

DECEPTION SERIES BOOK 2

A bouquet of purple roses and orchids is centered on the cover. A knife is hidden within the flowers, its blade pointing upwards. The background is dark with small white specks, suggesting a night sky or a dark surface.

BITTER DECEPTION

AKWAH K

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BITTER DECEPTION
Editing: Kaye Polishing

To those who believed in love and found a rough road leading to it. Never stop believing.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is not a dark romance but has a few elements that could be under this sector.

This book is a continuation of Sweetest Deception. This is not a Mafia series.

For better understanding of the characters, it is recommended to read the series
in order.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Descriptive scenes of assault, violence, death, paranoia, extreme language, use of guns, use of machetes, anxiety, domestic abuse, death of a parent, kidnapping, murder, blood, gore and homicide. This also follows extreme PTSD.

This book contains sexual content not intended for minors.

Your mental health matters so if any of these triggers may affect you, please skip this book. You should take care of yourself first before diving into a book that could trigger bad memories or affect you negatively in any way.

BITTER DECEPTION

Forgiveness never came easy.

This is the aftermath of a sweet deception.

When your own husband leaves you with tears in your eyes and a bitter taste of the sweet deception he once promised.

Love left me heartbroken to pick myself back up.

My husband wants me back and he will do anything to achieve that, not knowing that we may have to pay the price of loving another.

1

REMO



I quickly bend down to pick up my phone, and Aurora just sits there in front of me.

Helia: *Since you said she isn't in the good books of her father, we will threaten to release this to the press, tarnishing his reputation for not caring about his daughter if he doesn't give it up.*

I open the file he sent me, ignoring his message. Acid fills my mouth, and my blood runs cold as my eyes scan over the document on my phone.

My eyes switch between my phone and her background report, my wife sitting on the couch, and the gun in my hand.

My world shakes beneath my feet, and dizziness takes over me.

I hadn't found the time earlier to look at what Helia had sent me on Aurora, and now I'm realising my mistake. I shouldn't look. I shouldn't want to dive into her life and see what she doesn't want others to see.

It will be an invasion of privacy, but I need to know what caused those times she has frozen next to me, what those panicked eyes mean.

I'm making a mistake. I know it, but I scroll down her personal report, anyway.

Twice there have been reports of abuse on her body, but they were dismissed and erased, from what Helia has commented on the file. Someone tried to cover up her abuse. There are even pictures.

Burn marks. Circular, like something burning was placed on her skin and it

burned into that shape. Cigarette burns. There are two pictures of this similar type of burn mark. One behind her neck, one behind her ear. Hidden places no one would pay attention to.

The others are bruises, purple, yellow, deep maroon.

My hands tighten around the phone, almost making it crack.

I scroll down, trying to contain the burning need to punch someone. My eyes scan over the names until I see *his* name, and the need to snuff the life out of those eyes takes over me. All the more reason to kill this motherfucker.

Cause of abuse: Father.

Name of father: Mace Torre

Fuck. *Fuck.*

When I finally look up at Aurora, the unshed tears in her eyes almost makes me drop my phone. I almost forget about taking a picture of her in this state, almost forget about taking advantage of her trust like this to get her father. Because those tears... Just the sight of them, and knowing I caused them, has me weak in my knees. They are begging me to say this was all for show. But I have been planning to do this since the beginning. Until now. But now it's too late.

My mind plays what I saw in the document just now on repeat.

Restraining order against someone. Or should I say, attempted, because no one did anything.

I drop the gun and rush towards Aurora. She shrieks and pushes me away.

"Get away from me," she chokes out, hatred slowly filling her eyes. "I trusted you, Remo." The words are sharp thorns, piercing my skin, one by one.

I drop to my knees on the floor before her. "It's not what you think, Aurora. I —"

"What does it matter?" she shouts, her eyes red-rimmed and her body faced away from me.

This is the first time she's raised her voice at me. The frustration, the betrayal, is evident in her reddened eyes, in the shaking of her hands, in the way she bites her lip to stop the tears from falling.

"My father controls my finances and has been for years since I started my business. I was trying to get away from him, but I couldn't. I thought you would help me. I thought you would understand, and that you—" Her voice cracks as her eyes narrow at me.

My deception is ripping apart my loving wife.

That same painful feeling inside of me that pulls and pulls until I have to clutch my chest.

“What?” My mind suddenly comprehends what she just told me. “Your father is controlling the finances of your business?” I repeat.

Her eyes tell me nothing as she stands.

“Aurora,” I breathe out.

Cold shivers wrack my body. I am watching everything that could have been, break. This is exactly what I wanted a minute ago, isn’t it?

But I could have fixed her problem.

All she had to do was tell me. Then again, what did I do to make her trust me at all?

She’s lost whatever trust she had now.

“Aurora, this was... This was so I could just get your father to uphold his end of the deal. I would never hurt you.”

She smiles at me, but I don’t feel the effects of this one. It’s an empty smile.

“Did you not trust me?” Aurora whispers.

She pushes at my shoulder, and I fall back on my ass. I feel so weak at the moment.

Gritting her teeth, she stands above me, feet on either side of me, and grabs hold of my collar. Silent tears stream down her face.

“Did you not, for one second, consider that what I’ve been telling you about my father is true? He won’t take this bait. How could you think he would? You could have told me about this. I would have let you do whatever you needed, so long as you could get me away from him.” The way her voice cracks makes my own heart burst with pain I single-handedly brought upon us.

I did this. I did this, and it has changed everything.

She punches me. It’s weak. She’s shaking and sobbing.

The truth is frightening, but it’s real, and it’s in my face, showing me the reality of the situation.

When she calls me handsome and tells me it’s because she thinks I’m good looking, I brush her off, and yet when she doesn’t use the nickname, I feel like something is missing; then I question what it is about me that is different today. What caused her to not say it?

When she tells me excitedly about her plans, about what she wants to do, I believe her, because there are no lies.

I lift my hand, then wipe a tear from her soft cheek.

I used to question her motives, but deep down, I knew she wouldn’t do anything to betray me.

It’s fucking scary at how I feel, and these emotions suddenly feel too much.

I trusted her, and I didn’t even know it.

I placed my trust in her slowly until she had it, and I wasn’t even aware of it.

Aurora is free to go. I'm not restraining her. She can leave, run right past me, but her eyes are on me. Hard and unmoving, despite the tears.

"Don't cry over a monster like me," I say. My voice low.

"You're right. You are so right. But you know what hurts the most?" She leans down, her nose brushing against mine as she shuts her eyes, as if not even wanting to look at me. "I felt safe with you," she whispers against my lips.

My breathing picks up. All the roses in my garden have been lit on fire, and I am the one holding the match.

Felt. As in past tense.

Not anymore.

"Remo. Life is not simple. I wish I could say I trust you, but the reality is, I don't. I liked you. You were fun to mess with, and I enjoyed your company. Even your frowns felt like a warm hug to me, but pointing a gun at me? How do I believe you didn't mean to actually want to kill me?" She takes a deep breath in, keeping her eyes on me.

She lets go of my shirt and stands up.

"You protected and defended me against my father, and that means the world to me. You stayed home today to take care of me, and I couldn't be more grateful, so what does that say?" Her voice shakes, slowly dissolving into a whisper.

I shouldn't question that, knowing she has never, not once, betrayed me or attempted to.

Her honesty baffles me, because I have been lying to myself for months.

Too many mixed emotions. Too many weaknesses that come with those feelings.

Too many plans being a mess.

I take a deep breath before blowing it out. "Aurora. I'm sorry. Believe me, please. I..." I shake my head, thinking back to the moment I first saw her.

Aurora's face hardens, and her hands clench at her sides.

"I knew."

My head snaps up. "What?"

Her eyes sharpen. "You were bound to do something like this, weren't you? I knew there was a reason for you to enter this marriage, and I knew it most likely had to do something with my father, of course. But this? A gun? I just—I hoped you wouldn't hurt me to get back at my father. Clearly, I was wrong," she chokes out.

"You may have done this for your own gain, but I was losing myself over you, Remo. I would have handed over my trust, my heart, and my affection for you, but you didn't even think twice about holding a gun to my head, did you?"

She gets up and walks away from me, leaving me bewildered.

I am left in silence with my thoughts, overwhelmed by just how correct she is. She doesn't trust me, which I understand, but I don't understand just how easily I fell to my knees for her just now.

Running a hand down my face, I text Helia, telling him I finished off what we were supposed to do, no matter who actually lost something in the end. Which, in this case, was me.

I lost a part of my soul to Aurora, and I can't do a damn thing about it.

That was solely so that Helia believes me when he sees the picture and so that he can take care of what is about to happen to Mace. I've always needed to be strategic about everything, every deal, every meeting. This was just a small move on my part so that the next domino could fall.

But that also meant losing something. Someone.



I put on my tie, getting ready to go to work. I find myself constantly looking to my right, where Aurora is putting on her makeup next to me.

It's been two torturous weeks of her ignoring me.

Two weeks of me trying to talk to her. She just keeps walking out on me. She sleeps next to me but only ever comes into the room after I am already in bed. If I turn up later than her, she is already asleep or pretending to.

It's fucking with my head.

I have tried to reach out to her, but her assistant keeps telling me her schedule is packed. This silence from her... it's like she has slammed the door in my face without hearing me out.

If I were in her position, I would do the same. Maybe she is, at least, showing some mercy by not tarnishing our reputation in the media. Whenever we are caught by the paparazzi, she instantly lights up and puts on an act.

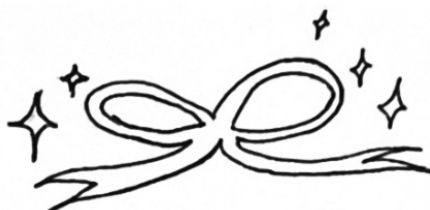
Two weeks and I am reaching my limit.

