

SYNDICATE
OF
SINNERS
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SINNER'S OBSESSION

BIANCA BORELL

Sinner's Obsession

Syndicate of Sinners Book One

Bianca Borell

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This book is a dark romance. It includes some triggers such as graphic violence, explicit sexual scenes, murder, and other mature situations.

Sinner's Obsession is a full-length, interconnected standalone.

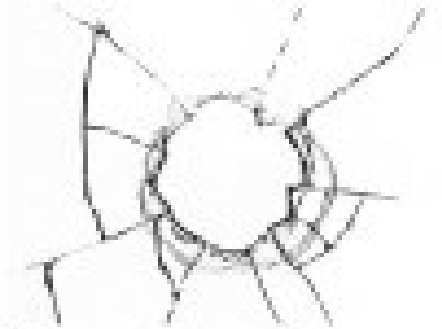


DEDICATION

To those who took a leap of faith. I hope wondrous experiences await you.

“Love is an untamed force. When we try to control it, it destroys us. When we try to imprison it, it enslaves us. When we try to understand it, it leaves us feeling lost and confused.”

– *Paulo Coelho*



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SINNER'S OBSESSION

BIANCA BORELL



Trepidation skitters down my spine when I see my father's name on my phone.

One ring, two, three rings seep through my skin like rattling snakes. I pick up, holding my breath as I touch the screen to answer.

“It is time to return home, Aurora. The jet will arrive in a few days. Be ready.” My father's rough voice blasts through the phone speaker.

He hangs up without another word, as if it's a chore to talk to me. Which I know it is, considering this is the only time he has called me personally in the seven years since he sent me away.

My father pays a fortune to keep me secluded here, even though I finished my studies a year ago. Thankfully, with my grades and Sister Theodora's help, I've been taking online English literature classes at the local university.

Tears spill from my eyes, and Chiara, my best friend, hugs me as I cry in her arms. She should be crying, but she's the stronger one between the two of us. I'm not the one who's being forced to marry—you'd think arranged marriages were a thing of the past. But here she is, consoling me.

Two girls suffering at the whims of their fathers.

“Everything will be all right.”

“How can you be so sure?” I ask, dreading the unknown. Inside the walls of this all-girls school, I have come to know what is expected of me. But outside, there is a whole world of undisclosed expectations.

“Because one day we won't be at the mercy of our fathers.”

“Don't do anything stupid when you get home.”

She flops onto her back. Her black hair spills in unruly waves over the pillow.

With a huff, she waves a hand. “I can’t just accept my fate as if I am not even my own person. My entire life has been mapped out for me from birth, Aurora. From the fucking womb. I want a life, a career. I want to do things my way. When or if I want to marry, it should be for love and not to secure my father’s position and power.”

“At least you know what is expected of you.”

Icicles of fear stab my back. Seven years ago, all I wanted was to return home. But with every year, apprehension rose. My father sent me here to an all-girls Catholic school for a reason: to not be seen, even forgotten, just because I look like my mother.

My dead mother who betrayed my father.

My gut screams at me at the impending danger. The only reason my father wants me back is because he has another purpose for me.

“I’m so fucking tired of being nothing more than my father’s chess piece. I’m not even the queen, just an insignificant pawn ready to be sacrificed for the greater good.”

Anger strikes her cheeks red. I place my hand over hers. “There is peace in accepting things we can’t change.”

“No. And what did that bring you, huh? I won’t accept being so helpless.”

A sigh rolls from my lips. The alarms on our phones go off. Time for dinner.

Cold, gray walls surround me. The old wooden floor quakes with every step I take. Through the big lattice-covered window, the sun battles with the heavy clouds gathering. With elbows looped together, we step into the hallway.

All around, a damp smell of hopelessness clings to our gray uniforms, our steps, and our words. Still, I’ve found peace in this place cut out of civilization. It’s comfortable for a prison. Our steps echo in the arched hallway. The walls are wide and carved in centuries-old stones, depicting statues of angels and demons fighting.

This school is a fortress for preserving innocence more than anything else. It’s disgusting.

In front of the big mahogany doors leading to the dining room, Sister Theodora approaches me with a slight limp. A sad, small smile parts her wrinkled lips, the lines getting deeper with every month.

“Go ahead, Chiara. I need to talk with Aurora for a moment.”

Chiara slips past the doors, and Sister Theodora directs me toward the garden, not her office. That’s the first tell. She wants me in a calm place for whatever she’s about to say to me. The last time we came here, I pleaded with her to let me go home. I missed my brother, I missed *him*, and I missed home.

The gardens open up into lush green, scattered trees, meticulously trimmed bushes, and a rainbow of colorful flowers. Tending to them has been the highlight of my stay here.

Sister Theodora points to a bench and with every second the silence stretches, I press a palm against my stomach to soothe my nerves.

She looks ahead, brows pinched together. “Your father informed me you’ll leave us soon.”

Unease sits between us like a bystander. “It was not my decision.”

She nods more for herself. “There is someone who wants to meet you. I had my reservations, but you, my dear, are a special human being. You’re kind, beautiful, and intelligent. You deserve more.” What she’s really saying is I don’t deserve to be sent away, to atone for something out of my control.

“Thank you.”

“I still remember when you first arrived, how you were afraid like all the others. But instead of being preoccupied with your own fears, you hugged every girl and told them everything would be all right.” She places a frail hand over mine, lips curled into a nostalgic smile. “My heart was so full. Kindness is not as difficult of a decision for you as it is for others. For you, it is innate. Take care of your heart, my dear. And if you ever gift it to someone, make sure that person deserves it. People can be greedy and malicious, but they also need goodness to show them there is always a path to redemption. Don’t let the world blacken your heart. Instead, offer light, goodness, and love.”

My throat clamps with emotions. Before I can say anything, she trudges away, her black-and-white habit starched and ironed perfectly. Not even a gust of wind can affect it.

A shadow falls over me, and I lift my gaze to intense blue eyes tinged with gold and a rugged face; eyes that have a similar golden hue as my mother’s. His eyes travel up and down.

“Years. I searched years for you,” he says, voice shaking at the end, a contrast to the strength his body emanates behind his tailored black suit.

Relief is written all over his face. Between Sister Theodora and this stranger, I've developed a muteness.

"My name is Hayden Carrera. I'm your uncle." He tips his lips up in assurance. It looks strained, as if he forgot how to smile, but he pushes himself for me to put me at ease.

"I don't have any uncles."

Our eyes meet.

This can't be. I can't quite grasp the turn of events of today. After years of inertia, I'm suddenly thrust into a world where everything moves at light speed.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to find you," he says calmly while his jaw clenches.

"I don't have any uncles. You're mistaking me for someone else." I must sound like a broken record.

"You're the spitting image of your mother,"

Nostalgia fills the cracks of the pause that follows.

My heart aches. I miss her so much. If my mother was alive, she would have never allowed my father to send me away.

"This must all come as a shock to you."

"It does."

"I'm here to take you away." My eyes widen at his statement. "I'm doing this all wrong."

Frustration is laced in every word he grits out.

I need to wake up. I must be dreaming.

A ringtone interrupts us and he picks up, taking a few steps back, annoyance tightening his shoulders. He disconnects the call quickly and when he returns, the tension hangs around him.

"You need to come with me. We don't have much time. Pack a bag. I will pick you up tomorrow."

"I—"

"Aurora, you're in danger. I promised your mother I would take care of you."

I stand on unsteady legs, and he grips my elbow. To support me or make me stay, I don't know.

"I will come for you in the morning."

"Why should I trust you?"

"I will tell you everything, I promise."

My head throbs with all this new information, and I ask in a small voice, “Where have you been all my life?”

“I had to do what I had to do to ensure no one would ever hurt you. People like your father.”

“My father?”

“Your father has other plans for you, and I won’t let him get his way,” he snarls. Even this stranger who says he is my uncle knows of my father’s hate toward me.

It’s not like I have any illusion of my father loving me. He’s never come to visit in all the years I’ve been here.

The stranger puts a phone in my hand and says, “Take this so you can reach me. I promise everything will be all right. You’re not alone. I will always be there for you. I won’t let him harm you like he did them.”

What does he mean? I open my mouth to ask him, but he says, “Tomorrow. For your safety, keep my identity to yourself until I can tell you the whole story.” I walk away with more questions than answers. At the foot of the stairs, I glance over my shoulder, and he’s still smiling at me. I feel his comforting gaze on me until I step inside.

This is crazy.

I enter the dining hall and spot Chiara, seated at one of the three long tables spanning the room. Automatically, I take the seat next to her, lost in the fog of my mind.

Chiara flicks her fingers in front of me. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

I shake off my stupor and take a few spoonfuls of soup when she adds, “You’re scaring me. What did she say?”

“Later,” I mumble, and we finish eating. After half an hour, we are excused. The moment Chiara closes the door to our room, I say, “I met my uncle.”

Her green eyes set on me in incredulity. “But you don’t have any uncles.”

“That’s what I thought. He said I was in danger.”

She paces around before sitting cross-legged on our dorm room floor.

“Hayden told me I should pack a bag because he’s picking me up tomorrow.”

“What if he’s right and you are in danger?”

“My brother will protect me.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“I should throw it away.” The phone—a.k.a. Pandora’s Box—glares at

me from where it resides.

“No, you’re going to keep it. Every ally is good.”

“We’re not in a war, Chiara.”

“But we will be starting tomorrow.”

After we shower, we get ready for bed. We both lie on our sides, facing each other.

“I will miss you. Whatever it takes, we’re going to stay friends.”

“Are you afraid?” It must be terrifying knowing she will soon become a mob boss’s wife.

“I’m not going to let anyone dictate my life.”

“Be brave, but not stupid.”

“I hope we can see each other soon. They can’t watch over me twenty-four hours a day. I will find a way. Maybe I’ll come up with a plan and we’ll go somewhere, just the two of us, and start a life we want to live.” This reckless attitude landed her here, but I would have never met my “person” if she weren’t exactly who she was.

I love her, I really do. I love the fire in her, her passion, but she is not a realist. I am, or I had to become one. When your father sends you an ocean away because you remind him of his dead wife, it’s a necessity.

The words of my so-called uncle stay with me.

I spend the entire night analyzing his words that sparked fear in my soul, resonating with the one that started after my father informed me I would be going home. My gut instinct tells me this is not good. After a night of chasing sleep, I scoot upright.

Chiara is already dressed. With slumped shoulders, she eyes her suitcases as if they personally offend her.

“My parents are on their way here. Yay. My one-way ticket to hell,” she says, chest deflating.

I rush to her and hug her. “It’s okay to be afraid, but if someone is capable of turning her prison into a life worth living, it’s going to be you.”

She hugs me tighter. The door opens and her shoulders go high as she meets her parents, who sigh at her sign of rebellion. They exchange a worried look and greet me before they leave together.

I’m alone again. This has been my reality for so long, I don’t even remember what life was like before this. There are just flashes of the past. My mother, smiles, hugs, chatter, and love. But it all vanished in the blink of an eye. Screeching tires, panic, gurgled sounds, and a car wrapped around a tree.

I change and finish packing, the phone my alleged uncle gave me vibrating on my nightstand. I freeze, urging myself to ignore it, but I answer. The silence is the first sign of a shift in plans, the sigh the second.

“Your father’s jet is early and there is no time, but I will come for you. Until then, be brave, okay? Promise me. I’m sorry.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“You have my number. Hide the phone. I’ll try to get to you as soon as possible. Do not let anyone know about me or what we talked about.”

“I won’t.” I pledge my loyalty without a second thought. Am I so starved for a bit of love that I make promises I am bound to keep?

“You have no reason to trust me, but I’m asking for it anyway. I wish I could have spared you for what’s to come, but your mother was a fighter, and you are one too. Everyone loses their innocence eventually. I am sorry I couldn’t have shielded you.”

The phone disconnects, and my heart pounds in my chest, a merciless thud of dreadful anticipation. I feel as if everyone around me knows about my future while I stumble blindly through endless corridors.

A knock has me jumping back into action, and Sister Theodora enters. “There is a car waiting for you.”

I nod and follow her to a black town car, hoping my brother is here to pick me up, but the flicker of hope fizzles.

A driver steps out and places my luggage in the trunk. I get in the back seat, uncertainty veiling me.

When we pull into the airport, my body strains with nerves. I force my legs to move toward the jet and take a few deep breaths to calm myself down while the driver carries the luggage behind me. A flight attendant greets me, and my nerves ease when I catch the familiar face of the pilot. I take my seat, and when the jet meets the sky, the flight attendant brings me a glass of sparkling water.

I write in my notebook, jotting down ideas for my book. In a perfect world, I’d travel the globe and follow my passion—writing. Words have been a consolation that turned into a calling—words I read, words I write, they sweep me into another world. They flow, create a world out of nothing but a blank page, giving me a sense of belonging, a deeper sense of being. Everything halts—time, worries, uncertainty when I give in to the call of writing.

Depleted of my creative juices, I close my eyes, more at ease and proud

of the small accomplishment.

When I open them, the countdown begins as the plane descends. I chant to myself, “Be strong, be brave, be happy.”

A lone tear rolls down my cheek. I miss my best friend. I miss my simple life of studying, reading, writing, and tending to the flowers in the school garden.

The moment the plane lands, all my hard work at keeping my nerves at bay flickers like the remaining embers in a foot-stomped fire.

I step outside to the Boston summer sun beating down on me. My brother Cameron steps out of a bulky black Escalade waiting on the tarmac. He shoves his hands in his pockets.

Even from a distance, I see the displeased look on his face.

I ignore it. I missed him. Rushing to him, I wrap my arms around his waist. He holds me tightly to his chest.

“Welcome home,” he says, his lips lifting in a terse smile.

The driver opens the car for us and we step inside. After shooting off a quick message, he turns to me. He’s so much like Father, from his hazel eyes to that square jaw and elegant nose. The silence makes me antsy, and I fidget with my fingers.

“Where is Father?”

“Waiting for your return.” His voice hides a sneer.

“Aren’t you happy I’m home?”

“Not like this.”

My heart deflates from the shot of hope I felt when I saw him just minutes ago. Sadness prevails.

Cameron is on his phone the entire ride. As we leave the city behind, a familiar road opens in front of us. Green, majestic trees line each side.

When I was little, I thought my parents were a king and a queen, ruling over a kingdom. The land my father owns is still as wide and majestic as ever. The wrought-iron gates swing open and the driver proceeds down the driveway. Security guards are plastered here and there.

Home. Or it used to be.

Marie, the longtime house manager, waves at me from the top of the marble stairs. Behind her, the imposing mansion of cement and marble rises from the ground. Home, and still it doesn’t hold the warmth I felt as a child. It’s just walls, surrounded by so much land.

The nearest neighbor is a mile away.

I think about *him*, my silly forbidden crush. I have loved my brother's best friend for as long as I can remember.

Shaking my wayward thoughts, I jump from the car and straight into Marie's arms. "My sweet child. Finally, you're home."

A few tears slide down the deep lines in her face and she presses me to her as if to shield me.

"Your father is waiting for you."

The brief moment of serenity flies away as I nod and follow her. I glance back, only to see my brother leaving, but not before he tips his chin, a sign letting me know everything will be all right.

"Your father is in his office," Marie informs me.

With every step down the long hallway, I take in the paintings and the art. Nothing has truly changed since I left, except there is not one picture of my mother. Every trace of her existence was wiped away. Marie knocks and his gruff voice has me tripping over my feet. I catch myself quickly and step inside.

My father is dressed in a bespoke suit. I don't think I have ever seen him without one. After seven years, some grays pepper his dark brown hair. The lines around his eyes are more prominent. He leans back and steeples his fingers over his mouth, a frown splitting his bushy brows.

He stops me with a stare, my feet rooting where I stand.

"You still look just like her," he says, disgust rolling over every syllable. "This will make things even easier."

I force myself to say something, but nothing comes out.

"Go to your room. I'll see you at dinner." He dismisses me with a wave of his hand.

I retreat. With every passing minute, I miss my safe place back at school.

I trace a finger up the curved stairway, Marie trailing behind like a somber shadow looming over me. She has been quiet since my father's reaction to seeing me.

Back in my old room, I catch the lights dancing on the wide windows, trapping the late afternoon rays. I flop onto my queen-sized bed.

"It's all the same."

"Just as you left it, my child."

"You know I didn't leave it."

She sits next to me and pats my hand with hers. "I'm happy you're back. You are even more beautiful than I imagined you'd be."

I catch my reflection in the mirror secured to the ornate closet door. What does beautiful even mean? Blue eyes with golden notes, straight blond hair that runs down my back, skin the sun loves to turn red.

“Maybe if I didn’t look like my mother, he wouldn’t hate me so much.” I take my eyes away from my reflection and stare at my fingers.

“Your mother was not only beautiful on the inside, but on the outside too. Just like you. It’s a compliment you should be proud of.”

I nod dejectedly.

“I am going to see to dinner. Afterward, you can tell me all about your stay abroad in England.”

My stay abroad. What a mockery. As if I’d been on vacation and not sent to a fortress filled with rules, lessons of obedience, and learning acceptance. I wouldn’t know what independence was if it gave me a concussion.

Marie closes the door, and I step inside the en suite bathroom. I shower before dinner, wishing the water would wash away my jet lag and the misery engraved on my soul. I towel myself dry and change into a knee-length dress, covering my arms as well. I pat it to smooth out every wrinkle.

My bedroom door slams open, and I bolt upright, seeing my father’s face filled with anger. I take a step back.

“Didn’t the nuns teach you some respect?”

“I didn’t know I was expected at a certain time.” I try for a soft tone, but a sparkle of defiance fizzles through. Not knowing what he expects from me and being on constant alert is exhausting.

“Do not test my patience. You have five minutes to come downstairs.”

He shuts the door behind him, and my heart slows to a normal beat. I put my hair into a loose braid and rush down the stairs. Marie gives me an apologetic glance, and my brother’s shoulders are as stiff as a board.

“The princess finally greets us.”

“Father, she just got here.”

The tension crashes down on the room.

“Just as useless as her mother.”

My brother’s jaw tightens. My father cuts into his steak while I take a seat across from Cameron.

“Should we say a prayer?” I ask, hoping to deflate the stiff air a bit.

My father bursts into laughter. “Save it for later.” What he doesn’t say reverberates through me with a more ominous ring.

My brother looks at me, care and protection sparkling in all the brownish-

green tones of his eyes. My father asks him questions about how his election campaign is going. Currently a US congressman for the State of Massachusetts, Cameron is running to become the youngest senator in the country in a few years. He keeps his answers short, but my father nods, pleased with his replies.

When dinner ends, my father leaves, taking with him that stifling veil of tension. I have so many questions now that I'm alone with my brother. I want to know about his life, career, and where I fit in all this.

Cameron dabs at the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "I need you to trust me."

My expression must be a mirror of confusion, but he stands up. Reaching across the table, he kisses the top of my head, leaving. A few moments later, a roaring of a sports car blasts through the partially open dining room window.

Marie finds me in the same spot, and I shake myself from my daze. On my way to my bedroom, I tell her about my best friend and my favorite nun, Sister Theodora. Even though she was the most strict, it's because of her I found how much I love gardening. I tell Marie how I have immersed myself in reading and writing books. How I discovered my love for running and that I was the best in my class. By the time we're finished talking, I feel more at ease.

When Marie closes my bedroom door, I pick up my phone and sigh. No messages from Chiara. I try to call her, but it goes straight to voicemail, igniting my worry further.

I type a message. **Hi, just call me back. I miss you and need to know you're all right.**

I open my nightstand, and behind a secret panel, I find my most treasured possessions. Possessions I had to leave behind, because the moment I came back from the hospital, my father sent me straight to St. Mary's School.

There's a picture of my mother. My beautiful mom, with her long, blond hair, and almond-shaped, sky blue eyes. She's wearing her full smile as she hugs me. I pick up my old diary, open it, and smile at the first entry.

Cameron picked on me today, but Kieran patted me on the head and said he picked on the wrong girl. He smiled at me, a warm beam as if the sun itself touched his mouth. I smiled back at him and then he went after my brother. He got him on his back, and Cameron had to promise he'd never say I'm a pest.

I wonder what he's doing. I should have asked my brother. He must be twenty-six now. Are they still friends? Does he have a girlfriend or a wife? I haven't even kissed a man yet. I pat my lips and wonder if I'll ever experience what I read in my books a thousand times over—love.

Be strong.

Be brave.

Be happy.

My mantra helps me ease into a blissful sleep.

The next day, I walk across the estate, stopping often to smell the flowers. The gardeners have done a wonderful job tending to them. When I go back inside, infused with a new wave of optimism and courage, I turn to head to my father's office, needing to talk to him. Now that I'm back, I want to go to college. I have the grades, and I can't just stay in the house all day long.

Marie stops me and says, "My child, stay away from him today. He's in a bad mood."

"But this is important."

I steel myself. It's my future, and I can't delay it. Maybe I just need to plan for it better.

If I was away for college, he wouldn't have to see me.

I knock, announcing myself with false cheer. "It's me, Father."

I step inside when he gets to his feet.

"Did I say you could enter?"

"I thought—"

"You don't think, Aurora. All you have to do is look pretty and keep quiet."

Watching his face contort into maniac aversion, I take a step back over the threshold and notice his eyes lose their hardness for a second. "What do you want?"

I gather all the bravery that plunged into my stomach, stammering, "I-I thought that with my grades, and seeing as though my presence upsets you, I should leave for college."

His mouth twists with derision. "You don't have to think about the future. Yours is already set for you."

"I don't understand."

What become clear to me is that my future is not my own nor is it in my hands. A spark of defiance rises.

"I. Want. To. Further. My. Education."

“What do you plan to study?”

“Literature.”

He bursts into laughter and heat blooms on my cheeks. He bends over slightly as if I was an inconsequential bug he could stomp on at any time.

“Understand this. You will do what I tell you to do. There is a dinner on Friday, and I want you on your best behavior. Now, go. I have things to do. Don’t bother me until then. Marie will take care of you.”

I close the door and walk down the hallway. When I reach my room, I slide down until I hit the floor and curl my fingers around my legs. With my cheek resting on my elbow, I sigh, a long, dejected sound ripped from my chest.

My phone rings and I rush to answer it. It can only be one person. My excitement overrules my bleak mood.

“I’m grounded.” Chiara’s face fills the screen, and my worry ebbs a bit.

“It’s only been two days.”

She huffs, waving a hand through the air. “Yes, apparently I am not lady enough for my future husband. When I told my parents they could drag my lifeless body from this house if they wanted me to marry that man, my father had enough.”

“Will it make you feel better knowing my father hates me and my brother is his closed-off self?”

“We really hit the jackpot with our families, didn’t we?” she asks, voice thick with sarcasm.

“What are you going to do about the marriage?”

“I’m going to meet him in a few days. I’ll tell him if he doesn’t want to end up strangled in his sleep, he won’t go along with this wedding.”

“Chiara, he’s a mob boss. A bit of tact would be helpful.”

“I’m not afraid of him.”

I wish I was that confident.



I tip the glass of whiskey into my mouth, and Cato's dark stare finds mine.

"Cameron's acting strange."

I nod, tapping my finger over the rim of the empty glass. Secrets between the three of us are unheard of.

He drags a hand through his hair. "You're not worried?"

I am, but one of us has to keep a cool head. "If we begin to distrust each other, then we might as well piss all over our oath."

My eyes land on his arm, where a tattoo sits beneath his black shirt. All three of us got the identical ink when we were nineteen, when we created a syndicate to rule over the underground world.

Cameron's car roars outside the building of our compound. When the sound dies, I give Cato a warning glance. He has the tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. But I owe my oldest best friend the chance to explain his secretive behavior.

Cameron steps inside the office, breathing hard under his suit jacket. Every time we meet lately, his eyes brew with worry and anger—not a good combination. In our world, it's the definition of trouble.

Cato shoots him a glare. "Fuck this. He has to tell us."

"Or what?" Cameron jerks a greeting, going straight for the whiskey bottle set in the middle of the table. Uncapping it, he takes a big slug.

"I'll make you."

Cameron waves Cato off. "He brought my sister back," he snarls, his words detonating.

Everything stills, even the blood in my veins. This is not good. Not

fucking good at all.

I tap my lower lip. “He didn’t say why now?”

I haven’t worked relentlessly in the last several years to fuck that man over, for him to upend that.

“No.”

“We can’t let her return risk what we’ve worked for,” I say, while my heart twitches at the reminder of a little sunshine girl. I squish the inconsequential twitch. She must be nineteen now. Not a little girl at all anymore.

I run a hand through my hair. Fuck, I hate surprises. Aurora coming back is the biggest surprise.

“What do you know?” My voice is harsher than I intended, and he raises his eyebrow at me.

“He has a dinner party planned for Friday.”

“How the fuck don’t you know more about it?”

“Kieran.” His voice drops eerily low.

A warning. But I don’t give a fuck. Every one of us has a clear task. If he fails, we all fail.

We sit around a triangle shaped table. We chose a triangle to represent our unity. And in all these years, we have never been at odds. Not once.

“We’ll be there,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

“He only invited a few of his friends and acquaintances.”

“All the more reason to show up.”

“I can’t come,” Cato says, features tightening.

Cameron jerks his face to him. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Well, I am meeting my fiancée.”

He downs his drink.

I massage my temples, a headache splitting my head. When Cato leaves, Cameron stares out the window with a forlorn expression.

He turns to me and says, “She looks just like my mother.”

I shut my eyes. That reminder brings back unpleasant memories. Like my father getting himself killed over his love for a married woman. “I don’t care.”

“Aurora is not my mother.”

“Yeah, so?”

He pins me with a serious expression. “Keep your emotions in check.”

“When don’t I?”

He studies my face, and I mumble, “No woman will ever unbalance me.”
With that, I stand up and walk out.

At home, I go into my office and stare at the picture of my father on the desk. I keep it as a reminder of how one woman made him vulnerable enough to put himself in the crossfire. I will get my revenge for his death out of duty, even though I know if he had been smart enough to stay away from that woman, he would still be alive, but I wouldn’t be in this position if he was. Who needs a soul when you have enough power to buy, influence, and destroy countries?

“Your mother and sister are here, sir.”

I close the door to my home office and greet my mother in the hallway. Her face is a porcelain façade, cold but still beautiful. My sister smiles at me shyly and waves. She is the best thing in my life, and I wonder how long it will take my mother to ruin that joy for her.

“Leonie wanted to see you.” The corners of her lips twitch unpleasantly. I ignore the passive-aggressive grimace, taking it for what it is—frustration over my father’s betrayal. Mine as well.

“I missed you too.”

I pick up my nine-year-old sister and breathe in her summery smell, flowery and sweet. I would burn the world down for her.

“Are you hungry?” I ask Leonie, and she nods enthusiastically.

My housekeeper, Tamara, appears from around the corner and claps her hands together.

“I made you your favorite,” she tells her.

Leonie’s eyes spark with childish innocence. “Chocolate cake?”

“Yes, but only after you eat.”

“I am not that hungry.”

“Darling, you know the rules,” my mom says, being a better mother to my sister than she was to me. Or maybe it has everything to do with the fact that I inherited everything from my father: my looks, and my ruthless business acumen. The only difference is I made the law bend to me. He always dangled on its fine line.

Inside the dining room, Leonie’s chatter and stories from school cut through the silent reproach my mother sends me. When Tamara brings out cake, my sister jumps up and down in her chair excitedly, and my mother’s eyes soften. They harden the moment she looks at me again.

When we finish dessert, my sister pleads with Mom to accompany

Tamara to the kitchen. She loves it there.

“Can I, Mommy?”

She nods. Alone with my mother, the tension settles in the room like fresh rain on barren soil.

“You’re twenty-six. Shouldn’t you at least introduce me to someone special?”

“There isn’t anyone.”

“Oh, I forgot. You’re too busy with your gang. I can’t believe you’re still friends with him.” Disgust coats her reproach. In her eyes, Cameron is guilty just by association.

“You’re enjoying your lifestyle because of my gang.”

That shuts her up quickly. After my father’s death, we wouldn’t be here if I didn’t do what I had to do. She waves me off while I cock my head.

“Why don’t you spare Leonie the image of you painting our father as—”

“As what? A criminal? A cheating bastard? He ruined everything by choosing that whore. How quickly you forget that if he didn’t die, he would have been somewhere else, living his best life with that woman and her daughter.”

Having had enough, I stand up, the chair scraping against the polished floor.

I kiss her cheek. “I never forgot what he did, but while you wallowed in your self-pity, I had to master this fucked-up situation. Goodbye, Mother.”

She lets out an indignant huff. “Are you gonna leave me now?”

“Enjoy the rest of the night. This used to be your house too.”

Back in my bedroom, I peel my clothes off and head to the shower. The hot spray unknots some of the tension in my muscles, but not enough to fall into a peaceful sleep. There is no such thing for me. And I stopped searching for that a long time ago.

I wake up before my alarm rings. I don’t know why I insist on using one. My body is set on waking at five a.m. After a three-mile jog, I shave and put on my suit.

My driver takes me into the city where the bank logo, HB, covers the top of the building. Everyone bows their head, greeting me on my way to the elevator.

After meetings and personal calls to our best customers, I call it a day and drive to the compound situated on the city’s outskirts. It’s secluded and in the belly of a forest, strategically located between the bank and my house.

To an outsider, it looks like another luxury building. The floor-to-ceiling bulletproof glass stretches over five floors. There are three penthouses. But it's all a façade. I'm here for business.

The security device scans my retina, and the elevator descends, heading three floors down to the real reason for the building.

Cato and Cameron are already in their seats. I roll my shirt sleeves over my elbows, our tattoos visible on our forearms. I take my seat, and Cato pushes two folders toward me.

"These are our new candidates, waiting for you to make the last call."

I open the folders, scanning through them. Hayden Carrera and William Thompson.

An established stock mogul who is also in the business of real estate and an heir to a media conglomerate, who has a penchant for illegal purchases.

My father might have led our bank into being one of the ten largest banks in the world, but I went further, creating an accounting firm to complement this. I wanted to climb so high that no one could ever reach me. It took time, skills, and the best team money could buy. We didn't go to college for the fun factor. We went to pick up recruits. It's a well-oiled machine, and it purrs like my Lamborghini Aventador.

"How are your polls?" I ask Cam, and his lips curve in his trademark arrogant smirk.

"We're heading there, safe and steady."

"Good."

"This calls for a celebration," Cato says, heading toward the bar. He retrieves a bottle of whiskey. It would have been so damn easy if we just wanted money. But above everything else, we want control and power.

We clink our glasses, and my quietness doesn't go unnoticed. I raise my glass and say, "We live and die together."

We empty our glasses, and Cato points at his forearm—a triangle with three symbols: a chain, a knife, and a cross. We chose this life, and now we have to deal with it.

We head upstairs, where people mingle in our private club. Depravity happens at the highest level. We provide entertainment once in a while, private parties where nothing is taboo. Our customers believe it's for them, but we do it for ourselves.

I lean into Sawyer, the chief of security.

"Everything cleared," he informs me.

Shaking hands and small talk is a must in maintaining the façade of someone who cares. I only care about what they can do for me. Women hang on their arms, never their wives or girlfriends.

I am so fucking bored with the scene. Sex, alcohol, gambling, drugs. It never changes, just the players from time to time.

I give Cato and Cameron a sign that I am out. There is no challenge for me here. Nothing jolts me from this permanently comatose state of functioning.

I go back to the office and stare at the picture. Ever since I saw Hayden Carrera, my brain has worked overtime to piece something together. But the fucking puzzle won't reveal itself.



Friday approaches like a panther, biding its time to claw the jugular of its prey. Dread fills me as I wake up to a white silk dress hanging over my closet door. I haven't stopped staring at the revealing fabric. Marie steps inside and I point at it.

"Your father chose it for you." She gives an apologetic shrug as I hop out of bed.

It's not that it isn't beautiful. It's almost elegant if it weren't for the slit on the side. But it's a bit too much. It's also backless.

"I am sure you will look beautiful in it."

"I'm going for a run."

I need to clear my head. Not even a few days back, and the walls are confining me, trapping me with no way out.

As I change into my running gear, she says, "Don't be late. The hairdresser will be here soon."

"I won't."

The moment I step outside the mansion, I inhale the fresh air and push my legs to exertion. I zigzag through the forest, AirPods blaring with music. I come to a stop and bend over, putting my hands on my knees, my lungs grappling for a breath of air. Leaning onto a tree, I look at the dense trees cornering me.

Panic hits me. I have no idea where I am. I have never ventured so far into the woods.

How long was I running?

I lift my arm, realizing I forgot to put a watch on. Hysteria bubbles inside of me, making me bow over and laugh. Maybe this forest will swallow me, and then I can be free. Free. What a foreign concept, elusive and so alluring.

After the initial panic, I take in my surroundings, but the trees don't provide the answer I need. With resolve, I run in the direction I came from. When a road appears, I loosen up. I reach a fork in the road and decide on the right path, running until sweat gathers at my temples, and I collapse on the ground.

On my back, I smile at the birds chirping and circling the forest, the tips of the trees caressing the morning sky. In and out I breathe, and I close my eyes. It's peaceful, serene, a reprieve.

A shadow falls on my face, and I peel one eye open, then blink wide awake.

First thought, it's not a bear.

Second, do eyes like that even exist?

They're blue with flickers of green. Like the ocean and forest fought hard but neither won, so they compromised. I remember those eyes. I remember those eyes very well. Those eyes once looked at me with candor. Now there is a layer of coldness that settles on my skin.

"Are you all right?"

"I got lost."

He extends a hand, and I grip it. A zap shoots through me at the contact. The images of a younger version of him flash before my eyes. But now, he's all man. His impact on me is even more poignant.

The boy was beautiful. The man is something completely different. And it makes my legs wobbly. Hard edges on a sculpted face, a body oozing power, thick thighs behind gray sweatpants, muscular arms behind a shirt that does nothing to hide a carved torso.

"What are you doing here?" His voice is a deep timbre, ending on a husky note.

Really, he doesn't remember me?

Hurt replaces the warmth—the disappointment settles over me like a blanket of snow. "Can you point me in the direction of my house, *Kieran*?" I emphasize his name, and his lips twitch as if he's struggling not to smile.

He arches an elegant brow. It's infuriating, that arrogant expression.

"Aurora." He says my name as if testing it out loud, ending with a rasp dipped in sensuality. My lower belly flutters.

“What gave me away? That except for your house and mine, there is nothing for miles, or that I look like my mother?”

“You are more beautiful than your mother,” he says matter-of-factly, without any warmth. With a clenched jaw, his eyes travel almost lazily over my body as if what he sees is unpleasant, yet he still can’t look away.

God, he’s sexy. Sister Theodora would have a conniption if I even thought of God and a man as sexy in the same sentence. Snapping out of my thoughts, I wave my hand in front of his face.

“I have to get back home. Which way?”

As if me opening my mouth took him out of his trance, he says, “You could get lost a second time. I’ll drive you back.”

The green in his eyes intensifies with something primal that sends tingles to my toes. We walk in the opposite direction while I steal glances at him. Kieran catches me every time and smirks, knowing his effect on me. His smile is like him, alluring, speaking of something lurking under the surface—dangerous, but also sinful.

“How was boarding school?” he asks, and we both stop as if surprised he broke the silence first. I push through the onslaught of nerves, making me behave even more awkwardly than normal.

“It was an all-girls Catholic school.”

“And now you’re back.” His answer is a swift cut with a knife.

We exit the forest and arrive at the front of his house. A memory comes to me and I remember a cute two-year-old baby.

“How’s Leonie?”

“She’s good.”

“Can I see her?” I am desperate to hear more about what I missed while I was gone. Bleakness has taken over from the years I have been away.

His mouth presses in a flat line. “No, she lives with my mother. After what happened, Mother didn’t want to stay here.”

“Oh.”

“Come on.”

I follow him into the house and inside the kitchen. An older lady I remember well blinks from me to him.

“Aurora?”

“Tamara.”

We meet in the middle in a hug. She pours us fresh lemonade. I catch the clock and shoot up.

“My father will kill me. I’m so late,” I say, and Kieran pushes himself off the wall. His presence alone unnerves me. My stomach hasn’t stopped fluttering.

In his black, luxurious car with brown leather, his scent intoxicates my senses, a woody, smoky scent. Masculine, sensual notes. The cool air from the AC blasts on my heated skin.

“You looked scared back there.” His words shock me back to the present.

Shifting in my seat, I respond, “It’s just . . . I thought they would be happy I came back, but everyone sees me as the ghost of my mother.”

“You are your own person,” he says with no trace of doubt, putting a smile on my face.

“I don’t know what I did for Father to hate me so much.”

Can’t I just shut up already?

“You were a child. No one should have blamed you.”

He grips the wheel and slams on the gas, forcing my back into the seat. When we reach my house, he parks the car in front of the stairs. I catch my father’s eyes, towering over me with sheer displeasure, his face scrunched up in anger. As I approach him, an apology is already on the tip of my tongue.

“Get inside,” he snarls.

I pass him and look over my shoulder to find Kieran’s shoulders stiff as he walks toward my father.

I run up the stairs, and Marie is already in my room, worry etched in her eyes. There is a team of three people gathered near my vanity.

After a quick shower, I take a seat, and they fuss around me while thoughts of Kieran swirl in my head.



4

KIERAN

I shove my hands in my pockets to keep from pummeling this fucking monster. Aurora is not my problem, I remind myself.

But my fury doesn't calm down. A storm brews inside me as I watch Aurora rush into the house. I crack my neck at the unpleasant feeling constricting my chest. I climb the stairs, making my face inscrutable. All the while, I want to kill this man with my bare hands. It takes everything in me to uncurl my fists. Soon.

Her sweet scent still lingers around me, taunting me. From the moment I saw Aurora, I wanted to touch her, check for myself that she's real. The similarity between her and the woman that brought my father to his knees are uncanny. She's not sunshine anymore, she turned into a storm.

They would still be alive if she . . . But she was just a child. An innocent child.

I approach Silas McNamara, his disdain for me in his eyes is as clear as the thunder gathering over our heads.

“What was my daughter doing with you?”

“You should look after her better.”

“I will deal with her.”

Not only did he yell at her, but he looked at her with pure hate. I shouldn't care, but I was intrigued by her, such a foreign concept. Yesterday, I complained about nothing fazing me, now it's too much suddenly. Be careful what you wish for, and all that bullshit.

“As a good neighbor and your son's best friend, I thought I should return

her to you. Intact.”

The word triggers him, and he mumbles, “Stay away from her.”

Stupid fucker. If I wanted Aurora, there would be nothing he could do. He shouldn’t antagonize me, though.

I tower over him, and he backtracks from our silent power struggle, inviting me inside.

People fuss around, and I remember Cameron mentioned a party.

“Welcome home party? My invitation must have been lost in the mail.”

His cheeks puff with barely contained anger that tells me he wouldn’t have wanted me to know. I would have popped in anyway, but now he’s disrespected me by not inviting me.

I love when things go smoothly.

“What time does it start?”

“Eight o’clock.”

I give him a look as if I am thinking about it, which angers the asshole even more.

Silas clears his throat. “How long are you going to play the not interested card with me?”

“I thought you didn’t want anything to do with me or my business.”

“Just because Ethan was stupid doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate that his son is better at doing business than he ever was.”

I grind my teeth, almost breaking them. I nod in his direction, validating his comment. Soon.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

“I expect an answer, and soon. I have a sizable sum coming due.” That gives me pause, considering I’m the reason he is losing money little by little.

The bastard grins. A hideous, power-hungry grin.



I look at myself in the mirror. My hair hangs in curls down my back, giving me an old Hollywood glamour, lips painted in red, the dress hugging my body, leaving nothing to the imagination. I feel too exposed and not at all comfortable.

“You look spectacular.” The hair and makeup team compliments me. But all I can think about is I am not wearing underwear. They air-kiss me and leave. I walk around trying to hide my leg, but the slit is touching my hip bone so I give up. Maybe if my father sees me, he will think it’s too revealing. But when he comes to check on me, his eyes glisten with satisfaction and my hopes burst.

“I want you on your best behavior. Or you won’t like the consequences.”

“Yes, Father,” I say through a whisper of irritation.

When the clock strikes seven, I drag in a lungful of air. I check my phone, but there are no more phone calls or messages from Chiara. How strange. Tonight she faces her future, while I find out why I came back. The feeling of foreboding terrifies me and my knees weaken with every step I take.

I grip the banister and my jaw drops at the group of men gathered at the end of the stairs. Their leering eyes scan me approvingly and with a gleam of something more. Something I don’t want to know for sure. I search for other women, but when I reach the last step, I confirm I’m the only one. It’s just me and ten men. I push through, wanting to hug myself and run back and lock myself in my room. Something tells me my fear would only entice them, and I’m tired of living in a permanent state of fear.

My father locks my elbow around his as he parades me around. Cattle for show, and my insides curl in disgust. Each man takes my hand to kiss the back of it. Two showers and ten liters of bleach wouldn't rid me of the filth that now feels like it's caked on my skin.

"Smile, and stop being stiff. These are my friends. Let them see you."

This is wrong, but I steel myself. He takes a step back as if inviting them to take a better look, and the hair on my arms rise in disgust.

"I would keep you locked in a room. Your beauty is spectacular."

I glare more than anything else because I won't validate that with a thank-you. That was not a compliment, it was an assertion of just how Delaney Jackson would rather enjoy me for himself. His name has been chanted like he's a damn god among immortals between the other guests. His meaty fingers graze up my arm, and I take a step back at the gleam I see in his cold, almost black eyes. With every second, my stomach churns with disgust.

"Can't wait to sample that innocence," he says with glee.

My insides churn at the thought of him touching me. I would rather slit my own wrists than let this man have me.

Instead, with a fake smile, I say, my words as sharp as a sword, "That will never happen."

"A little fire under all that innocence. I can't wait to show you how wrong you are."

He tips his head toward my father, and the glimmer in my father's eyes tells me this is not a game. Dread fills every crevice of my body.

The other men circle me, a bunch of hyenas rounding up their prey, one after the other, all of them eyeing me with blatant desire.

When the front door opens, the breath I was holding bursts from my mouth. My brother is the first to appear, his movement coming to a sudden halt. Kieran follows, wrath flashing in his eyes.

"My mistake, boys. I said eight. I meant seven, actually." My father smirks at his admission.

"Go to your room," my brother says through gritted teeth.

I mouth thank you and turn, but my father steps between me and the stairs, blocking my exit.

"This is my house, and she will stay right here."

"You heard your brother," Kieran says with a clenched jaw. He jerks his chin upstairs, giving me the last bit of courage I need to openly disregard my father's order. I flee past him up the stairs and collapse on the floor inside my

room.

I can't stay here any longer. I might be innocent, but I am not stupid. My father just offered me like a prize up for auction. Yanking the nightstand open, I send a message to my uncle.

Please hurry.

I breathe in and out. Opening the doors to my balcony, I step outside onto the terrace. Violets, oranges, and blues strike the sky in symmetrical lines. I lean my forearms over the banister and inhale. In and out.

After a while, whispered voices sound between my brother and Kieran under my balcony. I lean over the railing to hear what they're saying. Kieran steps back and catches me eavesdropping.

I go back inside and sink on the edge of the bed, lost in my thoughts. The house has turned quiet when Marie tiptoes into my room. I know it's bad when her eyes turn glassy.

She helps me out of the dress and waits for me while I shower. Back in my room, I find my father and another man waiting for me.

Alarm blares between my rib cage, and my father says, "Let the doctor do what he's here for." A silent warning threads through his words.

I am about to open my mouth when Marie says, "Please, just do what he says."

It's sheer fear coloring her voice. She has her hands clasped together over her heart, nodding at me to assure me that I am not alone.

The middle-aged man approaches me, his brown eyes etched in cold professionalism behind his thick glasses. "This will be just a prick. You won't feel a thing."

"What is that?" My voice pitches, ringing of apprehension.

"A contraceptive shot."

I stumble forward, dropping on the bed as if my limbs can't support me. By the time I come out of my trance, the needle is already in my arm.

The implications of my father putting me on the shot debilitates me. I can't even look at him. My own father, violating me like this. When they leave, a stuttered breath heaves through my lips.

"I am so sorry, child."

In the bed, I have my head on her lap as she holds me and caresses my hair.

"Your mother must be turning in her grave."

I close my eyes, falling asleep with a crushing sadness.

I get ready for breakfast and stop short in the doorway when I find my father waiting for me in the dining room. Last night's events are a fresh stamp on my retinas.

"Aurora, come inside."

His happy tone raises my level of caution even further, and I sit at the table farthest from him.

"Next to me."

I get up with balled hands. After he finishes his poached egg, he dabs at his mouth with a napkin, turning his attention to me. I recognize the look so well. It's the one he has after a successful business outcome.

"I knew you would be good for something, after all," he says, patting my hand. It would be a caring gesture if it wasn't for his words, sharp as a blade.

"Why do you hate me, Father?"

He waves me off. "I don't hate you, but I already loved one whore, and you are her spitting image."

My head drops, but fury has me shooting up and slamming my palm on the table.

"My mother was not a whore."

He backhands me, and my head jerks to the side.

"Don't you ever yell at me again. Go to your room."

Gladly, I push myself up, but his words freeze me to the spot. "I will get rid of you soon. He will teach you better manners than the nun. So many years wasted . . . All you need is a firm hand."

I cup my cheek and stare at him with disdain and a broken heart. He has to be talking about one of the men from yesterday. All of them are likely the same age as my father. I'll leave before I ever allow that.

I storm away, trying to breathe through the onslaught of emotions.

Closing the door to my room, I grab my phone to call Chiara, but my phone rings. A smile spreads on my lips at the telepathic moment.

"He sold me, like I'm some animal."

A gasp and then silence. I guess I finally left her speechless.

"I fucking hate that bastard. He's even worse than my father."

"You had something to say too?" I remember she should have met her fiancé. "So how was he?"

She sighs and says, "An asshole."

But it lacks the emphatic note. "What aren't you telling me?"

“Fine, he’s hot. I mean, I have never seen someone like him.”

“You remember the place where we just spent the last several years? You have nothing to compare to.”

“Yes, but we had internet. That’s plenty of resources.”

A small giggle slips from my lips.

“But he’s this arrogant jerk, a cold-blooded criminal. I hate him.”

“So, did you warn him off?”

She scoffs. “I did, and the asshole laughed and said he’s looking forward to it.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’ll escape. Did your uncle respond?”

“Not yet. So, we really are desperate? I don’t even know who to trust anymore.”

“We’ll be free. Soon.” Her hope bolsters mine.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Sisters for life.”



With my blood boiling and my pulse threatening to explode in my neck, I speed off before I fucking kill Silas for putting on that show. For treating Aurora as if she was his possession to sell. I shut the car door and stride to my home office. I tug at my collar and pour myself a drink, slumping in the chair.

That fucking degenerate. First, he lied, then we get to the house to find an auction. I left Cameron to deal with his father before I killed him. I slam my empty glass down. Her sadness ripped my chest apart. I almost lost my shit, and I pride myself on my unwavering control. This girl is a danger to my composure. Why the fuck am I so unbalanced, thinking about some asshole putting his hands on her?

I hear Cameron's engine purring before coming to a stop.

He storms inside, shirt unbuttoned. This guy lives for appearance, so this is him looking disheveled. He fills a glass and takes the seat in front of me on the other armchair. His disarrayed hair and his face contorted in anger reveal I won't like what he's going to tell me.

"He's selling her."

I nod. It was obvious.

"To Delaney."

My insides churn, knotting together to the point of snapping.

"And what do you want from me?"

"She is my *fucking* sister. He's selling her to Delaney Jackson. You know how sick the fucker is. He will destroy her."

“Get to the point.”

Cameron shoots from his chair and his blazing eyes clash with mine. This is not good.

I arch a brow. “We’re so close. You knew there would be casualties along the way. This one is yours. Don’t ask me something so stupid.”

He circles my desk and yanks the top drawer open. A dagger lies on top and my back stiffens.

“What are you doing?” I watch him test the edge of the knife. His intent look pushes me to the edge of my seat. Every second ticks with the tectonic shift.

“I lost my mother because of him. I owe it to her to make sure my sister doesn’t face a grimmer fate.”

I jump to my feet, snapping my head from the knife to his face. My ears drum with the unsaid implications.

“Aurora is my sister. There is no other way.”

Family is the biggest weakness, even for us. I close my eyes and inhale, but the nerves scraping at my ribs make it impossible to remain calm.

“What do you want me to do?” I grit out.

“Keep her safe.”

“Cameron . . .”

“You’re my brother,” the bastard says and cuts his palm as I extend mine.

“She’ll just exchange one prison for another. I don’t see how this will be better.”

“You won’t destroy her.”

“This was not in our plans.” Fuck. This is a fucking monumental complication. One I didn’t see coming; one I truly don’t fucking need.

“I know, but it will bind us more. My father may be a piece of shit, but he is feared and respected.”

“There would have been a better marriage alliance.” For me, but especially for her. I take the knife from him and slash at my palm. The stream of blood reminds me of the irreversibility of my action.

He squeezes my shoulder. “You wanted revenge. What better way than getting his daughter and messing with his plans?”

“Marriage is for life to us,” I remind Cameron. And I am as equipped to be a good husband as a wolf mating with a sheep. A catastrophic, unheard-of union.

We shake our hands, blood dripping between our cut palms, sealing the

deal. I snatch a tissue and wipe my palm from the stark red coating it.

I know deep in my bones this is a mistake.

My mother will hate it and our relationship is one strain away from being completely fucked for good.

But I would do anything for my brother.

Pleased with the oath, he leaves, and I call Cato.

“Cam called in his favor.”

“Yeah, he told me.”

“You should have tried to dissuade him.”

“He’s Cam.”

And he’s a stubborn asshole when he wants something.

“We’re both going to be married.”

“I don’t know about your future wife, but mine just threatened to cut my throat in my sleep and I believed her.”

The bastard chuckles. He always loved challenges.

“This is a mess,” I say and end the call, glancing at my father’s photo. I take the black notebook out of my secret drawer. On the page of his last entry, a message for me.

You will rule, so be ruthless. Build your empire and always have the upper hand against your opponents. Leniency will get you killed. Vigilance will keep you in the game. I couldn’t be more proud, because I know you will smash our enemies, but when you marry, do it out of your heart’s wishes. Don’t roll your eyes at me, Kieran. Let me tell you from experience. The right woman will elevate you, the wrong one will be your downfall. I chose wrong because the heart is a motherfucker who won’t let you find your peace. This is how men learn loyalty, not through their mind, but with their hearts. Don’t be a destroyer of your family, like me. Be better. Because the woman you only respect can’t compare to the one your blood boils to have.

Love got you killed, old man. Or was it temptation? Love, a big word. I don’t even know what it fucking means.

I am at the breakfast table when Cameron bursts inside, shitting all over my need to be alone. He asks, “How are you going to do this?”

I couldn’t sleep last night. All night, the sweet scent of revenge lingered. There is no remorse, no feeling of guilt. Silas should have never involved his daughter, but I gain so much more by binding Aurora to me.

I take a sip of my coffee, finding myself smiling at the thought of having her irreversibly bound to me.

“My way.”

“My father is a vengeful bastard. Don’t do something reckless when we’re so close.”

I wave him off. I have tiptoed around Silas for years. Bleeding him financially lost its appeal. I want to fuck with him. Playing with my enemies is so much more fun. Cato steps inside next and catches up on the discussion quickly.

“If he promised her to Delaney, he will want her back.”

Anger coils around my neck, and I snap my head to Cato.

“Let him try if he’s stupid enough to come after what’s mine.”

On my way out, I add, “I’m out. I have a big night ahead of me.”

I drive to the compound, my men waiting for me. Some would call them mercenaries. I call them my trained savages.

“We’re going to extract the product tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

My right-hand man and I go through the plan. It’s a fuck you to Silas right to his face. I am usually more subtle than that. I let my enemies know who fucked them over, but with a bit more restraint. But he deserves the humiliation coming his way.

My palms twitch to have Aurora next to me. The rush is even more potent than when I win. Since I saw her, there is something about her, something I have to figure out before this madness wraps around me and snaps my brain.

When darkness cloaks the sky, I hop in the van. My men wear black masks and I put mine on as well, patting my gun, reminding myself to not unload it tonight in his chest. There will be another time. He has to suffer first.

When we arrive at the house, my IT expert shuts off the cameras. The gates to the estate open and excitement floods my veins. My men signal that the security guards are down and we creep toward the main entrance.

I climb the stairs two at a time and tiptoe into Aurora’s room. I take a moment to take her in. Her hair flows down her back like golden silk as she lays curled up in her bed. It’s maddening to force myself not to touch it. I bend over her, and she twitches in her sleep. Those blue eyes with golden stars pop open, wide and scared. Her mouth opens, but I quickly press a cloth to it. Her entire body relaxes from the sleeping drug.

Daniel, my personal security chief and the one who has been like a father figure to me, opens his arms. I shake my head at him and pull Aurora even farther into my arms. I carry her downstairs and place her in the van, pointing my finger at my men.

“Guard her with your life.”

They all nod, and I go back inside. Let the fun begin.

The door to his bedroom creaks open as I tiptoe inside. At his bed, I smack the side of his face with my knife. Silas shoots up on his ass, his head snapping from right to left in a panic.

“Guards.” He’s pathetic as his voice crackles in fear. I cock my head. The smell of fear, the sweetest perfume.

“Don’t you know who I am? Don’t be stupid.”

I take my mask off, and the idiot actually looks relieved, and I smirk.

“Kieran, what are you doing in my house?”

“Taking something I want.”

“What could you possibly . . .?” He keels over and laughs. “You’re as stupid as your father. I almost respected you. I guess you’re still a boy led by his dick than the man you want to appear to be.”

He relaxes on his bed. I play with my knife and his eyes twitch.

“Don’t do anything foolish. Bring her back. She’s not yours.”

I lean over him, staring him down. Don’t give your enemies words, they hang on them like druggies hanging on every small hit.

“Kieran.”

This tactic always works.

“I am sure we can work something out.”

“How much did Delaney pay for her?”

“Ten million.”

Ten million for someone who’s priceless. My fingers around the knife itch to plunge it in his throat and bleed him out. “Aurora’s mine now.”

Fury dots his cheeks in angry red stripes.

“I might forget this indiscretion of yours for the sake of my son, but if you go through with this, I won’t.”

