or after," I add, my curiosity clawing its way up my throat.

"Good question, I'll check." Angel's fingers are back at it, dancing across the keyboard like he's playing some twisted concerto.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Matteo Ricci

Six days bleed by, a blur of shadows and whispers in my world. I shoulder open the door to my office. Eleanor's perched at the edge of the room, her eyes slicing through the silence. "Found this," she says, flicking a tiny mic taped under the desk with a manicured nail.

"Fuck." The single word is a grenade in the stillness.

Angel's already on it, fingers dancing over his phone like he's playing a damn piano. "It's Becky's," he grunts, and that's all the confirmation I need. That little rat had been scuttling here, laying her traps before every meeting.

"Anything else?" My voice scrapes out, a blade drawn across the quiet.

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"Clean as a whistle after that," Eleanor replies, her gaze sharp enough to draw blood.

"Should've known," I mutter, recalling when Becky tried tailoring me here. It wasn't just curiosity nipping at her heels—it was betrayal.

"Enzo's mole or just batshit crazy?" Eleanor's question hangs heavy between us.

"Does it matter?" I say, prowling closer. She stands, and there's a challenge in her eyes, a fire that matches mine.

"Let's give the bitch a send-off she won't forget," she purrs, and fuck if that doesn't sound like the best idea I've heard all week.

The table between us might as well be an altar, but what are we about to do? Sacrilege. But gods, if it isn't divine. Eleanor hops up, her cast making her usual grace a little clumsy, but it only amps the tension crackling around us.

"Want an audience?" she taunts, nodding toward Angel, who's smirking by the doorway.

"Maybe next time," he chuckles, shaking his head before leaving us to our sordid sacrament, the door clicking shut like a confessional booth sealing shut.

"Come here," Eleanor commands, and I obey, driven by raw need and the dark symphony of our twisted desires.

Sex with Eleanor ain't ever just sex. It's power, possession, a war where we both

come out on top. With my shoulder aching like a bitch and her leg all cast up, it's a dance of discomfort, but the pain's just another flavor in this feast.

"Take it," she gasps, and I do, claiming her over the table, each thrust a promise to protect what's mine. The mic listens, a silent witness to Becky's downfall. Our bodies move in a brutal rhythm, echoes of dominance and defiance interlaced with pleasure.

"Say goodbye," I grunt, and Eleanor's laugh is like a razor's edge cutting through the air.

"Bye, Becky," she mocks, the words bouncing off the walls.

I finish with a roar that could shake the concrete of our empire, feeling the last shreds of Becky's treachery crumble away beneath us. We're a mess of sweat and inked skin, a tangle of power and raw emotion, and as I pull away from Eleanor, I know that whatever comes for us, we'll face it head-on, together, unyielding as the steel of our bones and the blood of our hearts.

"Ready to clean house?" I ask, my breath ragged.

Eleanor smiles, feral and free. "Always."

Luca steps out of the lift, commanding attention as he moves with a predatory grace. The sharp click of his Italian leather shoes echoes in the corridor, a subtle warning to those who dare cross his path. His eyes, cold and calculating, scan the surroundings with a predator's focus, missing nothing. Every step he takes exudes power, each movement deliberate and precise, like a lethal dance choreographed for maximum impact.

"Luca," I greet him with a nod, feeling the weight of tonight's reckoning in the air.

"Good to see you again," he replies, thumping my back with a force that speaks more of camaraderie than comfort.

My gaze shifts to Antoni Rossi, his lean figure cutting a less imposing but no less dangerous silhouette. He offers his hand, and I take it, the grip firm but without the need to prove strength.

"Matteo," he says, a sly grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Antoni."

We cross the threshold into the boardroom, a den where decisions are carved from flesh and futures are bought with bullets. The chairs are thrones for kings of chaos, and we sink into them with the ease of men who've weathered storms of lead and lies.

"Is Eleanor here?" Luca's eyes roam the shadows, searching for the woman.

"Yeah," I chuckle, "but she ain't playing hide-and-seek. She's holed up in my office, waiting for me."

"Think we'll meet the woman who flipped this world?" Antoni's smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, but there's respect there—a recognition of Eleanor's brand of ruthlessness.

"Sure," I lean back, letting the leather creak beneath me, "after we're done here."

Luca nods, and I can see the anticipation lacing his smirk. The game's about to change, and he's ready to roll the dice.