I need her to look at me, to just glance at me once, because this silence is maddening.

It's a craziness that Aurora somehow covertly instilled in me.

A wound left untended and bleeding. A wound I created and one I will need to patch up.

AURORA



I reach my office and open the door with new fabrics in my hand, only to see someone sitting in my seat at the table with their back to me.

It's been a couple of days—more like two weeks—since I have been trying to keep my emotions tucked away, trying to see exactly what will make Remo accept what he feels. Him pointing the gun at me while I was sleeping... I admit, my heart shattered, but I knew I didn't do anything to provoke it. It was something on his part.

He doesn't know the pain he unleashed on me.

I haven't forgiven him. I can see that he wants me, wants to touch me, wants to kiss me, but he still won't accept it. What is between us? It's really starting to get to me, and it's only a matter of time before I have to decide if I will be staying.

I don't hate him. No.

I knew he did it because of my father. What frustrates me is that very early on in the marriage, I told him about my father. It didn't make sense for him to point the gun at me. So the conclusion I arrived at is that it was all for nothing.

It was for show.

And it turns out, I was right.

I checked last night when I sneaked into his office after he fell asleep.



I open the laptop. I am lucky and the heavens above are with me today, because it's unlocked.

My heart punches hard inside my chest as I sit on the chair, navigating on a laptop that holds nothing but the basic application on its desktop. My hands shake. What I am doing is wrong, but did Remo care about that when he pointed a gun at me? No.

The reality that he did it while I was sleeping, while I felt safe, it removed whatever safety net I felt with him. I didn't know what to think, but I didn't think too fast, nor did I overreact when I went into the bedroom. I stood in the bathroom in front of the sink and stared at myself, trying to work out the possibilities.

And I found that the answer would lie within his office, my father's office, and I needed access to either one of those two.

So here I am, trying to open the folder labelled as MT in the applications of the desktop. It's not hidden for some reason, but I know Remo isn't one to leave his path dirty. He will clear this all up.

Opening the folder, it reveals a list of recordings and videos. Opening the first recording, I put the volume to the lowest setting and lean close to the laptop to listen.

My eyes widen when I realise it's my father.

"How much did you say it cost for the property?" my father asks someone on his phone.

"Three million pounds, sir."

Father hums, and I pick up the clicks of a keyboard in the background.

"Remo's investment has come in handy, then. Draw up the contract and send me the property papers to sign. I'll take it."

More information is passed to him, then the recording ends.

I click play on another one.

This one is also of my father buying properties and smaller businesses under

his name, using the money Remo gave him, which was approximately twelve million pounds.

Then there is one last recording, and something heavy sits on my heart as I press on this one.

“You cannot marry my daughter in sole exchange for an investment from you, Mr Cainn.”

Realisation dawns. The recording is from the day Remo came over to my parents’ house. Either the night after I left dinner or the morning after, before I was told to come in.

“I don’t see how I’ve left you a choice, Mr Torre. You wanted this investment, and I need to marry a daughter of yours, preferably Aurora Torre.”

My heart drops to my stomach, hearing Remo demand this.

But why?

Why me?

“I will give you the investment money, in cash, as long as you marry Aurora to me. It needs to be a public wedding. And the marriage contract needs to last for one year.” The bored tone of Remo’s voice warns me of upcoming danger. I can sense the hostile atmosphere. Why did my father agree?

“Will that mean you will remove me from your blacklist? Will I no longer be avoided at conferences and meetings?” The eagerness in my father’s tone makes my stomach churn. Disgust fills me.

“Yes. Exactly as you want it. Your business will shoot up, and you will get investment from me. I think that’s a fine deal, Mr Torre. Do you agree to do this?”

There is pause, and even I am holding my breath, tears brimming in my eyes as I realise this was the moment my father sold me for the mere fact that he didn’t want to be blacklisted by Remo.

“Then we have a deal,” Remo announces once he hears my father’s silence and takes it as a yes.

The recoding ends.

I am gasping, my throat tightening, air getting trapped itself inside my throat, forming a lump.

Slow tears drip down my cheeks as I fail to keep my choked gasps in check. I quickly remove any traces that I’ve been here from Remo’s laptop, then I run out. I dash downstairs, into the living room, covering my face with my hands as I let my tears fall free.

I never knew my father would outright sell me for money and power.

Avoiding me and keeping me at arm’s length was fine, and I accepted that, but to have him just agree like that? Just to climb higher in society’s eyes?

I frantically shake my head as more tears roll down my cheeks. I can't stop them.

It makes me realise what happens when you make a deal with a man like Remo. You will make one wrong move, and it will be all over for you.

I realise what Remo is doing.

He will use that image of mine as blackmail material. He will hang it over my father's head, probably threaten to release to the media or even actually blame it all on my father, saying he didn't care for his daughter, just so Remo can get what he actually wants from my father.



I don't want to get involved in what Remo and my father have between them.

"I know it's you, Remo. I am not leaving until I get this dress made today. I only have four hours left."

I gently lay the fabrics near my workstation, then drop my bag on the table as Remo turns around in the chair. His eyes lock on me.

His head tilts as a finger runs over his jaw. A habit of his when he is thinking.

I haven't been completely ignoring him, only speaking when absolutely necessary, but I can tell my silence and avoidance is affecting him. He is becoming restless, trying to make me hear him out, but I walk away, look away, and don't pay mind.

He needs to realise that what he did was brutal. He smashed my heart into pieces just as I was beginning to trust him. He hurt me, and he needs to ask me for forgiveness.

And he needs to know exactly how to do it in order for me to even to speak him.

Dismissing him, I turn around and grab my scissors. Although I am focusing on cutting out my first draft design for a new collection, my mind is still

focussed on the fact that Remo is sitting at my desk watching me.

I can feel his eyes boring into me, and I can't help but glance over at him a few times. He catches me in the act each time. A flush makes its way onto my face.

"What are you even doing here?" I finally ask him, catching him writing something in one of the books I use to jot down my ideas.

I use pins to stick the fabric together, thinking I will do the sewing tomorrow once I get more time. Opening a boutique of my own will be a big step for me, but that has to wait while I try to keep up with the rise in demand due to my marketing, my recent event, and the newfound attention I have received from getting married.

It has definitely positively impacted my work.

Exactly what I had hoped for, and I got it. But with the man sitting in my chair, my husband, I didn't expect us to bicker, then secretly enjoy each other's company, not realising we were crossing a line that was there to protect us.

And everything has an expiration date.

It will all come to an end.

Like a fever dream. Like the fantasy that only makes you feel alive for a few moments before it's gone.

I don't want that. But then I realise how pathetic it is for me to feel that way when Remo held a gun to my head.

Remo has used me as leverage for my father, a piece in his game that he carefully moved, but did we anticipate that we would fall for one another like this? No. I really don't think so, and trying to provoke Remo to get a reaction out of him that shows he will want to keep me and not lose me is weakening my heart, because what will happen if the answer is a no?

Are Remo's feelings purely lustful, purposeful, or does he actually feel something for me? Enough to want to be with me forever?

Am I wrong to be hopeful even in a situation like this?

I glance over at Remo. He's looking at his phone, his ankle over his knee, his brows furrowed. I know one thing, no matter how wrong it is for me to admit this:

I don't want this to end.

I don't want to let Remo go.

I want to slap myself for still wanting him, but I will stay strong. I will not accept anything until he asks for forgiveness. If he doesn't, then it means I will need to walk out and not look back, knowing Remo could destroy me and burn the very ground I walk on.

As if sensing my eyes, Remo looks up at me. My stomach jumps under his

gaze.

I tilt my head, and a pencil falls out of my hair, making me gasp. I glance at Remo, and the quirk of his cheek tells me everything.

My heart rate is thundering inside of me, drumming against my ears as if wanting to break through and let him hear exactly what he does to me.

My hands shake ever so slightly as I grab a piece of fabric from the floor.

“Did you know that pink is my favourite colour?” I tell him as I find myself looking at the designs on the floor, on the table, and suddenly realising it’s just my colour.

Am I wrong for making conversation now? Just to fill the deafening silence?

Remo lifts a brow, looking down at me with a confused frown. I swallow thickly as he stands up, my eyes tracing his broad shoulders, wide chest, and long, strong legs. His tall frame towering, he slowly stalks closer to me, around the table, until he is in front of it, then leans against it.

I hold my breath for what he may say, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, holding me hostage until he answers me.

I am giving him an opening. I hope he takes it before I make the decision to walk away with whatever pieces of my heart I have left.

Turning to my mannequin, I stand up, tying my hair up again, and wrap the last piece, which is the skirt, around it, then stick the pins in.

“I thought it was white.”

I freeze, forcing down memories.

“It’s not,” I murmur, hoping he doesn’t question me.

But why wouldn’t he? My father already gave him a hint about what that colour means to me. I told him why I wear it long ago, but it doesn’t mean it’s dear to my heart.

His shoes click on the floor, getting closer and closer until I feel his warmth on my back. I stand straighter, and his hot breath fans across my bare shoulder and my back where it’s exposed by the open-back cut of my dress. My heart skitters. He brushes aside the strands of my hair that have fallen loose from my makeshift bun, his fingers grazing the back of my neck. I fight to hold in a shudder.

My breath falls in short pants, his hold on me making my mind hazy.

Remo slowly drags his fingers across the back of my neck until he reaches a spot I always try to hide. I shut my eyes, trying to find balance, to find silence, but it doesn’t work. He is right behind me, touching me so slowly, with such precision that I fear he may see the burning effect he has on me.

If he asks, I’ll tell him.

There is nothing to hide.