“Old man, you can’t get to me. You have other things to worry about, like what Delaney will do when he finds out.”

“I will tell him you’re behind this.”

“Do that, but know he comes after my wife.”

“Don’t you dare make her your whore,” he spits out, foam coating the

corners of his mouth.

I press the side of the knife to his neck, barely restraining myself not to slash through his skin. My nostrils flare. He flinches, aware that I'm losing my composure. He has never been more than a daddy's boy with a god complex.

"I can get to you anytime I want. This is your warning."

"He'll kill me. Let's remain civil and talk this through." His request for civility unleashes a fresh wave of fury. I guess he didn't feel chivalrous enough when he killed my father.

"You don't have anything to give me. Don't you know I don't take on broke clients?"

He gulps and sputters like an engine on its last life. "How do you know?"

I smirk, my patience at its wits' end. I push myself off and strap my knife at my side.

"If I go down, boy, I will drag you with me."

"Try, old man. But if I were you, I would start appeasing Delaney."

"If it's the last thing I do, she won't be yours."

My head falls back and laughter explodes from my lungs.

"Nothing of mine will ever be touched by you again. Especially Aurora. And we have to keep being the people the rest view us as, civil and friends. So, you will just smile and say how fucking pleased you are that the son of your best friend married your daughter."

At the door, I say over my shoulder, "Good night. You'll need a clear head tomorrow."

Silas curses, but I ignore him. My job here is done.

In the van, I shoot Cam and Cato a message.

Done.

When the van parks in front of my estate, I carry her sleeping body inside and up the curved staircase. Her sweet scent washes over me, a bouquet of cherries and cotton, calming every nerve ending as I bury my head in the crook of her neck. As if she was made to fit in my arms.

Inside the bedroom next to mine, I tuck her in. With the adrenaline spike crashing, I get in my office and pour myself a glass of whiskey.

"Kieran?" The woman who has been more of a mother to me than my own steps inside.

"What did you do?"

Tamara definitely made the wrong choice career-wise. With her skill of

analysis, she would have been one hell of an asset to my team. Instead, she insists on making sure my household runs well. That works too.

“Aurora will stay with us from now on.”

Worry lines her forehead.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“Don’t take that tone with me. I wiped your ass as a child,” she scolds me, and I grunt for patience.

“And you never let me forget about it,” I say, exasperated, before chuckling.

“Why did you do it, Kieran?” Her voice takes on an eerie softness, pushing the guilt button with an expert touch.

“Aurora did nothing wrong. Why kidnap her?”

I wave her off. I didn’t kidnap her, I saved her from a much worse fate. I shove away the guilt at how I took her, but I had a point to make.

I have never been the type to explain myself. Still, I say, “She’ll be my wife. Treat her accordingly.”

“You can’t do that to your mother.”

I snap my head in her direction. “I am doing this for my best friend. Cameron means more to me than the hysterics my mother will have over this.”

Tamara tips her head in a nod, her stiff body reeking of disapproval.

Taking one last glance at my father’s picture, I wonder if he’s smiling or thinks I made a stupid mistake. What I did is stupid, but the fucking oath and my weakness for the blond sunshine turned into one heck of a beautiful ruin.

I drag in a lungful of air and leave my office. And it’s Aurora’s image I take with me to sleep.



Shaking the remnants of my nightmare away, I swipe at the dampness soaking my skin. Opening my eyes, I adjust to the blinding sun pouring in. Panic scratches at my ribs with sharpened claws. I scoot to my butt, realizing I am not in my bed. My eyes wander around the white-and-beige room. A room that is not mine.

My hand shoots to my mouth, my heartbeats threatening to split my chest.

Be strong.

Be brave.

Be happy.

This mantra usually helps, but not today. *Calm down.* I am obviously not tied up. I search in vain for my phone. I need my phone. My uncle has to reach me. He has been my only hope for the last week.

The door creaks open, and my mouth dries at once. When Kieran strides inside, it does nothing to ease my nerves. Memories from last night stream through my fogged mind. Those eyes of his, right before he put a cloth over my mouth. Panic gives way to anger.

What is wrong with the men in my life treating me as if I am nothing more than an ornament?

Not one trace of guilt is to be seen on his gorgeous face. He tucks his hands in his pants pockets without a care in the world, not an ounce of regret. I stomp to him and press my finger in his hard-as-stone chest.

“Are you crazy? You scared me to death.”

He shrugs. He fucking shrugs.

“You kidnapped me, Kieran.”

“You should thank me.”

This can't be real. But it is. It is in my savage beating heart, in him standing in front of me as if we're having a normal conversation. Fury replaces confusion. I press my hands to his chest and shove him.

His jaw twitches. He grabs my elbow and puts his forehead on mine.

“You're scared. I get it, but I would never hurt you.”

“You kidnapped me. Came into my room and drugged me.”

Kieran grinds his teeth together. “I took you away from your father, who would have sold you to a fucking monster, Aurora. Do you know what that man's favorite activity is? Breaking women and turning them into his sex slaves.”

I wince, and a mix of emotions settles heavily on my chest—fear mingled with dejection, shame mingled with self-consciousness.

I wrap my arms around myself. “So, now what? Should I get on my knees and thank you? What about talking to me? Informing me?”

I take a step back. Strangely, I prefer knowing I am here with him. I escaped one monster. But who will save me from this one?

“Am I a prisoner?”

“You will be safe.”

“You didn't answer me.”

“If you want to think of yourself as a prisoner, then be my guest. I don't have time for this,” he says, and leaves me with my mouth hanging open.

Oh no. I storm after him and follow him downstairs and into the kitchen.

“Kieran, be reasonable. We need to talk.”

“Aurora, you be reasonable. You are safe. End of discussion.”

He ignores me and puts a cup in the coffee machine, his back to me while I prop my hip against the counter.

“Does my brother know?”

“It was his idea.”

I slap my hand down on the counter to support myself. The avalanche of information is dizzying me. “Where is he?”

“Cam should be here any moment.”

Tamara enters the kitchen, caution transforming her face as she scans our interaction.

“My dear, how are you?”

I throw my hand in his direction. “Ask Kieran.”

He shoots me a warning glare and takes sips of his coffee, looking out the window. Incredulity pushes me down on the chair closest to me.

Tamara prepares breakfast, stirring eggs in the buttered pan. At the domestic picture, a bout of hysterical laughter bubbles out of me.

I step outside, needing to clear my head. I'm pacing on the pavement when I hear the roar of the engine of my brother's sports car. He climbs out, and I put my hands on my hips.

"Really, Cameron?"

He leans on the hood of his car, eyes on me. It's the first flicker of relief I see since I returned, and I relax for one second.

With no hint of apology, he says, "I couldn't let it happen."

"You said nothing when our father sent me away."

"I knew you would be safe, far away from him."

"Yes, well, we both know how that turned out."

"If I knew what he planned to do, then I would have—"

"What?" I ask, desolate.

"It doesn't matter anymore."

"This is crazy," I scream, losing myself in the fog of emotions.

My brother comes to me and wraps me in his arms.

"It's going to be okay. I trust Kieran with you. This is the only way."

"I don't want this." Any of this. I want to be free, to study, and be my own person. I refuse to believe this is my life, where I don't have a say, again.

"I wish I could care more about what you want, but I can't. My first priority is to keep you safe. After last night, it's not only our father I'm concerned about, but also Delaney."

I shiver, remembering that glint in his eyes.

"Where is Kieran?"

At his name, butterflies leave their cocoons and learn to fly in my chest. But then I remember he kidnapped me, and I stomp right on that silly infatuation.

"How should I know?"

"This is not a time for tantrums."

Oh, my situation is a *tantrum* now. The men in my life could very well go fuck themselves.

"He was in the kitchen," I say with a smile reeking of sweetness.

Cam squeezes my shoulders. "I couldn't save our mother, but I'll be

damned if I won't save you."

"It was an accident."

His lips turn into a small smile, brimming with regret. "It wasn't an accident, and you could have died as well."

"What?"

Images flood my mind of sitting in the back seat of the car, reading one second. In the next, metal screeching as the car wrapped around a tree. Blood came out of my mom's mouth in thick rivulets as she gurgled a whisper to me. *Be strong. Be brave. Be happy.* I turned to the man sitting next to her with open, soulless eyes. Kieran's father.

My vision blurs with those images, and I hug myself as Cameron kisses the top of my head.

"We'll talk about this another time."

"You can't leave me like this. I deserve to know."

But he climbs the stairs while I walk toward the back porch and find a white pavilion. In the middle, a swing flutters in the wind and I plop on it.

What did Cameron mean? I remember my mother telling me we were going on a trip. That night before, when my dad came to tuck me in, I told him. His brow furrowed as I asked him where we were going. I shoved that fateful day so deep in my subconscious, I didn't realize that it was me. *My fault.*

What did I do?

I yell my brother's name as I break into a run toward the house. My brother and Kieran round the corner. I drop to my knees in the hallway, my palms covering my face.

"I killed them." Through a sob, I hiccup. "I told him we were going on a trip. They planned to go away with me."

Through blurry eyes, I seek Kieran's and then my brother's gazes. There is no accusation, but sympathy.

"I killed them."

"You didn't, our father did."

"I'm a murderer."

Kieran lowers and grips my chin, his touch anchoring me. "Don't say anything like that again. It was not your fault."

"It was." To Cameron, I say, "That's why you wouldn't even look at me at their funeral. That is why you let him ship me away. You blamed me."

I scream, exhausted by the lies, by the secrets, but most of all, by the

guilt.

I am sorry, Mom. I am so sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know.

Dashing off toward the stairs, I collapse on the bed, feeling like a ball thrown from corner to corner.

Tamara peeks inside and approaches me. She takes a seat on the duvet.

“It was my fault,” I say through hiccups, rivulets of tears streaking down my face.

“You were a child, darling. It wasn't your fault.”

“I didn't know,” I say, sounding how I feel—broken.

“Of course, you didn't. It was adult business.”

I sob in her arms. When my tears subside, I curl back in bed. I fall asleep thinking I will be strong and brave, but I doubt I will ever be happy. It's like we share the same destiny. Mom was never happy, except for the times we were alone. Every time my father would come around, she would stifle a smile and her entire body would tense up. How could I have forgotten that? The renewed grief and guilt choke me.

I lie in my bed, the moon peeking through the curtains. Kieran steps inside the room, a vision of rugged beauty and strength.

“Come on, sweetheart. Dinner is ready.” Softness threads through that cold exterior.

I turn my back to him, lifting my knees to my chin. He approaches the bed.

“Don't cry,” he says and wraps his arms around me.

I soak in his warmth, his male scent and distinct cologne that drug my senses. I grip his suit jacket and peer up at him as Kieran strokes my back.

“I can't take it when you cry.”

I calm down, hearing the same words he said to me when I was just a child, when he cared. Maybe he still does. My body's reaction to him and his nearness wreak havoc on my already hypersensitive system, but I can't allow myself to be vulnerable. Never again.

“You have to eat.”

“Will you force me? You're no better than my father then.”

Hurt transforms his face and he gets up, slamming the door behind him, leaving me confused and aching for his nearness.



Her words run on a loop in my brain. Aurora compares me to that man? I may not be a good man, but the comparison is undeserved. My sullen mood echoes in my steps as I walk into my office. Numbers bounce on the laptop, and I shut it with a growl. This will go down in history as the first time I wasn't able to focus on work.

Cato and Cameron step inside, studying me quietly. If I wanted them here, I would have replied to their messages.

"What crawled up your ass?" Cato asks.

"How is Aurora?" Cam adds.

"Starving herself."

A few hours under the same roof and she's driving me crazy. A bit of gratitude would have been great, but no. Instead, she compares me to her father.

"She has to snap out of it if she's gonna find a place in our world," Cato says, looking out in the distance.

"That girl will never fit into our world. She's weak and has too soft of a heart. This was a fucking mistake," I mumble, dragging a hand down my face. The words taste sour and feel like acid rolling down my throat.

"You're talking about my sister."

"You don't make a wolf out of a sheep. I need a ruthless queen at my side, not a lamb."

Cam slams his palms on the table, and I shoot up, getting in his face. When was the last time we fought? I can't fucking remember.

“Calm the fuck down. This is getting us nowhere. Get your head on straight. We have business to attend to,” Cato says, buttoning his suit jacket while I grab my keys, and we get in our cars. I am the first to reach the compound.

In the basement, our unwilling guests are secured to metal chains. One is my accountant and the other, a handler for the DeCavallaro family operating in New Jersey. I crack my neck, already feeling the tension leave my body. Tonight, I don’t ask. Tonight, I let the beast out. Aurora is right, I am a monster in my own right.

I look at the arsenal at my disposal. So many possibilities.

I test the knife and a drop of blood slips through. I lick my thumb, and Jeremy, the accountant, pisses himself. I haven’t even started yet.

“I’m sorry. Please.”

He could have come to me and told me someone was threatening his family instead of betraying me. Family is the greatest weakness—stronger men have done stupid things in the name of it. I would have understood. But no, my own employee decided to betray my trust.

“You should have come to me.” Jeremy has gone from rattling in his chair to saying a prayer.

My fist knocks the air out of his lungs. With Aurora’s words clamoring in my head, I pounce like the monster I am. Like the monster she considers me to be. Grunts come from the second guest. I prolong his misery just because he is well aware of what happens in our world when you get caught.

When I am done, I look at the pile of limp flesh under me.

Cato, Cameron, and our six most trusted men stare from me to the bloody mess on the floor. I take the machete from its hinges and sever his head with one swing of my arm.

On my way out, I say, “Get this shit cleaned and make sure everyone knows. The price of stealing from me is death.” Our enemies never learn, but again, I am also in the business of dealing with criminals. And I had to become even more ruthless.

“Aurora might be a lamb, but she’s good at transforming you into the king of monsters,” Cato says, both he and Cameron chuckling.

I wash my hands in the sink, looking at the bodies lying in a pool of piss and blood with disdain.

No one crosses me.

If some power-hungry son of a capo doesn’t understand the way things

work, too bad.

I gesture for my phone and press call.

“I’m sending you a gift, Ricardo. If this happens again, you will be replaced. Don’t forget who we are.”

I head back home and check on Aurora, only to find her room empty. I slam the door shut. If she wants to run, I’ll show her a hunter always catches his prey. I watch through my security cameras. Daniel shifts in his chair.

I have enough men posted around the perimeter. She won’t get far, but my blood races through my veins. I tell myself to calm down.

She’s going to be the death of me.

When Aurora appears on the cameras, she eyes the red dot and gives it the middle finger. My lips twitch.

Oh, a lamb with a bite. Interesting.

I am about to go outside when Tamara rounds the corner. “Treat her better and be more patient.”

“I’m trying to keep her safe.”

“Kieran, think of what the girl has been through. Be better.”

“I am not.” Not when there are even worse people than I am, morally speaking.

“Then I hope you will enjoy being miserable. Aurora deserves better. Show her you care.”

That word almost knocks me out. The oath was one thing, but Tamara’s words ring with a truth I have been perfectly fine ignoring: that I still care for her.

I shut the door behind me and take a sharp right toward the pavilion, feeling even angrier with her and myself. The swing still sways. I follow the alley and stop when I find her on her ass, watching over the patch of gardenias.

Aurora stiffens as I approach.

I crouch in front of her, and her glassy eyes find mine with a spark of defiance. “You won’t like the consequences if you run away again.”

“I wasn’t running.”

“I watched you on the cameras. I know when someone plans to do something stupid. You headed for the forest and then changed direction at the last minute.” I pause so that the next words sink into her stubborn head.

Those eyes take on a fiery blue tint. It makes me fucking proud.

She pats her chest in mock offense. “Oh, didn’t I behave like a good little

lamb?”

Fuck, she heard that.

Aurora pushes me, or tries, but I grab her and pin her under me. All her softness under my hard body. Her eyes widen, her dress bunching up her thighs. She looks divine under the moon’s light. Her pulse skyrockets and she licks her lips. And my dick rises to the occasion, ignoring the point I’m trying to make here. My grip on her tightens when she arches her back.

“Don’t challenge me.” My voice is sandpaper.

Her eyebrows rise and she lifts her chin defiantly. It makes me even harder.

“I don’t bend to monsters.”

I drag my nose against her elegant neck. “Sweetheart, I am the king of monsters. You will bend and you will kneel if I say so.”

“Never.”

“You should. You’re about to marry one.”

I push myself off her and adjust my jeans.

She scrambles up. “What did you say?”

I leave her staring after me, shouting my name.

When I hit the bed, I feel both unsettled and at peace.



Something snapped in me after I heard Kieran call me a lamb. Well, this lamb decided to eat the wolf for a change. If I could turn back time, I would shake the girl I used to be for loving the boy who turned out to be a cold, unaffected, ruthless asshole.

Kieran thinks he can control me, bend me. Not anymore. I am done. I stare at his retreating body, that body that was pressed on mine. Goose bumps hurry down my body. No, I stomp over that spark of unwelcome desire and head toward the house.

I yell after him, but he ignores me. He wants to be difficult, I'll give him difficult. And with that thought, I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

The next morning, I find Tamara in the kitchen. Her warm, brown eyes look at me cautiously. "Good morning. Hungry?"

"Morning. May I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course."

"Will you deliver my food to my room from now on?"

When my question is met with silence, I add, "Or I can just come and take it myself."

"Take a seat, please."

I do, and she pours some coffee and places it in front of me. "Kieran is not a bad guy."

I suppress a snort and she adds, "He had to grow up quickly, and his ways might be questionable, but I know he's doing this to protect you."

"Maybe he is, but I am not a child."

“No, you’re not.”

I guess after my mental breakdown, stubbornness is my new trait. I sigh, knowing I’m not doing myself any favors by behaving like this. Still, the frustration, the pain, the lack of being able to be my own person, blinds me.

After I eat a few bites of oatmeal, I decide to explore the house. I step inside a room where hundreds of books surround me. A gorgeous library with a glass wall where the forest stretches out in the distance. This could be my favorite place. I pick a fantasy book and get lost in a faraway land where magic exists.

My stomach growls. When I peer up from my book, I find Kieran leaning against the doorframe. It would be impossible to ignore him with the intensity staring back at me. His presence alone demands attention. My heart and my belly flutter as if sparrows spread their wings inside me. He’s beautiful, in a hard way. Hard jaw, hard chest, hard body. Every inch of him is rugged perfection.

I swallow and jut my chin. “What do you want?”

“Is this how you’re going to behave from now on?”

Gnashing my teeth, I turn the page.

“Lunch is ready.”

Letters jumble on the page as I chase after focus. But it’s hopeless. “Don’t you have anything better to do than look after me?”

I snap the book shut, taking it with me, and pass him by. Our hands brush, and a current zaps through me, unbalancing me. Kieran grips my elbow and his long fingers curl around my skin. He towers over me. He could overpower me so easily, dominate me.

Why does that sound thrilling?

I find his gaze, and in those depths, I see hunger and conflict brewing. I blink and it’s gone, replaced by irritation. Yanking my arm away, I take the stairs to my room, my heart beating frantically.

Hours go by as I binge-read the book before I give in to the necessity of eating.

I tiptoe downstairs. Inside the kitchen, the moon casts a dim light. I open the fridge, taking the casserole out.

After a few bites of vegetables and meat, the commotion at the entrance door startles me. With the lights turned off in the kitchen, I breathe a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, the lights turn on, cutting my luck short. Kieran stands in the

doorway, cocking his head to the side. His presence sends awareness through me. It's a heady feeling, being under his scrutiny.

"We should talk about how our marriage is not going to happen," I say as I stand up and rinse the plate.

The bastard steps inside. Every step toward me is flowing cockiness, as if he couldn't wait for me to challenge him.

I take a step back with each step he takes toward me. I cross my arms and try to stare him down when my back hits the fridge. His hands brace on each side of me. I am trapped. Trapped between his strong arms, trapped by his addictive scent, trapped by his greenish-blue eyes.

"Our marriage will happen."

"If you think I am going to let you touch me, you're mistaken."

Just to prove he can, his finger brushes a strand of my hair back. My breath trips over as he skims down my neck, pressing down on the erratic pulse.

"But you want my touch, don't you?" I'm about to open my mouth when he puts his finger on my lips. "Your body is not a liar."

The heat in the room blasts through me. He leans into me, trailing his nose against my neck, the sensation dizzying me.

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Set me free?" I ask in a whisper.

"I can't do that."

I try to push him off me, but his thumping heart gives me pause. "Why would you marry me?"

"It serves my agenda."

For a moment, I expected something different. And the disappointment drags my heart lower in my chest.

"I thought it was to keep me safe."

"That too."

The muscles of his arm strain as he pushes himself off me. I stare at his retreating back, and the movement shakes me out of the Kieran-induced trance. Oh no, he will not be the one who leaves first, again.

I follow him upstairs, stepping inside his bedroom, a minimally decorated room with gray walls and black furniture. Kieran eyes me over his shoulder as he peels his shirt off. I swallow back words when I see his chest, those muscles flexing, a six-pack melting into a *V*.

Stop looking.

But it's impossible. I glimpse a tattoo on his forearm, but I can't decipher what it is from a distance.

"Having a stroke?"

I snap my gaze back to his face, which is just as unnerving. "I've seen better."

He backs me into the wall in one move, pinning my hands above my head.

"You went to an all-girls school." His voice drips with something dark, primal.

I arch my back, loving him affected. "Yes, so?"

"Where did you see better-looking men? In your dreams?"

I lift my knee, but the bastard anticipates it and spreads my legs with his thigh. The heat of his body, his presence, overwhelms my senses.

"Let me go."

Kieran pushes himself off me, and I pat my dress down. It has a stupid tendency of bunching up around him.

"It's been a long day. I need a shower. So unless you're going to join me, leave."

He peels his pants off, followed by his black boxer briefs. My mouth dries as he stands there in all his naked glory. His body is a sculpture to be worshipped. I blink at his long, thick dick pointing at me, and my kneecaps melt, making my legs wobble.

He smirks, and before he steps inside the shower, he says, "There's room for two."

I snap out of my porn trance and rush out. Closing the door to my bedroom, I lock it and sink down on my butt, pressing my hand to my thumping heart. I don't even know why I did it. He can break the lock easily. Like every part of him, he's made to subdue, to take, to possess.

The title '10 KIERAN' is centered on the page. The number '10' is large and bold, set against a background of cracked, stone-like texture. Below it, the name 'KIERAN' is written in a tall, thin, serif font. The entire title is rendered in a light gray color.

That woman drives me crazy.

I pride myself on my control, but she pushes my buttons. Storming down the stairs, I grab my jacket and head to the door, but something hits the side of my head. I come to a full stop and watch the object, a book, hitting the floor.

Snapping my head in the direction it came from, I catch a defiant look on Aurora's face. That angelic face hides a little daredevil in her. Her aim is impeccable, and I barely suppress a laugh.

"Next time, it will be a knife."

So my lamb is not a lamb, but a wolf in disguise. In all this fucked-up mess, I give in and smile. My eyes find hers, and my damn heart twitches. Her blue orbs could drown me.

"Behave or else . . ." I itch to back her into another wall, to have her at my mercy.

"Where are you going? To destroy another poor person's life?"

A fire blares inside of her eyes, and I sigh. "Have dinner with me tonight and I'll consider not doing that."

I'm losing it. Did I ever negotiate? Not when I got nothing in return. There is nothing I can gain, but I don't want her to feel like a prisoner, even though it would definitely make things easier for me.

"No," she says and backs up.

I leave for my office with a weight pressing against my ribs.

After spending the better part of the day at the bank, I head to the

compound. Sawyer informs me about some new surveillance and says, “This Carrera guy. Something doesn’t fit.”

I nod. He’s too clean. I usually have endless blackmail possibilities, but not with him. There is nothing. No family ties. And a man that is that good at hiding his past is dangerous.

“Dig deeper.”

“If it’s a trap, I will find out.”

I doubt some magical information will pop up, so I need to switch tactics.

“Invite him over.”

He tips his head and I go downstairs to the basement, cleaning my knives and my guns. This is how Cato finds me.

“Who pissed you off?”

He shuts the door and opens his gun cabinet. We stare at each other, then at the wall plastered with targets as we empty our bullets in the center.

My ears ring, and when I approach the target, I say, “I win.”

“Fuck you. That was just luck.”

I smirk and he slumps in the chair in the corner, grabbing two glasses and a bottle from the bar.

“I hope when it’s Cam’s time, his wife will be the fucking ruin of him.”

“Problems in paradise?”

“You’re one to talk. I haven’t seen you this tense in . . . never.”

We clink to our misery.

“It’s nothing. And Cam will pay for this mess.”

“So, this is about Aurora. I haven’t seen her. When can I meet her?”

My fists curl and uncurl at my sides.

The fucking bastard laughs at my face.

Cameron steps inside and stops, taking us both in, the bullets laying scattered around and Cato’s cat-that-ate-the-canary grin.

“What the fuck happened here?”

Cato jerks his chin to me. “Our friend here is a bit overwhelmed with the task you gave him.”

I lunge at him, but Cameron comes between us.

“Calm the fuck down. If this is about my sister, then deal with it. And you fucking try to make this work because . . .” And he points at the tattoo. “You know what marriage will be for us.”

He shuts us up quickly.

I came to the compound to calm myself, only to drive back home more

tense than before.

I look for Aurora in her room, but she's not there. I run down the stairs, and my erratic nerves only calm down when I don't find her lying dead under her balcony. I storm toward the surveillance room, rationalizing over the fact that my men would have informed me about her trying to escape decimated by sheer panic. But the sound of splashing water stops me in my tracks.

I take the path to the back of the house and relax when I see her in the pool, glistening under the moon like a siren. She's exquisite, a goddess appearing in front of a sinner. I take in every perfect inch of her.

She's going to be mine. No one else will ever have her. I might not be the monster Delaney is, because I do want my women willing, but I am still a monster. And I will touch her, have her, and ruin her for all others but me. I will make her enjoy every second of it. Her surrender will be my greatest win.

My dick hardens.

Soon.

Aurora freezes in the water when she senses me. She tilts her head, and instead of fury or fear, I see relief. Something eases in me.

She gulps, her slender neck taunting me. Her presence is a bullet ripping through my bulletproof façade. An image of a little ray of sunshine running around fills my head.

Now, that sunshine has turned into the queen of temptation.

I have always been protective of her, but I never thought she would heat the blood in my veins like she's doing now. She's not a little sunshine anymore. Now, she's a devilish temptress coming to test my restraint. I take off my shoes and roll my pants over my calves. I take a seat at the side of the pool and dip my feet into the water.

"Checking on me? The big, bad Kieran is afraid the little lamb will escape?"

My hand shoots to her neck, dragging her to me. Her back arches, her nails biting into my thighs.

Her challenges are the biggest turn-on.

"I'd turn the world to dust to find you."

I release her, satisfied that I shut her up. She recovers quickly, and I peel my jacket off, then my shirt. Her eyes skim down my skin, heating every layer. I'm burning to have her, make her mine, tear through her walls, and bathe her in my sins. I thought her innocence would bother me. Now it only

makes me want to take it.

She swims to the end of the pool by the time I get undressed. Before she can get out, I grab her leg and pull her under.

She spurts water and hits my chest.

“You . . . you . . .”

Her neck turns pink, and she pushes me off while my hands tighten around her. For a few divine moments, the fight in her vanishes, and she lets me hold her. My insides reverberate with something I can't pinpoint as she lays her head on my shoulder. To hold her in my arms is so potent. So calming. I want to hold on to this so fucking much it burns me from within.

“Where were you?”

Jealousy. I hear it clearly this time. She holds her breath as my lips graze her shoulder and I say, “In the office.”

“Just in the office?”

“I met with the guys. Just with the guys.”

“I don't care,” she says haughtily.

“So, it wouldn't bother you if I said I fucked someone and then came home?”

Her eyes meet mine, fury blackening them. “You can do whatever you want to do. I won't be here for long.”

I drag in a lungful of air. I would never allow her to see what lurks under this façade, but she loves to provoke me.

“I would never let you go.”

This time I let her push herself off me. What did I expect? To find one moment longer of solace? That's not for me. She wants her freedom. I'll put her in a cage and myself with her.

Fuck you, Cam!

I swim my laps, and when I come up for air, my eyes land on her two round globes. My hands itch to leave my imprint on her ass.

“The wedding is going to be on Friday.”

She gives me the finger. It only makes me harder. Decision made, I snatch a towel and call the guys.

“Why the hurry?” Cato asks after I tell them.

I'm in a hurry because I can't wait to know she's mine. I need to make her mine. Just one of the many ways I am planning to bind her to me irrevocably.

When I hang up, I flip the ring box open. This will be for the outside

world, but beneath her skin will be another brand of ownership.

The door opens, and Tamara finds me in my office, holding the ring. Then she looks up, and defiance is written all over her face.

“I called your mother. She’s here.”

I ball my hands into fists at my sides.

“If this is the only way I can make you see reason, then yes. I know you will think it’s a betrayal, so I am quitting.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” I say and follow her into the dining room, disdain etched in my mother’s eyes when she looks from my father’s picture to me.

“Were you even going to tell me?”

“When the time came.”

My eyebrows draw together in confusion. I expected an argument, but it’s more resignation.

“If I asked you not to, would you?”

“I gave my word, Mother.”

She clutches her purse. “Should that make me feel better?”

“This has nothing to do with your feelings.”

From silent acceptance, she squares her shoulders, and I brace myself for the impact of her next words. “Is this how you will punish me, by marrying the daughter of that whore? I guess like mother, like daughter.”

“Mother, I won’t let you disrespect my future wife.”

“The men in this family never cared too much anyway, disrespecting their women. I hope you will be miserable with her.”

She turns on her heel, and I talk to her back, “I guess you’re not coming to the wedding?”

She shakes her head at me, disgust contorting her face.

There’s nothing like your own mother hating you. Nothing like your future wife hating you, either.

I am one lucky bastard.



11

AURORA

In the bedroom, I rest my head against the headboard. My body is all tingly ever since the pool incident. It felt good for that one moment before I remembered who he was and what it meant.

The knob turns, and Kieran steps inside. I didn't lock it—it wouldn't stop him. I shoot to a sitting position as he approaches my bed. His silence is always unnerving.

His finger brushes my cheek, and heat wraps around me. I close my eyes, the intensity in his eyes and my body's reaction to him dizzying me.

He plucks something from his pocket and flips it open. In a cushion, a princess-cut diamond ring sparkles between us.

I trace my finger over the beautiful ring. "Is this necessary?"

Kieran grabs my hand. I fight to pull it from him, but his grip only tightens.

"Don't do this." Not like this. He's crushing all my girlish fantasies. Sadness fills the crevices of my chest, feeling despondent. "This is not you protecting me, but you wanting to own me."

"The same thing to me."

My mouth opens and shuts as he slides the engagement ring on. I stare at it as if my eyes could incinerate it.

"Don't take it off. You won't like the consequences."

He tips my chin up, lowering his face to me. My lips tingle. I hate this attraction, this itch growing every time he's near me.

He buries his head in my neck and inhales, as if he's absorbing my very

essence, making my breath stutter.

“This is not how I imagined my proposal,” I whisper, and the hurt squeezes my heart. Confused, angry, and also bothered by his power to play my body, I shove him off me. “Get out.”

He leaves. I pace the room, my feet leaving a trail on the carpeted floor. I peel the ring off and throw it on the plush carpet. Ruled by pure rage, I hurry down the stairs. Sweat gathers at my nape. My steps boom in my ears, my nerves on an unprecedented high as I enter the kitchen. I yank on the drawer, grip a knife, and tiptoe back to his bedroom.

Kieran’s on his back, chest rising and falling, asleep. His chest is bare. Just a sheet covers his lower body. He’s breathtaking and it takes enormous willpower to clear my head and focus on the task I came here for.

This is not you, Aurora.

Still, I inch to his side. For a few seconds, I let my little girl crush on him have its moment. But she was naïve. This me knows that if I don’t fight him, I will lose not only my freedom, but also myself, in him. It would be so easy to let myself go. I press the blade to his neck and his eyes shoot open. My knees weaken at the assault of his eyes—blue dipped in green.

“Do it.” His deep, husky voice echoes in the eerie silent room.

Too busy being swallowed by the dare in his eyes, the blade pricks his skin and a few droplets of blood roll down his neck. My hand trembles and he slaps the knife away.

“That was stupid,” he says, gripping my waist.

I yelp, but end up straddling him. My adrenaline crashes, and guilt squeezes the air from my lungs.

His other hand snakes around the back of my neck, dragging my face to him. I steady myself with my hands on his chest, his heart slamming a beat just as frantic as mine.

His lips press onto mine, plunging his tongue into my mouth, groaning when mine meets his. Are kisses supposed to burn you and soothe you, make you soar but tether you on the edge of the abyss? He bites into my bottom lip, then sucks to ease the sting.

This is not a kiss, it’s a declaration of war and a conquest.

He trails his lips down my chin, licking down my neck and nibbling the sensitive skin. I arch up, desire uncurling in my lower belly. Wanting his mouth on me again, I cup his face while his hands move to grip my ass. Our eyes lock, an ocean and a storm colliding, and then our mouths seek each

other's. Again. We're incapable of escaping the fervent pull. I let go, diving into the floating sensations. His lips move against mine in a passionate, sultry dance, leaving me breathless.

When the kiss ends, I know I will never be the same. Kieran presses his forehead to mine, both of us panting. His hand strokes my back, and he pulls me down with him, wrapping his arm around my waist. No escape, just madness. Tonight, I choose to dive into it freely.

The next morning, I wake up in his bed and caress my swollen lips.

It wasn't a dream. The kiss, sleeping in the same bed, all of it happened. The shower is on and I slide from the bed, only to stop when I catch him standing in the bathroom door like he knows I was going to escape.

My eyes seek his neck and a fine rosy line stares back at me. Guilt strikes a chord in my heart, but the words won't come out.

"You're going to sleep in my bed from now on."

I sigh. I knew our kiss would make him think I would obey all his decisions. I will never be that weak, pathetic creature who accepted everything without having a say again. And hasn't this asshole heard of the word please?

"No, I won't," I say, keeping my chin high as I shut the door behind me, my heart still pounding.

In the hallway, I come face-to-face with Tamara, who eyes me and the door to his room. I blush from head to toe. So many excuses run through my head.

"Good morning," I say before dashing to my room and closing the door. I shower, changing into a pair of jeans and a flowery top, and go downstairs. He's already sitting at the breakfast table.

I take the seat across from him, and he smirks while I challenge him with my eyes.

Kieran sips his coffee, his eyes on me, unnerving me as I eat my oatmeal.

"Stop ogling me."

"I like what I see."

"Last night meant nothing."

If his grin widens a bit more, it will be bigger than his ego. "If you say so."

"I was trying to kill you," I say to remind him of my first goal. But his face doesn't lose its grin.

"And still, you ended up in my bed."

“That was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing,” I say, both of us knowing it’s a lie.

He chuckles, and all I can think of is his lips on mine. His eyes find my bare finger and the good mood threatens to tip over.

“I meant it, Aurora. Wear the ring.”

“I must have misplaced it.”

The easygoing disposition disappears, and he yanks me by the hand from my chair. I stumble as I try to match his pace.

We step inside a room, where a security guard watches us, and Kieran says, “You know what to do, Daniel.”

He nods, and apprehension has my insides on high alert. He’s putting a tattoo machine together. I try to free my hand from Kieran’s, but he grips it even harder, his eyes taking on a stormy hue.

“I will wear the ring,” I say through a gulp. The ring is way better than a permanent reminder.

“Too late.”

“Please.”

“Sit.”

I sit down, deflated. Silly me, thinking I could have a say in all this.

Kieran also takes a seat while Daniel presses the needle down on my finger. I bite down against the shot of pain. He inks Kieran’s initials, and when he’s done putting a layer of petroleum jelly and bandages my finger, he moves on to Kieran. I am both fascinated and indignant.

I jump to my feet and then storm away. In my room, I stare at the initials and bend to pick up my ring. The ring is a lie, but the delicate tattoo shows what I am to him—his. As if he put his signature on the document of my life.

The knock on my door pulls me out of my thoughts and Tamara steps inside. She offers me a small smile before entering my walk-in closet, chock-full of clothes in my size. I follow her, knowing I won’t like where this is heading.

“These stay here,” I say to the dresses hanging there.

She sighs and says, “This will never work if you continue to be stubborn.”

“I’m stubborn?” I can’t believe she’s siding with him. The crazy man tattooed me because I wouldn’t wear his ring.

“Both of you, Aurora. That boy you know is still inside him.”

“If he were, he wouldn’t force me into any of this.”

“Do you think any one of us chooses anything? It’s how we deal with and

what we make of our circumstances that counts. You could be happy together. I know you could.”

She folds my clothes, and I turn to leave. Outside, I stroll through the gardens, picking at the withered leaves, mumbling to myself. I tend to the flowers until my stomach growls. Taking my gloves off, I wipe my forehead, basking in the sun and feeling a bit better.

At dinner, I face him silently brooding at the table, my eyes taking in my initials on his finger. A bold, curvy *A*. He’s definitely flaunting it. Something fuzzy and warm settles in my chest. Mine is more elegantly done in fine lines.

“You will sleep in my room. Don’t make me come for you,” he says when he’s done eating his steak.

Really? Does he think I am a dog he can train? I grip the knife and dig into my meal as he stands up and leaves.

In my room, I know the rational thing would be to give in, but the other part of me disagrees.

I get in bed, waiting for him. My body hums with anticipation. I feel alive, a foreign feeling I haven’t had in forever and am desperate to chase, and experience more of it. If I didn’t know better, I’d think I am eager for him to come get me. Somewhere along the line, I either lost my mind or enjoyed playing with danger.

He storms into my room. His anger licks at my skin. It’s thrilling to challenge him. He scoops me up, and I glare at him. When we reach his room, he tosses me on the bed, and I scoot to my side, an inch away from the edge.

Kieran climbs into bed with me. He wraps his arms around me, pulling me to his chest, mumbling, “Maddening woman.”

This feels so good, like a cocoon made of titanium walls.

“If you’re good, I will give you anything you want.” I open my mouth, but he continues, “But you’ll never be free of me. This is going to be not just your life, but mine as well.”

“Freedom is all I want.” To make my own choices.

He kisses my shoulder, and I remain perfectly still. A featherlight kiss follows another until he reaches my neck, and that is enough to spark the raging fire between my thighs. I press my legs together as his finger circles my belly. It feels so good. His lips, his touch. A small moan parts my lips. We can continue our war tomorrow.

“Sleep, sweetheart.”

Cunning asshole. I turn to him and prop up on my elbow. In my stories, monsters are ugly and disfigured. He’s painfully and painstakingly beautiful. He peeks out of one eye. Like I’d believe he fell asleep that fast. And then it dawns on me. He wasn’t asleep yesterday either. So why did he let me do it?

“You could have stopped me.”

“Yesterday was your only chance to get rid of me. You should have taken it.”

Vulnerability wedges itself inside my stomach. I don’t hate him. I never have. I never could. As we stare at each other, I take his side into consideration. Monsters are not born, they are made. People don’t stop being good, but they can be bad given the right incentive or circumstance.

“But we both know you could never do that. Because, sweetheart, you like it here. The push and pull between us. You’re getting to know a part of you that you never let out. You just don’t let yourself accept it.”

His statement speaks to a very sensitive part of my brain, acknowledging that he is right.

I bite my lower lip. “I always thought I would marry for love.”

“I always knew I would marry for duty.”

“At least one of us didn’t get their hopes crushed.”

He props his cheek on his palm, softness caressing the hard edges at the corners of his eyes. “Love is nothing when you have my loyalty and my protection. You should know better than to hope for some sappy love story. Love only gets you on your knees, doing everything for a fleeting sentiment.”

“So, how often have you been in love to know all this?”

He shakes his head at me. “Sleep.”

“Do you prefer me in a certain position as well?” I sass back.

“Yes, with your ass to my dick.”

I shoot him a glare.

“You asked, I answered you.”

“Oh, so you’ll always tell me the truth?”

“I will, but don’t blame me if my truths hurt your good little heart.”

I turn my back to him, and he doesn’t try to touch me again. I should be relieved, but I am not.

I wake up on his side of the bed. Legs entwined, our skin touches, creating a delicious friction, and with him facing me. His eyes are set on me.

Kieran brushes my cheek, tucking back a strand of my hair. For one

blissful moment the space between us fills with hopes and dreams for the future.

“I thought we could go shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“Yes, for your wedding dress.”

“You’re doing a terrific job of making me hate you. Do you know I had a crush on you? Good thing I got over it.”

His grin is so wide it could be seen from space. He props his cheek on his palm and raises a cocky brow.

“So, you never imagined us getting married?”

“No,” I say too quickly, my sharp intake of breath betraying my lie.

“No?”

I can’t even convince myself, so it’s not a surprise he doesn’t buy it. Those times were different. My life was perfect and my dreams were just the dreams of a naïve girl. Now, I know better.

“I’ll pick you up at three.”

“Whatever.”

He kisses the corners of my lips and I inhale, a big mistake because his alluring scent wraps around my senses. I close my eyes, wanting more, but the bastard stops.

“I want you to crave my touch, my kisses,” he whispers above my tingling lips.

“Keep dreaming.” I sound zero convincing and I groan.

“I’m already making you my wife.”

“On paper, just on paper.”

“So, I can fuck others, right?”

Anger and jealousy rear their monstrous heads, daring me to say he can do whatever he wants. “If I can do the same.”

He grips my chin, his eyes darkening with possession. “Never.”

It’s official. I must be deranged because I like it.

“It would only be fair,” I say, tilting my head.

“Fair would be you giving us a chance.”

“This sounds more like blackmail.”

“It’s your choice.”

I snort and hop off the bed.

From the bed, he has a clear view inside the bathroom through the glass door. I turn to him watching me. His presence fills the room, making the

grandiose space appear tiny.

“Can you stop looking, please?”

“No.”

“I said please.” The second please rings of fake politeness, and of course, he’s not buying it.

“And I said no.”

He crosses his hands behind his head, and his eyes glint with challenge.

The big, oval bathtub calls to me, but I opt for the glass shower.

I turn the tap on and the steam has me coughing. He laughs. The deep, raspy sound has my heart skipping a few beats. I take the quickest shower in the history of showers and by the time I wrap the towel around me, he gets out of the bed and discards his boxers.

He’s shameless in his nakedness. I’m shameless because I can’t look away.

I steal a glance at his hands gliding down his powerful body. When he cups his cock, I bite my lip so hard it stings. His eyes find mine, a hunger so raw it roots me to the spot. He starts jerking his length, pumping up and down in dexterous rapid moves. I’m hypnotized.

“I know you’re a virgin, but have you ever made yourself come with your fingers?”

He knows it. I hate his assurance. “Mine will be rougher, bigger. I’m going to stretch you, fill you until you gasp. But you’ll take everything I’ll give you because you’re mine.”

My throat dries at the picture he paints. He closes his eyes and throws his head back as cum sprays on his hand.

“I can’t wait to make you come on my fingers, my tongue, with my cock.”

My breath stutters. I stumble to the walk-in closet. I’m hot. So hot, not even diving in icy water could cool me down. I place my hand on my pounding heart. What was that?

I change into a spaghetti strap floral minidress. It feels very intimate and domestic with us in the same vicinity, doing mundane things as if we were a real couple.

Kieran gets dressed in a custom-made suit and my eyes follow his hands as he buttons up his crisp shirt.

“See you at three,” he says, brooking no argument.

I roll my eyes at him, then he’s gone. I can now breathe again. But his

scent lingers in every corner of the room.

I could fight him, but going outside is way too good of an opportunity to waste. When the clock strikes three, I'm waiting for him outside the mansion. He gets out of his car to open the door for me.

I relax in the leather seat.

"Aurora, don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"Me? Never," I say mockingly.

As he presses the start button, he says, "Pleasure or pain, your choice."

Something tells me I need both from him. It's a scary thought and I keep my mouth shut.

I lower the window and breathe in the scent of trees and concrete.

Every mile that gets us closer to the city ignites happiness in me as I force my eyes to remain dry. Freedom for others is just a taste I can only indulge in once in a while.

Once we get to downtown, he valets the car in front of a couture boutique and we step inside.

"What can I do for you?" the saleswoman asks.

"We're looking for a wedding dress."

After she pours us each a glass of champagne, she asks if I have a dress in mind. I shrug and she disappears behind rows of gowns. Kieran takes a seat on the plush beige couch, scrolling through his phone. All the wedding dresses make me think of Chiara. Missing her twists my heart.

"I need a phone."

He looks from his phone to me. "Will you behave?"

"Kieran."

"If you behave today, I'll give you one after our wedding."

"What a wedding gift." I huff.

"It's my sign of good faith. It's up to you if you take it or not."

"I hate you." I wish that were true.

"Choose a dress, Aurora." He redirects his attention to his phone, and a pang of something unpleasant strikes me. Why do I crave the attention of this insufferable man?

When the saleswoman walks in with different dresses, I follow her to the fitting room as she puts them in front of me. It's the simplest one, made of lace with an open back and small embroidery, that calls to me.

She helps me try it on, and I look at my reflection, a smile parting my lips. The dress is delicate, elegant, almost ethereal.

“We can try the others as well if you like.”

I decline, emotions overwhelming me. I should run past her and hope he won't catch me, but I know he will.

“Should we show it to your fiancé?”

My fiancé. The term doesn't bother me as much as it should.

“Aurora.” My name out of his mouth is a curse wrapped in hypnotic silk. He yanks the curtains back and blinks as he takes me in, his eyes shining in appreciation and something more. Something I can't pinpoint. Why does this excite me when it shouldn't?

“You are stunning.”

“I thought it was bad luck to see your bride in her dress before the wedding,” I sass and he grips my chin.

“I make my own luck.”

His finger caresses my cheek, and I lean into his touch. I am blaming it on the fact that I am emotionally in need and also starved for attention.

“This is the one,” I say to the saleswoman.

After she takes my measurements, I approach him and with his free hand he takes mine, tucking it into his larger one. With this man, I feel like not even the devil himself could snatch me away.

Back in the car, he says, “I'm not a good man, but that's the man you will get. You're mine, sweetheart.”

“If you say so.”

The corners of his mouth tip up, as if he secretly enjoys our verbal sparring.

“Do you want to go somewhere else?”

I pat my chest in fake surprise. “You're not afraid I will use my chance to escape?”

“You could try, but I will always find you.”

I expect him to drive us back, but Kieran takes a right and drives for a few miles in the opposite direction. He parks, and in front of me opens a lake. Boats on the shore knock each other, a small, inviting restaurant on the right.

I get out of the car and approach the clear lake.

“Do you want to take a boat out?”

“Yes, I would like that.” Excitement replaces the gloom. There is nothing more beautiful than nature.

An elderly man approaches, and he smiles when he sees Kieran.

“Fox, this is my fiancée, Aurora.”

The way he pronounces my name while calling me his is a searing stamp. Bye-bye, freedom.

“We’ll take a boat out.”

“I’ll prepare something for the two of you.”

When he leaves, I say, “Wouldn’t have thought you’d be into this . . .”

“Into what?”

“Simple.”

“Simple is the best. I love this place. It’s quiet.”

I can’t shake the feeling, there’s more to it. Him showing me that side of him is dangerous to my heart.

The boat bobs on the lake. He extends his hand and I grip it.

“I would never let anything happen to you.”

“No, but who will protect me from you?”

“Is this so bad, Aurora?”

Our eyes collide when I stumble into his chest on the boat, and I notice how tired he looks.

“It is when you are not given a choice,” I whisper and detangle myself from him.

“So, what would you choose between being mine and being sold to a monster?”

“I know what to expect from a monster, not from you.”

I regret my words the moment they’re out.

Kieran tenses.

“I would have let you be sold, so thank your brother.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

And that hurts. A pain spreads across my chest, backing my battered heart into a corner.

I take a seat, and he runs a hand down his face. With the sun beating down on us, ducks surrounding the boat, we sway in the middle of the lake. It would be peaceful if not for the storm gathering between us. Kieran leans back and closes his eyes.

“What would you have done?”

“Gone to college. I’d stay with Chiara, my best friend.”

“What would you have studied?”

“Literature.”

“And then?”

“Become a writer. Instead, I will be married to you.”

His features tighten. “Life with me will be better. Without the pressure, you could wake up every day and do whatever you want. Not many would have the privilege.”

“So, you would be okay if I went to college?”

I wait with bated breath.

“Yes, the moment I know you’re safe.” His eyes open, carrying the same intensity that plays havoc with my senses. This puts things into perspective and it takes me aback. “Not expecting that?”

“No, because I feel like I am a prisoner.”

“And until you stop thinking you are one, then we’ll just live like that.”

“This isn’t even a life.” I huff and dip my hand in the water, my fingers grazing the surface. “Do you expect me to sleep with you?”

“I won’t force myself on you.”

“Not even blackmailing me into it?”

He cocks his head, smirking. “Would you be open to that?”

I put that idea into his head, but he didn’t have to like it. I stand and the boat wobbles.

“That would make me a whore.”

I yelp when he grips my thighs, and I end up straddling him.

“I wouldn’t judge.”

“You’re irredeemable, I swear.”

“Thank you.” That stupid smile of his weakens me. His fingers dip into my thighs, burning me from within. “When you marry me, you’ll get a phone. I’ll get you into college next month if you sleep with me.”

I feel dirty. So, so dirty. I push myself off him and his shoulders slump, giving me a despondent look that chills me.

“This was a mistake,” he mumbles more to himself.

When the boat reaches the shore, I rush toward the restaurant.

Inside, Fox points to a table and I plaster a fake smile on my face. I stare outside. Kieran is standing on the shore, his back to us.

“How do you know my fiancé?”

His eyes shine with fond memories. “I was about to close my restaurant. It’s not a well-known place. And when I stepped outside, I found him. Kieran asked questions, and by the end of the day, he helped me rebuild this. Few people come here, mostly some wanderers. But I am getting older and he wants this place.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, he said the same thing. It calms his soul.”

Our talk is interrupted when Kieran steps inside and sits in the chair in front of me.

Fox returns with a plate, and my appetite has me bouncing my legs.

Halfway into the meal, I say, “It was great of you to help him.”

He keeps eating, scrolling through his phone.

I wave my hand in front of him. “I’m trying to have a conversation with you.”

He casts me an accusatory glance. “Put that on my not-redeemable list.”

We finish the meal in silence. After he pays, we drive back home.

The moment I am out of the car, he speeds away, leaving me with a strange knot in my stomach.



12

KIERAN

I punch the wheel so often, my knuckles might break. When I reach the compound, I change into a T-shirt and shorts before heading to the gym. I take my frustration out on the punching bag.

This is a mistake.

Fuck friendship, fuck this bullshit. I should have let Delaney have her. Then she would have known how good she has it under my care. Miss All-I-Know-Is-A-Sheltered-Life has no fucking idea how the world works, yet finds me guilty on all charges.

Sweat and blood mix and I drop onto my ass in exhaustion. I turn to find Cato and Cameron eyeing me with an uncommon emotion—worry.

I shut the door behind me and get in the shower. Knowing you are a monster and being fine with it is one thing. It's completely different when the girl who used to look at you like you were the hero now sees you as the greatest villain. Aurora affects me, and fuck, maybe that's my punishment, wanting to keep her when all she wants to do is leave me.

I change and find them in our joined office.

“What’s on today’s agenda?”

“Ricardo, again. The heir of the DeCavallaro family in New Jersey, trying to unbalance the power by attempting to break into Boston. I’ll take care of him,” Cato says.

“Good. He didn’t leave us another way.”

Taking notice of my appearance, Cameron asks, “Are you sleeping here?”

I nod. I need to clear my head.

“Man, I haven’t seen you this—unsettled,” says Cato.

“We should have found another way. I always thought I would end up with a woman as flawed, even as ruthless, as me. Aurora is pure, and our world will just pollute her soul.”

“You’re not a savior, man. And if it’s any consolation, at least we’re going to be miserable together.”

I tip my head in acknowledgment. They leave and I go to bed, tossing and turning. She’s not the reason, I keep telling myself. Pull yourself together.

I bolt upright in the middle of the night when my IT expert, Rowan, storms inside the room.

“Someone is trying to hack the system.”

I jump to my feet and rush to the basement. My team is here, typing in a frenzy of codes, but I have no fucking idea what they mean. Every level of the organization is set up in threes to minimize the risk of having a rat. Cato storms inside, followed by Cameron.

Cato gnashes his teeth. “Someone better start talking.”

“They shouldn’t have been able to get this far,” Rowan says and leans back, a sign he’s got everything under control. “Wait.” He points to his screen. “This can’t be.”

“Rowan,” Cato says in a low tone, losing patience.

“Whoever planned this wanted us to know who was behind it. Who would be that stupid?”

“Someone tired of living,” Cameron says.

I snap my fingers. “Names, now.”

“This is the address.”

Cameron’s eyes widen and he says, “This is Delaney’s IP address.”

“How could he have come this far into our system?” The only rational explanation is that he’s working with someone. Someone who will learn the hard way not to cross me.

“Get back to work and find me answers.”

Back in the office, I’m playing with my knife when Cameron says, “These fuckers pop up like weeds. Who the fuck could be helping him? A new player and an old enemy?”

The list is endless.

“Then he should have kept it for himself.”

“Injured egos are the ruin of men,” Cameron says.

“I’m going to pay him a visit after the wedding.”

Cato and Cameron chuckle. They know I have a flair for the dramatic.

“In the meantime, let’s get everything we have on Delaney. Maybe we overlooked something. Even with an injured ego, he wouldn’t be this stupid to challenge us upfront like this. With everything that’s happening, I don’t want any surprises.”



Kieran hasn't come back for one whole day. I should be delighted. Instead, as I watch the empty spot next to me in bed, my heart squeezes. When he's around, all I want is to strangle him, but when he's not, there is something missing. I sigh and go into the bathroom, filling the bathtub with bubbles.

Was he with someone else? Someone who he doesn't feel like he has to proposition? Rubbing my body with the loofah, my skin turns red. I am so deep in my thoughts that I don't see him stepping inside, but my body heats up. Even my heart gives a little flutter at his nearness.

"Look who's back."

That mouth of his parts into a tired smile, and I am transfixed. He peels his clothes off, and I lick my lips. What is he going to do? My question gets answered when he enters the bathtub, naked, and I close my eyes.