"Drink?" I offer, reaching for the cut crystal decanter, its contents amber and aged—like us.

"Pristine, please." Luca asserts, his voice the growl of a lion laying down the law. Neat, please.

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"Rocks for me," Antoni shoots back, his relaxed demeanor belying the steel trap of his mind.

"Ancora un Colorado, video," Luca ribs him, the tension breaking like bones under a boot heel. Still a pussy, I see.

"Someone's gotta have taste buds left," Antoni retorts, and we share a laugh, dark and knowing. We're not just aging; we're surviving, thriving in a world that chews up saints and spits out sinners.

There was a crackle in my ear. Angel's voice was low and steady. "He's heading up in the lift now."

The words settle in my gut like a round-chambered, ready to fire. Enzo's last ride up, and he doesn't even know it. The four seats are about to be three because in this game when you fuck with one of us, you sign your death warrant.

"Right then," I say, the edge of my voice sharp enough to draw blood, "let the fucking games begin."

The lift dings like a damn funeral bell, and the weight of the silence that follows is thick enough to choke on. I lean back in my leather chair, its creak almost deafening in the stillness. We're all sipping whiskey like we ain't moments away from death, doing a waltz into the room.

Luca's grin slices through the tension, sharp as a razor. His eyes are alight with that familiar brand of madness that says he's ready for blood. Mine pulse in response, the

craving for chaos never far beneath my skin.

Footsteps echo, a slow march down the hall. My heart don't race—it's steady, like the drumbeat of war. Enzo's about to walk into his damn requiem, and the bastard doesn't even know it.

The door swings open. Enzo struts in, cocksure as ever, and heads straight for the whiskey. "Evening," he drawls, pouring himself a drink like he's got all the time in the world.

"Evening," we echo, a choir of ghosts waiting to drag him to hell.

"Look at you lot. Why are there all the long faces?" Enzo laughs, eyes darting around, looking for the joke he's not privy to.

I can't help myself; I lean in, feeding off the suspense. "I wouldn't say the Pope," I start, voice low and smooth as poisoned silk, "but Patrick did."

The glass pauses halfway to his lips. The liquid trembles, a prelude to the quake about to hit. He chokes on the amber nectar, coughing, spluttering, eyes wide as they snap to mine.

"Patrick..." he gasps out, the name a fragile lifeline he's clinging to.

"Dead," I confirm with a smile that could cut glass. It's all teeth and no joy.

Enzo goes paper-white, shock rooting him to the spot before he lurches up to his full height. "What the fuck is this," he snarls, but the fear's there, creeping into his tone.

"Missing someone?" I prod, twisting the knife. "Your right-hand man?"

"Tino?" Confusion slithers across his features, and a snake in the grass finally senses the hawk above.

"Yep, Tino." I watch the realisation hit and see it shatter his composure.

He gets it now. Tino's gone, his boy's gone. And him? He's a rat in a trap, surrounded by predators playing the long game.

Enzo scrambles for some thread of hope, his voice reeking of desperation. "He's away in London," he stammers, clinging to the lies Angel crafted.

"Wrong," I sneer, my smirk a jagged knife edge. "Your precious boy's chumming the waters in the harbour." The truth hits him like a freight train, derailing whatever bullshit he'd constructed in his head.

"Fuck," he breathes, all bluster gone as he sinks back into his seat, defeated. His eyes, those pitiful wells of despair, dart up to me. "How did you find out?"

"Kidnapping Eleanor was a dumb fuck move," I say, lounging back casually. "Tracked the bastard down by the shit he owned. Found out he's been obsessed with her since before she could even spell 'stalker.'"

The older man's face twists, something dark and ugly surfacing. "He loved her."

"Love?" I spit the word out like venom. "She was a kid, Enzo." Disgust coats my tongue, thick and sour.

"Details," he dismisses with a careless shrug. That's when I know he's beyond fucked up, beyond saving.

I slowly sip my whiskey, letting the silence stretch before I drop the next bomb. "And

who do we find holding the leash? Tino."

"Seems that way," he admits, his voice empty of fight.

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"Angel dug deeper," I continue, relentless. "Found a sweet little tidbit about Caitlin. Your cleaner, right?"

His eyes snap to mine, a flicker of something—guilt? Affection? It's gone before I can place it. "Caitlin was more than just a cleaner," he murmurs, almost to himself.