His finger softly glides over the small round scar on the side of my neck, and just on top of that one, there is another small round scar behind my ear. The cigarette burns.

“Who did this?” His restrained whisper makes me blink.

I swallow once more.

“My father.” My voice is quiet. I’m not ashamed, but those scars are a big part of my horrid memories.

Remo sucks in a sharp breath.

“For not wanting to work for him when I just wanted to start my business. It wasn’t supposed to be such a big deal, but I wanted to get away. Being neglected so much in that family... I felt left out.” I shrug, as if it’s not a big deal.

I gasp when his muscular arm snakes around my waist. I glance down at Remo’s hand splayed across my tummy. His other one wraps around my neck. He tugs me, plastering me against him. I feel every hard inch of his body, every muscle.

“Remo,” I breathe, my mind going numb. I don’t know what to say at all.

This is ... different.

He pulls me even closer, as if he wants to tuck me in his arms, to shield me away. His hand trembles ever so slightly on my stomach, like he is holding onto one last string of control.

“I’m working, Remo,” I protest weakly.

His dark chuckle hits me deep in my chest. I feel it wrap around my bleeding heart, feel it seep deep into my wounds and taint my heart.

I should step away.

My heart calls out to his every heartbeat, my love and affection for him dancing around us, waiting to dig deep into his chest and rest there, but I cannot forgive him.

I can’t lose myself in him when he hasn’t even tried.

“And I am deciding how exactly I am going to cut off Mace’s hands. I would be shaking with anger if I wasn’t holding you, *amore*.”

The hand on my neck pulls me closer. I drop my head back against his shoulder, and his gaze finally catches mine.

Those dark eyes watch me. His presence is such a strong force that my eyes can’t stray from his. The thick, dark curtain of his lashes hides the monster. I almost want to see if I feel anything remotely close to fear around him.

“You were supposed to be just a chess piece, and yet you turned out to be my sweetest mistake. A sweet deception that I am too addicted to.” His dark eyes affirm his truth.

His tone is heavy, dark, but sincere. With every single word that comes out of

his mouth, I find myself entranced by him. I experience a moment of weakness.

Warmth curls through me the longer he holds me in his arms like this, the longer he looks at me like he really means what he said.

I should push him away.

He hurt me.

Betrayed my trust by holding a gun to my face.

How am I so pathetic, letting him hold me like this?

How could I become so weak in his arms because of my feelings?

I can't freeze my heart for him. I'm not made like that.

"What chess game required such deception?" I ask him.

His hand on my neck slides lower to caress my chest. My open neckline barely hides anything. My stomach dips, and need for him grows low in my body.

Remo smirks, as if he knows exactly what I am thinking and feeling.

My heart drops to my stomach. I can't let him know that I'm this close to succumb to his torturous lustful ways. He can't know about my desire for him, that I want to do *things* with him, which I'll most certainly regret.

"A game where the King was supposed to be alone."

Somehow, I find that hard to believe. There is definitely another reason he agreed to this marriage. A completely different one.

"My parents wanted me married before I could receive my inheritance. It's a hefty one, left by my grandfather," he explains, and I am surprised he even shared this.

"Money?" I whisper.

He nods hesitantly. His eyes flickering between mine.

"Why me?"

Lowering my head, I look at the worktable. I don't want him to see my face. The first time I asked him, he told me it was my looks and my status, and it hurt. I hope he doesn't repeat it, but I know he will.

"You caught my eye first."

Everything around me stops. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. My heart pounds in my chest at his words, and my jaw drops open.

Was his story of how we met true? It can't be. I never saw him before that meeting in my father's office.

Maybe I was his first choice.

No.

I shake myself. That never happened, and it won't begin now.

"We both know lying doesn't get you anywhere," I reply, shaking my head and taking a step out of his hold.

He grasps me and slams me back against his rock-hard chest.

“I’m *not* lying. I keep the monster within me hidden, Aurora. I told you to walk away, but you didn’t. Now I’m not willing to let you go.”

How I was wrong, thinking Remo would melt for me. How wrong I was to believe that I would find love here when he is a monster. When he could be ruthless enough to hold a gun to my head.

His lips flutter across my bare shoulder, then his teeth graze a certain spot that makes me shiver in his arms. He bites lightly, as if to test if I hate it. I don’t. My heart pounds in my ears. I inhale, taking in his cologne. I shiver. He bites down harder, and I suck in a quick, sharp breath, the pinch of hurt further enhancing my arousal.

“Remo,” I whine.

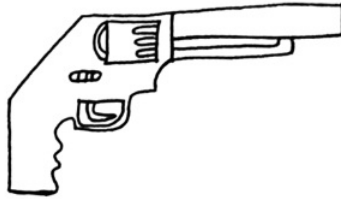
“Sorry, *amore*, but men need to know who you belong to.”

He didn’t apologise.

My heart aches. I will have to walk away.

3

REMO



I can't stop looking at her. I try not to smell her cherry scent, but it seems to linger around me. She occupies my thoughts.

I pass a bakery on my way back to the house while Aurora stays late at her office, and all I can think about is stopping and grabbing her something sweet. I fist my hands and tear my gaze away from the window.

I stopped denying my attraction to her the minute we kissed the first time.

The only thing bothering me is that I can't keep my eyes, or my thoughts, off her.

I have more pressing matters to think about, like the blood that will stain my hands today. I'm not going home. I'm heading to the Torre mansion.

I have a debt to collect.

A maid opens the door when I arrive, welcoming me in, and I walk towards his office on the ground floor. I know my way around now; I have been here too many times.

I walk into the office without knocking, then chuckle.

Another one of his maids sits in his lap, petting his face.

She yelps, scrambling to get off, and Mace looks furious. His face burns red, and his jaw clenches.

"Oh, this is fun, isn't it?"

The maid rushes out, hiding her face from me, but I know it's one of the cooks. I pity Mace's wife for being stuck with a shrivelled bastard like him.

"Mr Cainn." Mace clears his throat and sits up straighter.

I take a seat in front of him and watch him silently.

I may be more talkative with Aurora, but that is solely because if I didn't engage with her, she would find another form of entertainment and wouldn't look at me. I want her to keep smiling at me and giving me her whole attention. I *want* to be talkative with her. I want to tell her things that make her smile. And I want to touch her.

But when I am outside, in front of my clients, my partners, or in meetings, I don't talk.

So I watch Mace fidget in his seat under the pregnant silence. My eyes find a pen on the table, then I look at his hand. It is wrapped in white plaster, still healing from the injuries I gave him for badmouthing Aurora. It was just a small knife wound delivered when I came to warn him right after that disastrous dinner at his house. It seems the wound was deeper than I thought.

Or maybe I did know.

"Is there something you need? Is it Aurora again? Has she done something?"

I lift a brow at him, and he sighs and shakes his head.

"That girl never does anything right. It's only been four months. Not even take part in this marriage. A mistake is always a mistake."

My hands tighten around the arm of the chair, and my blood boils inside of me the longer I look at him. The wooden arm cracks.

Mistake.

I know damn well what happens when a parent calls you that. I know because the woman I have been looking for, the woman I agreed to this marriage for, is the reason.

Not only do I need to find Venezia, but I also need to know if she is actually alive, and that is more heart-breaking. How would I live with myself if I discover that the reason I got married, the reason I took on the inheritance of my grandfather, and the reason I let go of my previous life is no longer alive?

"I don't think you learned your lesson, Mace."

His eyes narrow across the table, the thick brows bunching together as his moustache trembles.

Someone's angry.

"Oh, I won't forget what you did. It's not easy to miss it when I can't do half the things I could. You know the deal is done and over with. I got my money; you got my daughter. There is absolutely no need for you to visit me again," he spits out.

Yes. That is correct. Mace wanted money, and I needed an alliance long enough to get the inheritance. The inheritance my parents have been after for so long. They didn't want to work any longer, so they birthed a son to be their golden ticket to the money. They thought building my grandfather's business by

just a few figures, then handing it to me as soon as possible would secure their future. They knew that their son once used to be anything but a businessman.

I breathe in and then out, looking over at the bookshelf to my left. There are always new additions on the shelves. His magazines, pictures of women and men, the hot topic of the month. It was a big company, Glamorous, until he drove it to the ground. Now, he's struggling to maintain his image.

It could explain why he hasn't been seen out in public when he was so adamant about throwing his money around.

So much money, a big estate, a family to flaunt, and yet not a single brain cell to keep him from making deals with the wrong people.

"So unfortunate that you had everything and were still seeking more. Now, how will you do work with two injured hands?" I slowly get up from my seat.

He does, too, crossing his arms to hide his trembles. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I round the table and stalk to him. My big frame towers over him, almost engulfing his lean body.

"One question, Mace."

His lip twitches, making his moustache move, too. Weird.

"Does raising your hand to your daughters give you a thrill?" Another step closer, and he takes one back.

Grabbing the pen I was eyeing from before, I turn to Mace. His eyes frantically dart around.

"You will pay for this, Remo. You are making a mistake." He raises a finger to me, and I grab it, snapping it in half.

He screams, then clutches the hand to his chest.

"You—"

"You raised a hand to Aurora. Multiple fucking times. I'm not a patient man, Mace. You have, haven't you?"

He doesn't speak. He's shaking, focus glued to his hand.

"Answer me!" I shout.

He flinches.

That is the first time I have raised my voice in a long time.

Mace's wide eyes dart over my face. His face is ashen, and his breaths are short and choppy.

"Y-Yes. She wanted to get away, but I needed someone to take care of my business. It was only fair—"

My hand wraps around his neck, squeezing hard. He barely gasps as his face turns red, then a ghostly white colour.

A purple hue starts to make its way onto his face, but I grit my teeth and

maintain my hold.

Feeling his pulse slow down under my fingers paints a sick smile across my face. My hands tingle, wanting to finish the job, but I can't afford to do that right now.