I open my eyes the moment the water spills over the edges. He leans his head back, arms draped over the sides of the tub, tension cording his muscles. I itch to touch him, soothe him, but I restrain myself.

"Where were you?"

He cocks his head. "Missed me?"

I roll my eyes at him, at the push and pull it seems we're incapable of escaping.

"You wish." And I wish my answer was no.

"If I'm supposed to sleep in your bed, then at least you should be there as well. Next time, I'm going back to my room."

"Do that, and I'll get you right back into my bed," he says matter-of-

factly.

I splash some water in his face.

Kieran runs the water through his hair, which almost appears black. He shouldn't be allowed to be this beautiful.

I thought it would be strange to have him in the tub with me, but it isn't. It feels intimate. I shouldn't allow it, and I shoot upright, the bubbles sliding down my wet skin.

His eyes peruse me lazily, marking every exposed inch. A heatwave crashes into me, subduing me. I am about to step out of the tub when his hands shoot up and grab me. I yelp the moment my body lands on his chest.

"Kieran." My voice turns meek. Just uttering his name weakens my resolve.

Every inch of my skin is hyperaware of him. He glides his hands up and down my arms, and my stupid brain lets my body relax in his arms.

Overruled by instinct, I lean my head back on his shoulder as he continues his ministrations. He's a wizard, and my body is spellbound. I shift my position and snuggle into him.

His fingers explore my front with lazy, soft touches, unraveling me. As if he knows exactly what he's doing to me, he rolls my nipples between his thumb and forefinger, making me desperate for more. I ache for more. The avalanche of sensations has me squeezing my legs where my wetness mixes with the water.

His breath fans my face. "Tell me to stop and I'll stop."

It's at the tip of my tongue but for the life of me I can't form the words.

He nibbles my neck, his fingers leaving a trail of fiery desire in their wake. Combined with him playing with my nipples, I feel I am on a precipice. This feels so good, I close my eyes, biting down on my lip.

"You like my touch, don't you?" The raspiness in his voice undoes me further.

"Yes." I do. I so do. Traitorous body.

He grazes his teeth along my neck. "Then give me your sounds."

The ache turns into a roar inside me. Impossible to ignore.

I let out a shuddering breath. "Please, Kieran . . . I . . ."

I expect him to demand the words that are so hard to express. We both know they would mean my surrender. He turns my face to him, our mouths so close. My lips tingle.

He presses his mouth to mine, and I give in.

It's in vain. God, I want him.

His dick gets even harder under me as he trails kisses down my neck. Just thinking about him entering me makes me dizzy.

“Let me make you feel good, sweetheart. Let me show you how good it can feel.”

I nod, another small sign of either acceptance or submission. His hands and lips feel so good on me. Like a promise, an invitation to sin, a temptation shutting off any bit of rationality. But I don't care. I'm losing my mind. He wasn't home one night and I'm ready to get on my back for him.

Weak.

My thoughts vanish when his fingers graze my pussy.

“Were you with someone else?”

He slips one inside, and I bite down on a moan. “Never ask me that question again. I have just one woman on my mind. One woman I want. One woman I am desperate to have.”

I float, sailing away in pure bliss through the carnal sea.

“Fuck, you're tight.”

He plays with my clit with his thumb and pumps another thick finger in and out of me.

“How does it feel?”

I babble incoherently.

“My fingers feel good inside your tight pussy, don't they, princess?” The way he says *princess* makes it sound so dirty. I get wetter and he pushes his fingers in and out of me in a maddening rhythm. “Such a good girl, letting me stretch your pussy to get ready for my cock.”

Oh my God, what is he doing to me? Turning me into this desperate, sexual creature, starved for more. I grip his thighs, muscular and hard, inching closer to his erection. Pleasure builds inside of me as he continues playing with my body.

His touch flames my desire, building it up so high, I feel like I am flying. I've made myself come before, but this is so much better. The intensity alone has me gasping for air, bucking above him. Even the water's caress adds to his sexual touch, a sensual duo of *let's make her lose her mind by overloading her senses*.

Everything in me tenses as I run toward the tipping point of pleasure. He notices how my body responds to his touch and increases the pressure.

“Open your eyes. I want to watch you come for me.”

I see my eyes in his, glazed over, drooping with desire.

He flicks my clit, hitting all the right places inside and out of me, and bites into my neck, licking the affected spot. “Just like that, let yourself go. You’re doing so good, princess.”

From deep within me, my orgasm erupts, a tornado sweeping over my core. I cry out his name as I come apart.

My head falls back on his chest, my body feeling limbless, boneless.

“Give me your mouth.” His voice takes on a smoky tone as he pats my pussy, prolonging my orgasm.

I turn my face to him and I ride his hand, my core buzzing with the aftershocks of my orgasm. His lips come down on mine. I moan as we kiss, so utterly spent, so utterly satisfied.

“What about you?” I feel him. Hard, poking my back, letting me know of his need.

“This was about your pleasure. Not mine.”

He picks up a sponge and washes my body with care.

I catch my eyes, dilated and sparkly, looking back at me from the mirror when I step out. Kieran wraps a towel around my body, but not before kissing each nipple. I shudder at the erotic image in front of me. I seek his lips, not wanting the connection to end.

He blinks one moment in surprise, the next his hands cup my cheeks, and he kisses me back, molding me to him. I shouldn’t like this, but it feels spectacular. It exceeds my curiosity about sex, going deeper as if coaxing my heart into the mix as well.

I need to put some distance between us. There are too many emotions and confusion pulling me in different directions.

“You’re still hard,” I say, focusing on the obvious.

“Don’t worry about me.”

I peer at him, not wanting to believe he’s giving me something for nothing in return.

“I thought—”

“What, that I would ask you to suck my dick? Get on top of you and fuck you just like that?”

He arches a brow, looking displeased, and it breaks the spell of the moment. This time when he doesn’t try to stop me, I step out of the bathroom and go into the walk-in closet.

I change into a yellow A-line summer dress. After I dry my hair and put it

in a loose braid, I go downstairs to the library and pick up a book. But I can't concentrate on the story, replaying in my head how good he made me feel. I have been in a permanent state of wetness. My panties are soaked.

"Lunch is ready," Tamara says. I close my book and follow her, happy to escape the pretense of reading.

I search for Kieran and when I don't find him, a pang of disappointment hits me.

"He left."

"Oh."

I take a seat and get back to eating. It's not the same without him. It's too silent, too peaceful. Apparently, I need brooding and brewing.

I leave half of my plate uneaten and go outside. I stroll through the gardens, watering the plants, plucking the dead ones out. Hearing the engine of his car, my mood lightens, shifting to excitement. I don't know why I expected him to come to me, but he doesn't.

He's playing with you, Aurora, I chastise myself. I step inside and stop at the sound of a guitar being played.

I follow the sound and peer through a door and see him. With his eyes closed, he strums the instrument, hitting every note. It reminds me of the boy he used to be. Transfixed, I creep inside, but his eyes open and set on me. With our eyes locked, he goes on and I take a seat, curling into the armchair, and just listen to the melodious tunes.

"That was beautiful. I didn't know you still played."

"You didn't give me the impression you're interested in knowing me. You've made up your mind."

Kieran doesn't reprimand me; it's more of a fact to him. But he's mistaken. I am terrified to uncover this man.

He already consumes my thoughts. The boy was embers; the man is a ravishing fire. And these moments, these signs of vulnerability, he shows me how much he wants me to let him in. Whenever I glimpse something about him that is warm and good, it shakes up something inside of me. And I can't allow to have even an ounce of vulnerability for him.

He made you come today, Aurora. That ship has sailed.

Kieran cocks his head, a frown deepening his brows. "You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Retreating inside yourself, building walls. But I will break them down."

One after another. Again and again, and a-fucking-gain.”

“You left today.”

He places the guitar to the side and puts his face in his hands. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Aurora, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“I think it would have been different if . . .”

Vulnerability so strong flickers in his eyes, tearing at my walls. “If we started differently?”

“Yes.”

“You’re attracted to me, but that means nothing when you give in for only seconds, while I want hours, days, months, a lifetime. I don’t regret how it started.”

We’re back to this, to the one truth: nothing will change, nothing will make me forget.

“Of course, you couldn’t possibly fathom what it is to have no choice.”

“If you like to believe that . . .”

“As if anyone could make you do things you don’t want.”

He puts the guitar back in its case. It’s in the way he takes care, as if to not break it. That melts me. When he leans back in the chair, our eyes lock.

“Give this a chance. Us. You want it too. And I am fucking desperate for it,” he says, leaving me completely mind blown.

I feel like I am being pulled in two different directions, and in the end, it will tear me apart. Restless and torn, I walk back into our bedroom and step outside onto the terrace, needing some fresh air.

Seeing how my patch of garden looks better, especially illuminated by the full moon, I smile. This has to be the most beautiful prison one can have. I lean on the banister and goose bumps erupt on my arms when I feel his arms wrap around me. It’s like after what we shared, I gave in to something. But it’s moments like this that make it easy to give in. When neither of us talk, when we’re not fighting each other—he to subdue me; I to fight for my freedom—it’s peaceful.

“The garden looks beautiful.”

“Thank you. I spent all my weekends tending to the gardens at school. It grounded me.”

“I want you to be happy, Aurora. I owe it to that girl who looked at me with stars in her eyes, thinking of me as her superhero. It kills me when you look at me as if I am your enemy.” He puts his chin on my shoulder, exhaling a heavy breath, and continues, “Do I want you to settle in and be comfortable

in this life? Yes, but not because I am a monster who wants to keep you prisoner. I didn't have a chance either. But your brother is my best friend. I owe it to him to respect my oath as well, to our dead parents, who wanted to give you a family and love."

"You didn't even look at me at their funeral."

"How could I? I couldn't give you your mother back."

"I thought you blamed me," I say and emotions clog my throat.

Kieran turns me to face him and presses me to his chest. "You were a child. It wasn't your fault."

"I told my father, maybe if I hadn't . . ."

"Nothing that happened was your fault."

I clutch his shirt between my hands. "I thought both you and my brother hated me for that, and that's why you just let him ship me away."

He lifts my chin, his eyes seeking mine. "We knew what would come, and we had to protect you."

I believe him, I do. Wholeheartedly.

"I need to kiss you," he says, voice thick with emotion.

I raise on my tiptoes and his eyes widen in surprise, but then his lips curl up in a smile, relieved. And that's how my lips meet his, with a smile.

Oh, heart, stay guarded. His eyes must have magic to compel me. It's no wonder those hands have a way of playing the chords of my heart and body. The kiss starts a sweet, languorous exploration that shifts into hunger as it deepens. Goose bumps erupt, an open field of poppies as a breeze sweeps over, and he glides his hands up and down my arms.

"Cold?" He suppresses a knowing grin, and I pin him with an annoyed stare I can't hold on to for long.

As he guides me back in the room, I replay the kiss. God, his kisses have the power to melt my synapses.

In bed, he puts his arm around me and presses me to him.

"I guess you're not afraid of me anymore?"

"Oh, if anything scares me, it's you."

"You liar."

I smile at him over my shoulder, but it freezes when I catch his face transform, his gaze serious.

What if he's right? Should I give this a chance? Cocooned in his arms, I fall asleep, experiencing a sense of belonging so strong it swallows me whole.

The next morning, I wake up in his arms, my face pressed into his chest.

Careful not to wake him, I slide from between his arms and lean my head against the headboard. I miss Chiara so much. Needing to talk with my best friend, I can't hold my tears back and they roll down my cheeks. He opens his eyes and immediately stiffens, his face drawn in confusion. His thumb gently wipes my tears away.

"What is it, sweetheart?" His voice is soft, filled with care.

"I miss my friend so much. She doesn't even know I'm getting married."

He grabs his phone from the nightstand and gives it to me. It's a small gesture. It shouldn't mean so much to me, but my heart gets bigger in my chest.

With shaking hands, I dial her number. When I hear her voice, I let out a long exhale. "Hi, bestie."

"I was worried sick. Are you okay?"

I slide from the bed and slip outside to the balcony. "I don't even know where to begin."

"Are you all right?"

That is such a heavy-laden question.

I tell her how my father wanted to sell me and how I am now at Kieran's place and about to marry him. She gasps, as if she can't find the words.

"Fucking men."

My mouth breaks into a small smile.

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow."

We hang up and for a second I think of calling my uncle. Before I change my mind, I am already dialing his number.

"Hi. It's me, Aurora."

"Are you okay? I tried to call you." His voice shifts into a warmer one.

"I don't have that phone with me."

"I figured that out."

"I wish I could have gone with you from the start. Now it's too late."

"I'm coming for you. And this time, no one is going to stop me."

Kieran would never allow that. And my uncle can't come before I marry.

"I have to go." I hang up and delete his number.

When I step inside, I give Kieran the phone. "Thank you."

He takes it and scrolls through it. I'm attacked with a trace of guilt. But it disappears, turning into anger. I'm sure he's checking the numbers I called.

There's zero trust, and that's a hurdle I doubt we'll ever overcome.

He hops off the bed and goes into the bathroom. "Wanna join me?"

"No, I'm good."

I witness the flash of disappointment, but it's replaced with stiff acceptance.

As I head downstairs, the thought that I'm getting married tomorrow unsettles me. I wanted to marry for love, and not because I have to. But there is a part of me—lust and childish infatuation mostly—that thinks I'm getting a good bargain. My freedom for an orgasm. It has to be the worst compromise in history.

I find myself in the garden, picking up flowers to create an arrangement. When I get inside the kitchen, I put them in a vase.

"They look beautiful." Tamara approaches me and hugs me. "Trust me, you're going to be more than fine. Everything will be great."

"How would you know?"

"Because I see how you two are when you're together."

Kieran comes into the kitchen, and we eat in silence.

"I have to take care of something, but when I come back, we could watch a movie."

He's such a conundrum, but I am inexplicably drawn to him.

"I'd love that," I say in a breathy whisper, and I go to the library, picking up my book.

The night blankets the sky and when he returns, he finds me in the theater room, a bag of popcorn resting on my thighs.

"What are we watching?"

I press play, and he bursts into laughter. It's a kidnapping movie. Engrossed in the screen, I squeeze his hand. I thought I would one-up him with my choice, but all I did was make my stomach turn.

The film is disgusting and nothing like my life. Kieran hasn't forced himself on me. He didn't make me trust him, only to break that trust and give me to others. I turn my face to him, tears streaming down my face. He lifts me onto his lap and strokes my back.

"I would die to protect you."

I believe him. Maybe I am crazy, but I know he's a monster who would never take advantage of me.

"Do you think if Delaney got to me, I would have become like the women in the movie?" I ask, gliding my finger over his shirt buttons.

He tips my chin up, searing my skin with a stony-faced look. “I would have never let that happen.”

“But you said—”

He lets out a heavy breath filled with remorse. “I know what I said, how I even made myself believe I don’t care about you. That you’re none of my business. But in the end, I would have never allowed it if it came to that. I guess your brother wasted his favor for something I would have done, regardless.”

“You should tell him that.”

“Cameron knew. He just wanted to make sure.”

I lean my head on his chest, and he scoops me up and carries me into our bedroom. He places me in the bed. When I don’t feel him at my back, I open my eyes and find him at the door.

“Kieran?”

“What is it, sweetheart?”

I’m raw with emotions and pat the spot next to me. He gets behind me, pulling me so close to him, something sets free in my chest. In his arms, no one can get to me. I am safe with him, but not safe at all from him.

I wake up and the thought that today is the day I’m getting married sobers me up quickly. Kieran is not in bed next to me, but I hear the shower running. I sigh and stand up, placing my hand on the window. The sun shines bright in the sky, birds chirp in the thick trees surrounding this mansion like protective shields.

I feel him more than anything else, as if his presence is connected to a visceral part of me that reacts to him.

I turn to him and water still drips from his chest. He closes his eyes.

“Can’t we just not do it?”

“No.”

His answer deflates me. I nod despite the mix of sadness and anger stirring inside of me. I wish I’d fought more, but I doubt the result would have been any different.

He walks out of the room. A sigh wrenches from my throat. This marriage, the vows, even the certificate are not real. The moment I can escape, I will. I tell myself to fortify the walls he’s torn from my chest so expertly.

But do I want to do it? There is something about him that just makes me want to dig deeper and find out what has me so entrapped by him.

I lose my train of thought when Tamara knocks and slips inside.

“Let’s get you ready.”

Her smile is so bright that you would think she was oblivious to this. I nod, words still eluding me. No one listens to me anyway.

After the shower, two women arrive to get me ready.

“Do you have something in mind?”

“No, whatever you’d like.”

Their eyes sparkle at that and I slump in the chair while the girls do their magic. My hair falls down my back in curls, and the makeup is just as glamorous. Will Kieran like it? I shake off the thought and stand up. Tamara helps me with the dress when they leave, barely containing her tears.

“You look beyond beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“If you’ll let yourself, you could be happy with Kieran. I know he’d like that.”

What about what I would like?

In the hallway, I grip the banister, the stairs in front of me dizzying me. But the moment I catch his eyes on me, completely transfixed, it gives me the strength to take the remaining steps toward him.

Kieran takes my hand and gives it a squeeze, his lips finding the shell of my ear.

“You take my breath away. You’re so damn beautiful,” he says, his voice breaking with emotion. I allow my eyes to take him in: the dark blue suit fitting his powerful body, the impeccable shirt only intensifying those eyes that hold me captive.

The moment is interrupted when Cameron steps into the house, reminding me what this is. I bite my tongue so hard, blood floods my mouth.

“You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.”

Behind him, a guy I have never met before appears. His eyes analyze me clinically, and a hint of apprehension flows through me. His rugged beauty is hard to miss, but it is muted by an oozing dangerous presence. He has to be another monster, if he’s a friend of my future husband and my brother.

“I’m Cato,” he says. Face-to-face, his posture is even more intimidating. I huff and introduce myself.

He exchanges a glance with Kieran and it bothers me.

“At least she’s a pretty lamb.”

Kieran glares at him, and I get in Cato's face. I press my finger in his hard chest.

"This lamb won't get eaten by any wolf."

All three of them chuckle, and my brother tips his chin approvingly.

Kieran takes my hand, and as we approach the pavilion, I strangle the flowers of my bouquet. I wonder what would happen if I told the wedding officiant I'm being forced to do this.

As if he knows what I'm thinking, Kieran leans his face to mine, looking me square in the eye.

"Aurora, no force on earth would stop me from making you mine."

He pins me with an intent look that strums at my heartstrings.

No one else is here except the four of us. Perhaps it is better that way. It would only pain me more for others to witness my complete lack of choice.

"Where is your mother?"

"She's not coming."

The way he said it, so visceral and utterly dejected, constricts my vocal cords. It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him why. We reach the officiant, and I plaster on a fake smile. Zoning out, I focus on the landscape stretching behind him.

I'm getting married, Mom. I miss you so much.

Kieran says, "I do," and my heart pounds in my chest mercilessly. If it weren't for his powerful arms, I would have fainted. He squeezes my hand. I'd like to think it's because he wants to offer me strength, but I know better. It's a hidden warning.

I gulp and say, "I do," binding us irrevocably.

Be careful what you wish for, it might come true.

When the officiant pronounces us husband and wife, Kieran's lips find mine, keeping me anchored to the present. It's soft at the beginning, coaxing me into a false sense of security. His kiss hardens, deepens, subduing me completely. The kiss ends too soon, but not soon enough.

My brother hugs me. "If there had been any other way, I would have taken it."

I want to say there was one, but it's too late now. The ring on my finger, and my signature on that marriage certificate, makes it real.

I still stare at the certificate, wishing it would disappear. Kieran sighs and walks over to my brother, who's already popping open a bottle of champagne. I guess my predicament is a reason for them to celebrate.

I down a glass of champagne and grab Kieran's too.

A taxi pulls into the alley, sending security guards in a tizzy. They run toward the car, guns drawn. Kieran already has his hands around me, pushing me behind him. I peek around him and see Chiara storming out of the taxi and running toward me. I push Kieran away, bunch my dress up, and run to her. We meet halfway and collapse in each other's arms.

"Am I too late?"

My eyes well up, not because she couldn't have stopped my marriage, but because she came.

"You're crazy coming here. Your father will kill you."

"It was worth trying to save my best friend."

We end the hug, and the guys surround us.

I wipe the tears away. "This is Chiara. My best friend."

"What are you doing here?" Cato booms and Chiara's eyes widen in shock.

Her mouth opens and shuts.

His hand shoots to her arm, but I slap it away. "Don't you dare touch her."

"It's almost cute how you protect her, but she's my fiancée."

I blink, taken aback.

Chiara's anger ignites, and she shoves him. "I thought you'd be smart enough to end our engagement. I guess you're not."

He tilts his neck to the sky, whispering for patience.

My brother bursts into laughter and both Cato and Kieran shoot him a murderous look.

"Does your father know?" Whatever Cato sees in her eyes, he runs a hand down his face. "Fuck my luck."

We leave the guys behind and sit down on the bench in the pavilion. I look around for the marriage certificate, but I guess Kieran already took it with him. Chiara or I would have torn that paper apart, even though it would be only a temporary fix.

The silence falls heavy between us.

"So, that's your fiancé? He's . . ."

Intimidating and scares the hell out of me. I will do anything in my power to keep her away from him.

"Cato's more bark than anything." Her eyes gleam with challenge. I can't shake the feeling she likes the games they play. This is not good at all.

“Do you like him?”

“No,” she says in a quick breath, looking away. “I just like messing with him.”

“You’re going to marry him?”

“If my father doesn’t kill me first.”

“He can’t do anything while he’s here. I’ll ask Kieran if he can do something about this.”

“So, you and Kieran?”

I stare at my hand, at the sparkling diamond ring on my finger, at the tattoo peeking beneath it, sizzling with the knowledge I have been his longer than today.

“I never thought the day would come when I would miss that godforsaken school.”

We giggle, and it’s so good to have her here. I forget everything around me.

Tamara appears, and Chiara takes her in, apprehension turning to anger on her face.

“How could you have let this happen?”

Tamara takes a step back, hurt clear in her eyes, but Chiara is on a rampage. “She’s a girl whose freedom was taken from her, and here you are, looking the other way. You’re a shame to all women.”

“Chiara, enough,” I say.

Tamara walks away, but not before I see the tears in her eyes.

“What? It’s true,” Chiara says defiantly.

“Stay here.”

I find Tamara in front of the garden. She’s silently crying and it guts me.

“I’m sorry for my friend. She can be impulsive.”

“Is this what you think of me too?”

I open my mouth to say something when Kieran finds us and he rushes to her side. “What’s wrong?”

The care in his voice tugs at my heartstrings. She eyes me and lies straight to his face. “Just emotional. My boy got married.”

Relief surges through me, and the tension in his shoulders softens.

He kisses her cheek and on the way back, his suit brushes my bare arm. I close my eyes at the flurry of goose bumps taking over.

“One day, one way or another, you will get what you want, and you’ll both be miserable.”

With that, she turns her back to me, her words haunting me.

Kieran, Cameron, and Cato are standing around Chiara in the pavilion. She's eyeing them as if she's going to try to take them all out.

"What's going on here?"

"I told them I am not going anywhere."

I look straight at Kieran. "Why can't she stay here? I married you. The least you could do is to protect my best friend."

"From whom?" Cato asks.

Chiara shakes her head at me, and I say, "From you."

It ends on a higher pitch. I am the worst liar. Kieran says, "If you tell the truth, I promise she won't get hurt."

"Aurora, don't," Chiara pleads with me, but this is about more than her pride. It's about me trying to protect her.

"From her father."

"Aurora."

"What? Do you think I'll be able to sleep at night? God knows how he will punish you this time."

A shiver rocks her body, and Cato's jaw tics. "I'll talk to him."

With that, he plucks the phone from his pants pocket and takes a few steps. He starts to speak, gesticulating animatedly, body corded with tense muscles. While Chiara and I stare at his back, my husband and my brother exchange a knowing look.

Hours pass. I drink champagne with Chiara while she glares at them. We end up on the opposite side of the garden as the men. We take a stroll, giggling, tipsy on the bubbles. With the sun lowering over the tips of the trees, we decide to go into the house.

I undress and shower in my old bedroom. When I come from the bathroom, Chiara is lounging on the bed. Disappointment and relief wage war inside me.

"This is not how I imagined my wedding night."

"Shut up. I'm going to give you the best wedding night ever," she says with a small smile.

I climb into bed next to her and prop my elbow on the mattress with my cheek in my palm.

"It's okay to be afraid."

"I am not afraid. I just hate my inability to do anything about it."

I feel her struggle. God, how I feel her.

“I can’t believe your father would have sold you.”

“I can’t believe your father allowed you to stay here with me tonight.”

“I lied. I’m scared now. Cato convinced my father somehow. No one ever could.”

The silence falls around us, thick as the shackles we can’t escape.

“Tamara said something today. Do you think we’ll end up miserable?”

“I’d rather be my own woman.”

I turn onto my side and when she falls asleep, I tiptoe out of the room. Downstairs, in the hallway, I come face-to-face with Kieran.

“Still trying to escape?” He tries for a teasing tone but fails.

I roll my eyes and walk to the greenhouse, where flowers bloom under the glass ceiling before the moon’s light.

His steps halt as I bend down and smell their sweet scent.

“Thank you.”

“It was Cato’s doing.”

“That is not the only thing I’m thanking you for.”

My head drops, accepting the truth. His finger brushes my cheek, and I lift my gaze to his to find a need that consumes me.

“I will wait for you to come to me, and I will relish that day.”

Through a big swallow, I say, “That will never happen.”

“So sure of yourself, sweetheart?”

I gulp, trying to reinforce my strength. I can’t let him get to me.

“I married you. That’s as far as I am willing to compromise.”

He frames my face with his palms, his lips almost touching mine. My lips quiver in anticipation. His nearness drives my senses wild.

“Let me in, sweetheart.”

“I can’t.”

He offers a curt nod. “I have a wedding gift for you. It’s on the nightstand in our bedroom.”

Just like that, he’s gone, and I am left with an ache I have no idea what to make of or ease. When I see a new phone waiting for me, my feelings take a deeper dive into the unknown.



14 KIERAN

What a vision, her face illuminated by the moon and surrounded by blooming white flowers. An apparition of divinity for the greatest sinner alive. Every day, I knock down at her walls. But she gives me a peek before building new ones.

I am imploding with need. For that ease only she can give me. That connection tethering me to something I can't fucking understand yet can't stop. I want this woman and I am going mad for her.

I step inside my office. My two best friends look at me cautiously. I am on edge.

"To my fucking wedding night."

They chuckle, and we clink our glasses.

"I'll never let my wife do that on our wedding night," Cato says, and I snort.

He'll learn that lesson quickly. You either let your woman do what she wants, or you'll end up miserable and crazy.

"At least mine gives me hope, but yours . . . She's something else entirely."

He nods more to himself. How the fuck did we end up in this mess? Oh right, because of Cameron. Getting what I want has never been difficult.

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

Cato's brows pinch together in barely contained anger. "She's terrified of her father, and I can't have that. If I ever find out he laid a hand on her . . ."

"You know he did. That fear was real," Cameron says.

“Of course, it was, but at least I’ll make sure it won’t happen again.” He cracks his neck. “I hate that I have to take her back.”

“Already a weakness.”

Both Cato and I shout at Cam, “Shut up.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” I say.

I’m fucking exhausted, but I grab my jacket and we’re out. Aurora’s words ring in my head. Until she caves, I will be her protector.

Nothing else.

In the compound, Cato and Cam entertain our guests while I am locked in the office, going through reports—working on my wedding night.

After a knock, my IT expert comes inside.

“What is it?”

“You said to watch out for suspicious activity.”

I wave for him to continue. Who the fuck needs a new lesson this quick? Rowan avoids my eyes, fingers fidgeting on the folder.

“I’m waiting.”

“Your wife made two calls that day.”

I take a sip, rage forming in my chest. “Traceable?”

He shakes his head. “No, it was a burner.”

“Thank you. You can go.”

The muscles in my neck strain from the tension this situation is causing.

I stare at my wedding ring glaring at me. Aurora wants to make a fool of me. I’ll show her she should never do that.

In the morning, I put a suit on, slapping the watch against my wrist. When I park in front of Delaney’s house, his butler lets me inside.

He shows me the direction to his office, and I find him sitting in his desk chair. I unbutton my suit jacket and take a seat.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Derision drips like venom from his voice.

I slept like shit. I am on a murderous rampage because I don’t know who my wife called. He should not test me when I am one match away from lighting his ass on fire. I slap both hands on his table, leaning over.

“This is the first and last time I will pay you a visit.” I let the unspoken threat dangle between us.

He shifts in his seat, crossing one leg over the other. “I want what is mine. So bring me that girl. She’s my possession.”

“That girl is now my wife,” I snarl, showing him my finger with the ring

on it, and his jaw tightens.

“Then we have a problem.”

I throw a folder in his lap, and I cock my head to the side as the realization hits him.

“What is this?”

“You forget I am not my father. He liked blackmail. I like destruction.”

Delaney looks at the pics from last night. Surrounded by security, his body marked by two red dotted lights.

“You will stay away from my wife. If you don’t, this is just one of the many ways I can eliminate you.”

He shoots to his feet, threatening me. “This is not over. You made a big mistake, Kieran.” Empty words, but I am already out the door.

When I am done, I go to my office at the bank. My assistant calls. “Mr. McNamara is here to see you.”

“Let him in.”

When my father-in-law steps inside, he hides his disdain and anger behind a socially acceptable mask. “You have cost me a lot of trouble, but now that we’re family . . .”

He stinks of desperation. I lean back and steeple my fingers.

“I want the money I lost because of your interference.”

“I don’t owe you anything. Get the fuck out, and don’t come here again.”

“I’m going to throw a fucking party, you arrogant fool, when you lose everything.”

Silas stomps away. With two enemies in the open and many more invisible, I can’t give her freedom.

I should go home and check on her. But her betrayal is still fresh. Aurora is determined to leave and I am set on keeping her. I can’t become even more obsessed with her.



15

AURORA

One night without him, and his absence has dampened any modicum of joy. I had gotten used to him stripping me so I could let go and let him in. As I toss and turn in my bed, I wake up Chiara.

“You should be happy that asshole leaves you alone.”

“I’m going to miss you.”

“We’ll see each other again. My wedding is in a few weeks. Fuck our luck.”

I half-giggle. She’s the first to take a shower and change while I stare at my phone. I itch to call Kieran, but that would make me lose the silent war we have going on.

After breakfast, we spend some time in the garden. When Cato comes to take her home, we hug and she hops in his black sports car, waving at me.

I freeze in the kitchen’s entrance when I hear Tamara saying, “Should I send you lunch over? Do you have guests?”

A pain hits my chest. When she turns to me, she hangs up quickly and busies herself in the kitchen.

Does Kieran have someone else while I am stuck here? *Guests* equate *women* in my mind. Jealousy shoots rationality in its head.

I can’t believe he would do that.

Rage clouds my vision. For hours, I try to calm myself down, but images of him with someone else wreck my composure. The betrayal pricks my heart with hundreds of tiny needles.

I storm inside the security room. Daniel stands, visibly concerned.

“Bring me to my husband.”

“He’s busy.”

“If you don’t, I will go to him myself.”

“That is not a good idea.” Daniel takes his phone from his pocket, but an adrenaline rush comes over me, and I snatch it from him and stomp on it.

“Don’t you dare. Now take me to Kieran.”

My husband is a cheating asshole. Did he think he can just leave me while he lives his best life? Never. I will never accept that. He’s bound to share my misery.

I pin Daniel with a glare, and he dips his head in acquiescence. Sitting in the car, my anger only intensifies with every mile we travel. When we reach the location, a glass building rises from the ground, stretching thousands of square feet, but I can’t see inside. The windows must be tinted.

Without waiting for Daniel, I shove the door open and stride right to the door. He gets his thumb and retina scanned, and the door opens into a hallway with gray walls and polished floors. Daniel slides his card over the elevator panel and when it stops on the first floor, my legs fill with lead. He points at the door and says he’ll wait downstairs.

My hand trembles as I open the door, my heart butchered in my chest at possibly finding him with someone else. The thought of him fucking someone else. That chest that my back leaned into, that body who at night was my cocoon now might be thrusting into another woman.

So many emotions running amok and the fog of my thoughts clears at once when his head snaps up. I feel a relief so strong it unbalances me.

“Aurora?” He looks at me with a furrowed brow, already in a half-up position.

Now that I see I had nothing to worry about, I’m pissed at his ability to keep his distance from me.

Well, fuck him.

I hurry back into the elevator with Kieran hot on my heels, calling my name. My finger bends, pressing the button, and the door slides shut right in his tightened-up-with-frustration face.

With Daniel behind me, I stride toward the car. “Drive me back.” He obeys.

Back home, I barricade myself inside my room and call my uncle.

“Please, I can’t take this any longer.”

“What did he do?”

I am sure he expects me to tell him despicable things. Instead, I say the truth. “He’s dangerous to my heart. I’m afraid of losing myself to him.”

The heart of that girl who loved him for years, even the heart of the woman who fights her feelings daily for him is at risk.

“And there is someone else, my best friend. I’m not leaving without her.”

“I cannot do that.”

“Then I’ll find another way.”

“We can come for her afterward,” Hayden tries, but I remain resolute.

“No.”

We spend the next few minutes coming up with a plan. The next time Chiara visits me, he’ll come get us. It doesn’t matter if it takes months. I will be free of Kieran, of these chains shackling me to him, to this house I’m starting to think of as home.

I itch to call Chiara and tell her. On my way to the kitchen, Kieran storms inside the house, coming toward me.

“We need to talk.”

“There is nothing to talk about.”

I stomp back upstairs and slam the door shut.

The door opens, and my heart speeds up in my chest. He closes it, trapping me inside the room with him. We stare at each other amid a poisonous concoction of anger and uncertainty brewing between us.

He steps toward me, but I put up my hand to stop him. I can’t let his nearness fog my senses.

“Let me ask a hypothetical question,” he starts.

A slight apprehension rushes through me but I scoff. He prowls to me, and I back up until my knees hit the bed and I fall back.

“You want me. But there is nothing hypothetical about that.”

I roll my eyes at his confidence.

“You’re afraid of losing yourself to me so you’d come up with something stupid—like believing you could escape me. I wanted to give you space, give you time to process your new life.”

I push myself on my elbows. “If you think me not having a choice is something I could get past, then you’re delusional.”

“We’ll talk about that, but now let’s get back to the other matter. You plan to escape?”

My heart pounds in my chest. My eyes widen, and I gulp, trying to keep my face from betraying me.

“Who is he?”

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

“Don’t lie to me. I’m not in the mood. Who the fuck is he?”

I snap my head to the side. He can torture me, but I will never tell him about my uncle.

“Okay then.” For one moment, relief spreads through me until he opens his mouth again. “Follow me.”

I freeze on the spot. Kieran stares at me, his face a clear indicator of whatever patience he had is now gone. He grips my ankles and drags me to him. I gasp when he throws me over his shoulder.

“Where are we going?”

I get my answer the moment he puts me on my feet and shuts the door to his office.

He pours himself a glass of whiskey and sits down in his chair. He can really be intimidating. Why do I find that so hot?

The heavy silence is almost deafening, and it makes my apprehension soar. A knock on the door makes me jump. Daniel steps inside carrying something, but I can’t make out what it is. But what I can make out is his inquisitive stare. He places it on the desk. With a nod, he leaves, and Kieran reaches for the box.

“Kieran.” His name breaks on my lips as he takes the object from the box. It’s a syringe.

I shoot to my feet and run toward the door. He’s on me in an instant, subduing me with his arms. The heat he emanates makes the cold gripping me a tad tolerable.

He strokes my hand, and he places his chin on my shoulder. For one second, I close my eyes, enjoying the feeling. But I remember why I ran in the first place and thrash in his arms.

Kieran lets me go. “Tell me who he is. Is he your lover?”

I bite my lip. There must be something wrong with me because I really enjoy his jealousy. I cross my arms over my chest, defiance changing my posture.

“Yes.” He can believe whatever he wants.

“And you think he can take you away from me?”

“He will.”

I shouldn’t challenge him, but this surge of adrenaline and heated emotions push me further. “I’ll make sure to wink at you one last time when

he comes to get me.”

In two steps, he’s back in front of me, slamming his lips on mine. I attempt to shove him off, but his arms go around my waist and he presses me closer to him, pinning my hands over my head. I feel so much of him, his pain, his anger, his possessiveness, and I moan as his tongue dives in.

He’s good at making me forget. His lips feel incredible, his body creating the perfect cocoon for me.

Kieran stares at my mouth then drags his eyes to mine. “Who is he?”

“I will never tell.”

“Fine. I will find out anyway.”

He releases me and yanks the syringe from the top of the desk. He approaches me with the grace of a predator.

I back into the wall. “What is that?”

“A chip. To know exactly where you are at all times.”

“Don’t do this.”

“Tell me who the fuck he is then?”

“And you won’t put that inside of me?”

“I’ll consider it.”

My head drops. I can’t betray my uncle. I can’t annihilate the hope that even though he will be able to find me, he won’t be able to get me back.

“I hope for your sake he deserves your loyalty. I warn you, Aurora, the man who tries to take what is mine won’t live to tell about it.”

I lock eyes with him, not even flinching when the needle pricks my skin. I close them, the implications dragging me under.

“It’s a microchip. No one can detect it. Whatever scenarios you imagine, they are all improbable.”

“I hate you. I really do.”

Zero trust and an unforgivable betrayal gives us no chance to be anything but shattered hopes.

“Don’t try to escape me. I will never let you leave. You belong to me.”

I search his eyes for anything resembling remorse. There is none. His eyes are a frozen lake with possessiveness lying beneath.

“You’re mine, Aurora, just mine. Until death do us part. And beyond.”

“Never. Not after tonight. Do you hear me? Never,” I scream.

“We’ll see about that.”



16

KIERAN

The syringe lies empty on my desk. Her accusatory glare filled with betrayal pricks at my chest. I've been stroking the spot for several minutes, but the unwelcome feeling persists.

Every time I think I know what I'm doing with her, it soon becomes painfully obvious that I don't. Aurora can be mad at me all she wants, but I have never felt this kind of fear, this jealousy. I have a lot of enemies who'd like to destroy me, and she has become my weakness.

Movement in the doorway draws my attention from my thoughts.

"How is she?"

If Daniel keeps questioning me, I will put a bullet through his skull.

"As a man who is happily married, you will never have that if you don't stop being a dick. Talk to her."

I lean my back against the wall, and he goes on.

"Aurora will understand your reasoning if you explain things to her."

"Stay out of my business."

"Your business is mine as well. I want you happy, and you have never been this miserable. You always said, if you can't keep a cool head, you won't survive long. Well, I'm here to protect you from not just your enemies, but from yourself too, so snap out of it."

"Get out."

I yank my laptop open, intent on working, when Tamara steps inside. Knowing Daniel, he went for the big guns and told her to come in here and talk to me.

Accusation flares in her eyes. “I thought you had better manners.”

The people of my household are keen on pissing me off. Is today Let’s Berate Kieran and Test His Patience Day?

I scowl at her, and she raises her eyebrows at me. “You don’t intimidate me. I’ve changed your diapers, for God’s sake.”

“You keep reminding me,” I huff.

The image of Aurora’s betrayed stare unbalances me, trapping the air in my constricting lungs.

“What happened, Kieran?”

I drag a hand down my face. “She makes me weak.”

“And you thought putting a chip in her would give you your strength back?”

“I can’t breathe around her. But thinking of her not being here drives me insane.”

Tamara walks to me and pats my arm. “I want you happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Do the right thing. Apologize and explain why you did that.”

“I doubt it will help.”

“Get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow will look different.”

Yes, but for whom?

I get in my car and meet the guys at the compound, telling them about Aurora’s mystery man.

“Who the fuck is he?” Cato inquires. We both turn to look at Cameron who shrugs.

“I have no fucking clue who he could be. It was impossible for her to go outside unsupervised. Maybe she’s bluffing.”

“No, she isn’t. And I can’t fucking have her think she can escape.”

The next moment, Cato’s on the phone. “I want the wedding moved up.”

When he hangs up, he says, “Bachelor party on Friday. I’m going to be a married man by the end of next week.”

I am not in the mood to party when my marriage is in shambles.

When we go downstairs, our team is already seated.

“If anyone comes at us again, I will hold you personally responsible,” I say, pinning them each with a hard stare.

“That would mean someone infiltrated us, which isn’t possible. Our checkups are thorough,” the chief of security, Sawyer, answers.

Our organization is built on levels, hierarchical levels, from scouts to security. “I’m not questioning the leadership’s loyalty, but everyone else

needs to be re-checked.”

Sawyer stands up, pointing at the two men, and says, “I’m going to check it out from the ground up.”

“Good, do that.”

When they leave, Cameron stares at me.

“Both Delaney and Silas seemed too unfazed for me to let this slide. Something is off and I don’t like that.”

“Yes, better to be sure than be arrogant fools like them. I’m off to do some handshaking.”

When we’re alone, I say to Cato, “I microchipped Aurora.”

“It was necessary, brother. She’ll be safe. How did she react?”

I cock my head to the side and massage my temples. “She hates me.”

“That bad?”

I nod, and he gets up and claps my shoulder.

“Happiness was never our end goal. Maybe our wives are our divine punishment.”

“I need to be able to trust her.”

“Then gain her trust back. Women are more forgiving than us. Maybe that’s our luck.”

What I do know is I will do anything in my power to keep her.

At home, I watch the window to our room from my car. Time to face what I did.

I tiptoe inside, only to find the bed empty. I groan. This woman is going to make me age prematurely.

I change into a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants, put sneakers on, and go hunting. If I have to show her daily she can’t escape me, I will.

I run toward the forest, and hear twigs crunching under her feet. She’s running with her sports gear on.

I follow her and she stops, her eyes widening in panic. After she sees it’s me, the look on her face turns from relief to anger.

“Did you think I’d try to escape? I thought you’d know where I was.”

Aurora pushes herself to a sprint before I can reply, but I am right beside her. I reach for her elbow, pulling her to me. Her breaths rush from her lungs.

“I will always catch you,” I say.

She groans, and I try another tactic.

“If you want to run, then there are certain conditions.”

She rolls her eyes at me, huffing. “It’s always conditions with you. What

are you doing home, anyway?”

“I won’t spend my nights anywhere else but next to my wife.”

“I hope your dick falls off then.”

“I’ve got my hand.”

She reties her hair into a ponytail, crossing her arms over her chest. “Have fun with that.”

She can be a mean little thing.

“I’m sorry.”

She blinks at me and takes a step back. “You can do whatever you want with your apology, but I don’t accept it.”

Aurora turns and runs back to the house. I grunt and follow her, my eyes on the curve of her back and that perky ass of hers, and I am hard.

She slams the door in my face, making my lips twitch. She’s the sweetest wolf pup with teeth.

I open it, and for one moment, I debate if I should follow her and demand she sleep next to me, but I doubt that will help my case.

I shed my clothes and take a lukewarm shower, the images of her heating my blood.

Who the fuck is the man she talked to? If he comes near her again, he’s dead.

Aurora is mine. No one else’s but mine. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to make sure she stays here with me, where she is safe.



I try to hold on to the anger, and most of the time it works. But there are moments when we see each other and his nearness switches something in me. Then I remember. I always remember, and it deflates me.

It's been a week since he injected me with the chip, and we run together every night. I was hoping Daniel would be my guard, but he's been away. So, I am left with him. My husband, my captor.

I ignore him as best I can.

I should want nothing from him, especially his attention, yet I crave it. He put a chip in me. That alone should make me hate him, but what I feel toward him is even more complex.

I am more confused than anything. He's so complicated, and I do not know how to reason with his behavior. If I wanted him to give me answers, he would. But do I want to hear them? Not knowing keeps my walls up by sheer will. I don't want them to fall again at his feet.

I call Chiara and she curses. "That fucking bastard moved the wedding up to next week. He won't know what hit him."

"Wait, what?"

"Didn't you know?"

"We're not on speaking terms."

"Please be there. I don't know if I can do this without you."

"Of course, I will."

When we hang up, I change into my running gear, and like every night, Kieran waits for me outside. I pass by him with squared shoulders.

We run side by side, the silence stretching between us like a rubber band. I come to a complete stop.

“Why?” I ask.

He could answer in so many different ways, but if he knows me even a bit, he will know what I mean.

“I had to.”

“I see.”

His answer sets a weight full of disappointment on my chest. “But do you? I don’t think so. I would do anything to protect you, but also keep you.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “This might have started as a favor to your brother, but I want to make it real. I want us to try.”

“I thought I was a lamb, and you needed a queen.”

Hearing him that night crushed the dreams of that little girl who worshiped the ground he walked on. What a sobering wake-up call. It was then that something shifted in me. And I’m petty enough to hold on to that feeling of misery.

“I was mistaken.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

Kieran clenches his jaw in frustration, puffing a heavy breath out. “Because you want me to make you feel better emotionally, and I don’t fucking know how. Physically, I can, if you allowed me.”

“You still think you deserve me?”

“I want you. I want you so bad I can’t fucking think, work, eat, sleep. You’re keeping me awake, starved, on the brink of insanity.”

His words heat my cold skin, feed my famished heart.

“Good.” I gulp, licking my lips.

Suddenly, he grips my chin, and his thumb caresses my lower lip. “Do you enjoy seeing me unraveling?”

I close my eyes for a second, feeling the same. Unraveled, on the precipice.

“Terribly. I will enjoy watching you want something you can’t have.”

“Is it because of him?”

“Yes.”

“I guess your father sent you in vain to an all-girls school.”

I push him off me and walk away.

Silence between us is better. Words only ruin, and we’re a pile of wrecked pieces.

After I shower, I yank back the duvet and climb into bed. This is not our first night of passive-aggressive games. That asshole is not the only one who has trouble sleeping. With him next to me feeling as if he's biding his time, waiting for me to make one move so he can pounce on me? And that's why we spend our nights glaring and challenging each other.

Our morning routine is the same. Kieran watches me while I shower and show him the body he will never touch again. He grunts as he rolls out of bed, changes quickly, and shuts the door behind him. We're nothing if not persistent.

I'm eating my breakfast when Kieran appears, but I don't stop chatting with Tamara, ignoring him. If his clamped jaw is any indication, he doesn't like it. Not at all. Good.

"What would you like to eat for lunch?" she asks.

"The mushroom soup is delicious. I've been thinking about it all week."

"I can make it for you whenever you want."

My cheeks heat when I catch Kieran's heated gaze. When he continues to stare, I choke on my grape. The asshole grins.

I must be reaching my breaking point. If he wants a show, I'll give him one. I turn to him, grab a banana, and peel it slowly. With my eyes capturing his, I swallow it to the back of my throat, no gag reflex at all.

His pupils dilate, taking over the blue in his eyes. I might have gone to an all-girls school, but that didn't mean we didn't occupy ourselves with other things in our spare time.

He shifts in his chair, the sexual frustration oozing from him. One moment he's sitting. The next, he grabs my hand.

In a smoky tone ending in a rasp, he asks, "When did you learn that?"

"To eat bananas? Pretty sure when my mom stopped breastfeeding," I answer, offering him my most innocent look.

His eyes burn with jealousy.

He leans over, whispering in my ear, "I will enjoy killing him. And I will take my time, Aurora."

He's crazy, he really is. Let him burn with jealousy while I rejoice over my win.

"You'd have to find who and where he is." I roll the banana over my tongue to provoke him further.

He shoots up from the chair, and I smile in victory. It's fun playing with him.

Very smart, playing with a wild animal.

Throughout the day, I write, read, and do some gardening. But nothing keeps my thoughts from going to him.

When Kieran comes back home, I expect him to come to me to show me again he's the kind of man who needs control and will do anything to shift the power back to his side. Nothing compares to our power play.

I swallow my disappointment when he doesn't come to find me. I change into my running gear, but I don't find him in the usual spot. Not waiting for him, I take off, a guard running at a distance behind me, but look over my shoulder in the woods for Kieran. He isn't there. Gloom clouds over my head, dampening my mood. I shake my head, hating how I got used to him at my side.

Back from the run, I shower, put on a soft pink silky top and matching shorts, and search for him. Kieran is in his office, a king on his throne. Normally, going to him nearly naked would be wrong, but this is important. I will be there when my friend gets married.

His gaze finds me over the rim of his laptop. His eyes darken and my skin, always betraying me around him, breaks out in goose bumps. I approach him, and he leans back in his chair, gloating that I came to him. But I don't let that satisfied look dissuade me.

"Missed me?"

He's infuriating.

"You didn't come running tonight," I say and trail my finger over his desk.

Satisfaction curls up around the corners of his mouth. "You did."

I gnash my teeth at his cockiness. Small talk just flew out the window.

I square my shoulders. "I want to go to my friend's wedding."

Kieran leans back and taps a finger on his lips. "How much do you want it?"

The asshole knew this was coming. Surely, he's going to use it as his trump card. He pushes himself off his chair, and the air sizzles around us.

His finger brushes my cheek, and his eyes swallow mine in their endless depths. No wonder I so easily lose myself in him.

"Let me rephrase. What would you let me do to you?" His voice lowers, deepening with sexual innuendo. The spot between my thighs throbs.

"Are you blackmailing me?"

"You want something from me, Aurora."

“Then the next question would be, what do you want from me?”

“You. I want everything from you.”

I turn my back to him, my heart pounding in my chest. His arms wrap around me, and I sigh.

“You were waiting for something like this, weren’t you?”

He places a kiss on my neck. I squeeze my eyes shut at how my body reacts—it comes alive. “You could always say no.”

“What kind of a person does that to someone?”

“Me,” he answers, with no trace of guilt.

My head drops, and he turns me to him, tipping my chin up.

“I wanted things to be different. Now I am just doing what I should have done from the start.”

“Force me?”

“Call it what you want. Now think before you answer.”

I shove him away, and his heated gaze follows me as I shut the door behind me.

How did I get into this mess?

I walk through the gardens to clear my head, calling Chiara.

“Don’t do it. I mean it. I will be fine.”

“He already took my freedom. The rest seems so inconsequential . . .”

“I hate him, and I hate them. They’re bastards.”

They are, but fighting them is useless. It is what it is, and until I go away, I can’t do anything.

Hanging up, I breathe in and out. I could delay the inevitable, but it would be futile. I step inside our bedroom.

“Changed your mind?”

I ball my hands into fists. Kieran might be beautiful, deceptively so, but inside he’s rotten. He lies on the bed and puts his phone on the nightstand, his sculpted chest glowing in the dim light.

I approach him. Each step takes me closer to the hangman. The last piece of what’s holding me back is wrenched from me. I stand in front of him while he decides about my life.

I shove the thought away. “I accept.”

My heart pounds in the silence surrounding us. As the seconds tick by, he gestures for me. “Come to bed.”

I look at him, completely stunned. I was sure he would ask me to get naked. “That’s all?”

He cocks his head, and I deflate. I knew it would be too good.

“Every night from now on, I will demand something from you, and you will do it. Whatever it is, however it is.”

His answer squeezes the air from my lungs while my nerves dance on the perilous edge of curiosity and excitement.

“Can I say no?”

“If you say no, things will continue as they are. If you say yes, you will get more and more freedom.”

More chances to escape. That’s the hope I hold on to.

I climb into bed, my voice dropping to a silky seduction. “I want something in exchange.”

“Do you think we’re negotiating?”

“Yes, if you want more than just a blow-up doll.”

“Even if you behave like one, I have my ways, sweetheart.” His mouth is made of sin and cruelty.

A burst of heat and an icy shudder battle to skitter first down my spine.

“We spend one hour a day together in the garden.”

His eyebrows pinch together. Yes, I just surprised both of us. But if I plan on escaping, I have to make him trust me and learn more about him.

“Deal.”

“Good. Now let’s sleep.”

Relief laces his words, making me relieved as well.

I inch toward my side when his hands lock around my waist. When I am tucked under his arms, his features ease, even his eyes lose their frost. I bite my lip, not knowing what to expect when he rolls me around to face him.

He’s hard and warm all around me. I am high on his presence alone. My palms rest on his chest and his heart beats as fast as mine. He glues his forehead on mine and his lips find mine.

I should fight him, but I’m tired and we have a deal. I chant that his lips on mine don’t feel good, and his hands on me don’t have me biting back pleasure—making me out to be the biggest liar.

One moment his lips are on mine, the next I yelp when he flips me, spooning me as I lie flushed in his arms. He tucks us under the duvet, and my heart and mind race from an avalanche of feelings and sensations he ignites inside me. I don’t get lulled into a false sense of security.

He will take me, and by the end of the week, he will have something of mine I will never get back. But it’s okay. If that’s the price for my freedom, I

will pay and get over it.

His arms around me tighten, and I fall asleep next to this beautiful monster.

I don't count the days as days in the week, but as days to my doom. Day one has begun.

In bed, I peek at him through one eye and find him smiling at me.

“We'll shower together.”

“Why?”

“Aurora.”

I remember he's not as important as being there for my best friend, and when he extends his hand, I take it. With every step toward the shower, my nerves hijack my system.

“I'm nervous.”

He cups my face in his hands, brushing his nose against mine. “I will never hurt you.”

Does he actually believe that? He has been hurting me from the beginning.

He will never see me vulnerable again. With a fortifying breath, I follow him into the bathroom.

Kieran peels my top off me, and his gaze dips from my neck to my chest. I bring my arms to cover me.

“Hands down.”

They drop like they have no life in them. His finger follows the line of my neck, down the valley of my breasts, to my belly button. My nipples pucker in anticipation. How can it be that my traitorous body craves his touch? His touch awakens every nerve ending in me. He drops to his knees, his hands splayed on my thighs with a promise to worship, and I clamp my hands on his shoulders.

His eyes find mine, entranced, and the intensity behind them weakens my knees. He peels my shorts off me, leaving a trail of flames behind. I step out of them on shaky legs, remaining just in my undies. My mind turns to mush, my heart races, and my body tingles. Every second that he keeps looking at me as if I am a wonder, unravels me further.

His hands travel down my thighs, peeling my panties down, his breathing getting heavier. He places kisses from my hip bone to my belly. I have never experienced anything like this. He flames my skin with his touch, but soothes the burn with a kiss.

My head falls back. It's maddening and addictive what he puts my body through. How can he play my body like this, and make me want what he does as much as I do, knowing he's a scrupulous monster?