"Course she was," I scoff, not caring about his sordid past. "And now, here we are."

"Here we are," he echoes, the finality of it sinking into his bones.

I lean in, my eyes slicing through the bullshit. "She didn't feel the same, Enzo." My voice carries a mocking lilt as I watch him squirm. "She worked for you, then bolted back to Ireland. They married some bloke named Conner and popped out Patrick seven months on. Ring any bells?"

Enzo's gaze flickers, guilt gnawing at the edges. "Good to see you did your homework well," he grumbles, but there's a twist in his words—a secret lurking.

"Spill it," I demand, not one for patience.

"She came crawling back to Sydney," he says, bitterness seeping through every syllable. "Begging for money, spewing stories about Patrick and her shit marriage."

"That's why you bankrolled Conner's business?" I ask, piecing together the sordid puzzle.

"Was supposed to be her ticket out," Enzo snaps, his face contorting as if recalling a

foul taste. "But the slut stayed. I said it was for Patrick. Promised to ditch the bastard when the kid turned eighteen." A twisted smile plays on his lips, like he's savouring a private joke.

"Let me guess," I say, my disgust rising, "Patrick overheard one too many of those intimate chats?"

Enzo's grin is all teeth, no soul. "Like father, like son. The apple didn't fall far from the tree." Pride oozes from him, sickening and thick.

"Is that why you helped him with Eleanor? Ten years ago?" I'm putting the pieces together, and I don't fucking like the picture they're painting.

"Yep," he confirms with a disgusting sense of satisfaction. "My boy wanted his girl. I knew what that ache was like, so I gave him a hand." He shrugs like we're discussing the weather, not the destruction of lives.

"Then you come crawling to me, give up Eleanor's location. Why the fuck would you do that?" I can't hide the confusion laced with rage.

"Patrick refused to toe the line and wouldn't return to Australia. Needed to remind him who's boss," Enzo yells, his face reddening. "Followed Eleanor around like a lost fucking puppy. It was pathetic."

"Needed her here to lure him back, huh?" I chuckle without humor. "Well, that backfired for you, mate."

Enzo's face hardens, and I know I've got him right where I want him—cornered and desperate. Power twists and coils inside me. This is my game, and in it, I'm the fucking king.

"Fuck's sake," Enzo mutters, his eyes hollow. "So what now?"

"Now?" I lean in, feeling that familiar itch in my trigger finger. "Now you die." Without so much as a blink, I yank the gun from under the table and let two rounds punch holes through his chest. He slumps, but I'm not done. Standing, I aim for his head and squeeze off another shot. The sound echoes, a sweet symphony to my ears.

"Hope you've got clean-up on standby," Luca says, the corner of his lip twitching.

"Always," I grin, reaching for the decanter and topping off my whiskey. The liquid gold swirls in the glass, catching the light. "More?" I offer it around, refilling their glasses with a heavy hand.

"Thanks," Antoni nods, taking his drink like any other night.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," I say, pushing back from the table. We stride down the hall, me leading the pack. The cleaning crew's already there, shadows waiting for my signal. I nod once, and they slip into the room like ghosts.

Two sharp raps on my office door, and it swings open. The barrel of a gun greets me. "Princess," I say, the tension bleeding away when she lowers the weapon.

"Matteo..." Eleanor's voice washes over me, soothing the raw edges inside.

"He's dead," I tell her, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Go sit behind the desk. Time to meet the rest of the family."

She moves with a limp but still manages to look like she owns the fucking world, perching on the edge of my desk. Sexy doesn't begin to cover it.

"Luca, Antoni, this is Eleanor," I announce, sweeping my arm out. The pride I feel is

a living thing, fierce and possessive.

"Hello, Eleanor," Antoni's voice is smooth and respectful. He takes a seat opposite her.

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"Piccola cosa come te ha causato tutto questo.?" Luca chuckles, shaking his head in disbelief. Tiny thing like you caused this?

"Yep, she's a goddamn wildfire," I can't help but boast.

Laughter fills the room, a brief respite in our dark world. The rest of the night goes by in a blur of business talk, the necessary evil of our existence.

"Anything else, or can we fuck off now?" I'm itching to be alone with Eleanor to wash away the blood and bullshit of tonight.

"Just one more thing," Luca interjects, and we all turn to him. "I want to start prepping my boy to take over."