"I love the feeling of a life ending under my fingertips. You know I am not a beginner at this," I growl in his face and throw him to the floor at my feet.

He is gasping, clutching at his hand, and his knees collapse when he tries to stand up.

"You touch her again, Mace, I promise that your life will end in a worse way than this. This is my final fucking warning."

He turns his pale, wrinkled face away from me, and I leave him there.

My hands twitch, not used to a job being left halfway through.

REMO



My staff carry bouquet after bouquet of white and pink roses onto my yacht. I keep checking my watch, then scanning the dock, anticipating the moment she arrives. She doesn't know what I've called her here for.

My eyes scan over the yacht filled with roses of her favourite colours, hope flickering in my chest like a broken light. I don't know if this is enough. I don't know if she'll forgive me.

I will earn her forgiveness. I can't lose her. The thought of her walking away from me, never seeing her again, or finding out that she's fallen for another man... My fists clench. I can't bear it.

Just as the last of the staff disembarks, my phone pings to tell me she is here. I make my way to the dock. The minute my eyes fall on her, her pink dress flowing with wind, I know she is the woman of my fucking dreams. She's holding her white purse in front of her with both hands, waiting patiently for me. My gaze catches on her glittering white heels, and my heart clenches. If she wants to step on me with those sky-high heels, I would let her.

As soon as I reach her, her eyes collide with mine, and the storm inside me calms, the sun peeking through the clouds.

"Why did you call me here?" Her soft voice travels across the breeze that keeps ruffling her hair.

I don't answer; instead, I hold out my hand to her. She regards me with uncertainty. The hesitancy in her actions—the hesitancy that I created in her—stings. A few weeks ago, she would have happily placed her hand in mine.

My hand falls when she doesn't take it.

"I have something to show you." Swallowing, I turn and motion for her to walk with me. She does, thankfully.

We walk in silence, and it's the worst thing ever, but I hope... I hope she sees that I am trying. We reach the end of the dock, and my yacht stands tall and long.

I take the step up the yacht, turning around and holding my hand out for her. She grabs it, taking the wide step onto the yacht. Keeping hold of her hand, I squeeze it and pull her behind me until we reach the cleared space.

She gasps.

I turn around to find her eyes darting over the yacht. Flowers are wrapped around the railing, the bouquets sit on the seats, on the floor, and cover the entire front of the yacht.

"Remo, what is this?"

"For you."

Her eyes fly to me and narrow. Is she trying to find a lie in my words? She won't find one.

"Are you trying to win me back with flowers? On a yacht, nonetheless?" She raises a brow at me, crossing her arms.

"Is that a trick question? I'm not sure how I should answer it." I step closer to her, feeling her eyes wavering and her confidence crumbling the second I am within her proximity.

"Well, it isn't working. Hiring a yacht and setting flowers on here, I could walk into a rose field and experience the same thing." She shrugs, glancing looking around, only for her eyes to widen.

"What..." she trails off, then runs to the railing, eyes fixed on the dock growing smaller as we sail away.

"Remo. Why are we moving away? You know it's time to head home. I'm tired and—" She spins around, then lets out a squeak. I'm standing right beside her, my eyes not leaving hers.

"One, it's my yacht; it's not rented. Two, all these roses have been purchased by me and will be delivered to our home once we return. You can't do that with a field."

She hums, taking a step to the side, but I stop her with a light hand on her arm.

"For almost three weeks you haven't smiled at me, Aurora. Give me something, please."

Her eyes turn fiery, filling to the brim with defiance, rage, and hurt.

"Maybe you should reflect on exactly what caused that? Think what you did, Remo. I am not about to forgive you so easily when you've barely fucking tried

anything. Having flowers delivered to my office with their meaning doesn't correct what you did. I don't care for things and money, Remo. I have enough money to buy myself whatever I want."

She snatches her arm out of my hold.

"Try harder. Your explanation lacks the actual truth."

She spins away and turns her attention to taking pictures and videos of the whole ride on the yacht.

I sit there and watch her while mentally putting into action the next part of my plan.

Fuck this.

I rise and snatch the phone out of her hand. Her brows furrow, and her mouth opens, but I place my finger against her lips. The orange and pink hues of the skies cast a rosy glow on her face, making her look every part of the princess she is, living up to her name.

"Stop it. Fucking look at me, Aurora. I'm not asking you to forgive me easily, but at least... don't ignore me like this."

The wind picks up, stealing a lock of hair, then dropping it across her face.

"What do you want?"

"Talk to me?"

"No." She crosses her arms.

"You can hate me and still talk to me. I see the way you still look at me. Just look at me, even if you don't want to talk. Hate me all you want, but I will make it right," I murmur, cupping the side of her face. My eyes fall to her plump pink lips.

"Remo, no."

"I don't see a problem with it. I won't ask you of anything," I try again.

Her hands grab at the lapels of my jacket, and she rises on her tiptoes.

"I do hate you. I hate that you broke my trust, and this little yacht trip does nothing to help your case."

Then she lets go and turns away, sitting on the seat farthest away from me.

REMO



Aurora walks into the bedroom to find boxes upon boxes labelled Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Louboutin, and many more. She bends down to open them and finds heels in every single box. Different colours. Strappy ones with high heels because she doesn't wear short heels.

After inspecting them, she shakes her head, turning to me as if she knew I would be standing here, leaning against the door.

"Why so many long-strap ones?"

I walk into the bedroom and stop behind her, glancing at the black heels she is holding. They have long straps that go all the way up the calf.

"Because I am a shameless man, and I love when you wear short skirts with them." My lips flutter over her bare shoulder, but I don't touch her skin.

"It turns me the fuck on seeing you like that." I let my fingers drop. She won't want me to touch her like that. Not yet, at least.

"Remo," she grinds out, but I quickly step back.

"Where will I put them?"

I shrug, then walk out.

Now, a week later, I am waiting at a location I purchased for her. I know she told me she doesn't want anything to do with money, but the heels and this place were already in the works before she told me, so I might as well show her. It doesn't hurt to try.

"What is it this time, Remo?" She sighs, but her eyes twinkle in curiosity as she looks up at the enormous glass building, quite like a greenhouse minus the plants, with two pillars in front of its cream-coloured wooden front door.

Grabbing her hand, I walk us inside and let her take it all in. It's a massive glass building with vines climbing up its walls, but the runway in the middle of it and the white seats surrounding it make it obvious it's for a fashion show.

The ceiling is tall and rounded, and there are two pillars on each side of the space. Marble structures surround the premises, and the stream of sunlight shining through the glass ceiling creates reflective rainbows.

And one so happens to fall on Aurora's face.

A smile touches my lips.

My life.

My empress.

My very own goddess.

"No..." she trails off, her hands going to her mouth as she looks at the structure in disbelief.

"Don't tell me you purchased the building I wanted for my next show."

I nod.

She turns to me, and the tears in her eyes sparks panic within me. She lowers her hands, and I notice her lips tremble. Did I mess up again? Does she think I want to only throw money at her and expect her to forgive me?

That's not what I am trying to do.

"How did you know?" she asks in disbelief.

I shrug, watching her carefully as she looks towards the rounded ceiling, a tiny smile curving her lips.

Oxygen re-enters my body.

The smile widens, and she bounces, clapping her hands, as she looks around the place with her eyes wide and mouth open, eyes scanning each and every crevice of this place, running her hands along the glass walls and chairs.

The second I see the smile, it breathes life back into me. Just the sight of her smile has me weak in the heart. I will spend millions more if it means she'll smile like this.

This fourteen-million pounds for a glass building for just one of her shows is nothing to me.

"This counts as something, right?"

She nods mindlessly, not truly paying attention to what I am saying. She walks around the whole glasshouse with a bounce in her step, and I follow her, fascinated with her smile. I am greeted with it each time she glances back at me.

Four weeks of me begging, and here we are. Finally, something to breathe life back into tattered ruins of my existence.

"This will look amazing, and I can spend time here after it's over. I could even sketch," she continues rambling.

I am finally closer to earning her forgiveness. That smile on her face is worth hundreds of millions of pounds. I'll happily spend it all on her.

"We are resorting to cooking now?" Aurora places her bag on the table as she sits down for the dinner I made, her eyes going over the ravioli I made from scratch, the homemade bread, the grilled steak, the salad with cherry tomatoes, and a cheese platter.

"Is this Chinese?" She knows this is Italian, the glimmer of amusement in her eyes crystal clear.

"Whatever you want to call it." I sit down at the table and motion for her to grab the first bite of the ravioli.

She brings the fork to her mouth, her eyes slide closed as she chews.

"It's good, I guess. It seems to be missing something, but I'll take it, since I am hungry."

I bite my lip, turning my face from her to hide my smile. She isn't accepting it, but she's hungry enough to eat the feast I made after coming home early from work.

This woman will be the death of me.

Each night after that, I made something new. I caught the appreciation shining in her eyes every time she sat down to eat what I'd made her. Apparently, she liked me cooking for her more than me buying her things, exactly as she told me on that day on the yacht.

I kept trying. I walked into her office when it was lunchtime and placed the food I cooked for her on her desk. I saw the surprise and tiny spark of joy on her face every single day.

The break in her trust was my fault, and I can only hope she forgives me and listens to why I felt I had to do it.

Instead of having flowers delivered to her office, I delivered them myself for the next month.

Spring bloomed into a beautiful summer. Now the season was nearing its end, leaves slowly withering, with the smell of rain faintly in the air, the humid air turning brisk.

And I finally saw her crack. I caught the small tilt of her lips, caught her bright eyes watching me walk around her office and the house, the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not looking. One month of silence. Two months of giving her gifts and food at her office. We near seven months of our marriage like this, the time flying by so quickly.