It takes a few seconds for me to realize I'm standing completely naked in front of him. He places open-mouthed kisses up my legs to the juncture of my thighs, where he breathes me in, as if inhaling my very essence out of me. His mouth trails up to my pussy and belly button, up the valley of my breasts, kissing my two pointed nipples.

I am dizzy with the onslaught of sensations. Every inch of my body tingles. I want more, need him to continue his deliciously torturous ministrations.

"You're perfect, inside and out."

He steals my capacity to form words. Every soft kiss, passionate touch, reverent word, renders me wanton.

"More?" he asks, baiting me, fingertips grazing along the inside of my thighs. He stops right next to pussy, knowing I need more, knowing I am dangling by a thread. My chest heaves. The almost-touch is maddening, making me desperate for release—I crave it.

Just one small push to free dive into euphoria, but the greedy asshole wants my surrender. I bite down my moans, so he stands up and kisses me, our omnipresent war stretching between us. I will not surrender. Never.

I back up into the shower wall. I have to regroup, regain some control of my body. This can't be good. Even I know that.

He squirts shampoo into his hand and closes his eyes as he washes his hair. My eyes fix on the long, thick dick dangling between his legs. It twitches, and I gulp, swallowing the saliva that gathered. Kieran has the nerve to smirk.

"He just wants inside of you as much as you want him inside of you."

"Dick." I slap his chest. He wiggles his body on mine, covering me in foam and I giggle.

For a moment, I forget. For a moment, I let myself go. For a moment, I am his.

He turns my back to his chest and shampoos my hair. He washes my body with gentleness and even wraps me in a towel when we're done.

But the moment we're out of the shower, he doesn't ask anything else of me. Instead, he gets dressed and leaves. I breathe, not in relief. It's more of a necessity. His presence is too much.

I dry my hair and change quickly. Downstairs, he finishes his breakfast when he says, “When do you want your hour in the garden?”

“Five?” I reply with the first number that comes to mind.

“I’ll be there.”

He stands up, kissing my forehead, his lips lingering there a moment longer, making my heart all fuzzy and warm.

Tamara claps her hands together when the door at the entrance shuts. “You’re trying? This makes me so happy, my child.”

Not wanting to ruin her good mood, I say, “I’m just showing him a bit of gardening.”

Because Kieran and I are nothing more than blackmail, ruined dreams, and false expectations.

“I’ll prepare a picnic basket.”

It’s at the tip of my tongue to tell her no, but she’s already buzzing around, even humming.

After I help her with lunch, I go inside the library to read, but catch myself glancing at the clock. When it strikes a quarter before five, I rush into the kitchen and take the basket with me.

I will earn his trust. I will seduce him. I will play him and win not only this mind and power game of his, but also my freedom.

With renewed conviction, I meet my fate.



After a meeting with the bank's directors, I drag a hand down my face. I feel like a teenager about to get lucky tonight.

The image of her naked in front of me plays on repeat. Working with a perpetual hard-on is not an easy task. I cannot wait to have her. I'm strung tight with incessant desire coursing through my blood.

Whomever Aurora is talking to, he was lucky enough to have had her. But she's mine now. Even if he's stupid enough to come after her, he'll find out she's completely mine now. I never thought Cato's wedding would work so well into my plans. Aurora will end up loving her life with me, the pleasure I'm dying to give her. I just have to break through her walls first.

After calls and going through reports, I leave my office. I speed home and lay my head on the headrest, trying to calm this enthusiasm spreading like wildfire inside me when I park.

Stepping out of the car, I follow the path from the driveway around the house to the garden. My steps falter, taken aback by the beauty in front of me. My damn heart twitches in my chest, followed by my cock in my pants.

Pushing through my momentary freeze, I approach her. She pats a spot on a blanket, and I am wondering what she's playing at this time.

"The picnic was Tamara's idea," she says, avoiding my glance.

It shouldn't bother me, but it does.

I lie down and prop up on my elbows to stare at the sun, my excitement wavering with every second.

She offers me a mini sandwich and I take it.

“How was your day?” she asks.

“Busy, as usual.”

I watch as she pops grapes in her mouth. Behind her, this garden has never looked better. After my mother left it to wither away, I never cared much about restoring it.

“The garden is beautiful.”

“Thank you. Why did you leave it like that?”

“My mother.”

“How come I haven’t seen her?”

You’re the only person she hates more than me. But I can’t tell her that. So I say, “She’ll come when she’s ready.”

Aurora blinks and says, “It’s because of—”

“Yes, it was bad for her.”

Aurora bites down on her lower lip. “She blames me?”

“My mother is still bitter about my father’s betrayal.”

“How did you take their affair?”

“I thought they were stupid. But love makes you do stupid things.”

“My father killed them.”

“How do you know that?”

“So, he was right,” she says to herself.

I see red. She better hope I never find out who *he* is. Every small progress gets her nearer to me and farther away from that fucker. I can already imagine pummeling my fists into his face. Her eyes widen, realizing what she said.

“What will happen tonight?”

“Nervous?”

“No, just curious.”

She can’t lie to save her life, and it’s that innocence, that untainted goodness of her I have to protect, even though she doesn’t want me to.

“Did you like last night?”

The perfect shade of red spreads on her cheeks.

“There will be more of that tonight.”

My cock hardens in my pants, and I adjust myself. I smirk, remembering how she stared at it. I guess the fucker had a small dick. He won’t have one if he comes after her. I curl my hands into fists.

“Was the marriage solely to protect me?” she asks.

“Does it matter?”

“Regardless. I want to know.”

I drag a hand down my face. “Know what? Me, my reasoning? What do you want to know, Aurora?”

“Why are you angry now?”

Because the thought of not having you in my life fucking bothers me more than I thought possible.

“This was a mistake.”

I grip her hand. “I saw you and all I could think of was that fucker Delaney would never touch you.”

“Thank you,” she says, squeezing my hand. It takes me aback how the tension in my body diffuses with just a small touch from her.

After enjoying the rest of the picnic in silence, I grab the basket and we walk back inside the house.

When dinner rolls around, I find her in the dining room.

“Do you want to watch a movie after?”

“I’d love that.” Her lips arch into a bright smile.

I have to have her, make her mine. I don’t remember anything else driving me like this before.

After dinner we step inside the theatre room, with popcorn and soda.

I pick a comedy that makes her giggle. I can’t help but smile back. Her beauty bewitches me.

When the movie ends, I take her hand, walking up the spiral staircase back to our room. I close it and force myself to take things slowly, even though my insides burn with a frenzied mix of lust and need.

I peel her dress off, and then undress myself. I carry her to the bed with her legs wrapped around me, and lay her on the mattress. I kiss her soft lips and she parts her mouth in invitation. Nothing on this earth could bring me to my knees, but this woman’s kiss can.

When I find her eyes, her pupils are dilated. The sign of her need has me groaning in satisfaction. I trail kisses down her chest and take a pebbled nipple in my mouth and she moans, gripping my arms.

Her head falls back while I suck on one rosy point while rolling the other between my thumb and forefinger.

“Kieran.” My name pours from her mouth in a whisper of desire.

I trail my mouth down her belly button and she giggles.

“That tickles.”

I look at her as I lower my face between her legs.

She props up on her elbows. “What are you doing?”

Her legs part on their own. The implicit trust she has in me brings me to my fucking knees. At least she trusts me with her body.

I slide my nose down her folds, her scent awakening a primal urge in me, to mark, possess, and pleasure. I grip her thighs and stretch her to reveal the most beautiful pussy on this earth—bare, soft, swollen. And mine, all fucking mine.

I lick her slit, and she grips the sheets, arching her back. A breathy moan rolls out of her heart-shaped mouth while I lose myself in eating her out. A starved man and only her juices can satiate me.

“Oh, God.”

“Not God, just a sinner.”

I dive back in, sucking and nibbling at her pussy. Seeing her like this, spread open for me, trusting and wet, my heart thaws under the pleasure in her glassy eyes. The pleasure I’m offering her. With her, it’s not my ego at work. With her, it’s sheer need to offer her pleasure.

With my fingers making a *V* over her pussy, my tongue plunges into her heat. Her moans trip over her lips in rapid succession, filling my ears with a decadent symphony.

“This feels so good . . . Please, don’t stop.”

Look at my feisty wife, saying please, begging for my tongue. How can I deny her when she surrenders so prettily?

“My princess likes being eaten out?”

“Oh, God, yes.”

I chuckle over her glistening folds. She’s soaked. Curling my finger inside her tight pussy, I go back to devouring her. Her fingers thread through my hair, yanking at the roots as she bucks under me, her moaning and desperation to chase her orgasm fueling me. Lapping at her with gusto, her toes curl, and her breath stutters.

“Come all over my tongue, princess.”

She shatters under me, and her chest rises and falls in quick breaths.

I crawl on top of her and kiss her, her nails caressing down my back.

My dick is painfully hard, but I force myself to slow things down. This was about showing her what I could give her. The promise of pleasure followed by making good on our deal. I can be patient, especially since I want her to want me, choose this life with me.

A few more days, and I’ll get inside of her. My blood heats in

anticipation.

When she opens her eyes, almost black with her entire posture relaxed, it relaxes me.

With our eyes locked, I brush her cheek. “Good night, sweetheart.”

She snuggles into me, and she falls asleep under my caresses.

Tonight was about her. Tomorrow is about us.



19

AURORA

I wake up wrapped in Kieran's arms. With memories of last night so fresh in my mind, a burst of heat takes over.

Is it supposed to feel this good? I thought I would die from the maddening pleasure. I climbed a high that made me dizzy, made me ache and crave more, everything and all at once. I expected him to take more, everything to be about his pleasure, but it was about me. Again.

I almost gave in and asked if he wanted me to take care of him, too, because I could see his angry hard-on. I cried his name out and moaned so loud, I doubt I can even speak today.

He kisses my shoulder, and I turn to him. My lips curl into a smile. He smiles back at me, and my world tilts a bit.

This is so unfair. A few days ago, I thought my anger would swallow everything in its wake. Sex with Kieran was meant to be a sacrifice for my friend, so I could be there for her when she married that monster. But now, I don't know if that's the only reason.

Kieran doesn't have to say anything as I follow him into the shower. His hands coax so much pleasure out of me, making me light-headed. His touch brands me, his kisses seduce me. Seeing him getting on his knees to give me pleasure is a high that is unparalleled. The pleasure builds up in my stomach, a volcano erupting, blasting through me until I am a pile of wanton ash.

"Give me your moans, princess. Be my good girl and come. I'm thirsty, and only your juices will quench it."

Oh my God, that sinner's mouth is so potent.

“Just like that.”

I trip over my feet when I do, but he catches me.

“Such a good princess, coming all over my face.”

His mouth glistens with my release, and he licks away the remnants of my orgasm. I’m in a permanent state of desire with him. My head falls on his chest and we stand like this, together, as he kisses my forehead.

After we shower, I wrap a towel around myself.

He’s inside me now, like a virus taking over. I have no defense against him. This is not good.

“This changes nothing about our situation,” I blurt out.

He grabs my hands and pins me to the wall. He silences me with his mouth, conquering me.

“Keep lying with your words, princess, but this pussy doesn’t lie. I’ll make you come on my fingers next. I’ll keep making you come until you can’t do anything else but tell the truth.”

I zip my mouth shut, and he pushes himself off me. I should have lied some more and challenged him to show me just that.

He grabs a suit and dresses as I walk into the room on unsteady legs.

My phone rings and my brother’s number flashes on the screen.

Cameron sighs as he says, “I did what I thought would protect you. I will never apologize for that.”

“Great, should I thank you, then?”

“No.”

“At least help my best friend.”

“I can’t.”

“Or won’t?”

“Who is he?”

So there was a reason behind his call. I should have known. Disappointment sloshes the contents of my stomach. My brother’s on a mission.

“I won’t tell you who he is.”

“Aurora, please.”

Instead, I tell him about my dream of going to college and living a normal life and how unhappy I am about my situation.

“Everything will be all right.”

I spend the morning in the library. Tamara brings me snacks when I decline lunch. I am so engrossed in my book. I can’t help but roll my eyes at

the main character falling in love with the villain. Stupid girl, you'll get your heart broken.

I shut the book and find Kieran eyeing me with an unreadable expression.

I glance at the clock, realizing we had a date.

"I forgot."

"We'll just skip it."

"So, we'll skip tonight as well?"

"No." His voice is resolute, trickling down my spine, heating my skin.

After dinner, we go into the bedroom. Every second brings me nearer to an orgasm, tricking my body into enjoying it. He shuts the door behind him, closing us in with something else too. Something colder, darker, dangerous.

"Your brother said you are unhappy living with me."

I hate this side of him. Cold.

"It's the truth."

"Strip."

"What?"

"Strip."

My hands tremble on the buttons of my dress, but I stop.

"I can't." I love the heat in his eyes, but I can't take the coldness when he's hell-bent on proving a point.

"The deal is off."

I can't believe him, or his cruelty. I chant to myself, be strong, be brave, be happy.

I follow him to his office. He's already downing a glass of whiskey. Here goes nothing.

"I don't like when you're being like that."

His eyebrows scrunch together.

"When you're cruel and inflexible. I don't like it."

"You don't like that, huh?"

His head drops, his shoulders sag, a pensive expression taking over his features. I hate how I became almost immune to the hurt of others. Kieran looks tired, sad.

Don't do anything stupid, Aurora. He deserves nothing from you.

I drop to my knees and unbuckle him. His eyes fix on me with raw emotions, and he says, voice thick with tenderness, "You don't have to do this."

He's back, and it makes this easier for me.

I take him out. He fills my hands and I doubt my fingers could fit around his girth. I inhale his musky scent, and my pussy throbs.

His power over my body is boundless if I am getting horny by just staring at his dick. I kiss the velvety head and it twitches. Kieran lets out a growl of pleasure, spurring me on.

I grip the base and lick him from root to tip. His head falls back, and I take him in my mouth, past my gag reflex.

The glass tumbler crashes to the floor, and his hand grips my hair. Our eyes lock, battling with the unsaid, as I suck him. I feel so powerful, it runs through my veins.

“Fuck, this feels so fucking good.” He trails a finger over his length by my mouth. “Take me. All of me.”

With both hands on my face, he slips farther down my throat and lets out a string of curses. I breathe through my nose, my palms on his corded thighs.

“Look at my princess, taking all of my cock and not gagging. Fuck, I’m a lucky man.”

I am so wet, my panties are drenched. I need something, a relief before I implode.

“Rub your pussy on my leg and make yourself come.”

I do that as he slips in and out of my throat. His green-blue eyes have taken on a hazy gleam, eyeing me like I’m the most fascinating creature. Tears stream down my face and he wipes them away with his thumbs.

“You will only cry from taking my cock in your mouth. Only then, understand?”

God, I stand no chance. None.

“You didn’t answer.”

I realize what he’s trying to do, making me talk with my mouth full of his cock. I muffle a yes, and he caresses my cheek, lost in pleasure.

“Good. Such a good girl. My good girl.”

I am one good girl away from coming all over his leg.

He pulls himself out, and my throat is raw from taking him. I can’t believe I could get that all in my mouth. He glides the head of his cock over my lips. “I am gonna come. But first you’re going to come by rubbing that hungry pussy over my leg.”

I do just that, a frenzy overtaking my movements. I am so sexually stimulated, it doesn’t take long to climb toward my release.

“Eyes on me.”

I do. How I must look, swollen lips, tear-stained cheeks, rubbing my pussy over his leg because I am desperate for release. He pumps his cock up and down in a lazy move, as if to savor and prolong the moment further.

“You’re almost there. Let me hear you.”

I explode and hold on to his thighs, surprised how hard I just came.

“Open your mouth for me, princess.” His voice is low, scraping at his vocal cords with pleasure.

He bursts into my mouth, and his salty cum coats my tongue.

“Swallow it.”

I do it on pure instinct, and he wipes the corner of my mouth. His thumb slips inside me, feeding me the last drop. “Such a good girl, sucking me off like that, coming all over my leg.”

He crashes back in his chair and gestures for me to go to him. I crawl to him, and I swear his eyes blacken. I need some emotional connection after what just happened. When I climb into his lap, he fists my hair and arches my neck back.

Jealousy flashes in his eyes, something dark and primal. “That was one hell of a blow job.”

Then why is he angry?

“He taught you well.”

I blink at him, confusion turning to anger. *Oh, this asshole.* He had to ruin it. With a dejected sigh, I say, “Yes, he did.”

Let him stew in his stupid jealousy.

My books have been great teachers. Maybe one day, I will tell him, and enjoy making fun of him.

He lifts me and backs my front to his desk, slapping my thighs open.

I grip the desk and bite my tongue so as not to moan while sheer pleasure clamors inside me.

“Whatever you had with him, it will never happen again.” He buries his mouth in my pussy, his hands digging into my ass cheeks so hard I know they’ll leave imprints—that’s what he’s after.

“Say it.”

“Stupid man,” I say, and he bites into one cheek, then soothes the skin with his tongue, and moves to the other.

I look at him over my shoulder. Kieran takes his phone out and snaps a photo. He shoves it in my face and I see the indent of his teeth and the brand of his fingers. At the image, wetness trickles down my thighs.

“Whose marks are those? I would say fucking mine.” His words combined with those burning eyes make it even worse and I can’t hide my physical reaction from him.

His fingers find my pussy drenched.

“Look at my princess, all wet. You like me losing control, don’t you?”

I do, I so do. Two fingers curl inside of me while he sucks on my clit. Stars collide in front of my eyes. No, not stars. What I see is the inception of new galaxies. I am sucked into a black hole, and nothing will be able to pull me out as I let myself go.

When I come for the second time, I lie spent on his desk with my cheek on the cold surface. His finger trails down my spine. I love these ministrations, him being unable to not touch me.

“You’re jealous.”

“I fucking am.”

His hand cups the back of my neck, and he drags me to his chest. His eyes penetrate every cell of my being, and I gasp at the intensity.

“I might be soft with you, but I will never let you be someone else’s.”

“I already belong to someone else.”

The monster reappears, and I know I fucked up. I should’ve just said I belong to no one but me. He cracks his neck and tosses me over his shoulder.

“Kieran, put me down.”

He takes two stairs at a time and shuts the door to his bedroom. It’s as if my words don’t even register.

He throws me onto the bed.

“Let’s see who can fuck you better, then.”

I have to hold on to that anger inside of me. I can’t afford to get weak for him. And when he’s like this, it’s better.

“I will never enjoy it with you as much as I did with him.”

Take that back, a small voice inside of me whispers, but I have to do this to survive him. I’m terrified of what lies hidden in my heart, ready to burst free through my chest.

He rips my dress from me—it lays in shreds at my feet. He crawls on top of me, caging me in. This is not how I imagined my first time.

“We’ll see about that,” he says, gaze darkening. “This is your only chance to say no.”

I keep my lips pursed, letting the storm brewing in his eyes sweep me over, and he thrusts inside of me.

I gasp, clutching his shoulders. Did he break me? Because it sure feels like it. And that was after two orgasms.

Kieran freezes on top of me and searches my face.

“Surprise,” I say with a grimace.

“You played me?” It’s shock written all over his face before he pales, washing it away.

“You were easy to play with. Just get it over with.” Because I don’t know how long I can keep my tears at bay.

His disappointment rips my heart out. It’s even worse when it turns into a sadness big enough to swallow me. Big enough for him to look as if seeing through me. How can he be buried inside of me and but so disconnected emotionally?

He moves to pull out, but I lock my legs around him.

“Look at me,” I urge, but he squeezes his eyes shut.

“I would have made it good for you, Aurora. Now we’ll both remember it as a fucking dirty night. This is something I can’t undo. Congratulations.”

My heart crushes in my chest. I should be the one hurt, not him. “Kieran.”

When he opens his eyes, I am in so much emotional pain and physical discomfort, but it’s nothing to the cold, dead look in his eyes.

“You want the monster, right? The one you love to fucking hate? Well, he’s all yours, sweetheart.”

His hand wraps around my throat. I feel my pulse vibrating against his fingers. He pulls out, only to thrust back in again. I am so full, stretched to the maximum. I seek his eyes, but he’s lost somewhere I can’t reach while he’s inside me, tearing me apart.

My senses are thrown around in an endless spin. With every move of his hips, the discomfort gives way to something else—pleasure. He thrusts inside of me again, and a strangled breath parts my lips. I am brimming with him.

How can I feel good when I am in an emotional purgatory? I claw at his back, wanting to make him bleed, too, make him come back to me.

The bed shakes, hitting the wall with the force in which he fucks me. He bites into my cheek, licking the afflicted skin. He strums my clit while his mouth lowers to one nipple, then moving to the other, switching between sucking on them as if his only focus is to make me come.

I miss him talking to me.

I hate this fucking race that means nothing. So what if I come? It’s nothing without that connection. And when it happens, even though I put all

my might into not coming, he pulls his erection out of me.

We both stare at the blood coating his dick.

He yanks at his hair, looking at my trembling thighs. This shouldn't have happened like this.

Kieran stumbles backward in the bathroom and bends over the toilet lid, throwing up. I cup my mouth as tears blur my vision. I am dragged into a vortex of blackness.

This isn't me. What have I done?

All my life, I have been good to others, craving love, and now I am enticing him to be a monster. What did I think? That I would feel better? That he isn't a good man? I already knew that.

I might not be a whore like my father said, but there is one thing he was right about. I am like my mother, selfish, not caring what I do as long as I do it for myself. I hear the water running and cabinets opening and closing.

When he comes back, he picks me up and places me in the bathtub. I hiss, but the warm water and the oils make it better. When I look into his glassy eyes, I curl up on the inside.

"I accept it, Aurora. This unhappiness. I deserve it. I'm fucking sorry."

I freeze at his dead voice. "You can move back to your room."

My heart breaks with sorrow.

"We'll go to the wedding. In public, we'll be the loving couple. At home, we don't have to pretend any longer. There is no coming back from this, after what I just did to you."

I should feel relieved, but I am miserable. He leaves me, and I hug my knees and cry. I don't know how long I stay in the tub with my cheek on my knee, but I am exhausted. I stand up and wrap a towel around myself. Still feeling him inside me, I go back into the empty bedroom and climb into bed, curling up on my side.

I open and close my eyes, chasing a sleep that avoids me with the capacity of a deer, sensing the hunter on her tail. I feel hollow, and I dig my nails into the pillow.

Was he so blinded by jealousy, actually believing there was another man? Was I so set on hurting him that I ended up hurting us both?

By now, I believe I have exhausted my tears. His wretched words, his dejected voice, strangled my heart. It was my stupid attempt to put a barrier between us. Because I always do that when we share something deep.

Congratulations, Aurora!

I won't have freedom, nor will I have him. The sad truth is, I want both. Even though I have no idea how it would work out.

With the sun streaming through the curtains, I wake up alone. The loss permeates the air around me, clinging to my damp skin. I caress the empty spot. I am sure neither of us thought this is how this week would end.

My phone rings and I drag myself out of bed to answer it.

Chiara is talking, but the words don't register. I'm lost in the fog of my mind.

"Aurora?"

"Hmm?"

"What happened? What did he do now?"

The anger my best friend carries will be her doom too. Sister Theodora once said how the way we react in the face of things we can't change shape our destiny. I could have accepted it, and maybe somewhere along the line I would have been happy until the moment I could be the master of my fate.

"I'll call you later."

I hang up. She's being forced to marry a man she hates, and here I am wallowing in self-pity.

After I get dressed, the slight discomfort between my legs has me flinching, but it will pass. It's the scars I put on my heart that will last longer. It's so easy to blame others whenever you can.

At the breakfast table, I search for Kieran, and Tamara's eyes find mine, caution and worry etched in them.

"Kieran left earlier."

After a few spoons of oatmeal, I drop my spoon in the bowl, dragging myself to the library.

I stare at the same page for so long, the knock at the door startles me. My heart speeds up, thinking it's him, but it's Tamara.

"Someone is here for you."

I follow her in the hallway and find a tall, attractive woman I have never seen before dressed in an impeccable suit, her brown hair grazing her shoulders.

"I'm Lauren. Mr. Hunt sent me." My eyebrows knit together when she adds, "I'm your new personal assistant."

"Please, come inside."

We step inside a smaller room, and Tamara returns with two coffees. Lauren pulls a laptop out of her big purse and places it on the table. Kieran must really feel guilty. Or is it because he doesn't care anymore? Or he's confident enough that I won't try to escape? Too many thoughts swirl in my head, causing a headache.

"Mr. Hunt told me you'd like to go to college. We could start with your application," she begins.

"Aren't most of them already filled?"

"Yes, but with a hefty donation . . ."

"I don't want to take someone else's place."

She slides her black-rimmed glasses higher up her nose. "I'll make sure that doesn't happen."

"What else do you do for Kieran?"

"All his social planning."

"Are there any events coming up?"

"A few, but he said he wants you to focus on college first. There is time."

I nod, swallowing the unpleasant lump lodged in my throat.

"Can you tell me more about what my husband does exactly when he's out in public?"

"Mostly galas. He only accepts invitations for charity dinners, or when his favorite sculptor has an opening."

I didn't even know about his love of art. It's surprising how I know next to nothing about Kieran, the man. By now Lauren has to think I am brain dead.

"What is the sculptor's name?"

"Arturo de Savoja."

We talk for a while longer and at the door, she offers me her business card. "Call me if you need anything. I am at your service. I'll let you know how things go with your application."

The moment she's gone, I search the internet for Arturo de Savoja. I go to his website and the few sculptures he has displayed have me immersed in them, sharp edges, magnificent shapes of human perfection and disfigurement. Two halves carved out, reflecting the good and bad in humanity. They do something to me, like any good art does. I wonder if Kieran loves them for the same reason, for this striking view of perfection and complete destruction mingled into one human form.

The rest of the day, I write in a frenzy. When the words stop flowing, I

save my work and shut the laptop. I cannot decide if I should move out of his bedroom again. But this move in, move out bothers me. Who does he think he is? I am staying. That is my room now, too.

“Aurora, is everything all right?” Tamara asks when she puts my dinner in front of me.

“Yes.”

“You both say that, yet neither of you seem like it.”

I force my lips into a small smile. “The food was excellent as ever.”

I return to our room, and scribble down in my notebook. One hour slips into another. I am so upset and confused. A ball of mixed feelings rolls in my belly, making me feel sick. I am both relieved and on edge when the door opens, and Kieran steps inside. He stops midway but masks his surprise quickly. He tugs at his collar, moving toward the walk-in closet.

His indifference kills me slowly. I don’t like it at all. I can’t stand it. I storm after him to find him undressing, watching me from the corner of his eye.

“Is there something you need, Aurora?” He uses my given name.

I want him to go back to calling me sweetheart and princess. He flipped everything inside me on its head.

“I’m not your dog, Kieran, or a damn ball you toss from room to room.”

His eyes cut through me as he continues undressing. What did I think I would achieve? That we’d talk about what happened last night.

I storm to the balcony, and as I crane my neck to the stars above, I pray. After so many weeks, it’s the first time I’ve felt the need to do it, but I need guidance. I’m at a loss. Prayers slip through my lips, and they calm me. When I go back inside, I climb into bed next to him, but he storms out and shuts the door behind him as if he can’t bear to be near me.

It’s for the best, Aurora. I take the comforter and a pillow and make myself a makeshift bed on the balcony where dark clouds gather, hinting at the impending storm. I watch thunder striking the sky until my eyelids grow heavy, and I fall asleep with the rain biting into my skin.

My head aches, my eyes are heavy, and fatigue threatens to drag me under the moment I try to peel them open. I pull myself up, but tumble back down, depleted of any strength. Was it that cold last night? I shouldn’t have slept outside and on the marble. I try again and brace myself against the doorframe. The door opens and our eyes collide. Kieran takes me in, as well as my makeshift bed, and drags a hand down his face.

“Did you sleep outside?” Worry threads through his voice, thick with something deep. Could it be that he cares?

I try to move inside, but weakness overtakes me, and I fall to my knees. He cuts the distance between us and puts his hands under me, scooping me up. He carries me to the bed and places his hand on my head.

“You’re burning up.”

“Yep, well, I am in hell. It’s supposed to burn, don’t you think?”

His jaw tics. Did I say that out loud? Stupid mouth, stupid cold. Who gets a cold in summer? Me. With my shitty luck, I won’t even be able to go to Chiara’s wedding.

Kieran disappears behind the door. He doesn’t care. Why would he? Now that I am lucid, I think he just wanted to fuck me. Yes, that was his plan. He doesn’t care about me.

Tamara comes inside and I smile at her, but even that hurts. My sweat drenches the sheets and I shiver.

“Is he gone? Why does he always leave?”

She puts a thermometer in my mouth, and her eyes widen. She rushes out of the room.

Kieran steps inside, shouting to someone on the phone to hurry, but I must be hallucinating.

“You’re here.” My hand lifts, but I can’t hold it up and it crashes back to the bed from sheer gravity. He is a figment of my imagination, surely.

“If you wanted to fuck me, I would have done that on my own, but you did and now you’re cold, and I can’t take it when you’re cold . . .”

“Shh,” he says, kissing my temple, his lips lingering there.

“You don’t know how you make me feel. You’re taking every part of me and putting them back with your name on the pieces and I’m scared. I’m so scared.”

“Open your mouth, Aurora.” His words are laced with anguish and so much softness it warms my freezing chest.

I shake my head. “No, I’m so tired. Stop calling me that. I don’t like when you call me Aurora, it’s not personal enough.”

“Just open your mouth and then you can sleep, sweetheart.”

I swallow the medicine. I’m cold, so cold. My limbs tremble, my teeth chatter, the bed shakes from my body jerking. But it gets better when my back presses into something warm and hard.

“I am afraid of this thing between us. You’re starting to feel like home.

And it's scary and you're punishing me for not knowing better.”

His lips press against my neck. “I'm sorry for being a clusterfuck of jagged and rotten pieces and not a man deserving of you. I could never deserve you because you're perfect, sweetheart. Fucking perfect.”

20

KIERAN

Forty-eight hours later, the longest and most torturous hours of my fucking life, end when the doctor says, “Her fever is dropping.”

The relief is so potent, it knocks me off my feet and I drop down at the edge of the bed.

“Thank you.” My voice is like sandpaper. When she leaves, I take her frail hand in mine. Her angelic face scrunches up, whispering my name in her sleep.

Watching her slip in and out of consciousness, blabbing things that have gutted me, sucker punched my gut. Things like she’s afraid, she’s confused. How she wished she told me the truth, only to retract her words and accuse me of being a bastard for believing there was someone else, because if there was, she would have never married me.

I was so stupid, letting my jealousy blind me. But when one woman brings you to your knees, you’re terrified of losing her. I hate myself, mostly because neither of us will forget our first time together—and not in a good way.

And we’d been on such a good path.

The door opens and Cameron steps inside, concern pinching his brows together.

“How is she?”

“The doctor said she should feel better when she wakes up.”

“Kieran.” I tense at the way he pronounces my name, as if he knows I will not like his next words. He cups his neck. “I think I should take her to my

place. This was a mistake.”

If I had a gun on me, I would have put a bullet through his skull. This woman, my woman, will stay right where she is, where she belongs. I fucked up, but she still wants me, and I will fix this. It might be just the babbling of a sick woman, but she clung to me the whole time she was sick. That has to mean something.

We stare each other down when Aurora awakens with a moan. To see some color returning to her face, eases my worry.

I palm her cheeks, and she places her hands on mine.

“What day is it?”

“Thursday.”

Panic transforms her face.

“I can’t miss Chiara’s wedding.”

Cameron appears next to us. “I don’t think that will happen, Aurora. You have to get better first.”

When her eyes seek mine, not his, I take her hand and kiss her knuckles. She is not asking me for permission but to take her side.

“Let’s see if we can get you on your feet in two days.”

She nods and leans against the headboard. Tamara brings her a plate of food, and she nibbles on a piece of fruit. I jerk my chin to both of them to leave. Reluctantly, they do. Alone, I feel an ineptness like never before.

“I want to shower.”

I help her up. Aurora wobbles on her feet. Guilt stabs at my heart, butchering it.

“Should I ask Tamara to help you?”

“You’re here.”

So many implications in one sentence. Giving absolution to the greatest sinner.

“I hurt you, and I couldn’t—”

She leans into me, into my touch. I am holding my entire world in my arms.

“Kieran.” My name out of her mouth is a stitch for every ruptured suture inside me.

I help her into the shower, and she giggles when I step in with my sweatpants and shirt on.

“You’ll get wet.”

“No problem.”

“I think we both need a shower. Take your clothes off.”

My hands tremble when I undress her. I don't deserve to touch her. But her eyes keep me moving, looking at me with so much trust.

“I want to go outside,” she says after we finish, as I'm drying her with a towel.

She closes her eyes and rests her head on my shoulder. As if I was a source of comfort, not torment. Knowing I don't deserve her and being reminded of that fact feeds me pounds of agony. I lift her up and bring her to bed.

“Maybe after I sleep for a while,” she concedes.

I stand at the foot of the bed, not knowing what to do. She pats the spot next to her.

Emotions choke me as I climb into bed next to her and press her to my chest, stroking her stomach.

“Will you let me stay with my brother?”

No is at the tip of my tongue, but I need to show her she is free.

“If you want to.”

“I'll stay here.”

I have never felt what relief is until this instant when I receive absolution. Forgiveness, though? I don't deserve it and have done nothing to earn it. But I will. I fucking vow it. Aurora smiles brightly at me and then she closes her eyes, and light snoring follows.

I let her sleep and head downstairs to find Cameron pacing in my office.

“She has to recover first,” he says.

“If I have to drag the doctor with us, I will. But Aurora will be at that wedding.”

“Be reasonable.”

“You don't get it.”

He opens his mouth, surely to persuade me when I cut him off.

“I've made my decision.”

Cameron challenges me with a look, but I wave him off. “Anything new about this guy of hers? I need to know who the fuck he is.” I know he isn't her lover. But whoever he is must be important.

“Nothing.”

My phone rings and my assistant says, “Mr. Hayden Carrera is here.”

“Postpone it.”

I hang up, and she calls again, my nerves straining with the second

intrusion.

“What?”

Her voice wavers when she says, “He’s insisting he needs to talk to you.”

“Fine, pass him the phone.”

“I have a tight schedule,” Hayden says, annoyance threading through his voice.

I force my voice not to snap. “I’ve got family issues.”

“I hope it’s not bad.”

“It’s my wife.”

“Is she all right?” His tone rings of obvious care, but I take it as small talk.

“We’ll have to postpone.”

“Or I could come to you,” he offers.

“I don’t do business in my house.”

“Of course. I’ll be in town a few days longer.”

Hayden must be desperate to keep his money safe. They all are. Still, my gut tells me there’s more. There’s always more.

“Meet me at eight at the address my assistant gives you.”

I hang up and Cameron says, “I don’t like this.”

“Me neither, but our team couldn’t find anything. Maybe I can dig something up.”

“No one is that clean.”

I nod in agreement. When he leaves, I’m already on the stairs when Tamara gives me a cautious look.

“I’m not in the mood for a sermon.”

“Just, this could be a cornerstone.”

I know, and I will not fuck this up. Because I want Aurora so badly, my insides ripple with all my suppressed feelings. Fuck, I care about her so much. I am not ready to pinpoint exactly what this onslaught of feelings means.

I tiptoe inside the bedroom. She peels her eyes open and her lips curl up. Her timid smile undoes me, revealing all my layers as if I am a Matryoshka doll.

“Can we go outside now?”

There is nothing I wouldn’t do to see her happy.

She dresses on her own. I don’t take my eyes off her, relieved to see her strength returning.

Hand in hand, we go downstairs. When she sees Tamara, she hugs her.
“Thank you.”

“Your well-being is all that matters,” she says, but the emotions are clear in her watery eyes.

We stroll around the garden and even a bit in the forest.

We find a bench and take a seat. Aurora tilts her face up to the sky.

“Thank you for taking care of me.”

“I’m sorry. So damn sorry.”

My head drops, and she leans her cheek on my shoulders. When did we go from the mess we were to a mess that needs each other? But I don’t care. She’s in my arms, safe and well. And all mine.

“So, college?” she says and lifts my chin.

“I told you I would give you anything you want.”

“What about you?”

“Do you even still want me, after everything that’s happened?” Never in my life have I experienced such insecurity; now it’s embedded in me like a second skin.

“Is it stupid if I say yes?”

I gather her in my arms, the meaning of my life, and hold her with all that I am. All my insecurities, all my wrongdoings, all of my hopes, and all of my love. *I love her*. It’s clear, like my blood pumping through my veins keeping me alive.

“I want you so much in my life. The thought of you not in it had me going crazy.” A beat of silence follows. “What’s your idea of freedom, Aurora?”

Her eyebrows draw together, and she fidgets with a button on my shirt.

“To be able do what I want, when I want.”

“I can’t undo anything I did, but I will be damned if I don’t try to fix it.”

I take out my phone and show her the chip tracking app. It’s secured by a retina scan, fingerprint reader, and a twelve-digit code.

“What is that?”

“Cato, Cameron, and I all have it. No one else knows except us. In case something happens, we can track each other.”

“Really?”

“We protect what is important to us.”

“I thought . . .”

“I’d find you regardless, but I don’t want that. I want you to stay because you want to.”

“And I will have access to it as well?”

She’s way too eager to get her hands on it. If this is how I can show her she can trust me, then I’ll do it.

“Yes, the moment Daniel returns, he can install it. But I will be notified when you access it.”

Her cheeks take a reddish hue and she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I knew there was a catch.”

I chuckle. “I told you I would be honest, but I never told you about my motives. I hate that you think you’re a prisoner because you’re not.”

“I can work with that.”

It strikes me how good of a person she is, way too good for me, but I don’t care. She’s mine, my own life’s present, and I am never letting her go.

“If you want, of course, and can forgive me, we could try . . . to move on.”

If Cato or any of my men could hear me know, they would double over with laughter, but I would punch the hell out of them. Aurora is precious. She’s worth every bit of the effort I will have to put in to make this thing work between us.

“I should have told you I hadn’t been with anyone, but I was so mad at you.”

“I know, and it’s me who should apologize, not you.”

She places a small kiss on my lips, and I let her set the pace. The kiss is sweet, just like her.

“So, freedom?” she beams.

“Yes, but you will have to check everything with a security team.”

“I thought . . .”

“If they’re stupid enough to come after you, we will be ready, but I can’t risk it. This will be your life. Our life.”

I wrap my arms around her. Can it really be this easy? Communicating, putting yourself out there, compromising? I should have done that from the start. I would have avoided the distrust, the hate, the anger, the breakdowns, that damn night and her getting sick. But would we have been here?

As we walk back to the house, I say, “I have a business meeting.”

She pouts, and it’s enough to make me abandon everything. “If you want me to stay, I’ll postpone it.” I’ve become my biggest nightmare, but fuck, if it gets me her, I’ll adapt to being this sap, doing everything for his woman. Whoever said happy wife, happy life, I’ll drink to that. Wiser words have

never been said.

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll come home right after.”

“You better.” She giggles, and I kiss the top of her nose.

Inside our bedroom, she curls up on the bed with a book. I bend down to kiss her and walk backward, taking her in. I already miss her when I drive to the compound. My phone rings and Sawyer says, “Couldn’t find anything on our men.”

“Then who got us, a fucking ghost?”

“I’ll move to check the files next.”

“Go home. You can do that from there.”

Cameron is already at the compound when I get to my seat at the table.

I glance at my watch, appreciating that Hayden’s a punctual man.

He steps inside, shaking my hand in a firm grip. I gesture to a chair and he unbuttons his jacket. “I hope your wife is all right?”

Cameron snaps his head from Hayden to me with an inquisitive look. “She’s doing better.” I gnash my teeth and ask, “Something to drink?”

“A glass of scotch.”

After pouring the drinks, I place mine on the desk and say, “What can I do for you?”

“The money I make on the markets is a lot more than I earn with real estate.”

Isn’t it always the same?

“How much are we talking?” Cameron baits him and his upper lip twitches in a smile.

“The exact amount you have on your report about me,” he says in a nonsense voice. He’s a bit too arrogant. It would be easy if he were stupidly arrogant. Because a cunning man is a dangerous one.

“We have to do our homework.”

“I did mine as well, on the banker, the mafia heir, and the star politician. Everyone knows about the three of you. Behind those masks hide the leaders of the most feared syndicate in the country.” There is not an ounce of fear in his voice though.

I take his file from my desktop. “Fifty million a month.”

“I am looking for a better interest rate as well.”

“That is a lot of money to move around.”

He nods, and after we settle the last details, I open a bank account for

him.

“I heard your parties are legendary. Nights of sex and games and whatever tickles your fancy.”

He knows way too much for someone who was never invited. I stare at him and he raises his hands. “Word gets around.”

No, it doesn't, but what better way to keep him under my thumb than having him as a client?

“Then tonight, you won't be disappointed. But if you heard correctly, you know your phone stays off-limits.”

I press a button under the table and Max, one of the security guards, comes inside. Hayden hands it over and Max knows what he has to do. “We'll keep it in a box for you, sir.”

I say my goodbyes and Hayden says, “Aren't you staying tonight?”

“No.”

There is a glint of something in his eyes as he says, “She must be a lucky woman.” But the subtle derision seeping from his tone has me balling my hands into fists in my pockets.

“Enjoy yourself.”

Cameron follows me to my car and says, “I don't like him.”

“Me neither. Keep an eye on him,” I say and speed away, those eyes of his haunting me, a very familiar mix of blues and hazel that sends shivers down my spine.



21 AURORA

In bed, face-to-face, Kieran nuzzles my cheek. I close my eyes, savoring the moment. So much relief and happiness cocoon me, I feel lightweight. Our talk from yesterday felt good, liberating. It also meant giving up on the one thing I wanted most—freedom. But apparently I don't need to. And as mad as he makes me at times, I want to try to compromise and give us a chance.

I open my eyes again and he's staring at me. My heart flutters as if it's a caterpillar turned into a winged butterfly. I don't think I can get over him looking at me like I'm the most precious thing in his life.

"How are you?"

"Better."

Relief dances in his eyes and I say, "We're still going to the wedding, right?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

Yesterday, I initiated our kiss. Now as he leans into me, I close my eyes and feel him penetrating every cell of my being, pushing away the heartache, the anger, and pain, filling it with himself. Be brave, be strong, be happy.

I think I just might be, Mom.

He ends the kiss, and comes back, pressing his pillowy lips another second longer.

I open my eyes and frown at him. "I want more."

"Such a demanding princess."

God. He's conditioned me to think filthy thoughts, to ache between my legs when he calls me that in that husky voice of his.

I pout, and he rolls me onto my back. My belly flips. I thread my fingers through his thick, dark hair, and confess, "I like this."

"Let's keep you liking this."

His sensual mouth trails down my neck and between my breasts, leaving a trail of desire, leaving me wanton. I give in to the pleasure until he stops and lifts his head.

"You're still recovering."

I blink at him, but he shoves himself off me. I tilt my head in confusion.

"You have to save your energy. We're driving tonight."

He storms into the bathroom. I watch as he gets into the shower, the water running down his sculpted body as he braces himself against the wall.

What just happened?

When he returns, towel wrapped around his muscular torso, he says with forced ease, "What do you want to do today?"

I roll my eyes at him. What we started, that's what I wanted to do.

"Come on, breakfast must be ready," he says, extending his hand.

After we finish eating, Tamara packs our bags for the wedding. For the rest of the morning, I play dress-up while Kieran watches indulgently.

Having all his attention is a heady feeling. He even comes with me to the greenhouse to help me pull weeds.

"Being here brings back memories of happier times."

"I'm sorry, Kieran."

"Their death and Silas's involvement in it shaped me into the man I am."

"I am glad you don't hate me for what my father did."

"You could have died. It's a damn miracle you didn't. If anything happened to you..."

When he's like this, I stand no chance. I know eventually I will have to accept the other side of him, and maybe love that as well. Perhaps one day, the darkness will dim.

Kieran digs small holes, and I put the seeds inside. It's peaceful. I want more of this, and it's how I know deep down I've already made my decision.

"How was your meeting yesterday?" I ask.

He looks off into the distance, a line burrowing between his brows. "There's something off about this Carrera guy and I can't put my finger on it."

"Then why did you accept the meeting?"

"To study him."

Daniel approaches us. Kieran orders him to install the tracking app on my phone. His reaction is hilarious, the way this bulk of a man blinks from Kieran to me, scratching his head. When he returns with my phone, I clutch it, eager to test it.

Checking the tracker has become my new favorite thing to do over the day, until Kieran says, “Sweetheart, I’m going to delete that app. My phone won’t stop pinging.”

I give in, grinning.

“Is it too much to hope that you are happy?” he asks, tenderness coloring his tone.

I bite my lower lip, and give a small nod. This sudden burst of feelings scares me. I would have never expected how we started to lead to so much more, especially after what happened. But this time, it feels different.

I feel different and the desire to stay overweighs the need to be free.

I didn’t choose any of this, but I guess I was chosen for this life, and I won’t fight against it.

My husband smiles at me as if I’m the sun after a hundred years of darkness. Not only do his words undo me, but also his smiles.

He kisses me on my forehead. A knock later, Daniel and Tamara come into the bedroom. He grabs the bags and Tamara follows him out. I get up and stand on my tiptoes, wrapping my arms around his neck, inhaling. I am addicted to his scent—male, heady, him. *Home*. He digs his fingers into my waist, his need mixed with mine, filling up the cracks in the space between our bodies.

“I want more,” I whisper.

He groans and parts from me. There is a hint of panic in his eyes I can’t pinpoint and worry rises within me.

“What’s wrong?”

He shakes his head and takes my hand in his and says, “We should get going.”

In the car, he scrolls through his phone as I message Chiara.

On my way.

Even though my nose is still running, I feel better. In the back seat, I lean my head on Kieran’s shoulder.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

I love when he calls me that. I especially love the emotions breaking on his lips when he calls me that. With a smile on my lips, I say, “Perfect.”

He traces a line on my cheek and kisses me. The car stops and my brother gets in, reclining in one of the leather seats facing us.

“Are you better?” His words are laced with worry, and I offer a small nod. “I told him he shouldn’t let you go, but does he ever listen?”

I am glad Kieran didn’t listen. It’s just a cold, not a life-threatening disease.

“I hope you get it next,” Kieran grumbles. “It’ll keep you from getting on my nerves for a few days.”

“You wish,” my brother bickers back.

I cuddle to Kieran’s side, our hands interlaced, and out of the corner of my eye, I catch how my brother studies us.

Cato gets in and plops down next to my brother, a nervous energy rippling through him.

“Ready?”

“I was born ready.”

I drag in a lungful of air and try to stay calm. But how can I when he’s treating this like it’s a joke? There is nothing funny about this.

“Feeling better?” His question takes me aback.

“Why do you care?”

“Lamb, my ass,” he mumbles, and Kieran muffles a smile.

“Can’t you just stop this marriage?” I ask Cato.

Kieran squeezes my hand, a sign not to go there, but I won’t stop trying.

“No.”

I was ready for a heated debate, even had some valid arguments at the tip of my tongue.

“No, just no?”

“Sweetheart.”

This time Kieran pins me with a look and I pull my hand out of his, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Chiara will never love you.”

“I don’t want love from her,” Cato says, tapping a finger on the door handle, looking out the window, seemingly unperturbed.

I said that to anger him, but the calm way he responds makes me wonder.

“So, why marry?”

“You should know people marry for various reasons.”

Kieran snaps his head at him, and Cato lifts his hands in the air.

“Don’t kill the fire in her.”

A look I can't read passes through his eyes, but I blink and it's gone.

When we reach Boston, I say to Kieran, "I'd like to stay with Chiara tonight."

"Daniel will drive you there." He sounds almost relieved. Did he hit his head or something? I didn't even want to test him on my freedom, it was more I anticipated a bit of hassle before he let me sleep somewhere else. This man gives me whiplash.

He kisses me and has a talk with Daniel. I get in the black, bulky SUV, another security car trailing after us. This is my life now.

I am so wrapped up in my head, I don't even notice Daniel parking the car in front of a white town house.

He opens the door for me. I climb out and rush straight into my best friend's arms.

"I don't think I could have done this without you," she says.

I greet her parents and her sister before we fly up the stairs and it's only then she rolls her eyes.

Chiara plops on the floor in a cross-legged position. "He has to protect the product until it changes owners."

"I'm sorry I was so off these past few days."

"You had the flu and you live with a monster."

"Kieran's not a monster."

Her eyes widen, her mouth parts in a surprised O before she shrugs.

"I expected it. On some level, I am relieved." Her mouth parts into a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. My stomach churns because I feel like I am betraying my friend by choosing to be happy.

"Things changed."

"So, what about escaping?"

"I won't do that anymore."

"But will you do that for me? Because I can't live like this. I won't."

Chiara puts her face in her palms and cries. I hug her, stroking her arm.

She wipes the tears away and pushes her shoulders back.

"So, how long are you staying?"

"The entire night."

"Oh, they must be planning to enjoy their night. I wish I could."

A plan forms in my head at the misery etched on her face. It's crazy, but I would do anything for her.

"We're going out too," I say and take her hand.

“Are you crazy?” But I can tell she loves the idea, my rebellious friend, her entire body lighting up at the prospect.

“Maybe, but your father won’t do anything, and Kieran knows what’s best for him, so that’s one less worry.”

“Would we even know where to go?”

We burst into laughter. We are really that pathetic.

She takes her phone out and scrolls through some options. “Here, we’re going to Poison. Apparently, it’s the best club in town.”

Hours pass as we talk, feeling like we’re in a secluded space where only we exist. We decide to wait until her parents go to sleep for our grand exit.

As we finalize our plan, a knock sounds at the door. Her parents enter, and her father eyes her intently. “Don’t do anything stupid.” To me, he says, “Would you like something to eat?”

Did that really just happen? He went from threatening his daughter to smiling at me.

“No, thank you.”

“Good night. Tomorrow is a big day.”

With his parting words, Chiara’s shoulders sag.

“Tonight, I’ll do what I want.”

“We’re not going out to cause problems,” I remind her, and she scowls at me.

“It’s just . . .”

If anyone understands her, it’s me. We tiptoe around the room to the closet and she throws a black cocktail dress at me. We change quickly and put on makeup.

This was the worst idea I’ve ever had. I know it the moment we tiptoe downstairs, dodging the house staff. My heart beats like crazy, even though no one would do anything to me. When we’re out the door, we rush toward the bushes, sighing in relief when we find a security guard engrossed on his phone.

At the corner, we grab an Uber, still high on adrenaline. I might either faint or burst, but seeing her smiling so widely, like she has no care in the world, is worth it.



I sip from my drink, watching Cameron, who has his arms stretched over the couch. Two women are clamoring for his attention. Knowing him, he won't do anything as long as he's in public. My phone vibrates in my pants pocket, and I pick it up to see Daniel is calling.

"They just left the house and took an Uber."

Half of me wants to smile, the other part wants to wring her neck.

"Follow them."

"Based on what they had on, they're headed to a club."

"What did she have on?"

He sends me a photo, and my cock hardens when I see her in a black dress, barely covering her ass.

"Boss, they're headed your way."

"Stay in position."

My princess wants to play. Well, let's play. I call security and tell him to let the girls in. Even with makeup on, Aurora doesn't look twenty-one.

"What's the matter?" Cato says, a glass in his hand, a small entourage at our table.

My eyes are fixed on the area downstairs. When I spot Aurora, my chest warms instantly. I point at them.

"What the fuck? Man, you have absolutely no control over your wife."

"Good luck taming your bride."

"What are we going to do?"

"Let them have fun."

“This is fucked up. Fuck.” He might come across as an unfeeling bastard. He intimidates people by just looking at them, but beneath that is someone in need of a reason not to give in to the darkness. He rakes a hand through his hair. “Any advice?”

“Get Chiara to trust you. Make her want to stay.”

“How the fuck did you do that?” he asks as if I accomplished the impossible.

“Put some work in. I had to figure this shit out on my own as well.”

“What are best friends for, huh?”

We chuckle, and for the sake of playing, I type a message.

What’s my princess doing?

A smile tugs at my lips as she takes her phone out and her eyes widen. She bites down on her lower lip. I am so curious about what she’ll do. The waiting kills me.

Enjoying our bachelorette night. Where are you?

I am full-on grinning now. She’s smart, beautiful, and kind. I got so damn lucky.

The bartender puts a tray of shots in front of them, eyes drooping as he takes them in.

“Should we let this continue? I don’t want her to throw up tomorrow.”

“Ever the selfless one.”

Stop drinking.

Her eyes shoot in all directions. She raises the glass and downs one.

“That fucker wants to die.” When I look at what has Cato all wired up, I see the bartender leaning over the bar, whispering something to Chiara. She doesn’t seem to mind with the grin splitting her face.

That is the final straw as Cato storms away. I follow close behind.

When we reach the bar, the tequila tray is empty.

I shake my head at Aurora, but she stumbles as she flies into my arms. “Husband.”

It’s the first time she’s called me that, and it does things to me I can’t even describe.

“Wife.”

She grins, and nothing else matters, just her in my arms. The peace of the moment is interrupted when Cato grips Chiara’s elbow and drags her away over his shoulder.

“What is he doing? Kieran, stop him, or I will.”

“She’s safe with him.”

“I have to see if she’s fine.”

Aurora grabs my hand, and we follow Cato and Chiara down a long hallway toward the basement.

I bring us to a stop in a secluded corner. I cup her face and do what my lips have been famished to do—kiss her. “She will be his wife. Nothing will happen to her.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Daniel.”

“Of course. Ugh, the traitor.” She scrunches up her nose in a sweet attempt to be angry.

“He’s there for your safety.”

She softens under my touch. “What were you doing?”

“I was with the guys having some drinks.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

I love her jealous streak.

“I’m married to an incredible woman. I don’t want anyone else.”

Locking her arms around my neck, she bats her eyelashes at me in a flirtatious way, playing with the ends of my hair. “She must really be something to keep up with you.”

“Oh, she is.”

With my hands squeezing her ass, I lift her. She wraps her legs around me and I pin her to the wall. I want to fuck her so badly, but then I remember how I took her for her first time and I retreat. She huffs in annoyance.

“What is wrong, Kieran? Why are you stopping?”

I clench my teeth so hard they might break my jaw.

“Don’t you want me anymore?”