"Really?" My curiosity was piqued despite myself.

"Gabriel," he says, his eyes glinting with something that might be pride. Or a warning. "He'll stir some shit up, no doubt." Laughter again, but it's edged with an unspoken understanding.

"God help us all," I mutter, half-joking, half-serious.

"God ain't got nothing to do with this," I think as we wrap up the night, our kingdom of shadows shifting ever so slightly with each move we make.

Epilogue

Eleanor Wang

8 years later

The sun's scorching rays beat down on my skin, a reminder of the relentless march of time. Fuck me sideways, Niko's eighteen today. The thought alone sets my heart racing like it's on some shitty carnival ride—one I'm not strapped in for. His laughter ain't echoing around the house, replaced by this godforsaken silence. Instead, he's out there, bobbing on the waves, living it up without his dear old mum and dad.

"Here, Princess," Matteo's voice slices through the stillness as he thrusts a margarita into my hand, its cool touch a balm to the heat.

"Thank you." My gaze locks with his—a cheeky glint dance in those dark eyes as we lounge like a pair of sinners surveying our kingdom. The bay stretches out before us, glittering under the afternoon glare.

"You still mad he wouldn't allow you to attend his party?" Matteo's grin is all teeth, knowing full well he's poking the damn bear.

"Yes, I mean seriously, I'm fun!" I jab a finger at my chest, a playful snarl tugging at my lips. "Who wouldn't want me at their bash?"

"Yes, you are fun, Princess," he concedes, that smile never slipping. But then he drops a truth bomb that has me choking on my drink. "Parents at your eighteenth birthday party aren't the cool thing."

"But what if there are drugs?" I can't help but push the words sour on my tongue.

"I can guarantee there is," he shoots back, casual as a motherfucker.

I swivel to skewer him with a glare that could curdle milk. "Tell me you didn't supply the boat with drugs, Matteo?" My voice is a low growl, the idea setting my blood to boil.

"I was eighteen once, too, you know," he says, trying to play it off like he's done the lad a favor. "They would have come from nowhere if I hadn't supplied them. This way, I controlled what and how much entered the boat," he finishes, proud as a pimp with a new cane.

I shake my head, the taste of betrayal bitter on my tongue. Even in the twisted confines of our world, Matteo's logic is a warped brand of insanity—his version of keeping control. But then again, control is what Matteo Ricci breathes, eats, and shits. It's his gospel, his commandments, his fucking creed. And as much as I hate to admit it, in this messed-up reality of ours, maybe his fucked-up way is the right way.

I grind my teeth, and the taste of anger is sharp on my tongue. "I don't like my son doing drugs, Matteo." My eyes lock onto his, fierce and unyielding.

"Princess, you might not believe this, but he doesn't." He's calm, constantly fucking calm, like a snake coiled tight, ready to strike. "I think being on this side of the fence gave him a different view of them," he continues, and I can hear the truth ringing in his voice despite wanting to reject it outright. "Plus, Angel is on the boat with him. He will reel it all back in if anything gets out of hand."

"Still can't believe he allowed Angel to go and not me!" The words come out more petulant than I intend, a pout forming against my will.

"That boat is a floating nerd's dream right now," Matteo chuckles, his laugh like gravel rolling down a mountainside. "I mean, seriously, the kid's friends are all in his tech class at Uni."

He's not wrong. Niko got into Uni two years early. Thanks to his tech studies and homeschooling, he is the little genius he is. There isn't much he can't hack code or rewire. His mates, a ragtag bunch of nerds, are testament to that. And yet, here I am, sidelined, my mind chasing circles of worry and motherly concern.

"I have something that will take your mind off it if you want..." The corner of Matteo's mouth quirks up, a smirk that spells trouble and has me on high alert.

"What's that, old man?" I shoot back, trying to keep the edge from my voice.

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"Forty isn't old," he retorts, his brows arching in mock offense as he stands, defying his years with the grace of a panther on the prowl. "See, I can still stand without an easy chair."

"Is that how we now gauge age now?" I reply, my tone dry as desert sand.

He strides towards me, his movements sure and fluid. It's a dance we've done a thousand times, each step leading us deeper into a tango of darkness and desire. His hand reaches for mine, a silent invitation, and I place my palm in his, feeling the rough callouses against my skin. With a swift pull, I'm up, barely catching my balance before he sweeps me off them entirely.