This time, it's me chasing her, walking into her office, waiting for her, wanting just a glance from her. Even a mere smile made my day.

I have been delaying everything about my plan, putting Helia off as Aurora became my priority. I was putting my wife above *her*.
And I never did that. Ever.

REMO



Soft humming flows through the house, coming from the kitchen, and something warm, like calm water, washes over me.

I slowly walk to the back of the house, where the kitchen is, and stand in the doorway. I watch Aurora walk around the kitchen, flour on her face as she mixes something in the bowl with a whisk. A deep green apron is tied at her waist, and her hair piled on top of her head, hundreds of strands falling out of the messy bun.

She looks up, and her eyes collide with mine, and I can't breathe anymore. Everything stops. A slow smile takes over her face, and my world restarts and spins faster. Like I'm in a storm, and she is the one still thing, my peace.

"You're home," she breathes out, and no other words could ever compare to those ones.

Something in the back of my mind prompts me to tell her. To tell her the truth: that although I want her to be mine, there is someone I've worked hard for the past few years.

She's making a dessert with lemons; she doesn't talk to me, though. A faint smell of cupcakes flows through the kitchen, and my eyes go to the oven. A tray of them is already baking. A smile touches my lips, knowing she wanted to occupy herself, so she started stress baking.

But then the smile falls as I realise that she won't come running into my arms. She won't pull me to her, force feeding me anything she made anymore.

"How was your day?" I break the silence, leaning against the door frame with my hands in my pockets so I don't make her feel crowded.

“Fine,”

“Are you tired? I can make you some tea,” I offer, watching her carefully.

She shakes her head, running a hand over her face to remove a strand stuck to her face. The action smears some flour on her cheek.

I take a step forward to help her but stop myself.

“I don’t need tea—”

“Once you’re done, I’ll make it for you.”

She frowns at the batter she is mixing, still not looking to me, and it fucking hurts.

“I said, I don’t—”

“You don’t want the tea?”

I walk quietly, slowly, towards her so as to not scare her, to not push her further away, even if I made progress with her.

I really missed her today.

Glancing around my office today, I kept looking at the door, wanting her to walk through, to smile at me and hug me, telling me about her day, so I would watch her with my chin in my hand.

It felt so cold, so lonely that I didn’t realise my world before her was so quiet, so empty, so bleak.

She came rushing in, with her chaos, her love for baking, her chatter about everything and anything, and her love for fashion. She threw a rainbow of colours all around my house, every inch filled with her, her laugh causing my heart to fall to her feet.

Aurora. My wife.

The one whom I betrayed and broke her trust because of how conflicted I was. I chose someone else over her for a second, but how could I make that choice?

They *both* have a place in my life, and I couldn’t hurt either of them.

“Aurora.” My voice is level, calm, and when she finally, finally looks up at me, I am left breathless.

Innocent. Sweet.

Tempting.

I have fallen. Every single atom in my body now listens to her tune. It sings in praises for her and only her.

I have become mad, crazy for her, and I didn’t even realise when that care, that affection, for her began.

My eyes fall to her full plump lips. Lips I want to kiss. I have resisted temptation because she has been ignoring me for the most part, but now that the barrier between us is dissolving, I want nothing more to gather her in my arms,

drop her on my bed, rip off her clothes, and fuck her senseless.

I never truly hated her. No. She was just part of my plan, and yet, along the way, I found that my self-control and emotions were connected to hers. I watched her run in the dead garden of my heart. Every step she took made flowers bloom beneath the soles of her feet, lighting up my world.

Will you listen to what I have to say that I couldn't before?

Will you, Aurora?

"Can I ask you for something?"

She swallows, her lip trembling as she sucks in a soft breath. When she nods, another lock of hair falls out of her bun. I grab hold of it and tuck it behind her ear, my eyes on hers, not leaving, not moving.

"Can-Can you forgive me?"

Her face falls, her hands going to her sides.

"Remo." Her whisper breaks my heart all over again.

I can't handle it anymore.

Her distance, her silence. I can't take it.

It hurts. It rips me apart from the inside, like one is carving every single vein out of my heart while keeping me alive.

I shake my head to stop her from talking.

"I can't take it anymore, Aurora. I just needed a picture. Just one for your father to sign over his company to me. It was in the contracts we both signed, but he wasn't ready to give it up. I realise my mistake now. I never even took that picture of you. I couldn't do it."

Grasping her hands in mine, I look at her through my lashes.

"Forgive me? Please?" I plead.

She looks into my eyes, and tears slowly flood the beautiful portals of the source of my life now.

"Can I say something?" she rasps out.

She sniffles, looking to the side before glancing back at me.

"I looked through your office and your laptop and found recordings. I listened to them, especially the one from the day you both negotiated the terms of this marriage. The thing is, I'm not that surprised my father would do this, and you have your reasons, but what is my fault in all of this?"

Her eyes and words feel like broken glass pieces shooting straight into my heart.

"Why did you have to break my trust just as I was feeling safe with you? I had never felt as safe with anyone as I did with you, so why?" Her voice has become so quiet, I have to lean in to listen to her, but I hear every single word.

"It wasn't your fault you were born to those parents, Aurora. It wasn't your

fault at all, but if I hadn't taken that picture, or whatever blurry picture that was, Helia—the man who will be taking over Glamorous—would have tied you up and tortured you before taking it, and I will not let him touch a single hair on your body.”

Her bottom lip trembles as she shakes, and her tears slowly slip down her cheeks.

I cup her damp cheek.

“*Amore mio*,” I whisper, kissing away those tears.

“I wish I could hate you. I wish I could hate my father, and I wish I could just leave this all behind, but these feelings are trapping me here. I hate that I can't let you go. I hate that it's ripping me apart just thinking of walking away from you, so tell me, what should I do?” Her broken sentences pull at my heartstrings, and her confession strengthens the fact that I am not the only one fighting this battle.

Cupping both of her cheeks, I lean in and kiss her soft puckered lips, then both her cheeks, her eyes, her nose, and her forehead, then her lips again until she stops crying and is only sniffing.

“Believe in me. Let me keep you safe. Stay with me and know that I will protect you, even if you hate me, even if you want to kill me and strangle me, but I will protect you. Even from afar, if you want it.”

Her adorable eyes sweep the rug from beneath my feet and drop me to the floor.

I wait for her reply, hoping, begging, in my heart that she forgives me.

And when I see her nod, I kiss her. I kiss her so she won't regret her decision; so she'll know she'll be safe.

My lips push hers open, pulling her lower lip in my teeth. I bite down hard, hoping it bleeds into the lipstick she is wearing. I suck her lip, pulling her closer and closer, my hold on her neck tightening ever so slightly. She gasps, and a soft moan leaves her lips.

Her hands fist in my pressed shirt, her nails digging into my skin, but I welcome the pain.

I let her go, but before she can take another breath, I kiss her again, capturing her lips in a long kiss.

When I let her go this time, she is breathing hard, and my eyes fall to the creamy skin of her neck. My mouth tingles, watering at the clean canvas I have in front of me.

My heart thumps hard inside of me, pulling and twisting.

“Go make those lemon tarts. I'll be waiting to eat them.”

She nods, and I let go of her.

With another look at her, I turn around and head upstairs to change into jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt with a V-neck. I pull my arms up to my elbows, only to stop as soon as I come out of the closet to see Aurora placing two trays on the bed.

One tray holds the lemon tarts and red velvet cupcakes topped with red icing, and the other tray has two cups of steaming lemon tea.

The feelings she evokes in me...

I want to keep her forever. She makes everything feel so warm. Makes me feel so at ease without trying. She has given me something I didn't think possible. She has made my cold walls a lot warmer. She makes me look forward to coming home and talking to her, to see if she is stress-baking or cooking anything, knowing she loves doing so. I want to visit her in her office multiple times a day, just to steal kisses from her, to hear her giggles. She makes me forget about my responsibilities, makes me forget my past, my possible future, and the mistakes I've made; because Aurora... She is a one-of-a-kind woman.

No one has ever made me feel like this.

My heart has chosen her.

It accepts her and wants her, and my mind can't help but comply.

With every breath I take, there is a reminder of her. She owns me in ways I didn't think were possible.

I have nothing left inside of me that is mine anymore. Everything belongs to her.

Watching her make efforts to make me happy, give me smiles that take my breath away, it all makes me want to keep her in my arms to protect her from the future, from the very knife I have in my hand that is about to dig into her.

I want to protect her from myself. And yet, selfishly, I want to bide my time, to just live in the present.

"They are done. I think I did an amazing job today."

She comes over and pulls me onto the bed, and I can't help but follow her. I sit on the bed with her, and she hands me a lemon tart, then waits for my reaction.

I bite into the tart as she eagerly waits.

She is practically leaning into me, the tray between us.

The flavours burst into my mouth, the lemon bits making the tart more flavourful.

"Well?" she asks, tucking her hair behind her ear. She has released it from the messy bun, and it cascades down her back.

"I don't know about it. It feels too rough, and maybe there's too much lemon. I think you didn't cook them enough—" I stop speaking when she blows me a

kiss and grins.

What?

“I’ll take that as a yes. Since you only give me criticism when you’re trying to avoid complimenting me,” she tells me, then takes a bite of her cupcake.

She looks around, then grabs the remote for the TV mounted on the wall between the bathroom and the closet.

She turns it on, climbing onto my side of the bed since I am sitting on hers, and gets under the covers next to me. She scrolls through the shows, landing on a movie with the couple kissing under the rain.

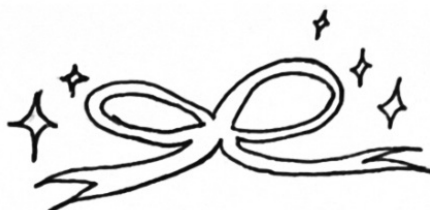
“You are welcome to stay or work in your office,” she tells me.