At the pain passing her features, I press my forehead to hers. If she only knew how fucking much I want her.

“Sweetheart, there is nothing in this world I crave more.”

“Then why?” she asks, as I set her back on her feet.

Cato and Chiara appear from around the corner, both disheveled, lips swollen.

She takes Aurora’s hand, and they disappear into the crowd.

“Fuck, Chiara drives me crazy. She loves to fucking provoke me. Get me shit-faced because this woman will drive me into an early grave.”

Two hours later, I tell Daniel he should take the girls home. They had their fun, danced, even had more drinks.

“Thank you for tonight,” Aurora says, her eyes sparkling as we leave the club.

“You’re my world.”

She presses herself into me, and I say, “Text me when you’re there.”

“I’m scared.”

I tip her chin up. “Why?”

“What if he catches us?”

My brows knit together. “Who?” Who will die a slowly, painful death?

My wife should never be scared, especially since she lives with a man that puts fear in others.

“Her father.”

“How did you get out then?”

“Through the door.”

Her innocence is an elixir cleansing a bit of my darkness. I watch Chiara, who seems paralyzed by the prospect of going home.

I shoot Cato a text. A minute later, he’s here, and when he sees Chiara trembling, he lifts her chin and asks, “What’s wrong?”

Her panic burns in her eyes, but she bites the inside of her cheek.

She’s stubborn, but she’s not my problem.

“You’re coming with me,” I say to Aurora, and she uses all her strength to drag me back.

“No, she needs me.”

My wife has a level of goodness even saints strive to reach.

All four of us get in the car and when we reach Chiara’s place, she whispers, “He’s going to kill me.”

“I’d kill him before he got that far,” Cato says and gets out of the car first. We stare at the mansion, devising the best route to get the girls in the house.

“She’s going to be my wife tomorrow. He can’t do shit to her.”

Cato’s lips draw in a line when we find the security guard sleeping. “Useless fucker.”

The girls get out and he opens the wrought-iron gates. “They don’t even lock it?”

His anger worsens with every second, and as we walk toward the house, I ask, “Where is your room?”

Chiara points at the second story, the last room on the right. A ladder with

flowers rests outside the window. After we exchange a look, he says to her, “Get up.”

“I’ll fall.”

“No, you won’t. I’ve got you.”

After seconds of them engaged in a staring contest, Chiara offers a small nod. When she’s up, she yanks the window open and slips inside. I kiss Aurora one more time and help her up the ladder, pushing her up with my hands on her ass, and she giggles.

“Enjoying the view?”

And how I enjoy the view of her legs and her black panties. Tomorrow night. No more bullshit guilt. She’s mine.

When we get back in the car, we burst into laughter, shaking our heads. We’ve never had to sneak out, not even when we were younger.

We drive straight to Cato’s penthouse and after he pours some whiskey, he says, “You’re softer around Aurora.”

“She’s my wife. I don’t want her to be afraid of me.”

“So, you think she won’t try to escape again?”

“No.”

“I hope you’re right, man. At least one of us won’t have to sleep with one eye open.”

“Not anymore.”

The corners of his lips arch up in a knowing smile, and he says, “Chiara might hate me, but her anger will just make her burn hotter for me.”

“Who’s the confident idiot now?”

“Have you found out anything about the guy Aurora has been talking to?”

“I’m waiting for her to tell me.”

He arches a brow at me, but I wave him off and finish my drink. I’ve taken enough from her. Now, I’ll only take what she offers me.

“If he thinks he can take her from you, he’s dangerous.”

“Or plain stupid. Either way, let him come. Better yet, he’ll come and find she wants to stay with me.”

“You’re one tactical bastard.”

Steepling my fingers over my mouth, I say, “It’s how we not only stay in the game but rule it.”



My heart returns to its normal rhythm once we're inside her bedroom. Chiara covers her mouth, but giggles burst out of both of us.

"That was exhilarating. I thought my heart might explode. I really wanted to see the face he'd make if he caught us."

"Stop provoking your father," I hiss, exasperated at her.

She raises her hands in a huff. "He's not my father. What father would treat his daughter like that?"

A shudder rocks me, reminding me of my own father's actions.

"It could have been worse," I whisper.

"Just because you are okay with this doesn't mean I will ever be."

"What happened in the club? Where did you disappear?"

She blushes. "The idiot thinks I am hot for him."

I sigh. She'd rather be miserable than accept her life.

I squeeze her hand gently and we undress quickly, removing our makeup. I debate if I should tell her, but she's my best friend.

When we're both in bed, I say, "I need to tell you something." My lower lip trembles, remembering that night. "My first time was awful."

"Yes, it's supposed to be."

"I wasn't talking about the pain."

"Oh." Her mouth parts and I continue,

"Kieran thought I had been with someone else."

Chiara rolls her eyes. "How can men be so stupid?"

"He made me so mad that I said I had."

It's almost comical the way her eyes round into two incredulous orbits.
“Why would you do that?”

I pick some invisible lint from the duvet. “I wanted to hate him, so I didn't think . . .”

“Then how can you stand him now?” she whispers, confused.

With my heart full of wondrous things just thinking of him, I say, “I never believed we would get past that, but we did.”

“I wouldn't have.”

“What I want to say is, don't repeat my mistake. Cato will be your first.” I place my hand on hers.

“Never.”

“Stop lying to yourself.”

“You mean I should just give in and enjoy it?”

“Yes.”

Chiara crosses her arms over her chest, brows pinched together. “If he touches me, he better be prepared to live without his dick.”

“You can lie to yourself, but a part of you . . .”

“I'm tired,” she says and turns onto her side, her back to me. “I just want to be free, Aurora. I thought you wanted the same.”

A pang of guilt hits me, but I am happy with Kieran, happy with how things have turned out between us. I want him in my life, desperately.

“I will always be there for you,” I promise her.

“So, you'll help me?”

“Yes.”

I know this will cause problems, but Kieran trusts me. He should understand it was not about betraying him, but about helping my friend.

“Thank you, bestie. I don't know what I would do without you.”

Her breaths deepen. I lean against the bed frame and type: **I'm in bed.**

My phone pings.

Good night, sweetheart.

I fall asleep with a smile.

The next morning, it's a rush of getting ready. When the beauty team is done with Chiara's makeup and hair, she looks incredible in her white mermaid-style dress.

“You look beautiful.” We both have tears in our eyes.

“I have never felt worse. At least I get a proper wedding.”

The chat ends when her parents come into the bedroom and nod in

approval.

On the drive to the church, I bite my tongue so hard, I taste blood.

“Don’t cause Cato problems. How he deals with you is no longer my concern.”

I have never witnessed my friend so despondent as if the fight has left her. But knowing her, it’s just a reprieve.

I arrange her veil and her sister picks up the train. With her arm looped around her father’s we step inside the church, flowers and candles on each side of the pews, hundreds of people watching her entry. A dramatic but melodious song reverberates through the old walls. My eyes stay on Kieran and when we reach the altar, I stand next to Chiara.

Kieran winks at me, and for one moment, I forget why we’re here. But the priest begins the ceremony and when he pronounces them husband and wife, applause erupts. Everyone zones in on the couple.

Cato pushes the veil back, whispering something to Chiara. He leans into her, his lips lingering on hers a few more seconds, her fingers trembling around the bouquet. I look elsewhere. It feels like I’m intruding.

As we leave the church, Kieran says, “I won’t let you sleep without me from now on. It was torture.”

His emotions shine so bright in his eyes that they warm my insides like hot cocoa. I wrap my hands around him.

“It still feels like I am in a dream.”

“It is very real, sweetheart.”

He places his palm on my cheek and his brow furrows. “You deserved a big wedding. I’m sorry.”

I lean into his touch, placing my hand on his. “It’s just a day, and I had mine, including the dress.”

“The dress in which all I could think was I wanted to fuck it off of you.”

I slap his chest and he says, “I won’t forget how you looked wearing it. You looked ethereal, out-of-this-world beautiful. An angelic face, a body to kill; a lethal combination in a dress that was made to send me to my knees.”

“You’re totally exaggerating.”

“Am I?”

We reach the reception. It’s held at a lavish and elegant ballroom filled with women and men in impeccable attire. Trays with appetizers and champagne are passed around by waiters. A band plays in the corner. We spend the next few hours mingling and dancing. Kieran and I keep feeding

each other while others stare at us.

I don't care. I am happy, until I see my best friend wearing a fake, strained smile on her face. My gaze drops to my fingers, and Kieran whispers in my ear.

"This is about them and it has nothing to do with you."

"It's just...She's my best friend, Kieran. I want her to be happy."

"He's my best friend, Aurora. I don't want him to be miserable, either."

Touché. When the party dies down, I rush over to Chiara and we hug for a long moment.

"Please, remember what I said," I whisper.

"It doesn't matter."

The icy look she sends Cato could freeze him over. He grits his teeth, mumbling something. We say our goodbyes and outside, Daniel opens the door for us. In the back seat, I straddle Kieran and cover his face with small kisses.

When Daniel parks in front of a hotel, I look at Kieran.

"I thought we'd go straight home."

"We'll stay for tonight. I have a surprise for you."

"Surprise?" Excitement bubbles up in my belly.

"My lips are sealed."

It's a blur from the check-in to the penthouse suite. Inside the massive space, I place my hand on the floor-to-ceiling window where the city's lights flicker in the night.

But my contemplation ends the moment his finger glides down my neck, down to my exposed back, his touch igniting an avalanche of goose bumps. He turns me to him. Every millisecond throbs with want. He devours my mouth, pouring into me all his need, desire, his hands conquering every inch of me, firing up my senses. I am addicted to this feeling of being tethered to him, but also levitating.

I place my hands on his chest. "Don't stop. I don't want you to stop again."

"Never again."

Relief washes over me. His hunger inflates my desire, and he grabs my ass, lifting me up. He hurries up the stairs to the king-sized bed and places me on it, ripping the dress off me.

"Do you have any idea how much that cost?" I gasp, looking at the tattered material.

“I don’t fucking care. You naked under me is priceless.”

I shoot to my knees and help him undress—wild with desire, blinded by want.

His mouth crashes on my lips, his tongue plunging inside, kissing me with a fervor that fires up my insides. His lips move to my breasts, lavishing my nipples with attention, sucking on them. It’s all-consuming. It’s maddening. It’s never enough. When he gets between my legs, I buck under him, wet and so damn ready.

“I need you inside of me, Kieran.”

“Come on my tongue, first.”

Frustration turns to pleasure, and pleasure turns to an orgasm rocking through me. I don’t have time to come down from my high because he slips back inside of me, inch by inch, and I gasp at the fullness, stretched beyond my capacity. I moan, so full with him, my breathing hitches as my nails dig into his shoulders. He stills inside of me until I adjust.

“Okay?” His eyes carry a tenderness that blankets my heart.

“Okay.”

His lips find mine again, and with our mouths fused together, he pulls in and out of me in a soft rhythm that has my pleasure level skyrocketing.

“Fuck, you feel so good on my cock, princess.”

He thrusts his hips into me, rocking my heart and body, making love to me. His eyes follow our joined cores, hunger and desire mixing the greens and blues of his irises. I wrap my arms around his neck and he pushes in and out of me, gently, delicately, almost lazily as if savoring every second. Our eyes lock, so many unspoken feelings shooting arrows from his heart to mine.

“God, Kieran.”

“Such a good girl, craving to be tainted by a sinner while she calls on God.”

I arch my back, needing him rougher, needing him unleashed. If I could, I’d hold on to him just like that, all of him in all of me.

“More. Let go.”

My words unleash his dark side. His hand wraps around my throat to anchor me. It’s irrelevant. I’m his, and there is no way to escape. I am high on the knowledge, at peace in the chaos of us.

He hits a spot inside me that makes my breath trip, chasing the high.

“I need . . . I am so close.”

“I know what my princess needs—to come all over my cock.”

The pressure on my neck increases while his relentless thrusts propel me into that blissful place where nothing else matters.

I come with a cry of his name, scratching my nails against his back. His thrusts turn savage, rocking the bed. He grips the headboard, stealing the breath from my lungs as he buries himself as deep as possible.

“Nothing compares to being inside your pussy.”

His head falls back, his body straining with the pleasure coursing through him. It’s an incomparable surge of power, knowing I am the one bringing him this pleasure. I constrict my pussy walls, and he lets out a string of “Fucks,” eyes wild.

“Tell me not to come inside your unprotected pussy.”

I want his cum. I earned it. But it’s still endearing. He’s thinking about protecting me. It’s too soon for babies. I never thought I’d be happy that my father forced the shot on me.

“Inside me.”

I lock my legs around him, pushing him even deeper inside of me. With a long moan, I say, “I had the contraceptive shot.”

His eyes turn murderous, knowing I had no choice about it, but I say through kisses, “Don’t think of that.”

“No other man will see you like this, feel you like this. Come inside you. Never. Just me.”

I feel him getting bigger inside of me. He erupts with a groan. I shudder at the warmth coating my walls. He thrusts lazily a few times to make sure my pussy takes all of his cum.

Satisfied and spent with my heart beating wildly, he falls next to me.

He props up on his elbow, his eyes full of an emotion I’m afraid I’m imagining.

Can it be? No, that’s too soon. Am I? I’m not answering that, afraid of the answer, afraid of the complications. What if it ends? What if he tires of me? What if—

He pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“What’s going through your head?”

I thought the words would come out. I thought I’d tell him about my fears, but something entirely different comes out. “Why did you stop the last few times?”

His eyes never leave mine as he says, “Our first time kept playing in my head.”

He rolls onto his back, his hands crossed under his neck, staring at the ceiling. Did I ever think he was a monster? Because he might believe he is, but now, I'm sure he's not.

I caress his jaw and say, "It was bad."

Kieran groans, "I was there too."

I tilt his head to face me. "But we have to get past that. It happened and we can't change it."

"I should have known better."

"I should have told you."

"The idea of someone else taking you from me . . ." His entire body tenses.

"No one could take me from you if I didn't want to go."

"Do you want to?"

"No."

"Then who is he?" I can't tell him that. I made a promise and I am intent on keeping it.

"Why are you protecting him? What if he wants to harm you, Aurora? I need to assess if someone is a danger to you." His frustration with my silence will change this night from a happy one to a thoughtful one. "I want to believe you, but if you would trust me, if you would trust yourself to really want to stay with me, you would tell me."

"Don't."

"What? Tell the truth?"

"Emotional blackmail, really?"

He cups my face and says, "I need to protect you."

I place my hands over his. "I don't need protection from him. And I want to spend time with him, get to know him, and when I decide that, you will not keep it from happening."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because I'll come back home to you."

"Why are you protecting him, then? From me?"

From my father, and to a certain extent, from Kieran. I don't want to put a man who would do anything to protect me in danger. Hayden is the only family member I've ever met from my mom's side. If she trusted him, I trust he won't hurt me.

"I trust only once, Aurora."

"It's enough."

I hope it is. He presses me to him and kisses my forehead. “There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Is he a threat to what we have?”

“No, never. I am yours, just yours, only ever yours,” I say breathlessly.

“I would kill him. No remorse. No guilt. If he betrays your trust and ever puts you in danger, I will, regardless of your pleas. He would have come for you already if he were man enough because God knows I would have.”

“Because you’re being irrational when it comes to me.”

His lips arch up into a thoughtful smile, and I kiss him. “I like that. I like that a lot.”

“Turning my princess into a little devil?”

“I need to if I’m going to stay on the throne next to my husband.”

I wish I could preserve this moment, unaffected by the dust time puts on memories. His eyes shine with so much more than adoration, his mouth glued to mine. But I can’t.

Instead, I will enjoy it for what it is, a beautiful moment that will pass, but we’ll have millions more.

The next morning I wake up, a smile stretching my lips as I feel his hands gliding down my belly, parting my legs. Mischievous flickers in his eyes.

His fingers play with my pussy, and I arch my back, the sensation crashing down on me, awakening me at full speed. The sounds of my wetness echo in the room, telling of my want. I look down to see his glistening fingers moving in and out of my pussy. What a sight: my gloriously naked husband fully engrossed in making my pussy his plaything.

His thumb presses on my clit, two fingers slipping in and out of me as he takes a nipple in his mouth.

“So, about my surprise?” I ask, even though it’s getting harder to concentrate with him playing my body with the laziness and dexterity of a maestro.

He releases my nipple with a pop. “After breakfast.”

Kieran slides down my body and spreads my thighs open. So, I guess I’m the breakfast buffet.

Three orgasms later, he hops from the bed while I gaze at his sculpted back, and that fine ass. He looks at me over his shoulder, catching me, and I

raise my eyebrows at him.

“If you look at me like that, we won’t get out of this room.”

This happiness, this intimacy I never thought I would experience, envelops me. I fall onto my back and squeal when he disappears into the bathroom. Missing him, I follow him, and his ministrations undo me. I feel how much he cares, and my heart opens to him. He owns it, and it’s scary, but I shove the fear away.

I put on some makeup and go downstairs where the butler pushes a cart filled with food into the room.

I see the cart covered with pancakes, eggs, fruits, yogurt, and three types of oatmeal—feeling spoiled and taken care of.

We eat in silence, soaking up these moments of harmony, of belonging. I have never been more thankful for getting that awful cold. It was worth it. Kieran is worth it. Happiness blossoms, a field of wildflowers blooming in every corner of my chest. I am not at war anymore with that little girl who had a crush on him, because he’s good, thoughtful, and so very loveable.

After we finish breakfast, he makes some calls while I take out my phone and message Chiara.

How are you?

Don’t ask.

Worry settles in my core.

Her succinct answer has me swallowing a lump.

Chiara?

Stop worrying and wake up from whatever trance he put you in.

“Sweetheart.” I lift my chin, and Kieran studies me. “What’s wrong?”

Even if he put me in a trance, I’m enjoying it too much to want to escape.

“I’m worried about Chiara.”

He kneels in front of me and takes my hand in his before kissing each tip of my fingers,

“Even if you don’t like or trust Cato, he is like a brother to me. I assure you, he won’t hurt her.”

“She didn’t seem like herself just now.”

“I remember someone being even worse when she married me.”

He grins and I slap his chest.

“And look how we are now, thanks to a stupid cold.” With a smirk, I ask, “Would you have let me go?”

A few beats of silence follow.

“No. I never wanted you miserable, but I never expected you to dig yourself into my heart like this. I’m crazy about you.”

“Are you now?”

He tickles and nibbles at my neck and says, “I was never like this. I’ve never felt like this. What you do to me, you’re everything.”

My heart fills with all these emotions.

“Let’s go. There is more I want to show you.”

“A taste of how my life will be with you?”

“I like that. Fuck, I like that coming from your mouth.”

With his hand in my hair, he pulls my head back, coming in for a kiss that steals the breath from my lungs, my heart from my chest.

It’s a rush as we leave the hotel and climb into the back seat of the car. When we reach the airport, he grabs my hand and we step inside the jet.

“Where are we going?”

He sits down on the cream leather seat and, with his hands around my waist, he pushes me down on his lap. I lie in his arms, his head buried in the crook of my neck.

“Honeymoon.”

Excitement rounds my eyes. “What?”

“You didn’t have the best of weddings, to put it mildly.”

“Marrying you was all I wished for as a little girl. So stop already.”

But his eyes, searching mine for any sign of a lie, have my chest contracting. How can he say he’s a monster when all he does is make sure I am happy?

“But I’m giving you the best honeymoon.”

It’s kind of backward, but his intention was to protect me from my father, at first, and my priority was to escape. But with our time spent together, things changed.

I’ve become invested; he’s become more possessive. From the first moment he began to steal small pieces of my heart and make my body his. There was no escaping. And now, with him firmly holding both in his grip, I know I am going to stay.

Yes, we need to spend more time together. I’ll call them dates. Dates that should have happened in the beginning, but our love story is different. Now I’m talking about love. Can that even be possible? The flutter of my heart agrees as I catch the intensity behind his eyes.

I hug him and press my ear to his chest, loving the steady pump of his

heart.

A few hours in the air, our kisses turn to need, but our moment is interrupted when the stewardess walks in with snacks.

“Tell me where we’re going,” I say, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

“We’ll sail around the Mediterranean.”

My hand flies to my mouth, and I blink like crazy. Is he serious?

“One month, just you and me.”

One month. One month with him alone is the best present possible.

“Thank you.”

Kieran rests his palm on my cheek, his thumb caressing my skin. “Don’t thank me for wanting to take you to see places or spend time with you. I’m selfish, nothing more.” His eyebrows draw together and I place my hand on his.

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re...” He gulps, and potent emotions swim in his eyes as he trails off. Those eyes I found hard are now a mirror to his good heart. And those hands I imagined as torture devices are now a safety blanket.

My husband, the man I belong to. The only one I want to belong to.



24 KIERAN

Beautiful.

Mine.

If I could, I would spend my time just looking at her, the image of perfection in front of me. Aurora cracked this hardened heart of mine and made it hers. I never needed it anyway.

I'll give her anything she desires, as long as she wants to stay mine. I'll make damn sure she does. Her place is next to me. My lamb turned into a lioness, but she's still preserving her gentleness, her goodness.

Are you still alive?

I type a message and Cato answers immediately. **Yes. Still.**

That bad?

Fuck, man, it's easier to tame a herd of hyenas. She's that wild.

I witnessed her strike, but he has to be exaggerating.

I'm happy with my choice.

Fuck you.

I smile to myself. Aurora stirs in the bed, a sob wrenching from her lips.

Discarding my phone, I brush her cheek softly. "Shh, it's just a bad dream."

She opens her eyes, a bit disorientated. "Kieran?"

"Yes, sweetheart. I'm here. Nothing will ever happen to you." I'll fucking make sure of that.

She falls back to sleep, and I take out my laptop, looking through some accounts, deciding where to extract and where to deposit money. With every

new client to balance, it becomes a craft.

I set the laptop aside, and she curls up next to me instinctively. And fuck, nothing has ever felt better. I breathe in her scent, summery and sweet, as if cherries and cotton kissed her skin.

I catch her contemplating me, a slight blush covering her cheeks, her face resting on her palm.

“We’re about to land.”

Her joy fills me with satisfaction. Fuck, a few hours ago, I had millions of dollars at the tip of my fingers, and that meant nothing to me. Her happiness? That is everything.

I remember her nightmare and skim a finger over her flawless skin. “Did you sleep well?”

She sighs and looks at a point over my head. “Aurora.”

“Oh, this is serious.” She semi-smiles. “You only use my name to make your point.”

“Figured me out already?”

“Almost.”

“Don’t digress.”

After giving me the cutest pout possible, she says, “Fine, I was taken, and my father and that awful man stood over me and—” Her voice breaks and I press her to my side and she continues, “And my hands were tied. I was so afraid.”

I lift her chin and seek her eyes. “That was a nightmare. Nothing more. No one will come even close. I’ll die protecting you.”

She wraps her arms around me and says, “I want you in my life. Not playing a Greek tragedy hero.”

I chuckle and she slaps my chest. “Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

“Nothing will happen to me, and nothing will happen to you. End of discussion.”

“Ah, I missed your bossiness.”

I pin her on her back, showing her who’s bossy when the stewardess knocks and asks us to buckle up. I groan at the missed opportunity in my jet.

“Next time, we’re entering the elitist club named mile high.” I take her blush as an answer. “So, you know what it is.”

“I read romance books. I am versed in all kinds of kinky clubs.”

“Is that so?”

We have to postpone this talk as I grab her hand and strap her in. When we land in the South of France, her eyes take everything in.

Aurora should have visited places like this, instead of being imprisoned in an all-girls school for years. I wonder if she'll ever miss not going out or making bad decisions. I'll offer her everything, so she never even thinks about missed experiences.

In the car, she rolls the window down. Her hand glides through the wind, the sun mixed with the breeze carrying warmth and salt lingering in the air. I prop my elbow on the window and watch her. She finds me looking at her, and smiles, a bright lift of the corners of her lips adding a touch of ethereal beauty.

Daniel drives while I check the surrounding cars. We've got two cars full of security, one in front and one behind. I would have never taken so many men with me if I were alone, but with her, I have to protect my world.

My father's words hit me hard. *One day you'll know just how far you'll go to protect the ones you love the most.*

Love. The air in the car is suddenly hard to breathe. I can't even imagine the pain of losing her. I find her eyes, worry etched in them.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, just thinking."

She raises her eyebrows at me, knowing damn well it's more. I lift her hand and trail kisses on her soft skin. It grounds me to the here and now.

The car stops in front of the port, and the white mega yacht glistens under the sun. We board the deck. My crew greets me, while I present them to my wife. The staff carry the luggage below. I follow her as she takes everything in with an awed expression.

"Like it?"

Aurora nods, pushing herself from the banister. The door slides open. She steps inside, where the living and dining rooms open to a decadent but sleek black-and-cream interior. She inspects everything with her eyes and with her hands, settling on a sculpture.

"I wondered where you hid them."

"There are a few in the house as well."

"Where?" she asks me over her shoulder.

"I guess you didn't see every room."

She taps her chin, turns around, and peeks in every room, until she finds the bedroom. And fuck, after so many hours, I need her. I turn her to me and

kiss her. The desire I caught just a minute ago in her eyes is now full-on spreading over her body.

Grabbing her ass cheeks, I pull her up to me. She wraps her legs around me, her pussy gliding up and down my dick. I never was this desperate, this rock hard. But this woman and her pussy are my undoing. I place her down and take a step back.

“Undress.” My voice turns husky with the command.

She slides her dress off and remains in her bra and panties.

“Those too, and make it slow this time.”

I unbuckle my pants, and when she is naked, I take my time to study the work of art that is her body. That smooth skin, the valley of her breasts topped by two perfect, rosy nipples, traces of curves that no artist could reproduce. I push her down onto the mattress. She parts her legs and props herself up by her elbows, her eyes challenging me. I love how the idea of me taking her is foreplay enough for her because I just want to be inside of her.

In one deep thrust, I am in paradise. She throws her head back and moans while I pump in and out of her, lust and frenzy driving me.

“You’re so deep.”

Fuck, I love how I affect her. I will be the only one she’ll know, but I’ll make sure she’ll never even fantasize about how it would be with someone else. I close my eyes, thrusting in and out. She’s my ruin, my rapture, she’s my salvation as well.

I turn her on all fours and bite into her enticing ass cheek, leaving my mark, putting my stamp on her.

“Kieran.” My name is a sultry whisper that makes my cock slide even deeper inside her.

Aurora throws her head back in ecstasy. Her skin takes on a golden hue. She has never been more beautiful than with my cock unraveling her.

I fist her hair and drag her to me, nibbling on her neck, strumming her clit.

“You see what you do to me? A starved man for your pussy.”

I love how my dirty words make her walls clench around my cock. It’s a sweet torture to be gripped by her tightness. She shatters around me. Pressing her back into the mattress, my eyes glide down her spine, to her ass, red with the imprints of my hands and teeth. My princess likes a bit of pain. This woman was made to satisfy every twisted part of me. I grip her ass while watching my cock, glistening with her arousal.

“Come again, princess.”

“It’s too much—”

“It’s never enough,” I say on a low groan.

She comes around me for the second time, and I thrust a few more times, filling her with all I’ve got, brandishing her with this fire coursing through my veins. Letting go.

I crash next to her, taking her lips in a long kiss, and she says, “That was not lovemaking.”

I stare at her, taking her in. Did I hurt her? Was I too rough? But with half-lidded eyes, she adds, “I liked it.”

I am going to make sure this honeymoon will take her to the peak of pleasure, emotionally and physically.



One week into our honeymoon, we're sunbathing on the deck, my body aching in the best ways possible.

After we visited all the hot spots in the South of France, from Nice to St. Tropez, we're now on our way to Italy. The yacht halts in a bay, and I follow him to a Jet Ski. Kieran puts a life vest on me.

"Can I drive my own?"

He gives me that 'not happening' look and hops on the Jet Ski. I giggle and hold on to him as he parts the sea. And then we switch places, letting me drive, making it clear I never stood a chance not to fall for him.

It's liberating. I speed over the water, the wind flapping my hair against my face. I take a sharp right and we flop into the sea. Laughing so hard, I swallow and cough up water, making my throat and nostrils burn. He pulls himself back on it, cutting the engine, and I swim toward him. After the adrenaline spike goes down, I hold on to him and enjoy the seagulls flying above us, the sun rays caressing the sea.

All the fun makes me hungry. After lunch we go swimming, and happiness overwhelms me. If I'd left, I would have missed all this: this experience of bliss, of sheer happiness, but most of all, of being in love

Once the yacht is docked, we amble through a small Italian village. I take in the picturesque landscape, a scenic image of nature and colorful houses wedged in the cliff. We have dinner at a small restaurant overlooking the sea, eating a plate of fish so delicious that it makes me moan. His eyes darken.

"Only my cock makes you moan."

I slap a hand on the table, throwing my head back, laughing.

He leans over the table and instinctively, I squeeze my legs at the filthy promise in his eyes.

“I will make you moan so loud tonight, princess. You’ll hear yourself when you think of moaning about something else.”

It’s still hot outside even with the sun dipping behind the horizon, but my body temperature has risen to scorching.

“There is a party we’re going to tonight.”

There’s a certain mischief in his eyes.

“Okay.”

“If it’s too much, you’ll tell me.”

Whenever he says that, it’s his way of telling me he will take me hard and rough. I never thought I would enjoy that, but now, I like the bite of the sting, of dangling over the threshold of pleasure and pain. Because afterward, he makes love to me, to assure me he worships me.

I still can’t believe this man is all mine. *Mine*.

After we finish dinner, we walk down the cobblestone path with my arm looped around his toward the yacht, getting ready for a night out.

I change into a black silk dress, the slit on the side caressing my hip bone, my front barely covered by the deep *V*.

His eyes find mine in the mirror, and my knees go weak from what I see. Lust, adoration, possession. He flips my hair off my shoulder and places a tender kiss on my neck that makes my heart all mushy. Kieran plucks a necklace from his suit jacket pocket. It’s a huge blue diamond nestled in a heart pendant.

Emotions dance between us as I pat the cold, smooth surface. “It’s beautiful.”

“Only on you.”

I apply some red lipstick and he wraps one hand around my waist. With the other he presents me with a mask.

“A masquerade ball?”

A smirk curls up the corners of his mouth. “Something like that.” He puts his on, signaling it’s time to go.

Daniel drives us up a hill to a mansion sitting at the edge of a cliff. Kieran gives a code to the guard at the entrance and we slip inside. Doors open up to a decadent ballroom, full of dozens of men and women dressed up in glamorous attire, all wearing masks. Dancers fly from one part of the ceiling

to the other, wearing wings and clad in transparent bodysuits that don't leave much to the imagination.

A man wearing a bespoke black suit appears and they shake hands. He looks me up and down with dark eyes and Kieran's jaw sets as his arms tighten around me with possessiveness.

"Dante, this is my wife, and she's off-limits."

"My apologies," he says, with an Italian accent. "Enjoy the night. You know where all the rooms are." He tips his head and disappears back into the crowd.

With every hour passing, the music turns to sinful beats and the lights dim to create intimacy. People lose their inhibitions, and my jaw drops when I see people undressing and fucking right in front of me.

I'm mesmerized by the view. I can't take my eyes off the men thrusting their hips into women's spread legs. Decadent moans rise above the decibel of the songs played, the carnal debauchery unfolding. I down my glass of champagne, but my thirst is of another kind. Kieran's fingers slide up and down my arms, his hot mouth on my neck, while in front of me, various men circle a woman, one taking her mouth, the other her pussy. I gulp and look at two women with a man, while they kiss, he switches from one to the other, thrusting inside them. The sexual arousal in here is sky high. Kieran's finger grazes my exposed thigh. A few inches higher, and he'll find me wet.

"Kieran." My voice is hoarse even to my own ears, need pouring from my dry throat. I grip his hand, my senses on overdrive.

"No one will ever have you but me. You can just watch others fucking."

Everything he does, he does on purpose.

"I just want you."

"And I just want you."

"Really?"

He grips my hand and I find his hard-on.

"This is for you, no one else."

His fingertips brush my nipples and I throw my head back against his chest and moan, my thong soaked.

He takes my hand and I follow him down a cellar path. My skin burns to be touched, for him to ease this unbearable ache. At the end of the hallway, he opens a door. The room is slightly illuminated, with satin covering the walls and a metal bedpost from where cuffs hang.

Kieran kisses my neck and pushes me forward, slipping my dress from

me. It falls to the floor in a swirl of fabric. I stand only in my sandals and thong, and my body is on fire.

He spreads my thighs and I bite my lower lip, knowing how wet he'll find me. He groans in satisfaction as he slips a finger through my folds.

"My princess is a little voyeur," he says, voice thick with awe.

He backs me toward the bed draped in black silk, and my back hits the mattress. A tremble passes through me at the intensity I find in his hooded eyes.

He begins securing me with the straps.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, and I lick my lips.

"Yes." Entirely. No doubt whatsoever.

I watch his eyes trailing over my restrained wrists and ankles as he undresses.

"We're gonna spend the night here," he says, heat and lust lacing through his husky voice. If I get any wetter, I will need a towel.

Kieran puts some music on and opens a drawer. He brings them out, holding them up to show them to me. Hidden are so many toys: vibrators, ropes, cuffs, some things I don't even recognize. He returns to my side with a bag he drops on the bed.

He squirts some massage oil and his hands glide over my body, relaxing me and setting me on fire at the same time. I gasp as he presses a button, and I am lifted from the bed, my legs parting on their own.

How I must look, spread so wide for him. Ready. Eager. Wanton. His hands glide down my folds, massaging my cheeks, spreading my wetness down my thighs. His thumb preps my back hole and my head falls back.

"Relax, princess."

With his fingers in my pussy, and his thumb in my ass, it doesn't take long for me to come, exploding like a firework.

"I want you to count how many times you come for me tonight," he says, gripping my waist and thrusting inside of me.

I come for the second time. In my haze, I return to my senses on the bed and he sets himself between my legs. A chain dangles from his fingers.

"Nipple clamps."

My nipples get hard at the visual, but more so after he puts his mouth on them, sucking them into pointed tips. My body has liquefied. The clamps bite my nipples, and I hiss, the chain laying heavy on my stomach.

I am a sucker for that pleasure and hint of pain, craving it like the addict

he has turned me into. I writhe as he attaches another clamp to my clit. His fingers caress along my thighs as he peppers kisses along the valley of my breasts down to my pussy, tugging at the chain. I strangle the sheets, feeling like I will surely die of sensual overdrive.

“You’re doing so good, princess.”

An electric jolt goes through me, and I pant, buck, die and am reborn in pleasure.

“How does it feel?” He chuckles, and I open my mouth to answer, but another jolt goes through me.

He thrusts inside of me at the exact moment the jolt starts again, and I scream, another orgasm ripping through me.

My breath hitches. A sheen of sweat dampens my forehead, my throat dry from all the crying out. He straddles my face and tips a bottle of champagne over my lips. It flows in a decadent river and then he dips his cock in my mouth. I drink a sip of champagne and then I slurp on his cock. Over and over again. I am drunk, so drunk on the sensations.

“How many?”

“Three,” I say, riding the aftershocks.

His fingers push away the hair sticking to the side of my face. “Just three?”

“Kieran . . . oh my God. I see freaking stars.”

“That’s not enough. I want you to see the beginning of the universe.”

He takes the clamps off, and my nipples sting, but he sucks on them in a soothing motion. How can I still want more?

He uncuffs me, and I lie on the bed, dazed, halfway in euphoria.

“Ready for more?”

I nod because I want—no, I need—to get whatever he offers me. All of it. Everything and more. Reading about sex is one thing, but experiencing it is something else entirely.

“Hold your knees up.”

I follow his instructions, and he slaps my pussy. I buck up moaning and see the satisfaction on his face at my reaction. I don’t know which one of us is dirtier, me for liking this or him for discovering my deepest darkest fantasies and giving them to me.

“Look at my princess’s perfect pussy.”

At his praise, a wave of delight rolls down my spine. “One day, I’ll come by just hearing you call me that.”

He pats my pussy, then slaps it a few times. I gasp from the pleasure he wrenches from my body, from his hungry look.

“You love me calling you princess, don’t you? Spoiling this pussy of mine. Spoiling you inside and outside the bedroom.”

“I so do.”

He squirts more oil in his hands and massages my cheeks, alternating between caressing them and then spanking each one.

“Good girl.”

I writhe under him.

“Kieran.” His name tumbles from my lips in a plea. I’m too far gone with pleasure to figure out what I’m begging for.

“You love that too, don’t you? Being my good girl who lets me fuck her how I want?”

“It makes me so wet.”

“It does, doesn’t it? And it makes me want to fuck you even harder.”

With half-lidded eyes, I watch, enthralled by the lust darkening his eyes, fully engrossed by the view in front of him. He parts my cheeks, and I stiffen for a moment, but with his other hand, he goes between my legs, and I forget everything.

Kieran glides one finger in and out of my ass. I close my eyes, and he says, “You’ll only know my cock, but . . .” He rummages through the bag with his other hand before shoving a small vibrator into me. “Once in a while, you’ll feel this as well.”

I moan when the vibrations hit my center. He holds me in place as I raise my hips under him.

“I need you to loosen up, princess. Come for me again. Be my good girl.”

And I do because I am his good girl. My limbs start to shake, but I force myself to remain propped up on my elbows.

“My little sex-crazed princess. Who would have thought?” His voice takes a reverent note, his eyes show of appreciation, as he slides two fingers into my back hole, and I grip the sheets.

“Ready?”

“I don’t think you’ll get in.”

“Not yet, but this will.”

The dildo slips inside my ass, filling me, and one second later, he removes the vibrator. I feel him inside my pussy too. It’s so much, I gulp in some air.

“How does it feel?”

A long moan whooshes out of me. “I am so full, Kieran, so full.”

He slides in and out of me, the sensation so intense I black out for a moment when I come a fifth time.

He kisses my lips, taking my mouth in a long, sensual kiss, leaving me breathless. When he finds my clit, engorged and sensitive, he says, “Up for some more?” His eyes remain locked on mine with so many dirty promises and raw adoration.

“I’m going to die.”

“My cock will bring you back to life.”

I giggle. “The level of your cockiness is astounding.”

He slides between my legs and eats me out, letting out satisfied groans. The sounds of how wet I am reverberating around us. He reaches for something and he says, “It’s a plug. This will stay inside of your ass until my cock replaces it.”

He helps me out of bed. It takes me a few moments to stay steady on my feet. I feel the small plug inside of me with every step I take. We enter another room which features a Jacuzzi front and center. There are so many devices around: ropes, a cross-like panel, and there is something resembling a horse saddle in the middle of the room.

“Hop on the saddle.”

Kieran presses me down on it. When the plug buzzes, I fist the ropes.

He gets behind me, kissing down my neck to my shoulder, and pulls the plug out. “You’re doing so good. I’m in fucking awe of you.”

A stuttered breath parts my lips. The anticipation blurs my vision.

“I need to fuck your ass, princess. Need to claim your every hole. Is that okay for you?”

“Yes,” I whisper-shout, lost in my ecstasy, licking my dry lips.

He spreads my cheeks, and he says, “This pucker is beautiful, like every inch of you.”

He guides his dick to my other hole, and the machine speeds up. I am pulled in so many directions, I will rip at the seams. His head slips inside of me, and I hold on to the ropes. He’s so big, and I squeeze my eyes shut, gasping.

“Your ass opens up so beautifully for my cock. Eager, just like your pussy.”

Every inch of him opens me up, tearing me, rebuilding me. Pain and

pleasure intertwine. My body welcomes him in, accommodating his girth with no resistance. My body, my heart, are his for the taking.

“I’m all in, princess.”

I grapple with the fullness of the maddening stretch. Kieran kisses my neck, down my spine, little tender pecks caressing every string of my heart. My moans mix with his groans, the sounds of skin slapping as he takes me reverberating through the room in a sinful symphony.

“You’re doing so good, taking all of me in your tight little hole.” With his hands digging into my thighs, he starts fucking my ass while the saddle stimulates my clit. I’m floating, carried away by the pleasure. My moans mix with his grunts, creating the perfect carnal melody. My final orgasm rips from me, and I cry out his name in wonder. He pulls in and out of me, awed at the gaping hole his cock leaves when he pulls out.

“You’re so tight, I can’t hold it any longer,” he grits out, coming inside my ass.

When our breathing returns to normal, he helps me climb down on trembling limbs and scoots me up.

He leads us to the Jacuzzi where I lie my head on his chest as he strokes my belly, wrapping us completely in intimacy.

“My perfect woman.”

I’ve found my home in the confines of his arms.

26

KIERAN

I carry Aurora to the bed. She's spent after everything her body went through tonight. I would have never thought she would go along with all this, but fuck, she did. She keeps surprising me. The memory of being inside all three of her holes tonight sends a shot of pleasure through my veins.

My brave, curious woman.

I let her sleep while I get dressed, locking the door behind me as I leave the room. I have business to discuss with the host of the party while I'm in town.

I find Dante balls deep in a brunette, and when I cock my head to the side, he lifts one finger. One minute, I can give him that. I'm not just here to have fun and enjoy my wife. I also have to take care of business.

After he tucks himself in, he points toward his office. Once inside, he lights a cigarette and pours two glasses of whiskey.

"Where is that beautiful wife of yours?"

"Asleep."

He chuckles, the lines stretching in the corners of his black eyes, and says, "So, I assume both of you enjoyed the party?"

I nod. I don't discuss the details of my sex life with anyone.

"Business as usual. You don't have much fun, do you?"

"You've known me for a while, you tell me."

He sips from his drink. His grip tightens against the glass when I say.

"I heard you're looking to expand."

"You heard right." His jaw tics. No one knows except me. He's not the

first to think he has the upper hand, but once in a while I have to show them I'm always on top of everything.

"I will take it as an indiscretion, but, Dante, if this happens again . . ."

I and my brothers set the rules, make the connections. We can't risk any missteps.

"I understand."

"As a token of your loyalty, for the next year you will pay double the fee for any money of yours I'm wiring."

With gritted teeth, he nods. Stupid comes at a price. Luckily for him, I'm in a good mood.

I leave and return to my wife with a pep in my step.

Tonight was a success.

Aurora stirs in my arms and those starry eyes of hers set on me. She grins shyly at me, a blush on her cheeks, and she disappears under the covers.

"Sweetheart?" I peek under the covers. Is she ashamed of what happened yesterday?

"I don't know what's gotten into me."

"Come here."

She climbs in my lap, placing her hand on my chest, and I stroke her back.

"It's sex. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"But the things we did, the things I saw—"

"Did you enjoy it?"

She offers a small nod, and I kiss her temple. "That's all that matters. It's not like we're going to do this often."

"So, we'll still do it?"

"Would you like to?"

"I don't know."

She's still so innocent, and I wonder if I have any right to corrupt her, but it's too late to second-guess.

"So you're into this?" she asks and peers at me, drawing circles on my chest.

"I like letting go, just for one night. Sex, alcohol, and nothing else in my head. But with you, it was something special."

"Would you like to be with others?"

“No, you’re all I need, sweetheart.”

“Good, because I don’t know if I could . . .”

I run my nose along her cheek and place a kiss on her swollen lips.

“Never. That will never happen. You can watch other dicks, but it’s only mine you’ll get.”

“I only want yours.”

Will I ever tire of hearing her say this? The still-guilty-as-fuck part of me needs that in order to let go of said guilt.

“Come on, let’s shower.”

By the time she gets out of the shower, new clothes are already on the bed.

“Daniel dropped them by.”

“He saw this room?”

I suppress a smile. She’s cute, all flustered.

“Stop being embarrassed.”

She changes, retreating into her headspace. I forget at times how she lived, sheltered and secluded. But I can’t have that. I pin her to the wall and kiss her, leaving her gasping for air. I cup her face, my eyes boring into her.

“You’re mine. My queen. We don’t justify our lifestyle or life choices to others, just to each other. Deal?”

“Deal.”

I peck her lips again, and then we head toward the car. I help her in, my hand on her ass, while she rolls her eyes at me over her shoulder.

After Italy, we spend the next two weeks sailing from Croatia, Montenegro, to Greece and the west coast of Turkey. I don’t remember ever taking time off for a vacation, but for her I will find time and give us more moments like these.

Together, lazing in the sun, discovering through her eyes every new place that puts a dreamy expression on her face; this has been the happiest time of my life.

I can’t pinpoint when I knew for sure I was falling in love with her. But this happiness, the peace she offers me is the most precious thing money and power would never buy.

No one else but her would.

I watch her swimming on her back, a radiant smile on her face. Aurora

dives into the sea. I jump to my feet, running to the edge, counting the seconds until she reemerges. Her eyes find mine, and I calm instantly.

She pushes herself from the water and sashays to me. Droplets trail down her body, a body that has become my addiction, my own work of art I love to get lost in. She straddles me, locks her arms around my neck, and presses her lips to mine.

Now, it's her turn to take what she wants from me. It unravels me, stripping me to my bones while she holds all the power. I kiss her back, wrapping my hand around her pulsing neck.

When the kiss ends, she falls next to me on the sand, the slight tan she got making her skin glow. She props herself on an elbow and says, "About your mother and your sister . . ."

She keeps asking me about them. I would love for her to meet my little sister all grown up, but I don't know if I can protect her from my mother. And if something came up between this woman who makes me happy and my bitter mother, I would lose it if she spits her venom at Aurora.

"What about them?"

I stall and she sighs and picks at the sand, already reading me so well it's frightening.

"Why don't you want me to see them?"

"It's not that."

"Why then?"

"Because I don't want to test my reaction to anyone treating you badly."

Her face takes on a pensive expression.

"Do you want to go somewhere in the city tonight?" I ask.

"I saw that little restaurant on the cliff."

"Then that's where we're going."

She smiles, and at least for a while longer I can protect her from finding out my mother hates her with every fiber of her being.



Days and nights blend together in paradise. I love Kieran so much. My love is endless and mysterious, like the universe itself. A local band plays just for us on the terrace of the restaurant while we dance under the stars. I press my head into his chest, knowing in my soul that I love him, and I am afraid when we go home I will lose the man I've come to know on this trip.

“Sweetheart?”

It should be forbidden to be this in tune with somebody else. It's a whole other level of vulnerability.

“Nothing. I'm just happy. And it's scary.”

His full lips arch into a smile. He's been so relaxed in the last few weeks.

It's long past midnight when we get back to the yacht. I lie in bed, watching his chest rise and fall in steady beats, and caress his scalp.

I had no idea this kind of happiness even existed.

Sleep finds me and I give in to its unstoppable lull.

The next morning, at the breakfast table, overcome with emotions, I say, “I don't even know what your favorite color is? Or food, or book, or band, or anything. I don't know anything about your favorite things.”

I place the spoon down and look out, where water surrounds us flickering like millions of diamonds.

“You know what matters. What makes me happy, and that would be you. My favorite thing is you.”

He pops a grape in his mouth, winking at me, but I'm determined to find out more bits of him every day.

He finally gives in at my unwavering stare, which makes me ecstatic.

“Black, it’s black. And yours?”

“White. So, our favorite colors are no colors at all.”

Next, I find out his favorite book is *The Prince* by Machiavelli. No surprise there.

At a dinner in a castle in Montenegro, I learn his favorite song is “My Way” by Frank Sinatra.

On a beach in Greece, I find out the meaning behind his tattoo.

“It’s the three of us, united, an equilateral triangle. No one has the upper hand. We will act accordingly to protect what we have built. And the insignia is Latin for ‘brothers for life, sworn in blood, acting by oath.’”

I trace the tattoo under his biceps. “What about that one-time favor?”

“If there is something truly important to us that we know might not be beneficial for our plans, but we still want it, each of us gets one favor.”

“And my brother wasted it on me?”

“Wasted? Sweetheart, don’t make me angry.”

“I don’t understand why he would have done this if he gets just one.”

“Because he loves you. We’d do anything for the people we love.”

I try to remember instances where I could say for sure, that my brother loves me. I trace them back to my childhood, when he would play with me, read stories to me, brush my hair, but it all ended when my mom was gone. I close my eyes and lift my face to the sky.

“Cam loves you, and deep down you know that. He also couldn’t risk your father using you to get to him.”

Anger ignites at the thought of my father. That man should have protected me; instead, he did the unforgivable.

“I wish I could visit Sister Theodora.”

Kieran tugs me to his side and says, “What did you like there the most?”

“It was peaceful.”

“So, I don’t bring you peace?”

He smirks, knowing he brings a storm, and I find peace in the eye of it. What he does to my body and heart is anything but peaceful, but I don’t want it any other way.

I cover my face with my hands and peek at him from between my fingers.

He flips me onto my back on the table, sliding my top off, and kisses a path from my neck to my chest. I love how I’ve become so uninhibited, taking my pleasure, offering pleasure. We make love on the sand, in the

water, in the shower, on the bed, every day. And every day, happiness and love take over my heart.

Our one month of pure bliss, sexual awakening, and getting to know each other comes to an end too soon. In the jet, melancholy sits heavy on my chest. On the seat, I lift my knees to my chin. Kieran makes some calls and when he finds me, he lifts me and sets me on his lap.

“I already miss this.”

“You don’t think we can keep this up back home?”

He smirks, fully assured that between us, nothing will change. I relax, hoping and wishing it, too, but still...At home, I won’t have him this much, and soon, I’ll start college.

“What about setting some ground rules?”

I lift my chin, and he cocks his head. His face serious.

“What did you like here the most?”

I feel heat poking my cheeks, and he smiles, kissing me. “Believe me, you’ll get plenty of that at home too.”

I slap his chest playfully and voice my greatest concern.

“You laughed. You relaxed.”

“And you think that’ll end when we get back?”

I shrug and he says, “I won’t change the way I am with you, because it’s you who brings this side out in me.”

“I liked that we were mostly alone.”

Kieran caresses my chin and says, “What about date nights, and one weekend a month where we just pack our bags and go somewhere? Just the two of us, minimal security.”

“I’d like that. I want you home, in bed with me at night.”

“Sweetheart, nothing could keep me from coming home to you, but there will be nights when I have to work.”

“Just work, right?”

He pins me with an intense look. “You are it for me, Aurora. Only you.”

“Okay, because you are it for me, too.”

His eyes become a clear lake, and he kisses me with a feverish hunger. He feeds me his elation in small bites. I am not the only one who needs reassurance.

The pilot says on the speaker, “We’ll reach Heathrow Airport in two

hours, sir.”

He mumbles a curse. “That was supposed to be a surprise.”

I cup his face and place my forehead to his. “You’re the best surprise of my life, Kieran. You are enough, and all I want is you.”

Is he crazy to think anything can top this? What’s a surprise when I have him doing all he can to make me happy? What more can I ask for than a man who would do anything to keep me content?

He keeps caressing my back until I fall asleep in his arms and wake up to his lips pecking mine.

“We’re here, sweetheart.”

I rub the sleep away and, hand in hand, we step outside. In the sullen weather, I rub my arms, and he places his jacket on my shoulders. There is a cold bite even on a summer day, clouds already gathering.

Daniel drives us to a hotel, and when he leaves, Kieran says, “I thought we could start with a date night right now.”

This man of mine. This man I was so keen on not letting in has now taken root so deep, no one could ever come close to reaching inside to cut him out.

We have dinner at a rooftop restaurant, where the city of London lights beneath us.

The next morning, we visit museums, strolling through the city, checking out all the tourist attractions. On a poster, I see my favorite band playing, and he catches me staring at it.

“I can arrange that.”

“Kieran, I don’t want any special treatment or VIP seats. We can just go as two very normal people going to a concert. But the tickets are sold out.”

He makes one call, and he gets us tickets.

He looks mouthwatering in a three-piece suit. But dressed casually in a shirt and jeans, draped in a leather jacket, looking so free, so like every twenty-something-year-old should look, makes him look so hot.

He’ll never have that freedom, but tonight he’ll have a glimpse of it like he so generously offered to me in Italy. The thought alone has heat spreading in my core. I wear a top, jeans, and one of his hoodies.

“Like it?” I ask.

“I like everything about you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say he has me. It physically hurts me to even think about losing him. He takes my hand, and we get lost through the masses of people.

We drink, dance, and sing along with the band onstage, hands raised and swaying to the music blasting from the giant speakers. He lifts me on his shoulders so I can get a better view. Others around us follow suit. We link hands, enjoying our new vantage point, and I relish the carefree atmosphere.

The night flies by in a haze of alcohol, sweat, music, and fun. When we reach the hotel, I'm still high from one of the best nights of my life. It feels like a dream. We both smell like spilled beer and sweat and the happy memories we made.

Our mouths only separate when we undress and slip into the shower. Our bodies collide together, as he says, "Thank you, sweetheart, for bringing joy to my life. And I mean you."

Words so full of emotion. I wrap my arms around him and I almost fall asleep in the shower. He washes me and when he wraps the towel around me, the last thing I think before I hit the bed is that I love him.

In the car, on the drive to St. Mary's School, I fidget in anticipation. I didn't lie when I told Kieran it gave me peace, but what I failed to tell him is how hard I worked to find peace there at the all-girls school. The feelings of helplessness rattle my newly gained confidence. A part of me will always be fettered to these grounds. If it wasn't for Chiara, the books, the garden, and Sister Theodora, I don't know if I could have survived all those lonely years.

"Sweetheart."

"Hmmm."

"You're coming back home with me."

A smile breaks through my corded facial muscles, and I slap his chest.

"Really? And here I thought you'd get bored."

"Not with you, wife."

Kieran lifts my hand and kisses my fingertips. Such a sweet gesture. The nerves vanish.

"How was it? Truthfully."

"Lonely."

"You'll never be lonely again. I promise."

Tears gather in my eyes. He tugs me to his side and kisses my temple. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I preferred to not think of you."

"Why?"

"I felt guilty, and I couldn't change a thing. I knew you were safe here."

Cameron always kept me up to date, but still . . . I should have come to visit you. I'm sorry I didn't."

"I really thought you hated me, blamed me."

He inhales a sharp breath. "After my father died, I was too busy taking his place at the bank, becoming so powerful no one would ever touch me or my family. That boy without a care in the world became the man that put the fear of God in all others."

His mouth presses into a thin line, and he massages his temples.

"The things I did, Aurora . . . At times I wonder how I can even touch you with the same hands that . . ."

His eyes burn with pain and anguish. I lift them to my mouth and say, "These hands had to do what they had to do, and these hands are good to me."

Nothing would change the fact that I love him, that his hands are also capable of gentleness, of goodness.