"And I can still do this!" he announces triumphantly as he hefts me into his arms, bridal style.

A squeal slips past my lips, involuntary and high-pitched. "Shit, Matteo, warn me next time!" My hands slap against his chest—a solid wall of muscle beneath tailored fabric—and I can't help but laugh, the sound raw and honest. "I nearly popped a poopoo valve!"

Matteo's face dips close, his breath hot against my skin as he licks the tip of my nose—a signature move of his that never fails to disarm me. "This isn't another one of those, 'I have a present for you upstairs things,' and it just ends up being your dick with a red bow tied around it?" I challenge, half-hoping it is, half-scared of what else it might be.

"But you love that gift!" He feigns shock, his face a mask of mock innocence that

doesn't fool anyone, least of all me.

"Ah, let's just agree to disagree." My voice is a whisper, our private world shrinking down to the space between us as he carries me, ascending the stairs with predatory ease.

When Matteo sets me down, my gaze locks onto a box—an enigma wrapped in plain cardboard—perched on our bed like a promise. "Well, go on and open it," he urges, his voice laced with mystery.

"Can't hide your old age from me, mate," I tease, watching him rub at his lower back—a telltale sign of the years we've weathered together in this savage, beautiful life.

"Open the box, Princess." His smirk is a dare, an invitation to step once more into the chaos of his love.

I scramble across the bed, fingers itching to tear into the mystery. The lid comes off, and there it is—a dildo, so blatantly ordinary amidst our extraordinary world. I look up at him, amusement curving my lips. "Um, don't we already own enough?" My voice dances between jest and sincerity because, damn it, with Matteo, you can never have too much.

"Yes, we do, but none of them are me." He points to himself, pride swelling in his chest like a badge of honor.

"What do you mean 'you'?" Confusion knits my brows, but intrigue pulls me forward.

"Come here and have a good look." His tone is a velvet threat, and my body responds before my mind catches up.

On hands and knees, I crawl—the predator's prey—and my body hums with anticipation. I reach him, and with deft fingers, I unbuckle his belt and slide down his trousers. Freedom meets his hardening length as it springs from the confines of silk boxers.

"Fuck me," I whisper, thumb brushing the slick tip. His groan fills the room, raw and guttural, as I take him into my mouth, working him with a hand that knows every ridge and vein of his power and might.

"Princess," he growls, the sound vibrating through my skull, "that's it."

His hardness pulses against my tongue, a prelude to the violence of pleasure that always lies in wait with Matteo Ricci—my lover, my tormentor, the mafia king who owns every inch of my being.

I lean back, the weight of the silicone creation heavy in my hand. I like it against Matteo's now rigid length, a perfect replica down to the last vein. It's a twisted kind of flattery only he could dream up. "This way, I can take both your holes at the same time and know it's only me inside you," his voice is dark chocolate laced with razor blades.

"Prove it." The challenge rolls off my tongue, baiting the beast in him.

"Turn around and shove your face into the doona." Matteo's command is iron-forged and non-negotiable. I comply, spinning around to present myself to him, my ass lifted high, face pressed into the fabric—vulnerability wars with excitement in my veins.

"Good girl," he approves, a low growl sending shivers down my spine. His tongue traces a fiery path from my clit to my ass, each stroke a shockwave that jolts me closer to the edge.

The cold, blunt tip of the dildo presses against me, and I brace for invasion. Inch by inch, he slides it home, stretching, filling every part of my core with a delicious fullness that borders on too much.

"Matteo..." I gasp, my knuckles whitening as they clutch the sheets. His hands grip my hips, anchoring me to the reality of his control, his ownership. This man, this mafiaking who's carved out a throne in the shadows of society, has now staked an even deeper claim in me. And god help me, I crave more.

"Swallow it, all of it," Matteo growls above me, his voice a dangerous purr that vibrates through my body. I arch against the sheets, desperate for release, as he fills me slowly, deliberately, with that replica of himself. The silk cover muffles my pleas, "Fuck, Matteo, that feels so good."

He's relentless, dragging me to the brink only to leave me teetering there, craving the fall. "Please, Matteo," I beg, my voice laced with need, but he's the puppet master, pulling strings and drawing out the moment until I'm nothing but a quivering mass of anticipation.