I found myself sitting in the same place watching the movie with her, and somehow, she ended up sitting right against me, her thigh and arm touching mine.

One thing repeats in my mind as I watch the movie with her.

Aurora is staying with me. Forever.

AURORA



I have a feeling Remo is close to confessing, or, should I say, close to giving up the control he has on his emotions, and will admit to me. I hope he's close to accepting defeat and will stop lying to himself.

Kamari dragged me out of my office today, knowing I didn't have any meetings. Shopping with her is mostly for a distraction. From Remo and my work, because they are the only two things I've thought about over these past few weeks. We have been shopping for the past two hours.

"I'll get that." Kamari purchases a vase, then turns to one of my guards.

I shake my head. How will they protect me if they have things in their hands?

Kamari shrugs, carrying it with her to the next store.

"How is Remo?" Kamari finally asks as we enter a perfume and makeup shop. My eyes instantly are drawn to men's cologne, and I float there.

A smile plays on my lips.

"I think something is working. I can't pinpoint what it is, but he... he was jealous when I was talking to Sam. I purposely went to grab coffee with him, knowing Remo was coming, and his reaction didn't disappoint." I find myself giddy at the memory of his expressions and words.

But what followed after... Summer has been rough. Kamari has been getting some updates from me, but not enough; because to repeat what had happened... I don't want to do that. I stood strong.

It was Remo's time to show me he wanted me.

Kamari gasps, grabbing hold of my upper arm and spinning me towards her wide eyes.

“Are you serious? You purposely tried to make him jealous, and it worked?”

I shrug.

I don’t think he is denying it anymore. His words have been true, but he hasn’t said he wants to keep me yet.

I pick up a cologne and spray it. It’s got a woodsy smell.

No. It won’t suit Remo.

“And what? He is trying to deny, for what? Have you not found a reason yet?”

I shake my head, then suddenly remember something. “He saw my burn marks.”

Kamari’s eyes widen. “What in the world has been happening? And you didn’t think to tell me any of it?”

I cringe, knowing I should have told her and maybe asked for advice. She has never thought poorly of me or turned me away.

“I’m sorry. I was just too caught up in this whole mess. I’m trying to get Remo to admit that he likes me, but he won’t. He asked who did it—the burn marks—and I told him. The last time he put a knife through my father’s hand for insulting and badmouthing me. I don’t want to know what may have happened since he found out about the burns.” I shudder, but at the same time, me acting calm over this is also disturbing.

Kamari mouths, *‘What the fuck?’* to me.

A laugh trickles out of me.

“Did you tell him, Aurora? About your stalker?” Her stern tone makes me still for a second.

I pick up another cologne bottle and smell it. Too sweet for a men’s perfume; it won’t suit him either.

I go to the next one and smell it, but before I can decide, Kamari turns me around with a hand on her hip.

“Did you?” She narrows her eyes.

I slowly shake my head. How could I? I had been heartbroken and had lost all faith in him.

“But I got security! Look around. I told them and briefed the head of security about it. I’m sure Remo knows I used his money for security, so it won’t be long before he asks. I’ll tell him then. You know it’s ... difficult to talk about it, but I’m trying to work up courage. It’s... hard.” I swallow, blinking away the memories once again.

Kamari places a soft hand on my arm, her sweet face like a blanket of comfort.

“But you need to, Aurora. Maybe if you offer something of yours, some part

of your past, Remo will see more and give something in return. You can bond, relate, or just sympathise with each other.”

I look into her eyes, the eyes that are telling me that there is no other way, anyway.

“Ruel,” I blurt out.

Kamari blinks.

“You can use Ruel to get your parents off your back! Who knows you better than yourself? Ruel!” I beam. That would work for her, but I also want to distract her.

She shakes her head.

“We are not talking about this. They are coming in a couple of months, and I am not prepared. At all.” She shakes her head. Her parents put so much pressure on her.

I pick another perfume bottle but stop at this one. It smells dark and spicy, with a touch of vanilla and a hint of musk that smells all male. This is the one. I wave a sales assistant over.

“Can you pack this one for me, please?”

She nods, going to the back.

As Kamari and I exit the store, the guard who has been following me around steps closer to me. I look up. Gabriel is a former special forces officer who now works private security for celebrities. He’s fifty years old, but he looks far younger.

“There is news for you, Mrs Cainn.”

I frown, holding a hand up to my eyes so I can see him better. He is almost as tall as Remo.

“What is it?”

His face turns grim. “Your husband has been in a car crash. He is in the hospital in Central London right now. Queen Mary Hospital.”

My heart drops to my stomach. “What?”

Everything around me suddenly spins. I turn and sprint to my car. Kamari and Gabriel are right behind me as I quickly get into it.

Remo.

In a car accident.

Was it my stalker? He would have been keeping an eye out for me.

What if it was actually him and Remo didn’t even know about it because I didn’t tell him?

My heart pounds too fast, and my eyes fill up with tears.

Kamari runs a hand down my back.

“Kamari,” I choke out, looking at her through watery eyes. “I should have

told him. It's him. I know it's him, and it's my fault. I didn't tell him. You were right. I'm going to tell him as soon as I can. I promise I will." My voice is quiet yet laced with emotion.

"These past three months... I should have... The last time I saw him four months ago, I should have." I gasp.

When I reach the hospital, I get out of the car and sprint to the front desk, then demand to see Remo or at least know where he is. It's a private hospital, so surely, they will let me see him.

"Remo Cainn?" I ask the receptionist, who guides me to the third floor.

I run towards the elevators at the back and press the button over and over. My hands are trembling.

"Aurora, please try to calm down. He's going to be okay."

I shake my head, my lips wobbling, trying to hold my emotions in.

"I should have told him, Kamari," I whisper once more. My fear, my nightmare, is slowly catching up to me, and I'm not prepared and risking my husband's life.

When we reach the floor, I run down the hallway, looking for room number ten, which should be at the end. I reach his room, breathless, and nod at the two guards standing in front of the door.

Slowly cracking open the door, I stand there, watching the nurse who is checking his vitals. He hasn't got a shirt on, but there is gauze wrapped around his stomach. More gauze is wrapped around his hand. His face is covered in bruises and cuts.

"I will come back to check on you in the evening. Once that is clear, you can leave tonight," the nurse says, then turns and leaves the room.

I rush towards him.

"Remo..." My voice doesn't rise above a whisper, and I look over his injuries again. "This..." I trail off, not knowing what to say. My hand raises, but I drop it, not knowing where to touch him without hurting him.

The smell of antibacterial, artificial fragrance makes my nose sting.

Remo looks up at me, his eyes vacant of anything.

"How? How did this happen?" I ask, taking a seat next to his bed. His injuries make my heart hurt.

Why couldn't I tell him? Warn him, at least?

He shouldn't have to suffer because of me.

Why was I so selfish?

"Are you crying?" Remo asks, frowning.

I look at him through blurry eyes, barely able to hold it in.

I choke out a laugh. "Of course not. You think I'm that weak? I'm strong,

Remo. I'm a strong woman." I jut my chin out, my lips trembling, but I hold myself together.

Remo's lips twitch into an almost smile. "That's right. You are my strong wife, aren't you?"

The tears are back, and I swallow the lump in my throat and nod.

"What happened?" I ask again, slowly leaning my hand closer to his uninjured one. Carefully gathering it closer to me, I wrap my fingers around his hand. My heart jumps when Remo tightens his hold on my hand.

My eyes snap up to his.

"A car just caught me off guard when I was turning at a junction. It hit the driver's side, but it's fine. I'm coming home tonight."

How could a person hit him when it was his right of way? Could it have been planned? If it was, when Remo does the investigation, it won't miss his observations.

"Okay. Okay, that's good. It means you aren't too injured." I try to smile at him but fail.

Wiping my tears away with my free hand, I give him another smile, this one stronger.

"I'm glad it's not too bad. What happened to your stomach?"

Remo hisses slightly when I point to the bandage around his stomach.

"A car part scraped me and caused a deep wound."

I gasp. "No, I take it back. You are not fine. This isn't just fine. You got hit in the ribs, in your stomach, because of a broken part of your car? Where was your driver? Why, out of all the days, you decided to drive today? Where were you going that was so important?" I rant.

Remo smirks.

"Stop smiling and answer me, dammit," I grit out.

"Ahh," Remo groans and looks down at the hand I'm holding.

My heart drops. I instantly let go of his hand. "Sorry! Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't realise I was—"

Remo's chuckle hits my ears. Is he laughing at me? Then he groans again. "Agh. The laughing hurts."

"How—You... You think this is funny? I ran here worried sick for you, and you are making fun of me?"

I wipe away my tears and swallow the lump in my throat, then I get up. Remo grasps my wrist, stopping me.

I look back down at him. He's smiling, the top half of his body leaning forward, a hand grabbing his injured stomach.

He looks so handsome when he smiles. This is the first time I have seen him

smile so wide and so freely. It makes my feelings for him grow further.

If only you accepted me, I would be yours for life, Remo.

I would be here every second of the day with him.

I forgave him and let his mistakes go because of how deeply I feel for him. If it was in my hands, I would turn the world upside down, burn it to flames for him, then lay myself down as a sacrifice. It's scary just how much I would do to see him smile at me.

"You are worrying too much."

I want to hit him for saying that. A good slap to the face would do. How could he just say I'm worrying too much?

"Too much? You almost got killed, Remo. That is not something little." My shoulders sag, worry wearing me down.

Remo tightens his hold on my hand, making me look down at him again.

His eyes soften as he focuses on me. A weird expression appears on his face; one I have never seen before.