Daniel parks the car and gets out to open the door for me. I force myself to step outside. I thought I'd never come back to this place, but as I take the impressive building in, I breathe a sigh of relief. It's not my home anymore.

Kieran takes a call and I walk down the alley, my fingers grazing the trimmed bushes on each side. Girls giggle and play all around me. I walk inside the washed cream-colored brick building, my steps echoing around me in the hallway. I greet every nun I cross paths with, and share a brief chat. I knock on Sister Theodora's office, and her smooth authoritative voice, says, "Come in."

I step inside and she stands up, relief transforming her wrinkled face. In her warm embrace, tears spill. She has been like a mother to me. How could I want to forget anything about this place when she is inside it?

Without the honeymoon, without Kieran and our time spent together, I would have never allowed myself to miss her and this place.

"How are you, my child?"

I raise my finger and say, "Married."

Worry transforms her face, so I add, "Happily married."

"Come. Sit, tell me everything."

I do, and it's cleansing. She pats my hand as I tell her about my father.

When I am done, she says, "You are a strong young woman, and the goodness of your heart, my dear, will always bring joy and comfort in your life."

I dab the tears away and she asks, “How is Chiara?”

“Being Chiara.”

She sighs, saying, “I have never worried about you. Even as a child, there was a depth inside of you. I thought you were an old spirit. Always knowing when to pick a fight. Chiara, on the other hand, is a warrior, a fighter who feels if she stops fighting, she’ll lose herself.”

I worry about her too. My temperamental and fierce friend thinks she has to go to battle with life.

We drink some tea and I ask, “Would you like to meet my husband?”

We go outside and my heart skips a beat when I see Kieran crouched down, helping a little girl tie her shoes.

“What happened to your uncle?”

“He came too late.”

As if she knows what I am referring to, she nods. She has always used her words sparingly, and I listened, as if to soak up her wisdom.

When we reach him, the girl says, “Thank you.” Then she giggles at him and runs away. Somewhere in the future, I’ll see him taking care of our own children. The image warms my chest.

I introduce Sister Theodora to Kieran and Daniel, who asks me to show him around.

We leave them alone, and I can’t shake the feeling it’s more than curiosity that pushed Kieran to talk to Sister Theodora.

“Daniel, what is this about?”

He scratches his head and keeps his lips sealed.

I storm away, anger coursing through my veins, realizing what this visit is really about.



Aurora figured it out. It's in her pissed expression, her flipping me off and stomping away. Daniel raises his hands, and I jerk my chin to follow her. I came here for this particular conversation, even if it makes her mad. She had her chance to tell me who the fuck he is.

If she were anyone else, I would have extracted that information any way I could. I tortured, maimed, killed, and yet I can't bring my wife to tell me who the fucker is. She's the exception. An exception that costs me all my patience, makes me teeter on the edge of sanity.

"You know why I am here." I skip pleasantries. This is a woman of God. I am sure she can sense my dark soul, the sins tainting my hands.

"Tell me everything you know about him."

She studies me, and she says, "You're too young to be hardened like this."

"Sister Theodora, I am not here for therapy."

"That light in her shines brightest in the dark, but she needs the sun to replenish."

Her words strike a very sensitive chord inside me.

Through a clenched jaw, I say "I will protect and take care of Aurora, trust me. Now, tell me."

"Young man."

"Kieran."

"Young man, I am too old to give in to demands." Her face takes on a hardened expression. I feel scolded for the first time in my life.

“So you trust this man, but don’t trust her husband.”

“It’s not about trust, it’s about my word.”

“What if she’s in danger and something happens because you don’t help me out?”

She pins her astute eyes on mine. “You’re cunning, manipulative. I don’t know if I like her with someone like you.”

“Excuse me, Sister, but I am all she’s going to get.”

For a second, I catch her lips twitching into a smile, but I blink and it’s gone.

“I am sure you will protect her, regardless.”

Frustration has me in a chokehold, and I call for patience.

“Why do you keep him a secret, like my wife?”

“Some men like to stay in the shadows because they are ghosts. He will never be a danger to her. To me, he was her only way out to live the life she deserves, to blossom in freedom.”

“I am not her father.”

“No, your leash is longer.”

I ball my hands at my side, and say, “I love her, Sister, and my love comes with certain shackles.”

“As long as she’s content and you don’t stomp out her light, you two won’t have a problem.”

“Why shouldn’t I worry about him?”

“I never said you shouldn’t. I said she won’t be in danger with him.”

I drag a hand down my face. “I thought you’d hold marriage vows more sacred.”

“I hold the intentions of people sacred, not their overestimation of what they might perceive as holy, only to dispose of them when things get hard.”

Daniel runs over to us, and my body tenses as I shoot up.

“I lost her.”

“How can you lose her?” I pinch the bridge of my nose. I am sure Aurora wouldn’t like me putting a bullet through his head. I should have taken Sawyer with me today.

Sister Theodora pushes herself off the bench and says, “She’ll come back when she’s ready.”

With that, she leaves us. If this woman thinks I won’t search for Aurora, she’s mistaken.

My phone chimes with messages from Cameron and Cato asking if I

found out who he is. My simple “No” should speak of my bad mood. I couldn’t even get information from an old woman.

My friends must be laughing their asses off.

“What do you want me to do?” Daniel asks.

“Wait for us at the car.”

I search for Aurora for over an hour, the trickles of rain seeping through my skin. I fight not only with my sour mood but with my panic. I could track her, but she has to understand I will find her, regardless. If something happens to her...she became the center of my world in the span of weeks.

I see a dress flutter behind a statue of an angel. She ducks too late. When I am within reach, she takes off. But with me on her tail, she runs toward the car. She leans against the window, her arms crossed.

“Was this your plan all along? To seduce me into getting that information. Was this all a fucking lie?”

Her anger with me is palpable, and it’s not helping that mine roars to life. A fucking lie? That’s what she thinks? I could rip the world apart with the fury brewing inside of me.

“Get in the car, Aurora.”

“What if I don’t?”

I grit my teeth and press her to me. “Don’t provoke me.”

With the other hand, I open the car door, and she pushes at my chest but gets inside.

“What if I do?”

Her eyes burn with challenge, and I summon patience.

I get out of the car when we arrive at the jet, waving for her to follow. She tilts her head away from me, crossing her arms again. Her entire posture is a huge fuck-you.

I drag in a lungful of air and lift my eyes to the sky.

“Look at it from her perspective,” Daniel offers.

“Don’t forget who’s the boss.”

“Aurora is good to you. Don’t jeopardize that because you’re mad at yourself.”

I thrust my head in the car and say, “If you don’t get out, I am carrying you out.”

Silence and defiance stare back at me. I grab her ankles to pull her out of the car and toss her over my shoulder while she pounds on my back.

Inside the jet, I place her on her seat, strapping her in. She flicks unruly

strands of hair from her face and tilts her head.

“What’s wrong? The powerful, cunning, unfeeling bastard didn’t get the answers he needed?”

“Keep provoking me.”

If her eyes were fire, I’d be burnt to a crisp. When we’re in the air, she yanks the belt off, pushes to her feet, and stabs me with a finger.

“You, you—”

She turns on her heel and slips into the rear cabin.

The stewardess asks me if I want a drink and I tell her to bring me the entire bottle of whiskey and a glass.

I am enjoying the calming effect of the alcohol when Aurora storms back in.

She slaps her hands on the table so hard the glass vibrates. “I want to know why.”

I take another sip and rest my cheek on two fingers, studying her. She’s beautiful, brave, and loving. I don’t deserve her. I don’t care. Either way, she’s stuck with me.

“I will find out who he is, Aurora. One way or another.”

“And then what?”

We’re locked in a battle of wills.

“Still don’t trust me? Still want to escape? I will never let you go. Never. Do you hear me? So whatever fantasies you harbor, get over them, sweetheart.”

“Really, Kieran? We’re back to that?”

Her posture turns dejected, and I wonder if this one fight ruined all we accomplished with our honeymoon. But how can I know when she doesn’t tell me who he is? I should stop, but my jealousy overrides reason. Coupled with my need to protect her, it’s a vicious combination.

“Hmm, when I am inside you, do you think of him coming to get you? When you scream my name, do you think of how he’d feel inside of you?”

A shudder rolls through her, her face grimacing in pure disgust.

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

“Then fucking tell me if it’s me and not him you want. Or is this your plan? Make a fool out of me, have me wrapped around your finger, and then betray me by leaving me?”

She claps her hands in a display of mockery. “Yes, that’s exactly what I am after. Congratulations, Kieran, you figured it out.”

I freeze while she storms away and shuts the door.

“She lied. You know that?”

I point a finger at Daniel. “I will shoot you. Stay the fuck out of this.”

I drink from the bottle until it’s fucking empty. Empty like my heart. You taste happiness, and like fine alcohol, it never lasts. She still wants to leave me. Happiness is not for me. I grip the glass so hard it shatters in my hand. Blood seeps through the shards.

“Sir?”

“What?”

“Your hand is bleeding.”

I wave the stewardess off.

A fallen king at your feet, Aurora, this is what you made me.



I pace until I calm down. That side of him is my biggest challenge. I can't believe him.

I was even about to tell him who he was, giving him my trust, betraying the word I gave so Kieran won't think I am interested in my own uncle.

How can he be so confident, so arrogant and demanding, but so insecure that he'd think I'd leave him for another man?

The door sways open and Kieran wobbles inside, the empty bottle dangling from his right hand. He braces himself on the wall.

"Did you drink all of that?"

He grins at me, proud as ever. My renewed anger with him dies when I see blood dripping from his left hand. I take his hand in mine.

"It's nothing."

"Nothing?"

I stare at dozens of tiny pieces of glass biting into his palm.

"Sit down." I push him down on the edge of the bed and run to the bathroom. I squirt a bit of disinfectant on a hand towel and kneel between his legs. He cocks his head to the side, those eyes on me burning. Power, lust, heat, comfort, love, all undoing me.

"I am hard."

"I see that, and it's beyond me how you can still get it up after you drank that whole bottle."

"I want you so bad. I fucking ache for you, Aurora. I'm always aching."

"Not happening."

With a boyish look, he says, “I will eat you first.”

“Kieran, shut up and let me finish this.”

He huffs like a petulant child.

“Does it hurt?” I ask and blow on the wounds as I take the pieces out with tweezers.

“It’s nothing.”

After I clean his hand, his eyes find mine. I know he means something completely different. It’s either he’s really thinking I will leave him, or he doesn’t trust me. I gave myself to him completely. How can he not trust the heart that he made his?

I rinse the towel in the bathroom sink, the water turning bloody. Having followed me, Kieran sways on his feet before crashing into the wall.

I wrap a bandage around his hand. He says, “I think I will survive this.”

He’s making fun of me, and I pass him by. Even drunk, he’s perfectly capable of gripping my elbow and pressing me to him.

“I never cared before, sweetheart, but now it fucking drives me mad.”

I turn to him and kiss his lips.

“Kieran, I am yours. I am here, with you, and I don’t want to go anywhere. So, don’t make me.”

“I am jealous and possessive, and that Sister Theodora basically said I give you a longer leash than your father. I wanted to say, ‘Fuck you. What do you know about us?’”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Let’s get you in bed.”

“I’ll never be sorry, Aurora. For taking you, for making you mine. I’ll burn this damn world down and everyone in it who thinks they could keep me from you.”

“No one will take me away because I don’t want to leave.”

“Good. Swear it.”

“I do.”

He crashes on the end and I climb into bed next to him, and he throws his arm around me.

“Mine, no one else’s.” I glance at him, this sculpture of a man who exudes power even in his sleep, subdued by vulnerability, by guilt, by fear.

I peck his nose and follow him into sleep.

I wake up to his fingers brushing my cheek, dried blood clinging to the bandage. I take his hand in mine and inspect it.

“We should change that.”

“I’m going to be fine.” His lips curve into a small smile and he plops on his back and crosses his hands behind his neck, his eyes on me, penetrating every cell of my body.

“I said some things yesterday—I’m sorry.”

I can’t keep a secret that is threatening to jeopardize us any longer. I take a fortifying breath. “He’s my uncle, Kieran. But I can’t divulge more. Not yet.”

He sits up straight, studying me, surprise etched on his face.

“You don’t have an uncle.”

“Apparently I do.”

I trace patterns on the duvet and he lifts my chin up.

“Tell me everything.”

“There isn’t much to say. He came to me the day before my father summoned me back home.”

“And you believe him?”

“I don’t see why I shouldn’t.”

His jaw clenches. “Because you don’t know him.”

“Or is it because you don’t know him?”

Our eyes clash and he drags a hand down his face. “Why can’t you tell me who he is?”

“Because I promised him I wouldn’t.”

“I don’t like that. Sweetheart, I will find out who he is one way or another.”

His intent look hasn’t faltered from my face.

“I want to get to know him. He’s my mother’s brother.”

“Why doesn’t Cameron know about him, then?”

“I think it has something to do with my father. He told me that my mother asked him to protect me in case something happened to her.”

“No one will protect you better than I can,” he says and cups my face. I feel his possessiveness, the truth behind his words, in my heart.

“I told you so you can stop thinking I have something going on with him.”

His eyebrows draw together, a pensive look on his face.

The pilot interrupts our conversation to announce we’re about to land.

“We aren’t done talking.”

“I am. That’s all I had to say about him. Or are we going back to you being distrustful?”

“I shouldn’t have behaved like that.”

One apology and the illusion of one. Sweet progress.

I bend, kissing him and he says, “For years now, I’ve been used to everything going my way.”

“And I know there is another side of you, one that is decent.”

“So, I’m not decent?” Amusement cracks in the corners of his eyes.

“What you pulled yesterday with Sister Theodora was terrible.”

Kieran slides his fingers up my back to my neck and presses me to him. “That softer side of me, only you get. That is reserved for you and no one else. I don’t pretend to be someone I am not. I am the man that circumstances, choices, and perhaps fate made me become. But I fucking swear to be better for you.”

I force my tears back, my heart crying for the carefree boy from our childhood, the sweet one who would smile so brightly. In his place is this calloused, imperious man. I love the fact that he gives me this part of him, but if I can’t take him as the package he obviously is, then what?

We land and all I want is to put this day behind me.

Tamara is waiting for us at home, her eyes scanning us.

“How was it? Did you take pictures? What was your favorite destination?”

“We’ll tell you tomorrow. I am taking my wife to bed.”

I never thought words would be this powerful, but his weave some kind of spell over me.

“Good night.”

I nod, reassuring her that we’re okay.

In the shower, with water dripping down his muscular body, he asks, “Why did you tell me?”

I’d rather keep watching his body than have another serious conversation.

“You know you can touch my cock, do whatever you want with it. He’s yours now.” He winks at me.

I turn around and say over my shoulders, “That was the plan, but my husband wants to have another heart-to-heart talk.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

I giggle, but stop when he grabs the back of my neck.

“Where were we?”

I explore his body lazily, sliding my hands down his torso. The hunger in his eyes consumes me as I kneel in front of him.

“Fine. Take care of my cock first.”

“I’m so sorry to put you through such an ordeal, husband.” I place my hand to my chest in mock apology, batting my eyelashes at him, and the corners of his mouth tip up in a grin.

“The time for talking is over. Now give me that mouth to fuck, princess.”
And I do.

Afterwards, we lay naked in bed. I sigh on his chest while he caresses my back.

“I hate jet lag.”

“Should I get you a sleeping pill or something?”

“Or we could have that heart-to-heart talk you were eager to have.”

“I was eager for exactly what happened,” he says, grinning at me.

I turn onto my belly and rest my face in my hands.

“You said I didn’t trust you. I tend to not trust what you do with information.”

“Smart woman.”

“I’m serious.”

He sighs, the playfulness threatening to tip over any second. We are a work in progress.

“I know you are.”

“You have no idea how badly I wanted to leave. I went through my escape plan every night.”

“And now?”

“Now, I don’t, Kieran. But that doesn’t mean I will just accept it when you do things like that.

He twirls a strand of my hair. “You’ll be my ruin in the end, won’t you?”

I seek his eyes where so many emotions mirror mine. “I don’t want to ruin you. I just want to live with you and see where things go for us.”

“I know where they’re going.”

“Yeah? I’d like to hear that.”

He rolls me under him and says, “I’d like to show you. For the rest of my life.”

The next morning after we have breakfast, Kieran kisses me, leaving me hungry for more. That has been my permanent state around him. My body and heart are never satisfied. Tamara clears her throat and I snap out of my

trance.

“You have a dreamy expression on your face.”

“Do I?” I say and feel my cheeks blush.

“I knew you were right for each other.”

I sip from my coffee and text Chiara.

I’m back home. How are you?

You call that home? That’s not home. Did that psycho brainwash you?

I put the phone aside, frowning, and Tamara asks, “What happened?”

“My best friend.”

“Is she all right?”

“I don’t think so.”

Silence descends over the table. I stand up, my shoulders heavy. Chiara’s unhappiness pains me. I spend the day tending to the garden, smiling whenever Kieran sends me a message.

I’m in the middle of a meeting, and all I can think of is you naked swimming in the sea.

Well, we can arrange that. We have a pool.

The moment he parks the car, I type another message and discard my phone on the lounge seat.

Find me.

My heart thumps in my chest, seeing the lights going on in the house. Kieran steps onto our bedroom balcony and our eyes connect. The mischief within his has my skin prickling. The seconds tick with desire as I wait for him to come to me. He strides to me, oozing that raw manpower, wearing just a towel around his defined torso. I float on my back and he curses under his breath. “Fuck, you’re naked.”

He yanks the towel away and dives into the water. When he surfaces, he slides his hair back, and my ovaries let out an appreciative sigh. I wrap my arms and legs around him. He’s a beautiful, sculpted masterpiece. And all mine.

“What are you thinking right now?” I ask.

“That I’m happy?” I splash some water in his face and he adds, “That I can’t wait to fuck you.”

I bite my lip. “Someone might see us.”

“None of my men would be stupid enough to look this way.”

“Cocky as ever, husband.”

“Wife, I know what I am talking about.”

I roll my eyes at him, but the fun ends when his fingers find my core. I’ve been soaked since the moment I heard him arrive. I’m like Pavlov’s dog when he heard the bell.

He slips inside of me easily. I am shamefully wet and ready. I bite his shoulder to muffle my moans, my back hitting the wall of the pool.

“Give me your moans, sweetheart.”

“But, Kieran...”

He angles my head and holds me like this, thrusting even deeper inside me. I cannot suppress the moans anymore, and I don’t care. Pleasure breaks like thunder in my belly, and I cling to him for support.

We stay like this a while longer, his back propped on the pool wall, and I on his chest.

“How was your day?”

“The usual. Wanting to come home to you sooner.”

A smile blooms on my face. He kisses my temple and adds, “Your brother is coming by tomorrow.”

“You told him?”

“That he supposedly has an uncle he never knew about?” His voice is thick with incredulity.

“Kieran.”

“Why are you angry at me right now?”

“I wanted to tell him when—”

“When what? You were sure? We both know it’s far-fetched.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

I want to preserve something from my mom. Is that so wrong, holding on to hope? I wish he’d understand.

I get out of the pool and put my bathrobe on.

In the shower, his words hit me. There is absolutely no reason to believe my uncle is lying. I will solve the mystery regarding him.

In bed, I am half asleep when I feel him climbing into bed next to me and it’s only then that I give in to sleep completely.

“I don’t like when we go to bed mad,” he says in the morning, kissing my neck.

“That wasn’t a fight. It was a disagreement.”

“So if you go to sleep without talking to me, that’s a disagreement? What would you do after we fight?”

“Don’t try to find out,” I say, tilting my head for a good morning kiss.

After we change, we find Cameron at the breakfast table. We hug and his eyes take me in. He nods as if agreeing to something going on in his head.

I set down my empty cup of tea and say, “Okay, what do you want to know? Because I told Kieran everything I know already.”

“Sis, we don’t have a damn uncle. I would have known.” He eyes me with a look full of compassion.

“Or maybe we have, and he was kept away for a reason.”

“You said Mom entrusted him with you?”

“Yes.”

Cameron leans back in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Then why wouldn’t he contact me as well?”

“Maybe he thought . . .”

“That I am my father’s son?”

“Cam, I will know more when I talk to him. Maybe we have some other relatives. I’d like to visit them.”

“No,” both he and Kieran shout at the same time.

“I wasn’t asking.”

Kieran curses under his breath and my brother stares at me. “I haven’t risked everything to keep you from danger only for you to go into it headfirst.”

“I’ll ask him to visit the first few times until you trust him.”

They exchange a glance as if saying, “We don’t trust anyone.”

Kieran’s phone rings and he answers.

“How was the honeymoon?” Cameron asks.

“Incredible.” I am about to tell him all the places we visited when my phone rings and I see Lauren’s name on the screen. With trembling fingers, I accept it.

“You got accepted at Boston University.”

I squeal and jump up and down. “I got accepted,” I mouth to them. I can’t believe I’m finally going to college.

“Thank you so much.”

“You did all the work. Your scores got you in. Congratulations. I’ll be in touch later this week.”

I hang up, and Kieran wraps his arms around me while I cry in his chest. He lifts my chin and says, “I hate when you cry.”

“These are happy tears. It’s just...I never thought...”

“None of us would have let you get anything less than everything you wanted,” he says, and I snuggle myself to him.

“What happened?” Tamara asks, worry ringing in her voice.

“She just got accepted to college.”

“I am so happy for you, my dear.”

After breakfast, Cameron and Kieran lock themselves in his office for the rest of the day. I hum as I open my laptop and read what I have been writing. I would have never thought I’d write thrillers, yet I’m drawn to the suspense and grit. When I meet my word count for the day, I go outside and tend to my plants. I lift my gaze to the sky, hoping perhaps a part of my mom is in the air that gathers just for me whenever I talk to her.

Kieran finds me talking to the plants, lips pursed in a poor attempt to suppress his amusement.

“I’m not crazy.” I stick my tongue out at him.

“But you’d tell me if they answer back, right?”

I slap a glove on his thigh. While his entire attention is on my face, I burrow my hands into the watery earth. I smile at him and press my hand on his cheek when I stand in front of him.

Surprise transforms his face.

“That wasn’t nice, was it, sweetheart?” he says in a low, husky voice, wiring up my body.

I take off and squeal as he grabs the hose, chasing after me. I laugh so hard my stomach hurts.

“Dinner is ready,” Tamara says, wearing the brightest smile.

Soaked from head to toe, water drips off of us to the floor in the hallway. She passes us two towels and puts her hands on her hips, shaking her head at us, trying hard to suppress her amusement.

The doorbell rings. My husband pushes me behind him.

Tamara opens the door and goes still when Kieran’s mother steps inside. I remember the elegant woman, her hair always pulled back in a tight bun. It’s been years since I last saw her. Nora’s followed by a sweet girl, grinning at us, her dimples on display.

“She’s already making a fool out of you. Just look at you.”

At the tension engulfing the hallway, I sway on my feet. “Hello, Miss Nora.”

“Get changed. It’s not appropriate to receive guests like this.”

I blink at her, taken aback by the animosity dripping from every syllable

like acid settling in my stomach.

“Mother, this is my house. Next time, call before you come unannounced.”

My chest constricts as I witness the decline of their relationship.

“Your sister wanted to see you.”

Leonie runs to him and Kieran crouches down to her. Something happens in my chest when I see him with kids.

“Hi, I’m Aurora. You were a baby the last time I saw you.”

“Hi, Aurora, I’m Leonie. I have so many questions.”

“Give us a few minutes to change clothes, and then we’ll talk, okay?”

She nods, and Kieran and I go upstairs. His mood has plummeted, and I doubt it will improve tonight.

In the shower, his entire body is stiff with tension. He closes his eyes, his hands balled at his sides. I uncurl them, smiling at him, and some tension slips away. He pushes me up the wall and slams his lips on mine, devouring my mouth as if it can take all the unease away.

We pant when the kiss ends, and he places his forehead on mine.

“I wanted to take you out and celebrate.”

I stroke his arm. “It’s okay. We can do that another time.”

“My mother, she can be—”

She doesn’t like me, and it pains me. She was such a huge part of my life when I was little. Nora and my mother were best friends. I guess her resentment transferred to me. It was definitely hard for her, my mother, her best friend, and her husband. The betrayal must run deep. The thought alone of Chiara and Kieran would make me go berserk.

We quickly dress, and then we head downstairs.

“If she continues being rude to you, I won’t stand for it.”

I take his hand in mine, interlacing our fingers, and say, “She’s hurting, Kieran.”

“But you are not to blame.”

I love how he would protect me even against his mother, but this is also not right.

“She’s your mother. She loves you.”

He scoffs and cocks his head to the side. “No, she doesn’t.”

I refuse to believe that.

In the dining room, we find Nora smiling at the little one, so much love shining in her eyes, but it vanishes the moment we step inside.

We take our seats at the table and she says, “Can’t I have dinner with just my kids, without the daughter of that woman?”

“The daughter of that woman is my wife, Mother. Aurora’s place is next to me. This is her home too.”

“It’s okay, Kieran.”

Nora looks at me, surprise transforming her face, but he shoots me a warning look and I remain seated.

“You’re pretty,” Leonie says.

“Thank you, you’re prettier.” She giggles and continues eating.

The silence is so stiff my back might break.

When we finish eating, Leonie asks her mother if she can go to the kitchen. Thinking it would do them good if I let them have a moment, I extend my hand. She takes it and we walk to the kitchen.

“I found this new cookie recipe. Can we make it together?” she asks Tamara, eyes sparkling.

“Let me finish this up first, sweetie.”

Leonie looks at me and shifts from foot to foot. “You could stay too.”

“I’d love that.”

We prepare the dough using extra chocolate chips. “We’re going to stay the entire weekend,” she says, wiping the flour from her face.

Tamara and I exchange a look. This will be tense, but I smile at the little girl, her happiness infectious.

“We can go swimming tomorrow,” I offer, and her blue eyes widen.

She bounces up and down while we finish putting the cookies in the oven. This is how Kieran and Nora find us. My husband smiles at us with fondness, and even his mother’s lips flinch into a smile that vanishes just as quickly.

“Bedtime.”

Leonie goes to her mother, but she runs right back to me, and says, “I like you.”

Three simple words that warm my heart.

“I like you too.”

“Can we be friends?”

“Leonie, that’s enough,” her mother says and her little face falls.

I bend down and say, “I’d love to be your friend.”

They disappear up the stairs and Tamara excuses herself. Alone with my husband, I find his brows pinched, exhaustion taking over his features.

“That bad?”

His grunt is answer enough.

I loop my elbow around his and say, "Let's take a walk."

We stroll down the pathway and halt at the forest entrance. Owls hoot, unperturbed, secluded by the thick leaves. The round moon peeks through the branches. He kicks a few stones with his shoe, looking at the dense forest.

"Would you like to talk?"

"Talk, huh?"

"Yes, you open your mouth and speak and hope the other person listens. But rest assured, I am a good listener."

Kieran chuckles lightly, and we drop onto the bench.

"My mother hates me, sweetheart. There is not much to say about it."

I want to say I remember her, how she fussed around him. Her eyes used to shine with the same love as she has for her daughter. She used to be warm, caring.

"I knew about your mother and my father having an affair."

I blink at him, shock muting me. My weight liquefies and seeps through the wood of the bench. "My mother will never get past the betrayal, which I get. I think I'd go ballistic, thinking about the woman I love and my best friend fucking behind my back."

His eyes find me, dark and full of possession. At the intensity, my throat dries, and I push the words out.

"I'd react the same."

He nods as if satisfied with my answer and he goes on, "But he was my father, and I loved him, regardless. When I caught them, I was so angry. I yelled at them. I knew things would go to shit, and quickly."

"They were in love, Kieran."

"They were selfish and reckless."

Silence falls for a moment, "Love, loyalty, family. What do they mean when the heart wants what it wants?"

He leans against his palms, looking up. "They left a trail of destruction behind them."

"I hope that in whatever form, they're together."

"They were together in high school, and they had a huge argument, so they broke up. When he came back, your mother had already married your father."

"Do you think my father knew?"

"I don't think so. Silas wouldn't have married her."

“They still didn’t deserve to be killed, Kieran.”

He grips the bench, and his stare pins me in place. “Your father knew you were in the car. For that alone, he deserves to die. And he will. I will destroy anyone who tries to harm you. No one will survive my wrath.”

“Am I a possession?”

His angry eyes answer for me. “You don’t possess anyone who doesn’t want to be possessed.”

“I thought you wanted to possess me.”

“I want you to only want me.”

“Why?”

“It’s only fair because you’re everything to me.”

We spend a while inhaling the freshness of the forest, hearing the skitter of animals in the bushes, their eyes watching the intruders. When I can’t suppress my yawns, Kieran takes my hand in his, and with my head resting against his arm, we go back inside.

On Saturday morning, we are all seated around the table. Nora’s eyes don’t stop shooting daggers at me or Kieran.

“Can we swim now?” Leonie asks.

We move outside to the pool. Tamara anticipated this, and refreshments are waiting for us on the table. I jump into the pool, and Leonie giggles, following me.

“Look how good I can swim.”

I clap, encouraging her, and with every praise, she smiles wider.

Kieran stretches his hands out and dives into the pool with the grace of a professional swimmer, cutting through the water with swift precision. It’s a cacophony of giggles and shrieks whenever he catches her.

“You’re good with kids,” I say as he wraps his arms around me. He places his chin on my shoulder and we watch Leonie holding her breath underwater.

“I could say the same about you.”

I trail a finger over his arm. “So, would you like kids?”

“Yes, a few.”

“A few?”

He whispers in my ear, causing goose bumps to appear. “Well, it depends on how many you want to give me.”

We are way too young to think about that. As if he knows what I am thinking, he says, “But only when you’re ready. College first. Maybe publish some of your stories too. I’m happy as long as I have you.”

I love him so much. My heart expands with him filling up all the space.

“Kieran, Kieran,” Leonie says, “Sixty seconds.”

“Sixty-two,” he adds, and she beams at him, counting with her. “You’re getting better.”

He kisses me and goes to her. I push myself off the edge of the pool and dry myself.

On the lounge chair, I put sunblock on, sipping from a glass of lemonade, and push the sunglasses up my forehead.

“Your mother would be proud. I guess at least one of you got a Hunt man.”

“I. Am. Not. Her.”

I love my mom deeply, but what she did is not something I am proud of. Yet, that doesn’t give me the right to judge.

“Get pregnant and trap him with a baby. Then you will definitely stay for good.”

“I will stay because we love each other, and it has nothing to do with anything else.”

Great, I just told his mother I love him. I’m not even a hundred percent sure he actually loves me back. I know he’s obsessed with me, utterly possessive, but does that count as love? Can you know for sure if the other person hasn’t said the words? My mood shifts from great to nagging thoughts.

“I am sorry you had to go through that. I can only imagine how terrible a betrayal that is, but I also remember the woman who chased after me, made cookies, and was the best mother to her son. I miss her, and I know Kieran misses her too.”

Her eyes widen and contradictory emotions flash in her green eyes. She opens her mouth, but clamps it and disappears inside the house instead.

Kieran asks me with his eyes if everything is all right and I shrug, because I don’t know.

“Come on, we’re going inside,” I say and stand up with a towel.

“Five more minutes.”

“Leonie, you said that five minutes ago.” Her doe eyes don’t work on me when the sun is high in the sky.

She sighs, but nods. After I dry her, she runs into the house.

“That goes for you too,” I say, approaching the pool, my hands on my hips.

“Fuck, I’m hard now. I like you bossy.”

I shake my head at him and he says, “Help me out?”

I lower my hand and the asshole pulls me into the water with him, his laughter echoing around us. I slap his chest as I cough the water out.

“Sweetheart, that was too easy.”

“Ugh.”

But he kisses me, silencing my protests.

“And here I was, about to ask you to help me with something,” I say, lowering my voice into hopefully a seductive tone, grazing my nails over his nipples.

“Is that so?”

“But now I am all wet.”

“You being wet is my favorite.”

He has no shame. I giggle.

“So, does the offer still stand?” he says and wiggles his eyebrows at me. I burst into laughter, but the playfulness ends when his hands dig into my waist and his tongue plunges into my mouth.

“Kieran, your mother or Leonie could see us,” I say through his kisses, but still locking my arms around his neck. I am so very weak when it comes to him.

He groans in frustration and buries his head between my breasts. With his hands on my ass, he pushes me out of the pool and carries me to our room.

From the top of the stairs, his lips stay glued to mine, our hands on each other, desperation pushing us to hurry. He shuts the door with his foot. We drop to our bed and he yanks my two-piece swimsuit off me, his tongue lapping at every inch of my body. I thrash on the bed, my need for him skyrocketing.

“Kieran, inside me. Now. Right now.”

I don’t need foreplay, just him inside of me.

In one thrust he’s inside of me, filling me, giving me all he has. I crave the fullness, the stretch, my eyes rolling to the back of my head. Nothing compares to the high he sends me to.

“Your pussy was made to take my cock, wasn’t it?”

“Yesss.”

He grips the headboard and thrusts again, black dots peppering my vision. I claw at his back as he takes me higher until I come with a stuttered breath.

With one final push, he stills inside of me.

As we come down from our endorphin high, my heartbeats normalize. Satiated, I place my head on his chest and he strokes my back. I love the cuddles after just as much. The tenderness, the care.

“I’m happy.”

“That’s all I want, sweetheart.”

I doze off, happiness flowing through my insides like a river.

After our nap, I meet with Leonie in the library and we both pick our favorite armchairs and books, reading in companionable silence.

Kieran steps inside, brows furrowed and says, “I have a meeting with the guys. You okay if I leave for a little while?”

I can sense his worry about leaving me alone with his mother. Putting the book beside me, I go to him, placing my hands on his chest. “I will be fine.”

“Sure?”

“Go. And, by the way, I’d like to see Chiara sometime soon.”

“Set something up and I’ll work it out with Cato.”

After a lingering kiss that goes straight to my toes, I push him toward the door.

He gives me that panty-melting grin of his, full of promise and orgasms, and my breath hitches.

“You kiss a lot,” Leonie says. She blushes and my cheeks heat as well.

“We shouldn’t do that in front of you.”

“It’s a bit gross but I can cover my eyes.” She smiles with her whole mouth, her front tooth missing.

“I’ll show you gross,” I tease. She dashes off and I run after her. She squeals when I catch her. Our fun stops the moment her mother walks inside.

“What are you doing to my daughter?” she asks, her voice taking on a fearful tone.

I stop tickling her.

“We were playing, Mommy.”

She gathers Leonie, and I am left stunned in the library, having no idea how to fix this, but I would never harm Leonie.

The thought that she thinks I might has my heart in a fist.

Not being able to focus on the words on the page, I close it and go to the garden.

On my knees, I tend to the plants, when a shadow falls on me. I raise my chin and Nora points at the garden.

“This could have been done better.”

“Then show me,” I say instead of telling her the Sisters taught me well.

A fine line digs between her brows while I rise to my feet and grab another pair of gloves.

I offer them to her, and her eyes switch from them to the garden. I sigh, prepared for her to turn me down.

She takes the gloves, and relief replaces the uncomfortable feeling. I watch her tending to the plants with care, talking to them.

“They love that. They react to pleasant sounds and even to intentions. There was this experiment done, and a flower recognized the person who killed another flower.”

I am stunned. This has been the longest she has talked to me, and with no trace of animosity.

I sit next to her while she says, “This garden is beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not Rebecca. And I am sorry about the way I treated you. You were an innocent child.”

“I am sorry for what they did to you.”

Her eyes seek mine. I am sure she’s looking for the lie she wants to detect, but she finds none.

She looks in the distance, a forlorn expression etched on her face. “It was her betrayal that shattered me. Rebecca was my best friend. And then she got herself killed and brought that man who has always been plain evil back to my door.”

“You’re afraid for Kieran.”

“Of course I am. He’s my boy.”

“He loves you too.”

She wipes at her eyes, fingertips glistening with the shed tears.

“You make him happy. I don’t remember the last time I saw Kieran like he is with you: carefree, young, happy, in love.”

My throat traps the words inside with the emotions thickening in my vocal cords.

“I’m sorry for my behavior.”

“Apology accepted.”

We work in a harmonious silence, plucking the withered weeds out and

watering the plants. Leonie runs over and plops down next to us, insisting she wants to help. And until the sun sets, we make a new bed of freshly planted flowers.

This is how Kieran finds us, his eyes set on mine. I nod, assuring him I am all right.

“You sure you’re all right?” he asks on the way inside.

“She’s hurt, Kieran. Maybe we should invite them over more often.”

“My own personal beam of light,” he says, kissing my temple.

During dinner, his mother interacts more with him, and he even smiles every now and then. My heart aches for him, but I also hope things will get better from now on.

The next day, we wave goodbye to them from the top of the marbled stairs, and Kieran wraps his arms around me.

“It’s just you and me now, wife.”

Oh, heart, stop fluttering like this.

We spend the day sunbathing and swimming. It’s the kind of Sunday that I never want to miss again. Everything is brighter, painting everything in vivid colors and sounds.

“I never thought it would be like this.”

He takes my hand in his and places a kiss in the center of my palm.

“Me neither.”

Vulnerability cracks that strong façade of his. He is good at guarding his feelings, but I have learned to peek through the opaque curtain.

“Kieran?”

“Already know me so well?”

At my pointed look, he adds, “I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

His head drops, and he runs a hand through his hair. “I thought I could control my feelings for you. I guess I found something I can’t control at all.”

“It’s okay to feel fear once in a while.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“I am right here.”

“Sweetheart. I am not letting you go anywhere.”

It used to scare me. It used to anger me. Now it reassures me, comforts me.

I challenge him with a look and he challenges me right back. Then my back hits the grass, his fingers splayed on my bare thighs. Unapologetic

possessiveness burns in his eyes, but it's him, and the whole package he represents is fascinating, savage, and mine.

“So sure of yourself?” I say playfully and thread my fingers through his hair. He bites my jaw.

“Aurora, I'll destroy this world to find you. I'd bring heaven to your feet. I'd take over hell just for you to be safe.”

I believe him. I cup his face and peck his lips. Our breaths mingle, our foreheads pressing together. “You're the best thing that happened to me. I don't deserve you, but I don't care either, because you're mine.”

“Are you mine?”

“I have been yours since I was a boy who watched over you. I am yours as the man who can't live without you.”

His confession shocks me to my core, fills me with endless euphoria.

He drops onto his back next to me as we stare into the cloudless sky. He interlaces our fingers. I breathe in and let life seep through every crevice of my being.

The title '30 KIERAN' is centered on the page. The number '30' is rendered in a large, bold, serif font, with the background behind it appearing cracked and shattered. Below the number, the name 'KIERAN' is written in a smaller, all-caps, serif font. The overall aesthetic is dark and dramatic.

The night reigns outside, while next to me in bed, my wife reigns over me. My eyes take her in; a beauty no poem could express, no painting could capture her essence. She's a song not written yet, because the verses are trapped in heaven where no mortal has access.

I watch her sleep, thinking about how she's changed everything. Even my mother started to like her. It shocked me that she kissed my cheek before she and my sister left, and called me her boy. All because of this woman, this good woman of mine who lays in my bed. Asleep, protected, safe, and loved. My love for her chased the sleep away, but I don't care.

What did you do to me? Bring me to my knees so swiftly I had no time to react. Aurora stirs in her sleep and her eyes open, a small line appearing between her brows.

"Can't sleep?"

Her worry undoes me, rips my insides to pieces and puts them back together. She rubs the sleep away and scoots upright.

"Go to sleep, sweetheart. I'm fine."

Tipping the corners of my mouth into a smile, I try to reassure her while I play with a lock of her hair. My entire life changed the moment she barged back into it.

"Why don't you hate me?" I ask her.

I remember all I did, a scarred man desperate for control. I could have lost the best thing in my life. Regret tastes rotten on my tongue.

The words of Sister Theodora have haunted me, mostly because they are

true. My leash is just longer than her father's.

Aurora's eyebrows draw further together.

"Do you want me to hate you?"

No, I want you to be happy, to love me back. It's official, I've become a statistic. The right woman turns you into a sappy, lovesick fool.

"I gave you so many reasons. And I'll probably give you more."

I try to put myself in her position, changing one prison for the other. The only difference is in this one, the warden is me. A man who is smitten with her. She may have a lot more freedom now, but it's mostly because of that fucking chip. I took her free will away, while I dangle something she can't refuse in her face. Me in exchange for small freedoms that should have been a right, not a reward.

I push myself from the bed, the thoughts driving me crazy, the air in the room suffocating me. I slide the doors to the balcony open, grip the banister, and crane my neck to the stars twinkling in the sky.

If I was a good man, I would have made sure her wings can spread even wider, not clip them. My conscience finally woke up and it's having a blast at my turmoil.

Aurora tiptoes to me, wrapped in one of my shirts, and my inner beast growls in satisfaction.

She offers me a small smile.

I am sorry, Aurora, but I can't let you go. I let her see the war brewing in my eyes. I turn my face to the forest stretching around us. Knowing the mansion of that bastard is just past the trees reignites my anger. She wouldn't have to do any of this if it weren't for that greedy asshole. I was too lenient with him, but not anymore. I can't let her go, but starting tomorrow I'll go on the offensive. Silas will pay for his and my sins as well.

Aurora places a kiss between my shoulder blades, and I clasp her hands.

"Talk to me."

"You wouldn't like what I am thinking about."

"Planning someone's demise?" she asks like it is an ordinary question. I turn to her, lifting her to my chest, and she crosses her legs around me.

"I don't want to talk anymore. Just let me be inside of you."

And that's exactly what I do until she falls asleep, my name rolling from her lips in a confession of sin with no regrets. I soak it in from her, hoping she'll grant me her absolution, and sleep finds me as well.

While she lies on her side of the bed, hair cascading over the pillow and her skin glowing in the morning light, I force myself not to kiss her awake. After I get dressed in the walk-in closet, I go downstairs, and Tamara puts a cup of coffee in front of me.

“Let her sleep today.”

“You couldn’t sleep?”

This woman knows me better than my own mother. My jaw tightens and she takes a seat beside me. It’s a clear sign I won’t like what she’s going to say. I shoot her a warning look, but she ignores it.

“There is a difference between being a bad person by choice and doing bad things for a higher purpose.”

“Semantics.”

She sighs and squeezes my hand. “Your mother should have reacted better. Nothing that happened was your choice. You had to do what you had to do for everyone to still have this life. But now you have that woman up there. She’s good and loving, and you owe it to her to not let your inner demons out.”

“I’d never hurt her.”

“Not physically, Kieran, but the level of her empathy is something I have never witnessed before.”

“What does a good woman like her find in someone like me?” The words come out, surprising me. It’s a thought I had for a while now.

Is Aurora trying to save me? That’s impossible. I live and breathe the lifestyle I chose, having one foot in the legal world and the other firmly planted in the criminal world.

“The things I’ve done to her . . .”

“Love, my dear, is the world’s panacea. Do better by her.”

The words stick in my throat as I swallow the rest of the coffee and drive to the bank.

I submerge myself in work for the rest of the day, checking the new safe system. Inside, gold is stacked in the center from floor to ceiling. After having back-to-back meetings, I finally leave for the day.

At the compound, Cameron and Cato greet me.

“Shouldn’t you be more relaxed after the honeymoon?”

“Yes, I was, until I came back to you two.”

They chuckle, but Cato’s smile is more forced.

“I see you’re still alive.”

“Fuck off.”

My phone pings and it’s a selfie of Aurora in the garden. I zoom in on the pic, mesmerized, and type: **You’re so beautiful, sweetheart.**

“The king has fallen.”

I shoot them a warning glance while they clink glasses, enjoying my rapture, my perdition.

“What kind of friends are you? Shouldn’t you at least be happy for me?”

Cato sinks back in the seat, crossing his arms, arching a brow in disbelief.

“Har har. My wife conspires against me every waking moment. She’s either planning her escape or how to kill me and get away with it. I’m in survival mode twenty-four-seven. I don’t give a flying fuck if you’re happy. At least if you were miserable, we could have been on the same page. Actually, why the fuck is he happy?” he turns and asks Cameron.

Both I and Cam stare at him in disbelief. I don’t think I’ve heard him talk this much, ever. Cato’s more of a doer than a talker, as if words are there to inconvenience him from getting work done quicker.

“I need something stronger,” he says, taking a swig straight from the bottle.

“Chiara’s a woman, and the last time I checked, the ladies flock to you as if you were a newly discovered popstar.”

His mouth twitches and he rakes a hand through his hair. “Not this woman.”

“Then you’ve lost your touch,” Cameron says with a disinterested shrug.

“I didn’t lose anything.”

“Then prove us wrong, instead of sulking.”

“We’ll see how well you do when your time comes.”

“She’ll stand no chance. I know how to work my magic with the ladies.”

“This idiot has no idea. I can’t wait,” I say to no one in particular.

Cato and I clink our glasses. I almost feel sorry for Cameron.

“Anything new?” Cato asks.

“I can’t wait to find the bastard claiming he’s our uncle.”

“Are you a hundred percent sure?” I ask. Maybe we missed something.

“My father would have found that out.”

“And if he didn’t, and he is who he says he is, then he is dangerous and smart,” Cato says.

“Did my sister say more?”

“No. But in her mind, she thinks I am just going to allow her to visit him

and form a family bond.”

“Don’t let Aurora hear you say that.”

I grit my teeth at Cato’s jab.

“I love that woman, but not even she can stop me from doing what I think should be done. Are we fucking clear?”

He nods, dropping the sarcasm.

I point to the tattoo under my suit jacket. “Nothing will change this.”

We take our seats at the triangular table. In front of us are folders, tracking all our major clients’ moves. I zero in on a picture of Hayden in his private jet, his eyes fixed on a bunch of photos. I look closer and I see red.

“That’s Aurora.”

“What?” Cato snaps his head to me, and Cameron takes the photo from his own folder.

“What are you going to do?”

“Let’s get him invited to the next gala.”

I shoot my assistant a message and tell her to send Hayden an invite.

I rest my cheek on two fingers and say, “We’ll invite Silas and Delaney too. When their guard is down, we roll out the plan.”

“And what about Hayden?” Cato asks.

“That will be my problem.”

“Hayden can’t be who he claims to be. It can’t be. It doesn’t add up,” Cameron says, staring at the pictures.

“I know.”

Either my wife is lying—the thought alone spirals me into madness—or he is. Then why the interest in my wife?

“But I’ll get my answers.”

With that, I leave them and slam the door shut, tugging at my jacket button.

I can’t let Aurora see me this wired. I take a moment to calm down before I climb out of the car. When I step inside the house, Aurora jumps right into my arms.

I love this woman and I would die to protect her.

“Missed me, huh?”

“Not a lot, just this much.” She parts her thumb and forefinger into an almost indistinguishable gap and giggles. I want her to be happy and carefree. Nothing bad will ever touch her, except me. I push her into the wall, her breath hitching. Her reactions fire up my desire.

“Let me show you how much I fucking missed you today.”

She pants by the time I stop ravishing her lips. She pats her mouth, looking gorgeous with swollen, pink lips, and her eyes glazed over.

After dinner, I throw her over my shoulder and carry her to our bedroom, where I splay her on our bed. Ravishing her pussy, I get lost in fucking her. Her moans ignite a frenzy. I thrust deeper, wanting to bury myself in her pussy and never come out.

She scratches my back, and the passion rages in my blood. We are both sweaty and spent by the time I am finished taking her.

She has her arms on my chest, chin propped on them. “How was your day?”

“Busy.”

“Is there more?”

“What gave it away?” I chuckle, more at ease now that she’s in my arms, where no one can take her away. “Was I too rough?”

“I thought you were on a mission to discover another hymen.”

My lips twitch. If someone can alleviate this onslaught of unease in me, it’s her.

Nothing and no one else.

I watch her eating her breakfast and want to trust her, but a nagging feeling persists.

“Let’s go to my office,” I say and she follows me with her stare, knowing something is wrong. I feel exposed, raw, and on edge.

I dial Hayden, pressing my phone to my ear. If he thinks he has all the power, I will prove to him how wrong he is. I just need to bide my time.

“Kieran.”

I draw the silence out before I answer back. “Hayden.”

“I received your invitation. I am looking forward to it.”

His eagerness doesn’t sit well with me.

“Is my money circulating?”

“You’re getting richer every day.”

“Good to hear.”

I hang up and lay the pictures of him on the table. Aurora peeks inside, and I hope she passes this test. I don’t know what I will do if she lies to me.

“What are you doing?”

“Researching a client.”

She approaches me, and my gaze never falters from her.

Her eyes move from picture to picture. They widen, betraying the recognition. She purses her lips and swallows. I urge her with my mind to tell me it's him. She doesn't, butchering something inside of me.

“Why do you have pictures of your clients?” she asks, her voice above a whisper.

“Making sure they won't try to get to me, or worse, steal something of mine.”

A shudder rocks her, and her fingers tremble as she holds one of the pictures in her hand.

Anticipation of her next words turns my muscles rigid. If my body strains any more, I will break a bone.

“I'll let you work.”

No kiss, no eye contact. I feel broken in two.



My thoughts are scrambled like pieces of two different puzzles. In the hallway, I collapse against his office door, not understanding what transpired in there. What should I do? That was my uncle. I have the slight impression Kieran did that on purpose.

Testing me.

Always testing me.

Sadness and anger clamor for the prime spot. I hate when Kieran is so cold and calculating, testing my loyalty. If my love for him is not enough to trust me, then we're doomed. A lone tear trickles down my cheek. I wipe the tear away and go to the library.

If he wants to deal with things between us as he does with his business, then the loss is on him. I am not willing to fight to make our marriage work by myself.

Every hour he remains locked in his office is another hour where the claws of anger grip me tighter in their clutches. I shut the book I'm trying to read and throw my head back against the armchair.

The door creaks open and Kieran leans against the frame, his hands tucked in his pants, ankles crossed. His hot gaze never falters.

"I made a dinner reservation."

Staring at him, disappointment settles deep inside of me.

I place the book on the small table, push myself off the chair, and go upstairs. I make quick work of changing into a green satin cocktail dress, put on my makeup, and let my hair flow down my back. He waits for me at the

bottom of the stairs.

“You look beautiful.” A mist of warmth seeps through his voice, resounding with honesty, and I hold on to the hope.

In the car, the silence suffocates me.

“Daniel, I’d like to hear some music.”

His eyes find mine in the rearview mirror, his warm gaze infusing strength. Life with Kieran will always be a roller coaster.

We reach our destination, one of those restaurants that serve food in the front room with a nightclub in the back. A maître d’ shows us to the farthest corner, where candles are lit on the table. It would have been romantic if not for my husband acting like a douchebag. I gave him my heart, body, and freedom, but he wants more. All my secrets and my trust, even though the only secret I hide from him is not mine to tell.

I down the first glass and pour myself another.

“That’s enough.”

I take a few bites of my meal before pushing the plate away.

“Eat.”

Instead, I grab and toss back a second glass of sparkling, golden liquid. The bubbles glide down my throat, warming my stomach.

“Am I not being the perfect puppet you desire, husband?” I say and rim the glass with a finger. I pour myself a third glass, filling it to the top. His jaw tics. I giggle and take a sip.

“Don’t drink that. You’re going to regret it in the morning.”

“But not tonight,” I say and take a long gulp. “I want to go dancing.”

He leans over a bit, his chest peeking from his shirt. “The only place you’re going to move your ass is in our bed.”

I want to dance. I am going to dance. Standing up, I giggle as I stumble on my feet, knocking my hip on the table.

Kieran is already up and following me when I slip through the club doors. I follow the music, and a bulky man trails his eyes over me in appreciation, letting me in.

The music blasts from the speakers and I sway my hips, hands in the air, shaking my head.

A hand sneaks around my waist. I stiffen and tilt my head.

“You shouldn’t touch me,” I say to the blond guy, wearing a cocky grin.

“Why not?”

My eyes find Kieran’s. Those eyes keep my heart hostage. Selfish man.

The fire in his eyes could turn glaciers into a volcano.

“Because of me.” He pushes the stranger off me. The poor guy barely catches his footing. His face turns from anger to raising his hands in a non-threatening way at my husband’s murderous expression.

“I am sorry, I didn’t know.” With that, he scurries away, leaving me with my brooding, fuming, and oh-so-sexy man.

“You found me,” I whisper and glide my finger down his buttons.

“Aurora.”

“Oh, it’s serious when you say my name.”

With a shake of his head, he turns me in one swift move, making me breathless, and starts dancing with me, his hands on mine, inflaming my skin.

“I am angry at you.”

“Why? You wanted to dance. We’re dancing.”

His finger brushes my cheek, and I lean into his palm. Then why isn’t he willing to give me what I want most, his trust?

The thumping in my head has me opening one eye. The light streaming from the window is like needles in my eyes. I scoot up and recline against the headboard.

Kieran is sitting in the armchair, legs spread, elbows on his knees, and hands steepled in a triangle. He points to the nightstand, and I see two tablets and a glass of water.

“They’re going to help you with the headache.”

“My head is killing me.”

“You rammed two shots down your throat after you already had too much champagne.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

He sighs and leans back, dark circles under his eyes.

“What am I going to do with you?”

After I swallow the pills with water, I go to him. I move my hips in what I hope is a sultry, lazy walk. The time for letting him give me what I want is over. I’m changing my tactics and I am getting what I want.

He cocks his head, his intense eyes licking at my skin. I straddle him and play with his hair, tugging it a bit to the side. His eyes burn into mine. But I can take the heat. I am the phoenix, he’s the ash.

“Who am I, Kieran?”

He cocks his head. “That’s a loaded question, sweetheart.”

His fingers dig into my waist and I feel his hard-on pressing between my legs.

“This is a marriage. Not a company. You don’t rule over me. You don’t rule over our marriage.”

“So, I don’t own you, wife?” he asks, voice turning sinfully low and gravelly. His hand comes around my neck, holding me captive. The heat, the challenge oozing from him, leaving me dazed. “So, I don’t own this?” His fingers rip my panties, the sting of the torn fabric biting into my hip. He thrusts two fingers inside me, finding me wet. “What about these?” He takes my nipples between his lips, biting, grazing his teeth along the sensitive buds, sucking on them. “What about this?” He slams his mouth on mine and my arms lock on instinct around his neck.

He bends me back, and I hold on to him.

“You still hold on to me, even though I would never let you fall. You don’t trust me, wife.”