Abruptly, the pressure vanishes, and I'm hollow, the absence of the dildo leaving a void that aches to be filled. I hear the click of the lube bottle, feel the cool liquid kiss my skin, and then his fingers are there, working me open, prepping me for what's to come. His touch is both fire and ice as he presses the molded silicone to my back entrance and pushes inside.

"Ooh my God, Fuck, Matteo!" The words escape me in a breathless exhalation as I press back into him, seeking that delicious fullness. My muscles yield to him, welcoming the foreign and familiar intrusion.

Matteo's rough hands chart a path of possession down to where I'm most sensitive. He circles my clit with a practiced touch, sending jolts of pleasure radiating through

me while the dildo moves in a maddeningly slow rhythm.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:52 am

"Please, Matteo," I whine, my voice breaking with desperation. He's a goddamn tease, a maestro conducting an orchestra of sensations designed to keep me hanging on the edge.

"Not yet, Princess," he denies me again, his voice thick with control. The dildo finds its home deep within me, held fast by his unyielding grip. Then, without warning, his flesh pushes into my core, filling me up in ways that test the limits of my sanity.

"Fuck," escapes me as the raw intensity of being so completely claimed by Matteo shatters every thought. He moves with a precision that ignites every nerve, his dick and the dildo moving in a synchrony that leaves no part of me untouched, unclaimed.

The world narrows down to the point of connection between us, where power and lust collide. Every thrust is a brand, every moan a surrender to the man who rules with iron fists and a heart that beats in sync with my own. Here, in the shadows of our dark desires, Matteo Ricci isn't just a name whispered in fear; he's my lover, my tormentor, my everything.

Heat coils tighter at my core, the world narrowing down to the relentless rhythm Matteo sets. My breath comes in sharp gasps, each one a plea for release. Tension builds like a storm within me, pressure mounting with every push and pull of flesh and silicone.

"Matteo," I pant, my voice edged with frantic need. The room fades, swallowed by the dark crescendo of pleasure that threatens to consume me whole.

And then it hits—a cataclysmic wave of sensation that tears through me, raw and all-

consuming. My muscles clamp down hard, squeezing his dick mercilessly as the dildo remains trapped inside me by the vice-like grip of my body. My vision blurs, stars exploding behind closed eyelids, every cell ignited by the inferno he's stoked within me.

"That's it, Princess, grip me tight," Matteo growls from above me, his voice a dark melody laced with approval and lust. His hand descends, fingers finding my clit with practiced ease, circling the sensitive nub as my orgasm ebbs away. He doesn't pause, doesn't relent—instead, he draws back only to slam into me harder, faster.

"Please," I whimper, the word barely a breath, but Matteo hears it as clear as a gunshot. His free hand anchors me to him, holding the dildo in place as if claiming every inch of me for himself. His movements are relentless, a testament to his insatiable hunger, his need to possess me utterly.

"Not yet, Princess," he commands, his hand working me over with increased fervor. I'm climbing again, ascending rapidly toward another peak under his unyielding touch.

"I'm not gonna last," I admit, the words torn from my throat by the sheer force of what he's doing to me. But he wants me there, on the precipice, because that's where he likes me best—completely at his mercy.

"Now," he orders, a pinch to my clit sending me spiraling into oblivion once more. Pleasure blinds me, erasing everything but the feel of Matteo inside me, around me, consuming me. It's a dark abyss, and I fall willingly, lost in the savage ballet of our bodies intertwined amidst the shadows of our twisted love.

"Fuck, Princess, you milk my dick so well," Matteo's voice is a growl of primal satisfaction. His body stiffens, every muscle taut and straining as he spills himself into me. He's a beast claiming his territory, and I am the conquered land, lush and yielding beneath him.

I'm drenched in sweat, and my skin prickles with the intensity of our coupling. Matteo collapses momentarily over me, his breath hot against my spine. His lips plant a possessive kiss on my slick back, marking me in ways invisible to the eye but scorched into my very essence. "Told you it wasn't a bow on my dick," he chuckles, the sound dark and smug.

Withdrawing from me, he removes the dildo with a lewd pop that echoes obscenely in the silence following our storm. A sharp smack lands on my ass, and it's Matteo's seal of approval, leaving a sting that fades to a throb of yearning for more of his brand of affection.

"Come on, Princess." His tone is lighter now, playful even amidst the darkness that clings to his aura. "Let me run you a bath so you can fall asleep and snore the house down."

The End