"I'm okay. I'm going home tonight. Don't cry," he assures me, but he doesn't know that this could potentially be my fault.

Swallowing, I nod and sit back down on the chair.

He shuts his eyes and rests his head back, and I sit there with him.

For minutes, for hours, I don't know, but I keep watching him. Quietly. My gaze runs over his roughed-up handsome face. I finally acknowledge that this man has been begging at my feet for another chance, that this strong, ruthless, and powerful man has grown weak for me.

I don't like seeing him like this. Remo is my husband, and he isn't supposed to look like this. I can't help leaning forward and running my hand softly through his hair, but I quickly retreat, not wanting him to open his eyes and catch me in the act.

The door opens softly.

I look behind me towards a worried Kamari walking up to me.

Her eyes dart between Remo and me. She raises an eyebrow at me.

"I will. I'll tell him. This was my last straw," I whisper to her. I can't stand someone hurting because of me, especially Remo.

Kamari stands next to me, and I let my head rest against her. She rubs my shoulder.

"Call me if you need anything, okay? I'll ask Gabriel to contact his head of security and ask about this."

I nod, and she leaves just a few minutes later.

The nurse comes back inside some time later, and Remo blinks awake. He tenses, and his eyes widen and dart around. The moment they find me, he takes a

deep breath, and the tension seeps out of him.

Warmth and adoration for him grows inside of me.

“Everything looks good. We suggest changing the bandages every day to avoid infections. Please keep away from doing anything strenuous that could pull the stitches in his stomach. No weight-lifting of any kind or strong physical work.”

I nod at her.

“If anything happens. Please come back.” She smiles at me, then lets me know we can leave.

I turn to Remo to see him halfway out of the bed already.

“What are you doing?” I scramble to help him.

Once we reach home, it’s a little harder to get him to climb the stairs without hurting his stomach or opening the stitches, but we go slowly and manage to do it.

Remo sits on his bed and lies down, his leg bent at the knee and an arm over his face.

I quickly head downstairs to get him water and a small bowl of chicken rice. I’m sure he didn’t eat properly other than breakfast. We spent a few hours in the hospital and didn’t eat while we were there. I heat it up, then grab the plate and water and head upstairs.

Placing the tray on his side of the bedside table, I softly nudge his shoulder.

“Remo, eat something,” I whisper.

His arm lowers, and he looks over at me, then looks at the chicken rice.

He goes to grab the spoon but stops once he realises his hand is bandaged.

“Let me help.”

I sit closer to him and grab the spoon. I scoop up some food, then blow gently on it. A lock of hair falls out of my ponytail, but I can’t move it away because of the bowl and spoon in my hands. I nudge it away with my shoulder, but it doesn’t work. Raising the spoon towards Remo, I find my heart throbbing painfully as he lifts a hand, slowly tucking the strand of hair behind my ear.

He loves doing this.

His eyes slowly glide over my hair, then my face.

“Thank you.” I try not to blush, but then I feel his finger skim over my cheek, and blood rushes to my cheeks.

“I’m not a child, Aurora. I can use my other hand.” He lifts his left hand, which is uninjured.

“Yeah, and you’ll probably drop food on yourself because you aren’t left-handed. I’m here, Remo, let me help.”

I lift the spoon closer to his mouth. Remo frowns but opens his mouth

reluctantly.

I smile at him.

“See? Not so hard. Come on, eat up, so I can check the few emails I have left to look at. Are you planning to go to work tomorrow?” I ask.

If he says yes, I will fight him over it. He just had a car accident, for God’s sake.

“I’ll see in the morning.”

I nod. Good enough for now.

I keep feeding him but can’t shake off the tingles erupting all over me. Remo watches at me the whole time I feed him. His focus on me burns and it makes me want to walk away, to stand under a cold shower, so my skin stops burning. It makes me feel alive. It feels right.

Like we are meant to do this.

Like we are meant to be.

I release a soft sigh, my heart longing for some sort of affection from Remo. For him to not be so hot and cold with me.

Once Remo is done eating, I hold the glass to his mouth, and he drinks, his eyes intent on me.

“Done?” I tilt my head at him, and he rolls his eyes.

“Just go do your work, Aurora.” He shoves me away with his good hand.

I gasp. “Used and thrown away? I feel so loved right now.” I laugh, shaking my head, then get up and head to the closet to change into more comfortable clothing.

The weather is warm, but we are nearing autumn soon, and living in London means that I should always expect a chill on the air.

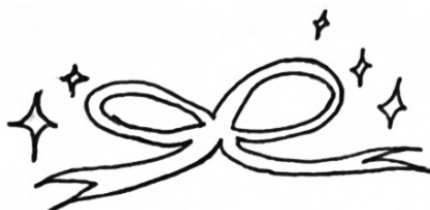
Grabbing my laptop from my desk, I walk up to the bed, settle in, and start to answer emails.

Each event has been putting me more on edge, and now Remo’s accident is creating this uncomfortable feeling inside me that is keeping me restless.

Something is wrong.

I just hope it doesn’t ruin both me and Remo.

AURORA



He didn't go to work today, and I came home early, too worried for him.

How will I get the courage to tell him who was behind this accident? How will I tell him I like him and don't want a divorce? I want to hold on to this. I want to hold on to Remo.

Time is ticking.

He ignites this feeling inside of me that can only ever be described as admiration—love, even.

Gripping the bathroom counter in my hands, I look up at myself in the mirror. Why is he holding back?

My dull brown eyes almost twinkle, catching the light. My cheeks are slightly flushed, a pink hue tinting them. My eyes fall to the opened buttons of my jumper. My cleavage is showing.

My eyes slide to the darkness outside and then to the switched-off lamp on Remo's side of the table as I exit the bathroom, and an idea forms. Placing my laptop back on the bedside table, I shut the curtains, then turn and head towards Remo, who is on his phone.

His eyes flick to me like a magnet. His gaze falls down my body, then travels back up. I just smile at him and bend down enough so he gets a good view inside my jumper, then I flick the switch to turn the lamp on.

His gaze pierces through me, lighting the flowers in my heart on fire.

I swallow, trying not to do anything weird. I look up, and our eyes connect. Like an intricate lock fitting in place. I suck in a sharp breath at the brewing lust

in his eyes.

“Do you need something, Remo?”

By the way he is looking at me, I can guess where his mind is headed.

“Fuck yes,” he rasps out. He grabs my wrist and pulls me so I fall into his lap.

“Remo!” I yelp, trying to get away from him—I don’t want to hurt him—but his hold on me is tight, so tight that I can’t move. Not a single inch.

Panicked, I look down at his bandage.

“You are hurt,” I try to reason, to no avail.

When I do finally look up, Remo’s whole calm demeanour has changed. Dark, possessive, carnal desire burns within his eyes. His dark lashes create a home for the shadows in his eyes.

He holds such animalistic force and power. His chest is not covered by a shirt anymore. The veins in his arms have popped, highlighting the sprinkle of hair scattered across his forearms. My eyes dart to the sheer muscle of his chest and abs. His every inch of skin brings to mind fantasies I’ve had about him.

Of him brutally entering me, forcing me to accept his large girth; of being used by him for his pleasure. Dark desire swims in my stomach.

“You don’t get to parade around and act like this is just you being nice,” he grits out, his hand pulling me down farther until my breasts are pressed against his chest.

His eyes drop to my chest. My breasts are pressed against him, clearly visible. My neckline is barely doing anything to hide them.

The desire in his eyes turns merciless.

He looks at me as if in accusation.

What did I do?

“Let me go, Remo. You are hurt, and you shouldn’t be touching me like this.” I narrow my eyes at him.

He quirks a brow. Then I hear a deep guttural sound, something in between a groan and a growl of sorts. He grabs my hips and deposits me on his lap so my knees are on either side of him.

“Remo...”

He kisses down my neck, light, fluttering kisses that have me panting in his lap. His hands mould to my hips, rolling me ever so slightly on his cock, which pushes against my underwear.

“Let me show you exactly what type of arrangement this is, because I don’t think you understand.”

He leans forward as if the stitches on his abdomen are nothing, like he didn’t just come home from the hospital, and nips at my shoulder.

He gives me another bite farther down right above my breast before he stops

in front of my nipple. My chest heaves in anticipation as his scent surrounds me. All male, dominant, and musky.

He clamps his teeth around my nipple through the flimsy jumper, and my hands fly into his hair with a cry. Desire pools between my legs.

“Tell me, do business partners suck your nipple like this?”

Before I can reply, he moves down the valley of my breasts.

“Do they kiss you in places like this?”

He licks right under my jaw, his tongue flat. A shiver runs down my spine, leaving me breathless to the point where I am panting, waiting for his next move. He is hurt, and I should move away, but I am trapped in his hold.

His hand dips into my shorts and cups my ass in a rough, brutal hold. I moan. My brows furrowing as his hands explore my body like he’s trying to memorise each and every crevice of my body.

“Do they touch you like this?”

I shake my head, my eyes tightly shut, trying to hold in the moans that keep building inside of me. My body heats up under his rough touch, and I leak with carnal desire.

His hand glides forward over my hip and dips between my legs, his fingers pushing aside my underwear as he ruthlessly plunges a finger into me. A choked moan escapes me, and my fingers dig into his shoulders as my head falls back.

“I didn’t fucking think so.”

He glances up, his eyes connecting with mine. He always finds my eyes, and they lock, like we are meant to be like this. Like we fit together, and we cannot escape the other.

He keeps pumping inside me, then adds in another finger, stretching. My eyes fall shut on a hiss. I am barely able to take in gulps of air. Pressure builds inside of me.

Then he stops.

“Don’t speak those words again, Aurora. Don’t you ever utter them, or else you will bear the consequences of your words.”

I whimper in need, desperate for him to work his fingers again.