“You don’t trust me either, husband.”

He grabs my ass and lifts me, throwing me on the bed. A delicious shudder skitters down my back. I love when he takes control. I stand no chance.

“Let me show you how I do own you, wife.”

After the longest agonizing seconds, he undresses. He takes his time, letting me stew in my need. Once fully naked, he prowls on top of me, subduing me. I have no choice but to take it all.

I cry out his name so many times my throat is hoarse, and my body is spent. Our bed looks like a war zone. I am aware of the world outside bending to the rules of time, but in this room, there is no time, no other reality other than him and me. And he’s proving a point.

He’s inside of me, thrusting in and out. How can he have this stamina when I am short of blacking out after my fourth orgasm?

He lifts my legs, placing my ankles on his shoulders, and I arch my back.

“Kieran.”

“What, sweetheart? Am I too deep?”

“Yesss.”

“Who owns this pussy?”

I don’t answer, though I should. We both know it’s him, but I love seeing

that potent mix of emotions burning in his eyes. He spreads my thighs, holding on to my calves. I had no idea my body could be this flexible. He rotates his hips, hitting the spot again and again and again. I will die of too many orgasms. What a glorious way to go.

“Say it, princess. I’ll do this all day long, all fucking week long.”

The orgasm blasts through me, and I whisper, my head dropping, believing him, “Yours, Kieran.”

“All of you?”

“All of me.”

He spills inside of me while my body rides the aftershocks, a sheen of sweat covering my skin. He climbs between my legs, pressing our foreheads together.

When my breathing normalizes, I say, “You don’t play fair.” It’s threaded with sadness more than with accusation. I bite my lower lip, emotions getting the best of me. Traitorous tears brim in my eyes.

I curl in on myself on my side, but he rolls me to face him. When he sees my tears, he drops his head.

“I-I don’t know any other way.”

My hand lifts to his face.

“You do, but this is your shortcut, Kieran. It’s your proven strategy and you follow it. I wish you wouldn’t do that with me, but . . .”

“This is how I am.”

“Why did you test me? I thought we were past that.” A storm gathers in his eyes but I’m not afraid. I’ve become one with the storm. “Can’t you, for once in your life, believe in something good, trust in this between us?”

“Tell me one good goddamn reason.”

“If you need a reason, then there is nothing I could say to make this better.” Swallowing the hurt, I tilt my head. “What about being your wife?”

“That’s not a good enough reason. In the grand scheme of things, it means shit, like it meant for your mother.”

I blink at him and put a bit of distance between us, scooting over.

“God, I can’t believe you.”

“The truth always hurts more than a thousand sweet lies we keep telling each other.”

“Why are you punishing me?” I say, wrapping my arms around myself. “Is it because your mommy stopped loving you? Or that she sees your father in you?”

“Aurora.”

He doesn't scare me. I tap my lips, expunging the venom his words produced.

“Or is it that this is the only way you can keep things by wanting to control—to own—them?”

“Aurora.”

I raise my hands in sheer exasperation. We're getting nowhere. “I know my name, Kieran.”

He storms out of bed, so I keep provoking him. “Maybe you think you can own and control the world, but you'll never own me.”

He cocks his head, a self-deprecating smile on his mouth.

“You shouldn't have poked the devil.”

“I'm not afraid of you.”

“You never were supposed to fear me,” he shouts and leaves. I lie on the bed, staring at the ceiling. I'm completely astounded by how quickly things broke apart between us. I thought we were past that. I guess I was wrong.

My phone rings. I tell Chiara we had a fight, and how mad I am at him.

“You woke up, thank God. I thought he had you wrapped around his fingers.”

Did I let myself be fooled? Was all this a plan to make me love him? Well, asshole, it worked.

Every hour he stays away rips my heart into shredded pieces lying all around the bedroom. I am not angry any longer. I am despondent.

When the door opens around midnight, at first I think I conjured him back, a ghost driving me crazy. Well, he did.

Kieran steps inside. I pick up the glass from the nightstand and throw it at him. It doesn't hit him, it hits the wall. The water spills down and the shards clink on the floor, broken like my insides.

“Get out,” I scream, and he leans on the wall, wearing dejection over his custom-made suit. I expected him to be cocky: strutting in here, wanting to own me, possess me when all I wanted was for him to love me.

I pick up the glass pitcher as he approaches me.

“I'll hurl this at your head if you don't leave.”

He's either brave or stupid. By the time I make up my mind, his chest presses against mine. He cups my face in his.

“You won.”

“What?” I ask, blinking, the groggy-sounding voice taking me by

surprise.

“I love you.”

The pitcher slips from my hand, crashing onto the floor like my heart spilling into my stomach.

“I am on my knees, Aurora. On my fucking knees. A beggar.”

“Say that again.” He begins, but I shake my head. “The first part.”

“I love you?”

“Is that a question?” I ask, a small smile stretching on my face.

“I love you.” He presses me to him, and I grip his shirt as we tumble to the bed.

“Don’t do that again, Kieran.”

With his forehead pressed against mine and emotions so raw filling the inch between our lips, he says, “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to do this. Loving you scares the crap out of me. I’ve never been scared in my life. But you terrify me, sweetheart. What I feel for you is something I’ve never felt before for anyone else. Only you have the power to destroy me,” he confesses, cupping my face into his shaking hands. Through blurry eyes, I see the fear, the vulnerability, and the regrets burning in his retinas.

“I want you to stay. Let’s work together through this mess.”

“I’ll do better. I know I can.” He shoves a hand through his hair and says, “The thought of you not trusting me, but somehow trusting that man guts me. I don’t believe for one damn second he is your uncle, because he can’t be. I went through all I have on him . . . it’s impossible. Hayden Carrera isn’t your uncle, believe me.”

“He seemed to be telling the truth about wanting to protect me. I believed him. He wasn’t awkward. He didn’t look at me the way you do or in that leering way Delaney did.” The memory alone sends a chill down my spine.

“No man could look at you the way I do.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my world. That’s why.”

I have been feeling my insides die a bit more every hour. But here he is, resurrecting everything. I guess I just need him. So much that it scares me.

“I am scared too, Kieran.”

I caress his jaw, brushing my nose against his.

“Promise me. No more of this.”

“I swear, you’re everything to me. Can I show you how sorry I am, starting with my mouth?”

Heat already gathers between us, a swirling tornado. He gets between my legs and shows me all night long how sorry he truly is, with his tongue, his fingers, and his cock.

I crash on his chest when the sun's rays streak through the window. As we lie in each other's embrace, he kisses my temple. "I was a fool, a jealous prick, and an idiot."

Love is forgiving, and I love him enough to believe every word of his is true.



As Aurora lies asleep on my chest, I sigh at my own stupidity.

I had missed her so much, even though we'd just been apart for a few hours. The time away from her felt endless, like how you miss the sun after days of rain. I have absolutely no idea what to do when it comes to her, or to us. I know how to fuck, but she made me fall in love. Losing control doesn't sit well with me, but I give in. I crave her presence too much.

My life used to be completely all about my work and my brothers, but now she's the biggest part of it.

She deserves a man who knows what to do in a relationship and can treat her right, but she's my first experience with one.

And it's not selfishness to have her so no one else can. I just can't fathom her not being with me. I am ready for the responsibility, for what life means when you have to accommodate two instead of one. I want to be with her because I love her and I believe I am the man for her like she is the woman for me. I kiss her temple once more, and my body gives in to sleep.

Pleasure rocks through me, and my hands grip her hair. I open my eyes to find her between my legs, her lips wrapped around my cock. Fuck, what a way to start the morning.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

She sucks me harder, trailing her tongue over the protruding vein. From root to tip, she takes me down her throat. It feels so good I strangle the sheets. I force myself to let her set the pace as she eyes me with a sultry look, gripping my cock and hollowing out her cheeks, alternating between sucking

faster and slower. She cups my balls, massaging them, driving me fucking insane with lust. I can't hold on any longer.

“Open your mouth, princess. I want to see my cum in your mouth.”

I erupt, and she shows me what a good girl she is.

“Now swallow.”

I thought I fucked out my need for her last night. But with her, it's a desperation, a damn necessity to get inside her.

She swings her leg over my thighs, straddling my lap, taking whatever she wants. And fuck if I won't give her the world wrapped in a pretty bow.

She pumps up and down my length, pushing her pussy down until I'm deep inside her. At the exquisite sensation, my muscles pull taut. With her palms resting on my chest, she starts riding me. While I grip her waist, she gives me the best show of my life. Fuck work, fuck everything else. I lose myself again inside her. I clench my jaw, the pleasure heating up my blood. Fuck, her pussy feels amazing wrapped around my girth. She thrusts her head back as she chases her orgasm. I scoot up, feasting on her pointed nipples begging for attention. And that tips my wife over the release threshold. Incapable of holding on any longer, I come on a low groan.

With her in my arms, that elusive peace I chased in vain on my own returns. I want more of this.

This weekend I am taking my woman somewhere.

“You're smiling,” she says, tapping my nose.

“I'm happy.”

“Maybe, but that is your 'planning something' smile.”

“Do I have one of those too?”

My grin widens. The good girl who turned into my sex goddess. Fuck, now I am hard again.

“Don't distract me with that.”

“Your pussy grinding on my cock. That's his modus operandi, getting hard in your presence.”

She slaps me playfully on my chest, and I say, “Pack a bag. We're leaving for the weekend.”

Her face radiates pure joy, and she jumps off my lap, squealing excitedly.

I pout for her to come back, but she rushes inside the walk-in closet. I am so whipped, trying to decide where we can go for the weekend. The East Coast or the West Coast?

“You didn't tell me where we're going,” she says, poking her head from

the closet.

“That’s what surprise means, sweetheart.”

“Kieran.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you this much. It’s by the ocean.”

Happiness colors those eyes of hers—the magnets to my heart—and her head disappears inside the closet.

“Can’t wait,” she says, humming.

I shoot Cato a text, telling him to bring his wife to the charity gala next week. Aurora misses her friend. He texts back: **That’s not a good idea.**

Aurora will be there too.

Yes, but I’ll have to make sure Chiara doesn’t do something stupid.

If things are going like I think they are, he’ll lose his shit, and soon. And Cato can be a loose cannon with a much darker side given the right incentive.

I am a lucky man with Aurora. She has changed my perspective so much. I doubt she realizes her impact on me. My little tectonic shift, putting the mountain underwater.

She rounds the corner, wearing a yellow ruffled dress, her legs bare, with white sneakers. She puts a big hat on her head, making her look even more adorable.

“Ready. I packed some things for you too.”

Seeing her this excited hits me square in the chest. I behaved like a dick again, but that stops here and now. If I have to seduce my own wife time and time again, I will. She’ll trust me, not only with her life but with her heart as well. And I’ll trust her. And maybe, soon, I’ll hear her say those three little words back to me. I never thought I’d want to hear them this desperately. But I can be patient.

I hold her hand and graze her ass with my finger when she hops in the car, holding back a smile as I take the seat next to her.

When we land in Hawaii, the heat blasts us, but it’s all forgotten when I see her lost in the landscape. She’s taking everything in: the lush greenery, palms sprouting from the ground, hills surrounding us, and the turquoise water stretching over the horizon.

I want to put that exact expression of utter bliss on her face every day. Aurora jumps into my arms. While I twirl her around, I feel with every fiber of my being, her place is in my arms.

After we check into the penthouse suite, we go on an exploration tour. And as we ride our bikes into the sunset, I feel invigorated. My life is more than just work, power, more money, more everything. I am more than good at what I do, but I want to be the best husband to her. I want to have my home, my oasis of tranquility, where I can let go, and just be. She's all that and more for me.

She releases the handlebars, stretching out her hands, smiling at me. Instant panic sets in. What if she falls and gets hurt?

"Sweetheart." Worry threads through my voice at her not gripping the bike's handlebars.

"Even if I fall, you'll take care of me."

We park our bikes at the side of the road and she takes a map out of her backpack. Which makes me chuckle. I snap a photo of her, her eyebrows drawn together in concentration, while I suppress a smile.

"Do you need help?"

"No, I just need a minute."

"Sweetheart."

"What?"

She's sexy when she's all riled up.

"Flip the map. That should help."

She huffs. "I knew that."

My woman has many talents, some I discovered, some I will, but following a map is not one of them. The sun descends behind the hill when she plops on a rock and raises her hands in surrender.

"I give up. I suck at this." She deserves praise for the time she spent trying to figure it out for herself. "I really wanted to go to this waterfall." Not on my watch. That radiant smile has to return—and quickly.

"What about we work as a team? Scoot over, let's decode this stupid map bothering my wife."

She smiles so brightly her eyes light up. I'll make a fool out of myself for the rest of our lives just to see the happiness on her face.

I point at everything we already passed and slide my finger to the road ahead of us.

We reach the waterfall. The moon illuminates the surface, a mirror toward the sky above. Aurora bounces up and down, her excitement infectious.

"We did it."

Three words and my chest swells with pride.

“Skinny dipping?” she asks, sending me a sultry look over her shoulder.

My wife slides the dress off and her skin glows under the moonlight. She dives into the pond and everything else disappears from my mind.

I shed my clothes in record time and join her. She places her hands on my chest, her eyes on me, conveying a hundred different feelings, all warming me up from within.

“Happy?”

She nods and closes her eyes in blissful contentment.

We swim for a while. I dive below the surface and she squeals whenever I graze her legs. My need for her pulsates in my veins and my hands sneak around her waist. Our lips meet, and the whole world slips further away. There is nothing else but my wife’s sweet lips pressed against mine.

She tries to suppress a yawn, but it’s the third in the last few minutes.

We swim to the shore and I pluck out my phone from my jeans, telling Daniel where to pick us up.

“I wanted to stay a little longer.”

“We’ll have tomorrow as well.”

“What about the bikes?”

“Don’t worry about them.”

If it were up to me, she’d never have to worry about anything other than being happy.

Back at the hotel after dinner, we crash into bed and right away, she starts snoring lightly. I follow her into sleep, a grin plastered on my face.

I wake up before her, order breakfast, and then I trail kisses all over her face. She stretches, a happy smile blossoming across her lips. She sits upright, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Her body never ceases to arouse me.

A knock on the door takes me out of my reverie. I get out of bed, retrieving the cart from the hotel staff and pushing it inside.

“Hungry?”

“Starving.”

After breakfast, we step outside to the balcony. She points at the mountain where the Haiku Stairs spans. “I wanted to go there but heard no one is allowed anymore.”

“Want to live a little dangerously?” I ask.

She nods, eyes sparkling. My little rebel.

“But what if we get caught?”

“I would never allow anything to happen to you,” I say, framing her face.

Aurora takes my hand and kisses the lines digging into my palm.
“I know.”



Back home, the week rushes by. It's Saturday, the night of the gala, and the hair and makeup team has just left. I catch Kieran's reflection in the mirror. His eyes take me in, and I feel beautiful under his gaze.

I stand up, my dress hugging my body.

When I am within reach, he presses me to him and slams his lips on mine.

"You look beautiful."

"They did a great job."

"You're beautiful because you are you. This is just a superficial layer."

In the limousine, nerves rattle my insides.

"Your father will be there. And Delaney."

A shudder rocks through me. "Why?"

"It's all part of the plan."

"Will you tell me what that plan is?"

"They tried to take something precious that didn't belong to them. I'll do the same to them. The only difference is I will succeed."

Hand in hand, we step inside an opulent ballroom, women in fancy dresses and men in tuxes chatting, waiters rushing around with trays of champagne flutes and canapés, soft music being played. People steal glances at us as we move past them.

By the time we reach Cato and Chiara, my head is spinning. Everyone wanted to meet me and talk with my husband while I tried to remember their names. Eventually, I gave up. I'm sure I will only see most of them at these kinds of gatherings. For the ones who are important to Kieran, he'll tell me.

Cato looks one second away from snapping. His shoulders are taut with tension. At his side, my friend offers me a small smile. I embrace her, and when she sighs around me, she breaks my heart. The men shake hands and hug.

“I missed you,” I say to Chiara before gripping her hand and slipping out the terrace doors. Kieran, Cameron, and Cato are deep in discussion.

“The king’s club. Their egos are astounding,” Chiara says, derision flowing from her mouth. But her words are contradicted by the way she looks at Cato, eyes full of heat.

I blink, not sure I’m seeing right. But there it is. And there’s longing too.

“Is Cato really that bad?” I ask, snapping her out of her trance.

She balls her hands at her sides. “Of course he is. He acts like I’m his damn possession.”

Knowing that conversation will go nowhere, I change the subject.

“I went to England and visited the nuns.”

“I can’t believe you went back there of your own free will.”

“Sister Theodora worries about you. I worry about you.”

“Have you talked to your uncle yet?”

“No.”

She sips from her flute, mumbling, “How convenient.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Do you think you are anything more to Kieran than a possession? Men like them—”

“Have you even tried to get to know him? Because I have and he’s not a bad man.”

“Brainwashed, like I said.”

“Can’t you be happy for me?”

“Can’t you be miserable for me?” she asks, the corners of her lips tipping down. She walks away while I lean my elbows on the banister.

“If you were mine, I wouldn’t have let you out of my sight.”

The hairs on the back of my neck shoot up. That gruff voice sending a bolt of revulsion through me, upsetting my stomach.

I turn to Delaney and scrunch up my nose.

“We both know I never was yours, and never will be.”

His demeanor changes. He’s angry and predatory. He steps in front of me, and I square my shoulders.

“Stop.”

“As if you could stop me.”

“I can,” Kieran booms behind him. “Get the fuck away from my wife. You can leave through the door or over the banister. Your choice.”

Delaney freezes one step away from me. “We were just having a conversation.”

“We weren’t having a conversation, old man.”

His gaze burns me with a threat when he whispers to me, “I will enjoy fucking the defiance out of you.”

Shivers run down my arms like crawling spiders.

Kieran’s eyes flicker with murder and his hand shoots to Delaney’s neck. I watch in fascination as Delaney’s eyes bulge from the sheer force, face swollen, mouth opening on a gurgle. When the color changes to a shade of purple, I see the desire in my husband’s eyes to end him. But this is not the right place. I wrap my arm around his and he pushes Delaney away. He bends down, hands splayed on his knees as he forces air into his hungry lungs.

“This stunt you pulled sealed your fucking fate.”

After catching his breath, Delaney looks at Kieran and then arranges his tie and disappears through the terrace door.

“Sweetheart, look at me.” He tips my chin up and says, “Would I allow anyone to get to you?”

I shake my head, unable to form words.

“You disrespect yourself and me by being afraid of that cockroach. He’ll be done by the end of the night. Come on, you don’t want to miss the show,” he says. The cold and calculating Kieran is back.

“Never show your fears. Lesser men thrive on it.”

Inside, I find my brother standing next to my father. I pause. Remembering Kieran’s words, I hold my head high and approach him. A flicker of surprise crosses his eyes.

I am not the girl you used to know.

“Father.”

“Aurora.”

Kieran wraps his arms around me, kissing my bare shoulder. I place my hand on his as it rests on my stomach. My father’s expression constricts with fury at our closeness.

“Enjoy the party. You never know when it will be your last,” Kieran says, and my father narrows his eyes at him. As we step away, we hear him ask my brother what that was about. I turn my head slightly and see Cameron shrug

and smile into the rim of his champagne flute.

Knowing our father killed our mother, Cameron's self-restraint and patience over the years is astounding. Because whatever happens tonight, my father will lose it all, and I am not sorry. Not at all.

"Dance with me."

In Kieran's arms, I forget everyone's staring at us. We're the only ones dancing without a care. I love him. With my arms around his neck, I lift on my toes to tell him this when my eyes land on my uncle. Hayden smiles, lifting his flute to me. I detangle myself from Kieran.

"What's my uncle doing here?"

"Ah, so Hayden showed up."

I grip his chin between my thumb and forefinger and say, "If something happens to him, I will never forgive you."

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to him." I pin him with a glare when he opens his mouth. "Alone."

I walk over and hug him. The last time we saw each other was too short.

"I think your husband plans to kill me," my uncle says, unaffected.

"Not without getting through me first." I loop my hand around his elbow and we take the stairs toward the porch that leads to a small garden.

"How long are you staying?"

"Only for the weekend. You could come back with me?"

"I can't."

Uncle Hayden looks behind me to where my husband glares from the top of the stairs. If Kieran's eyes were a gun, my uncle's chest would be riddled with bullets.

"I wish it was because he wouldn't allow it, which I know he won't. But I can see it's more because of the way you look at him."

"I love him." He grumbles, not caring to hide his annoyance. "You're not pleased."

"I wanted to free you."

"I am free."

We find a bench and sit. "Kieran thinks you're lying."

"He's a clever and untrusting bastard." Pride and admiration line his eyes. I don't know what to make of him.

"Don't provoke him. He has trust issues."

Uncle Hayden bursts into laughter. I elbow him. "Sorry, but that was an

understatement.”

“Kieran thinks you want something from me.”

He shudders, as if the thought alone disgusts him.

“Are you happy?” he asks.

“I am.”

He studies my face and nods. “You know I will always be there for you.”

Yanking something from his pocket, he gives me a cell.

“If I can’t contact you, I will barge through every fortress he might build to get to you.”

I hug him and say, “I feel this connection between us. I feel my mother is looking out for me by sending you.”

Tears roll down my face and he hugs me.

“I miss her too.”

“Will you tell me about your relationship with her?”

“Not now, but soon. Your husband is approaching and he doesn’t look happy.”

“You don’t seem scared.”

“He wishes,” he says, and I suppress a smile, wiping at my tears.

34

KIERAN

Breathe in, breathe out, I repeat as I watch them while taking the stairs down to the garden.

My woman loves to test me. My hands tighten around the glass.

“Kieran.” Cameron grips my elbow. “Don’t make a scene.”

“Did you see his fucking face when she went with him? I’ll kill him.”

“Hayden is not afraid of us, that’s for sure.”

“And why isn’t he?” I snarl.

“I don’t fucking know.”

A gasp resonates behind me and Chiara’s eyes fill with apprehension. How the fuck she is afraid of me but shoots daggers at the man who is at least as dangerous as I am? I have no clue.

“Her uncle is here.” Her eyes flash with hope. I study her, but she schools her features into a blank expression. Our brief exchange confirms that Cato saw that too.

I head to Aurora, but Chiara says to my back, “For some fucked-up reason, I cannot even comprehend why she loves you. Aurora’s even happy with you, but if something happens to him, she’ll never forgive you.”

I take two stairs at a time and find them sitting on the stone bench overlooking a fountain statue. It’s fear of losing her that stops me from putting a bullet through the arm my wife holds, through the side she leans into, through his mouth smiling at her, through his fucking eyes filled with so much care.

Her eyes find mine. I expected fear for her so-called uncle, but it’s a dare

I catch in her glassy eyes. I eat the distance between us.

“What did you do to make her cry?”

Hayden leans on his palm, unfazed. The fucker has the confidence of a god. Sadly for him, he’s not immortal.

“He did nothing. We were just talking about my mom.”

Breathe in, breathe out, and repeat the process.

“Sweetheart. This man is not who he says he is.” I enunciate every word through gritted teeth.

The bastard’s lips tip up in a smirk, daring me, and waves a hand between them in a display to show me I’ve got nothing on him.

“Then what am I to her?”

I approach him when my wife shoots to her feet and glares at us. “Behave.”

“Let’s go.”

“Kieran.”

My voice lowers. “Sweetheart.” My patience will snap any second now.

Aurora puffs but says, “Fine.”

I watch her hugging him and I imagine ripping his limbs apart.

“Stop touching my wife.”

He rearranges his features into a mask and looks her straight in the eyes.

“If he’s too much, call me.”

Hayden brushes past me and says, “If I can’t get ahold of Aurora, we’re going to have a problem. One you won’t like.”

He either has the balls of a hundred men or is suicidal. I can kill him if he’s so keen on that. I am so wound up, not even her touch can ease me.

“Sweetheart, we have a really big problem.”

She flicks a strand of hair back and digs a finger into my chest. She’s so different from the scared girl I first laid eyes on.

“No, you have one. And I suggest you fix that attitude because he’s staying in my life.” She shows me a phone. The bastard must have given it to her so I can’t trace and track him. I drag a hand down my face.

“Kieran, do you love me?”

“You know I do.”

Her features soften. She locks her arms around my neck, making it bearable when I am internally losing my shit at the control slipping from my fingers. “I get that you want to protect me, but he wants the same, and I want to know him better. You won’t stop me.”

Aurora challenges me, fully aware of my reaction, but she knows I won't risk losing her.

"Fine. You can stay in contact."

She suppresses a smile.

"And you'll play nice."

"As long as he doesn't try to take you from me, and as long as he doesn't touch you anymore."

She shakes her head at me, smiling lovingly at me. "You have no reason to be jealous. I am yours."

"You better be."

The corners of her eyes crinkle as if she finds me amusing. She locks her hand around mine, leaning her head on my arm. My anger and my jealousy vanish. She is mine. That's all that matters.

I breathe a sigh of relief as we walk back to the ballroom. Wrapping my arms around her, I whisper, "Watch."

I jerk my chin toward where her father and Delaney are and relish how their faces transform from smiling to panicked. They rush outside, shoving past people, and yelling into their phones. Money is our business. We can make fortunes and take them away just as easily. And I just left them without a penny in their accounts. They won't recover from the hit.

My guys and I exchange a smirk. In moments like this, I feel I am the king. I can take, break, or make everyone around me.

"What did you do?" Aurora asks.

"What I have been waiting to do for a long time."

And for the rest of the night, I forget about Hayden and enjoy the time with my woman at my side. It's in her expression, the ease with the danger contained, that she's safe, protected. And there is nothing I wouldn't do to make her feel like this.

We step inside the limo. I kiss her temple while Cato gives me an annoyed look and her friend glares at us with disgust and fascination. Chiara steals glances at him while he scrolls through his phone.

We reach home. Aurora kisses me one more time and waves goodbye. The women leave us.

"This calls for a celebration."

I nod, staring at my biggest celebration walking up the stairs. When will Aurora tell me she loves me back? I never believed I needed to hear those words, but until then, it'll eat away at me.

Even now, when I should relish winning against the man who killed my father, I can't.

"The day has come. The king is on his knees for one woman," Cato says.

"Fuck you."

Cameron chuckles as we step inside the office. I get a whiskey bottle and three glasses.

We raise them and down our drinks. I drained Silas's accounts and put every cent right into Cameron's account, while Delaney's money has been put in our mutual account.

"Do you feel different now that you are even richer, Cameron?"

The corners of his mouth arch up. "Everyone gets what they deserve."



Chiara is quiet as we ascend the stairs, and I show her to a guest room. She walks inside and turns to me.

“I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

Accusation lingers around us, and I sigh.

“Chiara.”

How can I explain to her that feelings were already there from our childhood, so all they needed to grow was a spark? He touched not only my body, but my heart too, and he keeps his hand firmly wrapped around it. She waves me off and leans her hand on the window, peering outside.

“None of them are good men.”

“Yes, but the man he is to me is good.”

“So, you forget everything else he does? How convenient.”

I sigh, approaching her. “I don’t forget, but my husband is a product of his circumstances, just like everyone else.”

“You really love him?”

I nod and ask, “How is Cato treating you?”

Too many emotions flash in her eyes for me to set on one. “I’m tired.”

“I love you. You’re my best friend and that will never change.”

She turns to me and hugs me, whispering, “I can’t live like this.”

“Tell me how to help you?”

Her green eyes turn glassy with hope. “Would you?”

“Of course, but if part of you can give this a chance, take it first.”

“Never.”

I leave her alone, wondering what she will decide. I shower and curl into bed on Kieran's side, inhaling his heady scent. I would have missed what I have with him if I left.

Morning finds me gazing at my husband, his long lashes fluttering awake, and I thread my fingers through his thick yet soft hair.

My heart quivers in my chest as his lips curve up in a smile. I squeal as he flips me onto my back and sets himself between my legs, his mouth on mine, awakening every nerve ending in my body. As if he can't decide whether to make love to me or fuck me, he switches between the two, his need and passion for me in every thrust, in every moan he elicits from my body.

Kieran rests his forehead on mine and grumbles, "I wanted you all to myself this weekend."

I will never tire of hearing his need for me.

"They're our friends."

"They can be our friends without having to bother us."

I suppress a smile, gliding my hands down his sculpted chest and ridges of muscles.

"They will be gone on Sunday."

I cry out when he lifts me up and carries me over his shoulder and into the shower. After we change, we go downstairs.

Tamara has already prepared breakfast in the dining room.

"You would think they were her guests," he whispers, placing a sweet kiss on my neck, but Tamara hears him.

"Might as well be. You would have already eaten and left them to fend for themselves if it were up to you."

"They're old enough," he grouses, and I force down a laugh. I'm completely mad for this man.

"You're a poor host." I giggle and Tamara adds, "You're no better either."

We burst into laughter as she fusses around. One second I'm tucked in his lap, the next he places me down and runs up the stairs, pounding on Chiara and Cato's doors and yelling, "Wake up. My wife is hungry."

I hide my face in my palms and even Tamara laughs at his actions.

"My boy is in love."

A few minutes later, they come downstairs and neither one looks like they slept.

"My house, my rules," he says, digging into his plate.

I pass him the butter, and he gives me the milk.

“Look at them as if they have been married for a decade already,” Cato says, taking us in with an incredulous stare.

I press my hand on Kieran’s leg and he chews instead of replying.

When we finish, we all head toward the pool. The guys jump in while Chiara and I lounge on the chairs. My husband beckons me to go to him, and from the corner of my eye, I find her looking for Cato, who is underwater. Her nerves are palpable and she is already half-upright when he surfaces.

She huffs and gets to her feet, stomping away. I gesture to Kieran that I am going after her and my husband nods but he doesn’t look happy with my decision.

I find her in the garden, taking everything in.

“I don’t want to talk about anything. I just want to stay here for a while.”

“Do you want to be alone, or can I keep you company?”

Chiara plops on the bench while I water the plants, even though we have an automatic sprinkler, but I need to do something.

“You seem to be growing into your new role.”

“I’m happy and contented.”

She processes my words and asks, “What about your uncle?”

“He was there yesterday.”

“And is he still alive?”

“I know you have formed your opinion about my husband, but let me assure you he is not a monster. Kieran wouldn’t hurt anyone I care about.”

“He bankrupted your father. He’s done for life.”

“My father. I should thank him. Ending up with Kieran is the best thing his actions could have brought me.”

“They’re so far up on their high horse, they forget new players rise up every day.”

“Are you worried about them?”

She shakes her head so fast it might dislocate from her shoulders.

“No,” she says, too defensively.

“It’s okay if you do. I would be the last person to judge and never my best friend. And I saw the way you look at Cato.”

Color heats her cheeks, and she avoids looking at me. “Like I want to stab him because that is all I think whenever he’s near me.”

I wish she would answer honestly, like she used to. I sigh and sit next to her on the bench, squeezing her hand.

She shuts her eyes and says, “The bastard is getting to me.”

I remain perfectly silent, hoping she continues, but she stands up and leaves me with more questions than answers.

I exit the garden, walking back toward the pool. The guys spot me returning alone, and Cato’s eyes search for Chiara. Something passes in his eyes and he storms after her. I open my mouth to tell him he should give her some time, but he’s already at the door.

I squeal the moment Kieran splashes cold water on my heated skin.

“Come here.”

He opens his arms and I jump in and emerge, brushing against his body. His mouth sets on mine, wrapping me in him.

“Where is my brother?” I ask. Kieran pushes me up the pool stairs, his hands on my ass. I shoot him a glare and he offers me the most innocent look. He can’t pull that off.

“Dealing with your father.”

“Alone?”

Panic hits me, and he kisses my shoulder, drying me with a towel.

“Cam’s a big boy. Don’t worry.”

“Of course, I worry. He’s my brother.”

Kieran cups my face and says, “I love how fiercely you love. I love how fierce you are and how you want everyone safe.”

“Don’t distract me.”

“Your brother wants your father at his command, that’s all. He would never pass up a chance of keeping this lifestyle.”

“But I don’t get it.”

“Your father suffers from a god complex, believing he’s the mightiest and no one can stop him. To him, being a puppet in someone else’s hands is the biggest failure.”

“I thought...”

I hesitate, and he says, “I don’t kill for sport, Aurora. I am not a good man either, but I don’t take pleasure in killing. I prefer keeping them alive while I strip them of everything.”

I stare at him, knowing that’s the part of him I thought I would hate forever. The part that will make it impossible for me to love him. And it’s now when my husband blatantly tells me he likes to torture, more than kill, that I find how deep in love I am with him because the first thing going through my head is, I pray for him to be safe.

“Are you scared?” His voice breaks, reminding me there is also this other side: caring, loving, and sweet.

“No. Never of you, but for you.”

“You know I love you. I’d rather kill myself than harm you or let anything bad happen to you.”

I feel the truth of his words reverberating through me. I rise onto my tiptoes and kiss him.

“I take you as you are, Kieran,” I confess and his smile reappears. For now it’s just me and my sweet Kieran, the other under lock and key, to be unleashed later for his enemies.

We spend the evening with the guys fighting at the barbecue and even Chiara’s lips curve up in a small smile.

“Flip it already,” Kieran says.

“Cato, it’s fucking burnt,” Cameron adds, voice dipped in frustration.

“You two know shit.”

I drink from a glass of wine, chuckling as they put new patties on the grill.

“How do you deal with his possessiveness?” she asks and I look at Kieran while his eyes find mine, love and this inextricable link between us, sizzling.

“He makes up for it.” I giggle and she pushes me playfully.

“Yes, at least they’re good in bed.”

I turn my head to her and her eyes go wide.

“You can’t leave me hanging.”

Chiara bites her lip and says, “We fuck. Angry fuck, mostly.”

I rest my elbow on the table, urging her with a wave of my palm, and she adds, “He’s all consuming, and I can’t—”

Our moment is interrupted when the guys come over with the food. She was about to open up a bit. I huff and cut into the meat, hoping we’d continue the conversation after dinner, but no such luck.

It’s as if her semi-confession dampened her mood because she jumps up and Cato says, “Eat.”

“You’re not my fucking boss,” she yells, and he surges to his feet and towers over her.

“Fucking eat. You can throw a tantrum afterward.”

She grabs the steak and slaps it onto his mouth. I can only watch while Cameron doubles over with laughter. Even my husband has trouble keeping his amusement at bay.

Chiara storms away. After Cato dabs a napkin at the corners of his mouth, he stomps right after her. I get to my feet. I can't leave her alone with him when he's this angry, but Kieran grabs my hand and shakes his head.

"No."

"No, no. I am going."

He pulls me to him and I end up in his lap, and his lips trail down my neck. He's trying to distract me.

I give in, already smiling at what's to come. My brother watches our interaction and when his phone rings, he picks it up and informs us there's an emergency at the office before leaving.

Kieran relaxes under me as I cup his dick over his pants, rubbing his hardness. His eyes are half slits, enjoying my touch, and I take this chance to bolt. Not more than a nanosecond later, he comes after me. Adrenaline and excitement cram together in my stomach.

I should be checking on Chiara, but it's hard with him distracting me. Something is definitely wrong with me.

He snatches my elbow, turning me to him, and I crash into his chest.

"Trust me. Cato would never lay a hand on a woman, especially his wife."

I nod, wholeheartedly believing him. He kisses the side of my head and we return to our seats. "I still worry about her."

"Cato has never hurt a woman, and he won't start with Chiara, even though she drives him mad."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because we're alike. Only weak, pathetic, useless men hit or take a woman by force. And, sweetheart, none of us are such men."

With my elbows on the table, I place my cheeks in my palms, batting my eyelashes at him. "What kind of man are you?"

He sends me a flirtatious grin. "The one who's totally mad for his wife."

"When you say things like that—"

"Are you wet?" I slap him playfully on his arm, and he bites my lip. "Why am I asking when I know the answer?"

From the corner of my eyes, I see Cato approaching, his fingers raking through his hair.

Kieran kisses me and he adds, "I won't be long. I love you."

I love you too.

I'll tell him, right when we're back in our bed, where it all started.

Stepping inside the house, I call Chiara's name. Up the stairs I go, still calling her name, but there's no answer. Worry ignites in me. I knock on the door. When she still doesn't answer, I tiptoe inside and find her curled up on the bed.

"Chiara?"

When she finally hears me, she leans on the headboard and says, "Help me. I can't stay with him. I just can't. Please."

I don't remember her ever pleading. My heart breaks for my best friend.

"How can I help?"

"Your uncle."

I know I said I'd help her, but hoped I wouldn't be put in the middle.

"Help me escape. Please."

I shake myself out of my thoughts and walk into our bedroom. The phone lies on my nightstand and my finger trembles on the screen. The implications of what I have to do sit heavy on my chest—cement being poured over me, drowning me.

Am I really going to do this? Kieran trusts me. He will understand that I love him, but I love my friend too, and I have to help her. He has to understand. He'd do the same for Cameron and Cato. I am doing the right thing, but a voice inside me whispers betrayal.

Grabbing the phone, I go back to her room. I dial Uncle Hayden's number and he picks up right away.

"I need your help."

"What happened?"

I drag in a lungful of air and say, "You wanted to help me escape. I don't need it, but my best friend does."

"I will pick you up tonight."

"I can't come. I have a tracker. Silence on the other end, and a horrified gasp from Chiara shoots through the silence.

"No problem. I'll know how to disable it."

Fascinating how easily a plan of escape is formulated in the next five minutes, and with every word, I become numb. He tells me he's going to take care of everything and to be ready.

"Don't hurt anyone," I plead and hang up.

"Thank you," she says, relief written all over her face while my heart withers in my chest. I nod, words stuck in my throat. Chiara squeezes my hand.

“Take this chance as well. He has you brainwashed. He even chipped you.”

“It’s not like that.”

“That you defend this despicable act tells me I am right.”

I roam through the house and end up at the end of the hallway. I open the door, and tears already stream down my face, finding the sculptures Kieran loves.

I feel him long before the door clicks closed.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

His love digs the knife deeper. I was supposed to tell him how in love I am with him tonight, not betray his trust. He will take it as a ploy and will ask himself if any of this was real. And it couldn’t be more real than this.

I turn to him, my entire body shivering. Kieran cups my face, lifting my chin up, looking at me with those eyes brimming with love for me, kissing my forehead. Loyalty, fuck you.

“I am just emotional.” The lie turns sour in my stomach. I am about to vomit.

I drag him toward the sofa and stare at the half-human half-beast sculptures.

“Tell me why you love this theme?”

He plays with a strand of my hair. “I like the contrast as if you are your own antithesis.”

“A war going on inside you?”

“Yes. These statues are meant to remind me that in the end, I could conquer the world, but not conquer my own demons.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, for so many things. I wish I had been next to him from the start, sharing the light he tells me I have with him.

“It’s better since you are here,” he says, giving me his truth. I am so sorry for the pain I will cause him, and for the first time, I am going to unleash his demons and not keep them at bay.

We were doomed from the start, the way things started between us. It was just a mirage.

No. I love him; he loves me. Together we will overcome this strain I will put on our relationship. Our love will get us back together. I kiss him and rest my head on his shoulder.

“Let’s get you in bed.”

I freeze for a moment. The sooner we reach the bed, the sooner I am

going to leave him.

He carries me to our bedroom and places me on the bed. He climbs in next to me, wrapping me in him, and my heart constricts in my chest, causing physical pain. We'll get past it. I have to trust us.

As if the universe conspires against him, it's the first time he falls asleep before me. I allow myself a few precious moments to take him in. That will have to do for a few days.

"I'm coming back, Kieran," I whisper. "I love you so, so indescribably much."

I slide off the bed, startled by the shadowy figure in the corner of the room.

My uncle signals for me to be silent and my hand shoots to my mouth. He's all dressed in black.

"What is that?" I point to the syringe in his hand, starting to regret this. If anyone gets hurt, I will never forgive myself.

"It's a sedative."

I am rooted to the spot as he injects the sedative into Kieran's neck. His body jerks, but it must be powerful enough to keep him asleep.

I move on autopilot. Chiara waits at the bottom of the stairs, rubbing her arms. When she sees me coming down with my uncle, a sigh of relief parts her mouth.

The seconds tick so loudly they pierce my eardrums while we hug each other.

"Thank you."

Tamara rounds the corner, and she eyes us, concern written all over her face.

"What are you two doing up?"

"I'm sorry," I say, and she approaches us.

"Aurora?"

"I'm coming back. Please, tell him I am coming back."

"Don't do this, please."

My uncle moves toward her, but I shoot him a glare not to do anything to her, and he stays his foot.

"I love him. I love him like crazy, but I have to do this."

Tears roll down my cheeks, and she turns around.

"I didn't see you tonight, but come back."

Relief surges through me and I nod frantically, as Chiara breathes again.

“I thought that was it.”

I am numb as we walk outside and climb into the black car. I watch my home getting smaller and smaller in the back window.

“Thank you.”

I squeeze her hand in answer. My head splits with this headache, and my heart already misses him. Everything inside of me craves and screams after him.

I didn't even tell him I love him. I hug myself, suddenly cold.

Why did I wait? Was it selfishness? I wanted to hear him say that to me for a while longer before I'd share my feelings.

On the tarmac, a jet waits for us. With steel flowing through my veins, I step inside and my uncle says, “Put this bracelet on. It will redirect the signal.”

With trembling fingers, I put it on.

What have I done?

The title '36 KIERAN' is centered on the page. The numbers '36' are large and stylized, with a cracked, stone-like texture. Below them, the name 'KIERAN' is written in a serif font, also with a cracked texture. The background behind the text is a faint, cracked pattern.

I force my eyes open, the nightmare playing in my head as I groan, my moves sluggish. I turn my head to find Aurora's side of the bed empty. Panic has me shooting up and calling her name. The night almost gives way to day when I rush from the room. She must have woken up earlier, but the eerie silence, this motherfucking gut instinct telling me it's not the case, has me panicked and furious. If something happened to her, if anyone dared to take her from me, I am going to unleash all levels of hell on them.

I freeze as I see Daniel lying on the floor in the hallway. I check his pulse. Finding one, I shake him, and he wakes up with a growl.

"What happened?"

"Someone entered the house last night."

I yank at my hair, shouting, "How the fuck was this possible? This house is meant to be a fortress."

He bows his head and I storm into the guest room and find Cato forcing his eyes open.

"What the fuck happened?"

"They took the girls."

Thunder strikes with every silent beat. Panic turns to lethal calm.

I check my phone. Why didn't I track her from the start?

When the signal redirects from one place to another, I drop onto the chair, gravity pulling me under with the knowledge. They couldn't have known... that means...No, she wouldn't do that. I shake my head, only for Daniel's eyes to find mine, and I know his words will cut through me.

“The girls were in on it.”

Cato lets a string of curses out while I stare at the monitor. My eyes find her, glassy, as she holds Chiara in the security footage from last night.

You fooled me really well, sweetheart. I wish Hayden had killed me so I wouldn't have to experience this betrayal, having to go through the humiliation that this asshole got to me in my own house.

I smash the chair against the wall and storm outside.

“Why didn't you stop her?”

Tamara freezes and sighs, “Aurora said she's going to come back.”

A self-deprecating laugh bursts out of me. “Yes, well, why didn't she tell me the same?”

“Kieran.”

I let myself become a fool because of her. I'll kill him. No wonder she didn't say those words back. Aurora played me, an angel who seduced the devil and ended up playing him. I'll congratulate her the moment I put a bullet through her so-called uncle. They must be having a good laugh at my expense.

A woman is what ruins any man. In that aspect, we're all the same. I became a fucking cliché.

“We need to find them,” Cameron says as he takes in the men, slowly waking from their forced sleep.

“No, we need to find *him*. They're with Hayden.”

If she thinks she can escape me, my wife is in for one hell of a wake-up call.

We rush into the car and speed to the compound.

In the conference room, our men place folders with all they have on Hayden in front of us. I stare at his various houses.

Cato slams his hands on the table. “Fuck.”

Even if we split up, it will take days.

“We'll storm every one of them.”

“How the fuck did he do it?” Cameron asks, cupping his neck, body silently trembling in frustration.

No one else could have pulled this off. How the fuck can he be this good, have this much fucking power, and be stupid enough to mess with us like this?

“I'm going to kill him, and no one else will ever dare to cross us again,” I vow.

You're dead, Hayden.



My uncle has been on the phone for the entire flight, making preparations for the war my husband will unleash. Chiara finally realizes the consequences of her request and curls up into a ball on her seat, making herself small and silent.

My thoughts have revolved around Kieran, about the outcome of my decision, keeping sleep miles out of reach.

We land in a makeshift airstrip in Florida, the night still blanketing the sky. He ushers us toward the car, and black jeeps surround us with men dressed in black cargo pants, weapons strapped at their sides, securing the area.

“Why do we need so much security?” Chiara asks as she buckles her seatbelt.

I love her, but if she thinks the man that could get us out is any less dangerous than our husbands, she’s plain naïve.

I slump in the back seat, sitting silently as we are driven for half an hour through the thick jungle and complete darkness. In front of the car, steel gates open and men with dogs walk up and down the perimeter.

A huge mansion reveals a fortress made of faded orange walls and thick glass. The size of the building, the land surrounding it giving the impression it’s a small city. And with the number of men patrolling, it’s clear Hayden lives in constant alert.

My uncle gets out of the car, but not before saying, “You’ll be safe. I’ll protect you. Nothing will happen, okay?”

I nod, my throat dry and incapable of forming words.

A middle-aged woman appears and smiles at him, welcoming us in.

“Magdalena, show them to their rooms.”

She does so, and I break down alone in the guest room, dropping to my knees on the floor.

I have to call Kieran. By now he must be thinking the worst. I gather myself and search for my uncle. I find him in what must be his home office. Hayden sits at a black desk in front of two big screens, a drink in hand.

“I need to call my husband.”

He gestures for me to take a seat.

“Do you want something to drink?”

“No, I am fine.”

I wrap my arms around myself and a man barges in.

“Sir, sorry, but Alessandra—”

“I’ll deal with that in a moment.”

My heart pounds in my chest. Does he keep a woman here? He gets up, forehead creasing, and puts his phone in my hand.

“I don’t want to go to war with him, but I will if I have to. Tell him that.”

With those words, he leaves me completely astounded.

I call Kieran, my heart pounding so fast it might crack my chest. He will understand. Yes, he has to. With renewed confidence, I press the phone to my ear.

“Hayden.” The loathing in which he spits his name out sends a spike of apprehension between my ribs, and I cover my mouth. “I will find you and you will regret the day you took Aurora from me.”

That’s his monster voice, the one I would also be afraid of if I didn’t know I hurt him.

“Kieran.”

An eerie silence follows on the other line. I can hear my heartbeats drumming in my throat.

“Aurora.”

“I know you’re mad.”

I wet my lips to be able to continue, but his voice sounding dead stops me.

“Congratulations. You played me really well.”

“Kieran—”

“You are one hell of an actress.”

His accusation stabs my chest, but this is not the time for self-pity. I drag a fortifying breath and say, “Hear me out.”

“Nothing you could ever say to me will keep me from killing him.”

He hangs up, and I grip the desk, closing my eyes.

Uncle Hayden steps inside, and his eyes take me in with a hint of worry.

“I take it the talk didn’t go as you hoped.”

I shake my head, and he approaches me.

“Kieran, he said . . .”

“I know what he plans to do. Don’t worry.”

“But I worry,” I say and raise my hands in the air.

His entire face radiates calm.

“How can you take this so lightly?”

He shrugs. “I’m still alive.”

I wonder how many times does it take to spar with death to become immune to it?

“I am going to pay them a visit. Our talk is long overdue too. But I would like to spend some time with you before that.”

I offer a small nod, depleted, dejected, hollow.

“Let’s eat. I am sure you’re hungry.”

I’m not hungry, I’m ill with worry, and I want my Kieran back.

We step outside and I remember why he rushed out of the office.

“Who is Alessandra?”

An entire range of emotions passes through his eyes. “No one.”

“No one doesn’t have you reacting like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like she is so much more.”

“You are so like your mother.”

The sharp change of discussion doesn’t go unnoticed, but I’m starved to find out more about Mom and him.

“Will you tell me about your relationship with Mom?”

“What do you want to know?”

So many questions run through my head. It’s not that I don’t believe him when he says he’s my uncle, but Kieran is also right. Something doesn’t add up.

I open my mouth, but Chiara steps inside, wearing a despondent look.

“Are you all right?”

She nods and we go to the dining room. An entire wall of glass, with the

most spectacular view over the landscape outside, spreads in front of us.

Magdalena says something in Spanish as she sets the table. I play more than I eat my food.

Uncle Hayden's phone rings and he apologizes before he picks up, leaving us alone. I stare at my friend while she lifts her eyes at me, whispering, "This place is so guarded."

"Did you think someone who would mess with Kieran and Cato to get us wouldn't live just as dangerously and need just as much security?" My voice rises to a pitch I've never reached before, but my nerves are stretched to the limit. Her eyes widen at me. I didn't want to yell, but at least I knew what type of man Hayden Carrera has to be. My friend just took the first way out, not caring about anything. Dejection and guilt spar inside me. "I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't have dragged you into my mess."

I go to her, hugging her. "You're my best friend. I want you to be happy. That's all."

"I will be," she says as if trying to convince herself.

"Let's walk around the perimeter."

This place is even bigger than Kieran's. We come across an entrance separated by a wall, but a man stops us.

"You can't go inside. Boss's orders."

We take a step back and lift our eyes. We gasp the second a woman's shape comes to the window, her hands crossed, and beside her is my uncle. She gesticulates, and he backs her up to the window.

"Now I know this was a mistake." Chiara sighs and leaves.

I wait for my uncle to come down and the moment Uncle Hayden sees me, he abruptly stops.

"Who is she?"

"She is not your business."

I cross my arms over my chest. "Are you holding her against her will?"

"Yes."

"My life is not a fairy tale," my uncle says with no remorse.

"I got that."

"I had to do a lot of bad shit to get where I am."

If eyes are the mirror to the soul, well, my uncle is dead inside. There is no life, no light, but determination. As if he's on a mission and that's it.

"Why?"

"Revenge."

There is no guilt or shame in his facial expressions. I allow myself to accept that his eyes, even though familiar, have scared me from the start because they're soulless.

"Would it make any difference if I told you I'm happy you're here?"

My mouth curls up in a small smile, and he says, "Rebecca talked so much about you."

"She was a great mother."

"For you."

The next question is at the tip of my tongue when he says, "I have to leave for a few hours, but I will tell you everything you want to know."

Uncle Hayden walks away, leaving me with too many questions and wonder if I will like the answers.

I follow the same path back to my room. Once inside, I take a long shower and crash on the bed, staring out the window at the sun rising lazily over the horizon.

Chiara walks into the room with an unsure step and says, "Can't sleep."

"Me neither."

She climbs into bed next to me and we stare at the ceiling.

"Where do you want to go after this?"

"Back to England. Resume my studies. I just need a passport."

"And money."

"Yes, that too."

"I'll ask my uncle."

"I don't want his money."

"It's not up to you if you want it or not at this point."

"You're mad at me," Chiara whispers.

I shake my head and place my hand on hers.

"No, I'm not. I'm worried, that's all."

I play with the bracelet, and she says, "Wait a few more days. The second your signal is back, Kieran will be on his way here."

A sigh rolls out of my tongue. "He's going to be so mad."

"Just come with me."

"I found my place, and I love it."

"He will never forgive you."

"Kieran will because he loves me."

She snorts and says, "Monsters don't love."

"I think monsters can love the most, in their very own fucked-up way."

“I never thought you’d fall for someone like him, but then you have had a crush on him since I can remember.” Her eyes wander toward the window. “Who is that woman?”

“My uncle got all defensive when I asked about her.”

“How can he help one woman escape while he’s holding another captive? This situation makes me sick.”

As the conversation ends, Chiara turns to her side and her breathing evens out.

I slide out of bed and tiptoe out of my room. Relying on memory, I step inside his office, looking to find the phone I left.

I hoped I would find some phone calls and a few messages from Kieran, but there’s nothing. Hurt transforms into anger, and the next second I redial it. The sound of glass clinking on the table greets me and my throat dries again. His silence is deafening.

“Kieran.”

“I trusted you, I let you in. I was a fool, wasn’t I?”

“Stop saying things that are not true, please.”

“I thought you were happy with me, but then it was the only way. Escape by making me love you. But, sweetheart, nothing you could ever do can make me let you go.”

It’s as if my words don’t even register.

My heart can’t deal with a hurt Kieran.

“I love you.”

He hisses. I should have told him the moment my heartbeats weaved those three words.

“You left. There’s no need for lies anymore.”

“I am in love with you.”

He hangs up. I stare at the phone. The pain suffocates me at the thought I’ve lost him. I drag myself to the sofa and plop on it.

This is how my uncle finds me.

“What happened?”

“My husband doesn’t believe me, so . . .” I don’t recognize my voice ringing with despair, but this is exactly how I feel.

“Sleep for a bit.”

I can’t. Instead, I roam through the house and find an indoor pool. I shed my clothes and dive right in. When I can’t feel my arms anymore, I pull myself up. I dry myself and the moment my back hits the lounge, sleep drags

me under.

“Here you are. I was worried,” Chiara says. “Are you okay?”

Startling me awake, I rub the sleep from my eyes. “I must have fallen asleep in here.”

Picking up the phone, I see no missed calls, no messages.

I throw it aside, and it bounces a few times over the lounge chair. After I shower and change, I find Chiara and my uncle in the living room.

“I had a long talk with Hayden. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go with her?”

I am pretty sure there are two types of caged birds. Those who dream of escaping, but even if they get the chance, they stay, and those who take the chance and never look back. I would be caged if I didn’t realize I was. But I am, we all are.

“Yes. I choose him. I choose my life with him. But I need more time to get through to him. Chiara...”

“I will be fine,” she assures me.

Uncle Hayden looks back at her and says, “My man will have your passport and money for you. You’ll leave tomorrow night.”

She nods. This is her only reaction. I thought she would jump up and down with joy by now.

I open my mouth to ask her if she’s okay when my uncle says, “I can’t postpone our talk. I have to be in the air shortly.”

I eat in a hurry and follow him to his office. His entire desk is filled with letters. I recognize my mother’s writing and my eyes well up. I miss her so much. Sobs rip through my throat and he hugs me.

When I calm down, he asks, “Something to drink?”

I nod, and he pours two tumblers of amber liquid. We move to the sofa, where we face each other.

The liquid burns my throat but leaves a warming note behind.

He taps the arm of the couch, his eyes focused on me.

“I am not your uncle.”

“What?” I screech, thinking I don’t even know this man, but I trusted him. I am so stupid. I jump to my feet, fully in panic mode.

“Sit down, Aurora, and stop being afraid of me.”

“Is that a command?”

Hayden just points to the couch and I slump right back in.

“I don’t understand. I thought you—”

“I am your brother.”

My thought process just got obliterated. On repeat, the sentence plays in my head. How can that be? A nervous energy ripples through my body. My hand shakes so bad the liquid sloshes over. I gulp it down in a feeble attempt to calm down.

“What?” I lift my eyes to his, his face carved in stone, revealing it’s not a joke. I have another brother. This is a lot to process.

“Half-brother. Your mother got pregnant with me when she was young. She gave me away.”

“My mom would never do that.”

His hands grip the armrests, a forlorn look etched into his features. “You would be surprised what people are capable of doing.”

No, no, no. I shake my head and he says, “I really don’t have much time.”

“I just found out that you’re not my uncle but my brother in the span of minutes, and it’s you who doesn’t have time to explain?”

“This is the woman I want to see. A fighter.”

A beat passes, and I place the glass on the table.

“She never told me about you,” I say.

“Be strong, be brave, be happy?”

“What about that?”

“It was three—for all three of her children.”

I have to be in shock as my brain seems not to know what to do with all the information—process, filter, ponder.

“I don’t get it . . .”

“Rebecca was young. The love of her life left her. My adoptive mother promised her I would be taken care of.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for me. I survived. I was destined to be the strong one.”

He smiles at me, his entire posture speaking of strength borne out of hardship and survival. No wonder he isn’t afraid of anyone.

“This changes everything.”

“No. Your mother was the best version she could be to you. My feelings should never paint a different image of her.”

“It does. How could she let you go?”

“She did what she thought was the best.”

“But she found you, right?”

“By then, my path in life was set.”

“You’re my brother. Cameron and I have a brother.” My heart fills at once with warmth at this knowledge.

I can’t wait to share that with Cameron.

“My father was Ethan. Your husband’s father.”

Stunned, I can only blink.

“I was the product of their youth. The day they had the accident, they wanted me to meet you. I’m sorry it took me this long to find you. Cameron, with his yearly two flights to England, finally tipped me off.”

“You’re Kieran’s brother too?”

He nods. I grip his arm.

“You have to tell him. Please.”

He chuckles softly. “Not even two minutes as your brother, and you are already protecting me. It should be the other way around.”

I throw myself at him, wrapping my hands around him. His body relaxes more the longer we embrace, as if he’s not used to hugs.

“I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.”

“Don’t be sad for me.”

But how can I not be? Everything in me tells me he has lived a horrible life.

“You didn’t deserve to be abandoned. I can’t believe she did that.”

“Aurora. All she did was love and protect you.”

“By never protecting my brothers,” I scream.

“Read her letters. I have to go.”

Alone with the letters, I pick out a random one.

My dear boy,

Today Aurora’s first tooth came out. I never saw yours, but I’ve seen it on Cameron and Kieran. I can’t look at the boys without the pain. Forgive me.

One after the other, she recounts what I do, particularly while she always puts the four of us as a unit.

Good job, Mom. They might end up killing each other.

I pace around, minutes turning into hours.

How am I going to get through to Kieran? If I tell him, he will never just accept it. But Cameron might. At least I hope he’s the one to listen to reason.

I pick up the phone and call Cameron. “Hi.”

“Aurora? Are you all right? Tell me where you are?”

“Cameron, listen to me.”

“Where are you?”

“I am safe, but Hayden is coming to you. Do not harm him.”

“Tell me where you are?”

“I’ll tell you if you promise me.”

“Aurora, you don’t have to protect him.”

“He’s our half brother, Cam.”

He bursts into laughter and says, “And tomorrow, sis? What is he going to be tomorrow?”

“I will explain everything. I am coming home tomorrow. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I hang up and rush to find Chiara. I find her leaning against the window.

“What happened?”

“I just found out Hayden is not my uncle but my brother. I have to stop them from killing each other, but Cameron isn’t listening to me.”

“And Kieran?”

I call him and he picks up right away.

“Kieran, listen.”

“What is it, Aurora?” His voice is cold. It seeps through my skin, freezing up my bones. How can he switch like this? I swallow my hurt.

“I am coming home. Just don’t do anything until then. I’ll explain everything.”

“No explanation will help. He sealed his fate,” he snarls before hanging up.

My phone drops to my side, tumbling down like my hope.

Chiara hugs me and says, “I am sorry.”

Picking up the phone, she dials a number, her fingers trembling.

“Cato.”

“What are you doing?” I whisper-shout.

She shakes her head at me and I strain to hear what he says, and she adds, “I want to make a deal.”

I hear him loud and clear as he says, “I’m listening.”

“Me for Hayden’s life.”

“Don’t,” I say and she holds her hand up, halting me.

“I’m coming home tomorrow.”

The phone slips from her hand, clanking to the floor, and I shake her.

“Why did you do that?”

“I owe it to you and Hayden. Neither of you would be in this mess without me.”

I hug her. We both cry and she says, “And now get me drunk.”

We go into his office and two glasses later, we giggle from the mess we’re in.

But the giggles turn to seriousness. “Not even alcohol lasts long enough.”

“Are you afraid?” I ask.

“Not of him, but of myself.” She drags herself up and stumbles as she disappears behind the doors.

The phone rings in my hand, and Kieran’s name flashes on the screen.

“Aurora, Aurora, what am I going to do with you?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“Don’t need me anymore, huh? Clever move to use your friend.”

“It’s not me using people. That’s your specialty.”

“Don’t you love me anymore, sweetheart?” I hate the sardonic tone rolling off him.

“I love you. It’s just that now I know you don’t love me,” I say and hang up.

I guess I’ve exhausted all my tears.

The phone continues to ring, but I ignore it.

But there is no ignoring my heart fracturing into millions of pieces.



She thinks I don't love her. I throw my phone against the wall and it shatters on the floor.

Cameron lies in one chair in the compound's conference room, looking outside with a pensive expression ever since he talked to Aurora. In the other armchair sits Cato, blood splashing on the floor from his bleeding palm, and I wrap mine, cursing. Fucking blood oaths.

My eyes burn into Cato's head, "I hope this time she kills you."

"Kieran, man," Cameron says in a placative tone that does nothing to calm me.

I drag a hand down my face and shout, "You ask me to sit through a meeting with the man who stole my wife from me and do nothing?"

"My sister said when she comes back, she'll explain."

"Oh, she will."

I slam the door shut and leave to calm the fuck down before I end up killing them. It's been over twenty-four hours since she left me. Since I've been catapulted straight to hell. I punch my desk, my knuckles split.

I call her repeatedly, but she doesn't pick up.

Answer the phone.

Nope.

Aurora!!!

I call her, and she declines it.

Don't make me mad, sweetheart.

You are mad with me or without me.

I need to tell you something.

The time to talk is over.

I call her again. She declines again.

I summon patience. I also realize my attitude toward her didn't help either.

Did you fuck him, thinking of me?

Look how my wife calls back.

She yells at me, "You're the most maddening, stupid man!"

"It worked to get you to call me, don't hang up, please."

She snickers at my please.

"Talk to me."

"I wanted to talk to you badly, repeatedly, but you didn't." Emotions break through the strong façade and my chest cracks.

"I will listen now."

"Oh, what an honor." She sniffles.

"Why are you protecting a stranger like this?"

"He's not a stranger, Kieran. And I would never forgive you if something happened to him. He's suffered enough."

Who cares that I have been miserable since I woke up without her, terrified? No, to my wife, Hayden's well-being matters more.

"I won't kill him."

"I would like to thank you, but we both know you didn't do it out of the kindness of your heart."

She hangs up. I shower and put on my suit. The guys are already waiting in the office.

I watch the black Escalade come to a halt. He brought only one man with him. Hayden's one self-confident asshole.

"He's asking for it."

"And I would have delivered gladly."

I shoot Cato a glare.

"What if it's a ploy?"

"You trusted the woman who wanted to kill you. We deserve to die in humiliation."



I am still in survival mode. When the adrenaline slows, I will crash, but now is not the time.

I call Hayden and he answers right away.

“I need to fly back home tonight.”

“What did you do?”

“What was necessary to save your life.”

“I love your protectiveness, but I survived until now, and none of them scare me.”

“Yes, well, I know my husband, and brother. Not fearing them is plain stupid.”

“What did you do?”

“It was Chiara.”

“I’ll let my men know. I’ll wait for you at the airport.”

I hang up and find Chiara in her room. She bursts into hysterical laughter, but something else flickers through, almost relief.

“All of this for nothing.”

“You can back off.”

“Oh, you don’t make a deal with the devil and expect anything less than giving your soul away.”

“I don’t know if I should thank you or be mad at you.”

We hold on to each other as if to gather strength and go outside.

“We’re going to leave in three hours,” a guard says. We nod.

“What about that woman? I haven’t seen her out of the building.”

She leans into me, whispering even though there are no guards around, “I couldn’t sleep, and it’s the most guarded area. I tried to look around, but nothing.”

“Hayden said she was no one.”

“Then she wouldn’t be this guarded.”

“I didn’t believe him, anyway.”

Chiara’s eyes become bottomless with terror. She cries out, and when I turn around, madness erupts. Gunfire erupts in a *trrr* that is deafening. The front door explodes, and cars storm inside with armed men shooting at everyone. Blood splatters around.

“We’re going to die.”

Panic freezes me until Chiara grabs my hand and pulls me out of it. A guard runs to us, pointing toward the heavily guarded building.

“Move, move.”

“Where are we going?” Chiara asks.

“To the safe house.”

Smoke rises when a bullet rips through his forehead. The guard drops to the floor next to us, blood spilling from his temple, eyes rolled back. She screams and I grab her hand and say, “We’re going to hide in the woods. They won’t find us there.” With a squeeze of her hand, I say, “Run!”

“What are you going to do?”

“I need the phone.”

“I am not leaving you.”

Giving in, we run toward the house, and I bend to pick up my phone when I am grabbed by my hair. My scalp aches from the assault on my hair, and I hiss.

“Got her,” someone says in an earpiece.

I thrash in his grip, hitting him repeatedly, but this bulk of a beast doesn’t even flinch. I am in full survival mode. No time to let fear distract me. There’s a pop, and he crashes on top of me.

Chiara appears in my line of sight, holding the gun. She helps get him off me as I wonder when she learned to use a gun. We take off, running to the exit. The safe house is surrounded and we take a sharp left toward the forest, ducking and scrambling on our knees and elbows. Bullets ripple in the air, a concerto of death while my blood pumps in my temples.

We’re surrounded and outnumbered.

“There are so many,” Chiara says, voice shaking.

I inhale through the fear that has my heart pounding in my chest.

“We’re going to die.”

“No, we won’t.”

“I wanted my freedom so bad, I guess I am getting it.”

“We’re going to make it.”

I infuse myself with sheer belief. I refuse to believe anything else.

With trembling fingers, I dial Hayden. I know they will find us sooner or later. The clock is ticking.

40

KIERAN

Hayden struts inside and jerks his chin in a greeting.

“I assume the time for bullshit is now over.”

I grit my teeth, tasting blood, as we each take a seat. He gestures for his man, who brings over a briefcase before he steps out.

“I have been in this game longer than you have. And I have the advantage of knowing you before you even had me on your radar. Don’t take this personally.”

“One of these days, we will retaliate,” Cato says.

“No, you won’t.”

“Motherfucker.”

He waves us off and says, “Aurora and Chiara are flying back tonight.”

“We know,” says Cato.

“I want a seat at your table and twenty-five percent.”

We burst into laughter. “Or I will take thirty-three percent. From you, Kieran, and Cameron, and help another mafia family take over, Cato. The possibilities are endless.”

We shoot to our feet. If this idiot thinks he can come and start demanding shit, he’s out of his fucking mind.

We stare each other down and all four of us draw our guns when the door opens and his guard comes inside.

“Boss, they stormed the house.” Panic rings in his voice.

Hayden takes his phone from his suit jacket, eyes moving from right to left, the corners twitching with rage and says, “If something happens to the

women . . . Find them and get them into the safe house,” he shouts into the phone and hangs up.

My soul just left my fucking body.

When his phone rings, he says in the calmest tone possible, “Aurora, don’t be scared. I will come after you.”

I point my gun at his head, finger itching on the trigger.

“Any last wishes?” Even with the muzzle of my gun pointed straight between his brows, he doesn’t react but waves me off.

“I don’t have fucking time for this. You want her back as much as I do. We’ll continue this discussion afterward.”

“If something happens to them, I will hunt you down,” Cato swears, and we bolt through the door and inside the elevator, where God himself tests me not to kill Hayden on the spot.

Aurora didn’t call me, but she called him.

I have encountered loss, but this slices through me with the dexterity of a machete.

I call her and she picks up and my name from her lips is the sweetest torment.

Bullets ring through the phone.

“Sweetheart, take that bracelet off.”

“Already did.”

“Are you afraid?”

“A little.”

“I would burn this world down for you.”

“I know. Get along with him, okay. If anything happens to me . . .”

“Nothing will happen to you.”

“Promise.”

“I will promise you when I have you back.”

“Kieran.” I’d pawn my heart. I’d be someone else’s willing slave, do anything just so I didn’t hear the fear in her voice while trying to make me think she’s fine.

“Sweetheart, I love you.”

“I love you too. I’m sorry, but Chiara needed my help. And I was coming back. I swear.”

A scream rips from her throat before the phone clatters to the ground. All that remains are those piercing sounds and my heart tearing from my chest.

Hayden hangs up and says as we get in the jet, “I thought you took care of

your father and Delaney.”

“We did.”

“Then someone is helping them.”

He taps a finger on his knee and places a call. In the next ten minutes, he organizes an army.

“I have her,” I say as I detect the dot moving and finally breathe. I will come to get you, sweetheart, and no one will ever dare to take you from me again.

“You’re not our fucking uncle and definitely not my fucking half brother,” Cameron says, and Hayden looks him straight in the eye.

“Are you sure?”

“Start talking,” I say, my fingers tapping on the gun. I don’t need his fucking help to get her.

“We can have this conversation after we get them back safely.”

I put the safety back on the gun and drop back in my seat. Hours. It will take hours to get to her. I drag a hand down my face and he says, “We will find her.”

“Why does she trust you so much? Buying into all your bullshit?”

“You should ask her that.”

Silence follows. I watch the dot move over the water.

“I need a submarine and a helicopter. She’s not on land anymore.”

Hang in there, sweetheart.



41

AURORA

We crawl toward the wall with renewed hope, but it will be impossible to climb it. Maybe I can lift her. One of us would have a better chance of escaping.

The voices approach. Each step they take in our direction vibrates the ground under my feet and hands.

“Got you, bitch.”

The gun hits my head, and Chiara screams before everything darkens.

I fall in and out of consciousness. When I can finally peel my eyes open, I cradle my head. My fingertips are red from the wound. I hiss in pain, but the panic takes over and I bolt upright. I am in a bed, and from what I can see out of a round window, water is stretching endlessly. On shaky limbs, I rise and pull at the doorknob, but it doesn’t budge. Remembering Chiara, I pound my fists at the door.

The door is yanked open, and I take a step back as a massive man enters. My heart shoots in my throat, but I swallow it right back where it belongs. My fight-or-flight instinct activated.

“Shut up already.”

“Where is my friend?”

He backhands me and I fly onto the bed, holding my cheek. Blood flows in my mouth.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Annoyance flickers in his eyes and he approaches me. The glint of malice has my stomach churning with unease. I brace myself for another slap, but he

yanks me by my hair. I scratch at his forearms.

“Stupid bitch. You’ll get us all killed. Your pussy must be that good. Let’s see how good.”

His hand covers my mouth, and I twist in his arms, trying to free myself. I hit him with my hands, with my feet.

“Enough.”

That gruff voice seeps through me, awakening disgust in me. I crawl back to the end of the bed.

“I told you not to touch her,” Delaney says. He fires the gun, and blood splatters on my face, soaking the front of my dress. I don’t flinch, don’t breathe.

He advances and I scramble from the bed, wanting to run toward the opposite side, but my moves must be sluggish because he grips my leg. I try to shake him off, scrape at the sheet with my nails, but still, he yanks me to him.

“You can’t escape me, sweet Aurora.”

The hair on my arms stands up.

“Let go of me, you fucking leech. Where is my friend?”

He slaps my other cheek. Pain is replaced by fury and I jump to my feet, a cornered animal about to pounce. I will never show fear again. And if I die, I want to go out like a fighter, not a scared mouse. That will never be me again.

“First rule, no questions. I am asking them, and you will answer.”

“And if not?” I goad him and this time I am ready when he lifts his hand, but I kick him in his groin and dash through the door. Men with vicious, deadly stares are posted everywhere, but no one stops me. Up the stairs, the salty breeze has me covering my mouth. We are in the middle of the ocean. No island, no other boats, nothing. My heart smashes against my chest.

I turn around and that malicious sneer has me wrapping my arms around myself. Nausea rises inside my stomach.

“Second rule, obey me.”

“Never.”

“Hold her.”

Delaney gives a man the order, and he grabs me before I can run.

“Since the moment I saw you, I have waited for the day to possess you.”

“You’ll never have me,” I spit in his face.

“I will enjoy every minute of breaking you. You will be such a nice addition to my collection.”

“Dream on. And oops, you wanted a virgin? Sorry, Kieran took care of that.”

His face scrunches up in red anger. “You will regret that.”

I grin, revealing teeth, in his ugly face. “Actually, I don’t. I loved every minute.”

“Take her back to her room.”

The guard drags me back and shoves me inside before locking me in. Not wanting to think about what Delaney’s going to do with me, I pace around the room, thinking about how I can buy more time. Maybe I should stop provoking him. I could, but he looks at me in that derisive, superior way and I won’t stand for that. I want him to see he can never break me.

Spent from the adrenaline rush my body has been under, I slide down the wall. Lifting my knees to my chin, I rest my head on them. The door creaks open, and everything halts. I promised myself I would never cry again because of him or for him, but seeing my father entering, knowing I am here because of him, breaks me.

“What did I ever do to you?”

He looks right through me.

“Do you like to see me like this, beaten? He will probably rape me too.”

“Shut up, Aurora.”

“What happened to you? I remember you loving me, caring for me when I was a child.”

He leaves me alone and I sniffle. Minutes later, he comes back with an ice pack and extends his hand.

“For which one? You know what, Father, it doesn’t even matter.”

I tilt my head to the side and rock myself. He stays a while longer. I feel his gaze, but I can’t gauge how he looks at me.

“Why?”

If I want to get over this hurt, I have to know the answer. My heart will learn to live with whatever the answer is.

“There is a fifty percent chance you’re not my daughter.”

“There are tests.”

“I never wanted to know the answer in case—”

“In case I am yours, right? Can you teach me how you did this, switch from a loving father to this monster?”

“Stop with the attitude.”

“You broke my heart, Father, so fuck you.”

He covers his face, dejection oozing from his slumped shoulders.

“Delaney won’t hesitate to hurt you.”

I laugh hysterically. “Then let him. What did you think was going to happen?”

Tiredness overtakes me and I say, “I am your daughter, but you are not my father anymore. Leave me alone.”

I must have reached the breaking point and finally fallen asleep. Maybe I simply want to wake up and find this is just a nightmare.

I wake up with my back hurting, my muscles stiff from my position on the floor. The door opens and a bald, tattooed man carries a food tray. After he puts it on the nightstand, he leaves. Pushed by sheer survival instinct, I dig into the plate, using the plastic fork and knife. Emboldened by the satisfaction they wouldn’t trust me with a regular knife, and needing physical strength, I eat the mashed potatoes and chicken. I would rather try my luck in the ocean than be at the mercy of these monsters.

The door squeaks open. My father and that man come inside. I wonder how many hours I have been in here.

“You again.”

“She still thinks she’s in control. I will rectify that.”

He moves toward me, but my father grips his elbow. Delaney shakes him off and shoves him into the wall.

Foaming at his mouth, he says, “She is my property now. If you ever stop me from getting to her, you will regret it.”

He unbuckles his belt and I scamper from the bed, trying to dash past him when he shoves me hard, and my back hits the wall. My vision blurs. The whoosh resounding in the air should have me prepared, but it’s nothing compared to the pain welting my chest. My throat lets out a muffled scream. I look him right in the eye.

“Fuck you.”

With another snap of the air, the belt hits my arm, a pain ricocheting through my body.

“That’s all you can do?” I challenge. He will not break me. I stand higher.

The belt rains on my thighs and stomach. I buckle over but stand back up again. From the corner of my eye, I see my father clenching his hands at his sides. I slide up against the wall for support.

“Will you obey me?”

It hurts to breathe, to even think of words. My skin sears with pain. Still, I

shake my head and say, “Never.”

He curses under his breath and grabs my hand. My shoulder aches from the pull and he throws me on the bed. I bite into his hand and he backhands me again. I spit the blood in his face and look at him. “Come near me, and I will make you regret it.”

He tugs at his pants, pulling his dick out, pushing himself on top of me. I am cornered, but I scratch at his arm. He lunges for me but is quickly yanked away.

“Enough,” my father says, guilt flashing in his eyes.

They stare each other down. Delaney tucks himself back in his pants, threading his fingers through his thinning hair as if to compose himself. At the door, he says over his shoulder,

“He’s leaving, and then no one can save you again.”

I breathe a small sigh of relief, and my father’s face contorts into so many emotions.

“What, Father? Didn’t you know he was going to do this to me?”

He cups his neck before he leaves, and I allow tears to roll down my face. A few minutes later, the bed dips. “I’m going to put on some pain relief cream.”

I nod, almost desensitized as if suddenly all the survival mode has been switched off.

I hiss at the contact. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Because of her.”

“But I am also half yours.” I’ve heard my mom so often praying silently that neither Cam nor I take after him.

Guilt flashes through his eyes, but he continues applying soothing cream. “You lost both of your children because of your hate.”

“I lost everything, Aurora.”

“Do you know where Chiara is?”

“It’s only you on the boat.”

My heart hurts, thinking something happened to my best friend.

When he’s done, I scoot away, the pain rippling below the surface.

This is not over, just a small reprieve, and terror grips my chest as if claws are ripping it open.

I can hear a helicopter nearby, feeding my starving soul some much-needed hope, only for it to disintegrate when the door opens again.



42

KIERAN

The cargo jet finally lands in Florida, in the private, secluded airport where no public transportation takes place. I run down the stairs and straight to the jeeps waiting on the tarmac.

“I have to look after someone,” Hayden says, heading to the second one. This comes as a surprise for someone who did everything to help get Aurora back. Fine by me.

“I’m coming with you,” says Cato, and Cameron hops in the car with me.

“We’ll follow you in the chopper shortly,” Hayden says and drives off.

We speed toward the ocean, and I already see the submarine in the water when we park. *I am coming, Aurora.*

Cameron clasps my shoulders and says, “We’re going to find her.”

Finding Aurora is not my concern because I will find her. In the last few hours, all I did was watch the tracking device, but in what condition am I going to find her is what concerns me. Fury surges through my veins, a raging hell unleashing within me. They will pay for this.

We run toward the submarine, with our ten best men, following behind us.

The door seals and I ask the captain, “How long till we get there?”

“Thirty minutes.”

Thirty minutes and then I am going to hold you again, sweetheart. With every minute, I let rage simmer and consume me to the point the monster in me fucking roars in pleasure at the carnage I will unleash.

“We see it. Twenty men are on the deck, but we don’t know how many

are inside.”

This isn't enough to stop me from getting to her.

I channel all the despair, anger, and terror I've gathered into calmness—needing to concentrate and be lethal in my focus. I change into a wetsuit and wrap my chest in a bulletproof vest, strapping my favorite knife at my waist. I dive headfirst into the water and follow the direction of the boat.

When I surface, I toss the face mask aside and climb up the anchor chain. I heave myself over the side and land on the deck with a muffled thud. I duck, tiptoeing to the nearest guard, and slice his throat. His gurgled breath pumps me up. I pull him toward the wall and discard his gun overboard. My adrenaline is so high I feel invincible at the moment. Cameron throws his leg over the railing and hands me my gun and the silencer. We separate, and I drag in a lungful of air, raising the gun in my line of sight. I take four more men down. Cameron takes down three, but when one drops, bullets ring in the air, announcing our presence.

Suddenly, there's gunfire everywhere, bullets whooshing past me like endless rain on a stormy night. One grazes my arm, but I turn around and empty three rounds into the guard, who stumbles back. I take him as a shield, firing until I reach the entrance. A groan leaves my mouth when a bullet pierces the same arm. I turn around and aim my knife at my attacker's chest. Cameron takes down two coming from the other side, and I bend to yank my knife from the now-dead man's bleeding chest and reload my gun.

“Kieran, man,” Cameron says, worry in his voice. I shove his fear aside. It's a bullet wound. It went straight through. It's nothing compared to the days without Aurora.

I jerk my chin as a shadow falls on his left. The second the guy appears in my line of sight, I jerk the gun and fire straight between his eyes.

In my earpiece, someone says “The deck is clear.”

But nothing assures me, not until I'm holding her in my arms.

I look around at the blood painting the deck in rivulets of red.

The helicopter hovers above us, and Cato and Hayden come down on two ropes, landing on the deck.

“That was quick,” Cameron says. I don't have to ask Cato if he found Chiara. His shoulders have finally dropped the constant edge of pressure and tension.

We step inside and two guys approach with rifles pointed at us.

“Fuck.”

We duck out and Hayden rolls a stun grenade. The sound is deafening as it explodes. As we get inside, we find the two guards writhing in pain. We quickly shoot them to eliminate the threat.

I make my way through the bodies, my knuckles bleeding from all the souls I delivered straight to hell, the smell of burnt steel rising in a perceptible fog. My arm twitches with the pain.

I'm coming, Aurora. Nothing will hold me back.

I duck into a small opening in the corridor. With the element of surprise on my side, I take more men down. I catch my reflection in a broken glass: a busted lip, a bloody temple. With two more men approaching, I get on my back, pretending to be dead next to the other bodies. A couple step over me, I slice through his calves and shoot the other man before he can even make a full turn.

“How many are there, man?”

“Keep going. You can bitch later,” I say to Cameron in my earpiece.

“They are on the second floor. Hurry.”

“What is it?”

“Delaney’s holding a gun to her head.”

Everything stills in my head as I ground myself.

“On my way.”

My heart pounds as I take the stairs, one after the other. He messed with the wrong man’s woman.

“Do you have a clear shot?”

“No.”

“Do not shoot unless you are a million percent sure you won’t hit her.”

“I won’t, and Kieran?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to save your woman, but she...she’s...”

“Tell me?” Feed the monster.

“She...”

“What? Fucking tell me.”

“She’s hurt.”

A bellow explodes from my throat. I will enjoy killing him.



Booted feet stomp all around. *Kieran's here.*

My lips turn up into a smile. My heartbeats calm down, and I spring to my feet. I sway, dizzy from the pain in my temples, on my body.

My father yanks the door open and says, "We have to go."

"It's Kieran. I'm not going anywhere with you."

"There is still Delaney to deal with, and he won't let you just leave."

"Why are you helping me?"

"I'm paying my debts to you and your brother."

The way he says it, his words have a certain finality.

Smoke fills the floor; how many bullets have been shot to create this fog-like veil?

He opens a door and says, "Stay here."

After a couple of seconds, I decide I'd rather take my chances than wait. Peeking outside the door, I slide down the wall, picking up a discarded knife. I am almost outside when a hand covers my mouth and I bite it. I turn around, only to come face-to-face with my worst nightmare.

"Now, we don't want to spoil the surprise for your husband."

I look around for a way out while his lips part in a maniacal smile. Holding his gaze while my hand conceals the knife from his sight. I don't even want to think about whose blood is smeared all over the blade.

"You will be my ticket out, but between you and me, I'll kill you either way."

"Kieran will kill you and I will watch."

“Your father said the same thing right before I put a bullet through his head.”

He wasn't a good father, but he was the only one I had. My heart twitches at the news. He yanks me to his side, and my eyes collide with Kieran's behind his back.

“Don't take another step,” Delaney says to Cameron, Cato, and Hayden, who point their guns at him.

“I love you,” I mouth, and for one second, his eyes warm, but then the coldness of a killer takes over. Who would have thought the sight would offer me comfort?

“Drop it, or I will shoot her.” Delaney points the gun at my temple. Kieran approaches with the grace of a wildcat. Three more steps and I am free.

“You're surrounded,” Cam says, looking at me. He sees the knife in my hand and gives a small shake. I wiggle myself from his grip. I am in a half sprint to Kieran when Delaney drags me back and hits me with the back of his gun on the side of my head. Blood spills from it, smearing down my cheek. Kieran lets out a piercing roar.

“Taking my wife was mistake number one. Hurting her was mistake number two. Thinking you will survive is your final mistake.”

“I will shoot her.”

He points the gun at my temple again.

I plunge the knife right into Delaney's side and I push him off me, running to Kieran.

Two bullets ring in the air. From the corner of my eye, I see Kieran's horrified look as he drops the gun to catch me in my fall. But I am free. I am in his arms. *Home*. Relief is short-lived as pain rips through me. Everything happens so quickly. Blood floods my mouth and desperation transforms his face, eyes frantically taking me in.

He presses his hand on my lower side.

“You're going to be fine, sweetheart.”

Tears gather and roll down his face. I lift my hand to caress his stubbled cheek, but my hand drops. He tugs me to him and sobs as he tells me, “Don't leave me. Don't fucking leave me.”

“I love you.”

Everything turns black.



44

KIERAN

From the corner of my eye, I see Cameron slicing Delaney's throat, while he bleeds out from my bullet.

So much blood is covering my hands as I stare at my beautiful wife.

"I love you," I whisper, rocking us. She goes still in my arms. I hold her to my chest, kissing her temple, cheek, eyes, and mouth. She needs to open her eyes. Why isn't she?

Throwing my head back, I roar. I don't fucking want to live in a world where she's not in it. I won't.

Hayden drops onto his knees in front of us and Cato clasps my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, man."

Cameron cups his neck, letting out a deafening sound of grief.

Hayden's fingers go to her throat. She's so still, so cold in my arms.

"Don't fucking touch her." Anger burns from my eyes.

"There's a pulse."

I yank his hand away and feel a small flicker of a pulse. But it's the flicker I hold on to.

He bends down to take her, but my hold on her tightens. I scoop her in my arms, and we rush to the helicopter.

"Prepare a surgery room. And bring Alessandra with you," Hayden shouts into his phone.

I am fucking numb as the helicopter flies toward the island.

We hurry to the car. Her lips are turning purple. Every second feels as if she is slipping closer to death. I will join her if that's the only way I can be

with her. It's so hot outside the cement melts under the tires, but her body is ice against mine.

Hayden barks orders at his men, and we speed to where he gives directions.

When we reach the green steel-and-cement compound, surrounded by the thick jungle, he points toward a door.

Everything is already set up.

"You must need it regularly," Cato says. Hayden waves him off, eyes looking from my wife to above with sheer despair.

A brunette climbs out of a car, and her eyes widen when she takes us in, covered in blood.

She ignores Hayden and if this wasn't a life-or-death situation, I would have laughed at the woman who must be Alessandra. She sets her eyes on Aurora in my arms, limbs hanging loosely. She points to a makeshift operating room inside transparent walls.

I place her on the table and turn to her.

"Please, save her."

Her entire demeanor changes, giving me the impression she knows what she's doing. She checks Aurora and says, "She's not breathing."

Alessandra pushes down on her chest, giving her CPR.

"Do not stop."

Hayden comes inside and says, "If you save her, you're free."

"Hayden," Alessandra begins.

"Save her." Something deep passes between them.

She prepares a defibrillator. Aurora's chest rises and falls, but nothing happens. The second time goes the same and my heart seizes in my chest. I watch as Alessandra's hands tremble, and she looks at me as if telling me she's sorry. I close my eyes. Aurora's chest lurches two more times.

"We have a pulse. You're a fighter, aren't you?" Alessandra says and tosses the defibrillator aside. I stumble, holding on to the edge of the bed.

"I have to operate." She injects something, and I watch how she disinfects the wound and tries to extract the bullet.

"Put pressure on this," she orders, and I do as she says.

Alessandra rips Aurora's top off, and I take notice of her battered body, at those angry welts against her perfect skin. "She lost a lot of blood. What's her blood type?"

The question takes me from my mental shutdown.

“Type O,” Hayden, Cameron, and I say.

“We need blood. What we have won’t be enough.”

Hayden rolls the shirt sleeve over his elbow and says, “Take all you need.”

“I can’t just take your blood. What if it isn’t a match? She will die for sure.”

“Take my fucking blood. It won’t kill her.”

“Hayden,” she pleads with him.

He opens and closes his eyes for a moment as if to calm himself. “She’s my fucking sister, and I have the same blood type, so take my damn blood and save her.”

Silence follows. Her eyes blink and I snap my head at him. He’s keeping the bullshit up even now.

“Are you fucking delusional, man?” Cameron says, echoing my thoughts.

But Hayden props on the chair next to her and she stabs his vein with a needle, taking his blood from him and readying it for Aurora.

“Not jealous anymore, *cariño*?”

“Shut up or I’ll drain you.”

“I’m not alive, anyway.”

After the longest twenty minutes of my life, she says, “The bullet is out, and I haven’t seen any internal bleeding, nor did the bullet perforate any organs. We just have to wait for her to wake up.” The bullet clanks as she discards it in a metallic box. I pocket it. When I find out who the fuck helped Delaney, they’ll wish they never crossed me.

“Thank you.”

“I might need more blood.”

“Then take more,” Hayden says, even though he looks one second away from passing out.

“You need a break.”

“I don’t need a fucking break,” he counters and shoots to his feet, wobbling.

“My point exactly.”

She storms away. I tell him, “You have some explaining to do.”

“I don’t have to explain shit to either of you, brother.”

I jerk my head to Hayden who stares arrogantly back at me.

“I am not your fucking brother,” I spat back through my clenched jaw.

“If your father is not your biological father, then you’re right, we aren’t.”

I study him, and if I weren't this physically and mentally exhausted, I would have launched myself at him.

"Why didn't you say that sooner?" Cato approaches and stares him down.

"All I wanted was for my sister to be fine."

"You know you have another one?" I ask just to see his reaction.

"Yes, and you and your mother love Leonie enough for me to not intervene."

Through gritted teeth, I snarl, "My wife is not your concern either. She wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

"No, she wouldn't be here if she wasn't born into our world."

"This talk is not over," I say turning back to her small frame. Some color returns to her cheeks and I clasp her hands in mine, kissing them.

Cameron slips through the curtains and he squeezes my shoulder. "Aurora will pull through this. She's strong."

Yes, she is. Strong, good, and loving. I've been a complete idiot. My accusation will haunt me from now on. I'll never doubt her again. I will give her everything she wants, even if that means she wants me out of her life.

Alessandra steps inside and checks on her.

"Her pulse is stable."

"Thank you."

"It's my job—or it was." Her eyes burn with accusation as she looks outside and finds Hayden. "I guess even monsters have hearts." She shakes herself off and says, "She should rest for a while."

"She will."

Alessandra rolls her eyes at me and says, "And take her to a proper hospital too."

"Can she fly?"

"Not for a few days."

Chiara stumbles inside and covers her mouth as she takes my wife's battered body in.

"I'm so sorry, Aurora."

I grit my teeth. "Take her from my sight. Now."

She lifts her head, defiance coloring her pale face.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"If you stay, I will kill you. My wife is here because of you," I snap, and she takes a step back, tears rolling down her face. "With friends like you, who needs enemies?"

“Kieran,” Cato warns.

“Get her out of my sight. She will be your fucking downfall, man.”

He drags her away while she leans into his side.

“You should eat.”

“I’ll eat when my wife wakes up.” I square my shoulders and hiss, which causes Alessandra’s eyes to narrow.

She prods my arm. “You were shot.”

“It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Do you want her to wake up and find you like this?”

No. I nod for her to continue and she pulls my vest off.

“The bullet went through. I will clean and stitch it.”

She shuffles around and says, “We’re out of anesthetic.”

“I can take it.”

She cleans and stitches my wound, giving me some antibiotics to swallow.

“You didn’t have to save my wife, but you did. Thank you. If there is anything you want, I will give it to you.”

She looks at Hayden glaring at us with suspicion.

“Can you teleport me back in time?”

“No, but I can take you from him.”

“Your family ties are already strained. I will be fine.”

I grip her elbow and look her in the eye. “My offer stands now and in the future.”

She nods and Cameron comes inside with a plate of sandwiches. “You need to eat.”

“My wife lies here and you think I could fucking eat?”

“My sister lies there, too, and I ate because she needs me to be strong and not a martyr.”

“He’s right,” Alessandra says. She has a calming vibe around her, even though I have never witnessed eyes so lifeless.

I resume my position, waiting for Aurora to wake up.

Cato clasps my shoulder. “I love you, man. You’re my family, but don’t you ever threaten my wife again.”

“Your wife? The wife who’s probably thinking up another escape plan right fucking now?”

He rakes a hand through his hair and I shoot to my feet.

“We need queens at our sides and not traitors. My wife is loyal. She

almost died to give yours a way out. Your wife is loyal to no one but herself.” His jaw tics, but he can’t deny the truth of my words and I go on, needing him to wake the fuck up. “Do you think our lives will get easier, our enemies fewer? I planted a fucking chip in her and gave her the password to mine. But I did what I had to do to protect her, making her understand that if she stays, then this will be her life.” I stab a finger at the air, pointing at Chiara. “That woman will never accept the lengths you would have to go to protect her, to keep her safe. Let her fucking go.”

He stares at me with an arched brow. “Would you have let Aurora go?”

“I didn’t have to.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I almost lost her because I wanted to keep her by force. Let her go.”

“She’s my wife. Marriage is for life.”

“Yes, but we could also make someone disappear if we want. There are loopholes, and you know it. We could fake her death and she could disappear to live her life somewhere else. I would die for you. You’re my brother. I just want what’s best for you.”

“Regardless, you better get along with Chiara, because your wife loves her and that bullet won’t change a thing,” he says, storming away.

Chiara glances from him to me, leaning on the wall, misery engraved in her puffy eyes. She storms in my direction. She’s persistent and brave. I have to give her that.

“I am sorry,” she says, surprising me. Her eyes never waver from mine, as if allowing me to see her open vulnerability. Something I’m sure this woman seldom shows. “And if I could take her place, I would, without a second thought.”

“I don’t like you.”

“It’s obvious.”

“But I love my wife.”

“Lucky me.”

With a trembling hand, she places hers on Aurora’s.

“Next time you plan to escape, do it alone.”

“I . . .”

Feeling calmer, I say, “I get it. I truly do. It’s anchored in our DNA to be free, to find our way on our own, but you are like a bird incapable of flying. Your parents clipped your wings. What you went through the last couple of days is just a small part of what this world hides. It’s ugly and dangerous.”

“I didn’t choose this.”

“Regardless, but plan better next time.”

“You really want me gone, don’t you?” A wistful expression takes over her features.

I shrug. “You don’t want to be here, so, yes, loyalty above everything else.”

“I still think you brainwashed her.”

“I don’t have to justify myself to you.”

I take a step toward her, and she cranes her neck to me. It’s her stupid bravery that has Cato so wrapped up in her. She’s a challenge, and I hope he cracks her soon and stops this cat-and-mouse game.

“If you go, you will never see my wife again.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“Still don’t get it? This is a life with a closed circle. Once you step out, that’s it.”

Our conversation is interrupted when a hiss escapes my wife’s mouth. I jerk my face to her. Her lips curl up as she sees me. Life. She resurrects me back to life with a simple smile. I bend over her and cup her face, inhaling the scent of my woman, my home. I kiss her lightly on the lips.

“Don’t you ever scare me like that again,” I stutter.

“I almost died, and you’re still bossy.” She cracks a joke, but whatever she sees in my eyes, has her caressing my cheek. “I knew you’d find me.”

I hold her hands in mine and she tries to move, but I place my hand against her chest.

“You need to recover.”

She closes her eyes and Chiara waves at her.

“Hi.”

“Are you okay?”

Only my wife. She’s too good for this fucking rotten world.

“You lie in a hospital bed and ask me that?”

“What happened?”

“They wanted you, and I escaped when they weren’t looking.”

Chiara approaches and asks meekly, “What did they do?”

My blood rushes the opposite way through my veins as I grip the bed.

“You can see what they did to me.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

I stifle a grunt and she turns to me and says, “Where is Hayden? Is he okay?”

“Your brother is fine.”

“Our brother. And Cameron?”

“Everyone is fine.”

“My father—is he really dead?”

“Yes.”

I don’t even fucking care that I wasn’t the one to kill him.

A few tears roll down her face and she says, “He tried to save me. If he wasn’t there . . .” A shudder rocks her and her head drops on the pillow.

“Sleep, sweetheart.”

“Hop up.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She drags herself to the side, ignoring her pain to accommodate me. *What did I ever do to deserve this woman?*

Aurora places her head on my shoulder and says, “I am still mad at you.”

“I gave you plenty of reasons to be mad at me.”

“But I also love you, and—”

“And?” I wait with my breath caught in my throat.

“And I’ve missed you. I don’t want to fight anymore and won’t do what I did again.”

“If you told me, I would have found a way.”

“I know that now. I just want to go home.”

“We’ll have to wait for your recovery.”

She places her head on my arm while I stroke her back, the raised skin from the belt wounds having activated murderous thoughts. I can’t kill Delaney a second time, but I will find him in hell.

“Kieran?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Thank you for still coming after me.”

I brush my nose against hers.

“I told you once. Nothing would have stopped me from coming after you, nothing you could do.”

“Hayden’s my brother.”

“Apparently mine too.”

“It’s a bit weird, isn’t it?”

“I’ll have to get used to him, won’t I?”

She giggles and hisses. I kiss her temple. "Sleep now."

With the even rise and fall of her chest, I can relax and I fall sleep with her in my arms.



Throbbing in my right side wakes me. An IV is stuck in my arm and I am surrounded by transparent curtains that separate me from a wide open space. And my husband lies beside me, sleeping. It's then I see the bloody bandage on his shoulder.

“He’s fine.”

I tilt my head to the side and find the woman from the window.

“I am Alessandra.”

“Aurora. I saw you.”

“I saw you too.” Something passes in her eyes and I recognize that look, jealousy. “I thought you were his . . .”

“Ohh.”

She hustles around, checking my wound, and I say, “Thank you for saving my life.”

“It’s my job, and you are a strong one. Take it easy for a few days.”

Kieran stirs awake and says, “She will.”

I missed his protectiveness so much. I missed him so much. She leaves us with a nod.

“How are you feeling?”

His eyes take every inch of my body in, and I say, “A bit better.”

“We’ll spend a few days at Hayden’s, then we’re heading home.”

A few hours later, he scoops me in his arms ignoring his injury and places me in the back seat of the car. He strokes my arm, and the engine lulls me to sleep.

I wake up to the moon high in the sky, with Kieran next to me in the guestroom at Hayden's place. I caress his injured shoulder and he stirs.

"Does it hurt?"

"It hurts because you hurt. That bastard had a way too quick death."

"I am fine, Kieran." But as I say it out loud, a few tears roll down my face.

"What is it, sweetheart?" His forehead creases with worry.

"It's just . . . in the end, he was my father."

"You're too good, you know that, right?"

"Children love their parents unconditionally. What happened to him?"

"The same thing that happened to the entire crew, all dead and submerged with the boat."

"Are you feeling better now?"

"No, but justice was served."

He leans in to kiss me. "I'm sorry."

I breathe his heady scent in, at home between his strong arms. "Do you trust me now that I won't leave?"

"I trust you. I don't trust you when it comes to helping others."

"You would have done the same." My stomach growls, and he hops off the bed.

"You need to eat."

When Kieran leaves to bring me some food, everyone else rushes inside and encircles my bed.

Chiara and Alessandra hop on each side of me and the guys crowd behind them. Kieran reappears with a tray and curses under his breath while I suppress a smile.

"She needs to rest. Leave."

I laugh so hard, I hiss at the pain.

"Leave. Right fucking now," he shouts and this time they all leave, except for Alessandra, who gives me something for the pain first.

When I'm alone again with Kieran, he feeds me a spoonful of soup. "That was rude."

He arches his eyebrow. "I don't care. You have to rest. I want you—"

I lift my hand and caress the scruff on his jaw. "I am here now, Kieran. Safe, alive, yours."

He places his forehead on mine and whispers, "Good, because I have no life if you're not in it."

Tears gather in my eyes and I say, “I love you.”

“I love you. You’re what matters. You’re my life.”

He gathers me in his arms and strokes my back.

“How is Tamara?”

“Worried. My mother is too. You see, sweetheart, everyone ends up loving you.”

The next morning I awaken to the noise of construction. I try to get out of bed by myself when I hear the bathroom door open and see Kieran approaching.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I roll my eyes at him.

“I can’t stay another second in this bed.”

“Aurora.”

“Kieran.”

Our eyes lock in a power struggle.

I got what I wanted by leaving the bed but how I ended up being carted around by him is a mystery to me.

Outside, the sun’s warmth heats my skin and the fresh scents in the air tickle my nose. He puts me in a lounge chair and stands guard.

Hayden comes over to us and the animosity still lingers in the air between them. I hope with time, it will get better.

“Feeling better?” he asks and sits down beside me.

“Yes, thank you. So, Alessandra?”

The moment I say her name, he freezes, only to add a second later, “There’s nothing to say. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some things to take care of.”

“Denial,” says Kieran with a grin plastered on his face.

“You know you enjoy your brother suffering.”

His jaw clamps up. “He’s not my brother.”

“He is, so he’s family. God, it was better when you thought he was my secret lover.”

At that, the heat of hell unleashes in his stormy eyes.

“Sweetheart.”

“Don’t sweetheart me.”

He crouches between my legs and his eyes turn to liquid heat as I bite my lower lip. “I was your only lover, *am* your only lover, and I will stay your only lover.”

I’m sure he means that. I’m also sure I want exactly that.

Chiara and Alessandra step outside and I wave at them to come to me.

“You’re really pushing me away,” he says, amusement rolling from his tongue. “Let’s see what happens when I have my tongue between your thighs.”

“Kieran.”

I fan myself and shove him playfully away. When the girls sit next to me, I squeeze Chiara’s hand.

“I get it. You feel guilty, and I look like crap, but enough is enough. And you, Alessandra, why are you still here when you could leave? You’re both in denial when it comes to Cato and Hayden.”

Both protest at the same time and I say, “Be honest. You like being with them.”

“How do you do it?” Alessandra asks.

“We find the best in each other, and the rest is a work in progress.” We just fit, a crammed-together picture of yin and yang.

A pensive look shadows both their faces.

“You should do what you want to do.”

Chiara shakes her head as Kieran comes to check on me. “I counted. Five minutes.”

“He’s overbearing. Over, over, overbearing.”

“I like his over, over, overbearing. It’s fun, especially . . .”

“No need to gloat.”

We burst into a fit of giggles. A few minutes later, a van pulls up and from it, Kieran rolls a wheelchair and I grunt.

“Kieran, baby, I don’t need that.”

“Yes, you do. Please.”

Wow, he can say please, and nothing happened, no earthquake, no thunderstorm.

“This would give me peace of mind.”

“You’re such an emotional blackmailer.”

“Is it working?” He grins and I slap his chest. It works every time.

He rolls me inside the house into the living room. On the big, comfy couch, I watch a movie with the girls and say to Alessandra, “I would like you to come to visit me.” I want to get to know the girl with the sad eyes better.

“I will.”

“Yes, do that. I am starved for a friend who is not dick-whipped. I feel

alone,” Chiara whines.

They chuckle and I flip them the bird.

After the movie, they help me up and I step inside Hayden’s office. The guys are all there, the tension in the air palpable.

“Sweetheart, is everything all right?”

“Sit.”

Reluctantly they sit. I look at Hayden and say, “I want my family near me, and you are family. Come back with us.”

“No,” the other three shout.

“And your schoolyard bullshit has to stop. Whether you want it or not, Hayden is family and he is loyal, just like you.” Turning to my half-brother, I add, “I like Alessandra. And it won’t stop me from being friends with her if you are stupid enough to let her go.”

Cato chuckles, and I say, “Ah, it’s funny because it rings true, right?”

With a sweep of my eyes over them, I say, “Now, sort out your mess because I am not leaving until you do.”

I slam the door shut, satisfied with my entrance and exit.

Outside, Chiara and Alessandra widen their eyes as I catch them eavesdropping.

“You rocked in there.”

“A near-death experience changes a lot.” I raise my hand to Chiara and say, “And if you say you’re sorry one more time . . . I love you. I would do that again and again, but don’t tell Kieran.”

We burst into laughter and Alessandra says, “I wish it was easier, but . . .”

I wonder if this is all that will remain of our new friendship, just memories.

Inside the bedroom, I wheel myself onto the balcony, so many thoughts running through my head, and Kieran finds me here.

“I was scared to lose myself in you. Now I know love implies a bit of losing, giving, serving. I thought I owed it to that girl in me to escape. But you can’t escape your feelings.”

He crouches in front of me, taking my hand in his. He brings my palm to his mouth and places a kiss in the middle of it. “Thank you for choosing to stay, for giving me another chance, remaining mine.”

“Is something wrong with me if I want that?”

“There is nothing wrong with you. You’re everything. And if loving me means something is wrong with you, then we’re both defective. And if it

works for us, then it's fine.”

“I want to go home.”

“We'll fly out tomorrow.”

He scoops me up gently, and I kiss his chest, my fingers gliding down his side.

“Sweetheart.”

“I really, really need you.”

“Believe me when I say I won't get out of you for days after you recover.”

I pout and he says, “You were shot. Lost so much blood, and I don't remember once when you didn't overexert yourself while fucking.”

When he puts it like that . . . We have time. I trust that we'll have time for all we want.

Kieran kisses me all over my face and places me on the bed.

Cuddled in his arms, I caress his wound, and he says, “Those two days . . . If it wasn't for the chip, I would have gone crazy. I know you hated it, but still you take me, this life, as it is, glamorous on the outside, bloody on the inside. If I was a better man, perhaps I would let you go, but I am selfish. And I will continue to be selfish because we're going to have children, and my enemies, even though I have them in check, the power struggle never ends.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Fuck if I know.”

My heart expands with all my love for him at his open vulnerability. “It's you and me. Our life, that's it. I am your queen.”

“Yes, you are. I'm sorry.”

I caress his cheek, pressing my lips against his.

“I've read that the first year of marriage is the rockiest. We'll have a lifetime to make up for it.”

He chuckles, serenity softening his expression. “I adore you, sweetheart. I fucking adore you.”

Back home, I am pampered by everyone, even by my mother-in-law. I told her everything. Nora cried as if to expunge all the venom she gathered and set herself to move past the hurt and heal. I take it as a good sign that she cares because I am now an orphan, needing all the parental love I can get. I even

told her about Hayden and she said, "I'd like to meet him."

That surprised not only me but also Kieran. And to his mortification, she treats Hayden as her child. Even Leonie, after a few times, calls him brother. Hayden's getting a bit of peace in the inferno of his pain and I could burst with relief.

I can't say the same about my very jealous, very possessive husband.

But I show him every day he's my world, with my heart, with my body. A body that is continuously sore from all the lovemaking. I have no complaints, though. I am possibly even bragging. We're insatiable for each other. But in the weeks following my recovery, a lot has happened.

I am so grateful that our love gives us the capacity to keep going and face all the trials that will come. As well as a place to call home. Peace with danger constantly looming.

I can't wait to start college and taste a bit of normalcy after everything that's happened.

Kieran props himself on his elbow and caresses my cheek. My skin blossoms under his touch and my heart expands with him, for him.

His love roots me in the ground while having my heart beyond the clouds.

He drags me to his chest and kisses me, losing himself inside of me.

"Mine, just mine, always mine. In this life and whatever might come after."

"Yes. Yours. Forever. I love you."

With the sweetest kiss on my lips, he says, "I love you, Aurora. You're the sweetest addiction, the purest delight. My one and only love."



Thank you so much for reading Sinner's Obsession.

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To my readers, thank you so much for picking up my books and reading them! I'm filled with love and gratitude. I strive to write stories you could fall in love with! Thank you for reading and supporting me! I love you!



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I hope you loved reading Aurora and Kieran's story as much as I did writing it. *Sinner's Obsession* is my first dark romance, and their love story swept me up in a world that consumed me. I typed in a frenzy, lost sleep, had no appetite. I was that invested.

I was a goner for Kieran's obsessive love for Aurora and the way she brings out his softer side. They prove not only that opposites attract, but can make it work. Their love started a shy flicker and turned into a firework. And even blind as they were at times, they couldn't keep ignoring their feelings. And when they gave in, it was epic.

Aurora and Kieran have a special place in my heart. I can let them go with a dreamy sigh, knowing they are in good hands—in each other's.

This is the end of Aurora and Kieran's story but they will have plenty of cameos in the next books.

Syndicate of Sinners will be a four book dark romance series. What started as passion project turned into so much more. And for the foreseeable future I'll be trapped in their dark, edgy world.

Thank you for reading *Sinner's Obsession*.

P.S. *Sinner's Perdition* will come next, and this is all I am saying. Chiara and Cato are combustible.

Live a life of love, starting with yourself.

Yours sincerely,
Bianca Borell

One who has always been in love with the magic words can create on a blank page.

P.S. If you've liked this book, please tell a friend, and maybe even share your thoughts about *Sinner's Obsession* online. I'd love it if you'd write a quick review on the vendor page from where you purchased it, or click on those stars. <https://books2read.com/u/4jqIYI>

Reviews help tremendously and whenever I read how you loved it, my author heart bursts with happiness. :)

Thank you so much.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bianca Borell is a contemporary romance author, voracious reader, nature lover, and unapologetic daydreamer. She spends her nights deciding between getting up to write or trying to silence the voices of her characters. The battle is never-ending. She has a weakness for tormented characters, second chances, and happy endings.

She currently lives in Germany with her amazing husband and indulges in way more pastries than she should.

For updates, news, and releases, be sure to visit Bianca's official website at www.biancaborell.com