“I have tried to prove to you how I feel about you, so don’t make the mistake again,”

He presses a soft kiss on my cheek, as if that will soothe it all. A small intimate gesture in contrast to his vicious finger fucking.

“Got it, *amore*?” he whispers, his lips right on top of mine.

I nod mindlessly.

I feel his beautiful smile against my lips as he softly presses a quick kiss against them.

“Good girl.”

My stomach dips with those two words. He brushes against that sweet spot inside me, and I break apart with a loud cry.

I ride wave after wave of the sweet explosion, my eyes fluttering open as I witness Remo’s face fill with awe. His hands slide from my shorts, and he licks his fingers one by one, humming.

I can’t take my eyes off his lips. I’m turned on all over again. He sucks in those long thick fingers that were stretching me so well just a second ago.

“You taste like I knew you would,” he whispers. “Every time I kiss you, I know,” he continues, his eyes capturing my own, his words quiet, like he is admitting to a small secret.

“Like what?”

“*Mio.*” His Italian slips in, and a silly little grin paints my face. I know what he means. He says that when he calls me his love.

Mine.

Remo’s eyes are smiling, though his lips don’t lift. He grabs the comforter on my side and pulls it back, then places me there. Pushing my shoulder to lay me back, he pulls the comforter under my chin.

“Come on, go to sleep.” He nudges my chin, pulling me into his embrace. I let him move me, but I’m careful not to hurt him.

I lie there, watching his eyes flutter closed and his breathing even out. His huge shoulders and wide chest cover me, making me feel small, protected, and ... loved.

I keep getting all hot and wet when I remember Remo’s words. His words, his touch, and the soft dirty whispers of his repeat over and over in my head, and I press my thighs together and fidget. I’m worried I may not be able to focus on my work tomorrow.

That was the first time he’s touched me like that after what he did. And my body, deprived of any kind of lustful skin-contact with him, was calling, begging, his name. It was purring because of the way he touched me.

It was rough, harsh, and dominant, but what is his touch if it isn’t laced with the cruelty he has wrapped around him?

Remo sleeps, but I keep waking up to check on him. I fill his glass of water during the night and keep checking his temperature. I barely sleep because of the worry, and when morning arrives, I am tired and not in my right mind, but at least Remo looks fine, like nothing is wrong.

“You looked like you didn’t even sleep,” Remo tells me as he walks to the bathroom.

I just sigh, massaging my forehead. I can feel a faint headache coming.

Grabbing the new gauze and ointments, I knock on the bathroom door. It opens to reveal Remo standing there with only his sleep trousers on. When he looks down at what is in my hand, he slowly opens the door wider.

“Let me help you before I go to work. I can’t argue with you if you decide to go in today, but I will come to check on you. Got it?”

Finding the end of the wrapping, I slowly remove it from his chest, my hands skimming his chest. Each time my fingers brush his skin, his stomach tightens.

My cheeks feel like they are on fire. I can feel them burning, and nothing I do can stop it.

No one told me it hurts to be in love like this. No one told me it would be a burning ache inside of me. A fire I cannot tend to even if I wanted to.

As I remove the last part of the gauze, my hands go to the small white padding that has a red blotch on it. I peel it off slowly, my eyes watching for Remo’s reaction, to see if it hurts him.

Four stitches. No, there are six.

Six stitches.

My chest constricts, and a burning hot flame scorches my skin to the point the burn seeps into my organs, setting them aflame.

I bite my lip to keep my tears at bay. How much did it hurt? How did he feel when he was hurt, lying there bleeding, with the car part piercing him?

How could he act like it was nothing?

“Does it hurt?” I whisper, almost afraid to speak any louder.

Remo places both his hands on the sink behind me, his arms on either side of me.

I look up to find him looking down at me with tenderness. His lashes flutter as he blinks, his lazy gaze on me making my heart beat a little louder.

“I’m okay, *amore*. It doesn’t hurt. I’ve dealt with worse,” he murmurs, using his good hand to tuck my hair behind my ear.

I suck in a sharp breath; the bathroom walls closing in on me as Remo keeps me trapped under his dangerously dark eyes. His arms cage me in, the veins raised on his forearms on either side of me. My eyes can’t find one place to stick to.

“What do you mean, worse?” My eyes return to his, but he only shrugs.

His eyes soften. “It means I’m not weak. I’ve fought battles before and have been doing it all my life. The only difference is that you are here this time. I don’t sleep with my wounds bleeding, I don’t throw my medicine bottle away, and I have not once had to shout for Isabella to come and give me the medicine while I changed the dressing myself.”

I am breathing faster. Shorter breaths.

My eyes keep switching between his, trying to find a lie, to find something that tells me he doesn't like me and everything he just said is a lie. It's not.

The answer I have been looking for is written in every action of his. The answer I have been trying to find has been hidden within each and every single word that came out of his mouth.

I had been looking in the wrong places for the pieces of my heart that he stole.

"You have the best doctors at your service, Remo," I whisper, shaking my head, but Remo grabs my chin.

He leans down until our lips hover just above each other's.

Our breaths mingle as he slowly leans down.

Not touching but still brushing against each other.

"A retired boxer doesn't get doctors to tend to him in underground fighting."

My eyes widen.

Boxer?

Underground fighting?

Remo was a *boxer*?

"What?" I whisper.

My head feels light, like I am hearing it all wrong, but I am not.

Remo chuckles against my lips, the sound deep and rich with masculine power.

"Hurry up and finish bandaging me. You keeping that hand on my chest is making me want to lower it so you can take care of another problem you've created for me."

I instantly remove my hand from his chest like it burned me.

Remo. My husband. Is a total mystery, and I didn't even know. I didn't know he was a boxer.

What is he doing parading around in suits and taking care of an empire he seemingly doesn't want? The heir to the Cainn empire, to the Giorgio Vino wine company empire, was a boxer?

A rule breaker?

"Remo, what do you mean? Since when?"

He lifts a brow at me, as if contemplating what he should tell me.

"When I started university, I got with the wrong crowd and found the underground fighting ring. I hated what was waiting for me after graduation, which was becoming the future CEO of Vino Cooperation, so I did boxing to rebel against my parents." A bitter tone touches his words, but Remo speaks like it's nothing.

"I was in my apartment trying to make designs for my first ever collection in

my early twenties. I knew what I wanted to do and wanted to make it my career. I found peace in designing them, stitching them together, and seeing my designs come to life.” I offer him a piece of me too.

He hums, his eyes trailing after me.

“That’s why life placed you perfectly in my sights, to hold me still when everything around me crumbles, to keep me grounded when I am about to ruin everything, and to keep me sane when I am about to lose my sanity.”

He softly brushes away a strand of my hair from my forehead. Then he softly traces the shell of my ear. The skin there cackles under his touch.

“If that isn’t life telling you that you are mine, then I don’t know how else to explain it.”

My chest expands at his words, and alarms go off in my mind. I am falling and not looking to save myself from doing so.

I keep glancing at Remo as I tend to his wounds, on his chest, stomach, and hand, then putting some clear ointment on his face where the bruises are. I wonder what he may have looked like after fighting.

His rippled chest on display, black shorts bunched as he punched his opponent with such power, such speed, they would topple over, bleeding from their nose that broke on impact.

Something hot pools in my stomach, and I can’t stop thinking.

Remo fighting.

His big hard body relieves stress by punching and breaking people down with his force.

And now he looks neat, put together, not a single speck of dust visible on his suit. In his mid-thirties.

So many questions, but I hold them back.

“Done,” I announce, turning around and putting things back into the box. As I am doing so, Remo takes a step closer and pins me against the counter. I look up at him through the mirror, only to find him smirking.

He leans down until his face is right next to my ear, all while his hand travels over my stomach, going under my shirt and gripping my waist on the side. I inhale a breath as butterflies float around my stomach.

“Thank you, *amore*.” He steals a quick kiss from me and rushes out.

Only when I know he is gone do I actually breathe properly. I suck in sharp breaths, trying to breathe, because he was suffocating my air. He was all around me, his masculine scent, his strong body covering my own.

Remo was a boxer.

And now he is the CEO of his grandfather’s Italian wine empire.

Getting myself together, I pick out a glittering pink corset, pairing it with

white trousers and pink heels with lace bows on them. I tie my hair back with a soft pink-coloured bow in a half up-half down hairstyle.

Let's hope the foundation and concealer will hide my tired state.

Smiling at myself in the mirror, I take a picture of me blowing a kiss to the camera, then post it on my social accounts.

I look cute.

With a smile, I head downstairs, where I know Remo will be in the kitchen.

I stop in my tracks as soon as my footsteps land at the doorway.

Remo's white shirt is unbuttoned despite his suit jacket, and his tie is lying on the table.

"Remo, why isn't your shirt buttoned?" I drop my bag on the counter and sit in front of my plate of French toast next to him. My mouth waters at Isabella's work. The melted cream, Biscoff crumbles, and syrup look delicious.

When he doesn't answer, I look at him. His eyes are wide, stuck to me. He looks struck, like something has frozen him in this state.

I wave a hand in front of him.

He blinks.

"I couldn't," he mutters, somewhat distracted.

"Let me do it for you. You could have told me. Look at you being so stubborn. Get up." I get off my stool, and he follows.

I start buttoning his shirt and then I run a hand down his buttons in case I missed any. After making sure, I grab his tie off the counter. I go up on my tiptoes and loop the tie around, then drop back to my feet and tie the knot.

I concentrate to get it done right. Once done, I smile, proud of how good of a job I did.

"There. See? It didn't take so lo—"

Remo presses his lips to mine, except this time, the surprise lasts for just a moment before I kiss him back.

Threading my hands through his hair, I pull him closer, a sigh escaping me which Remo uses it to his advantage and slips his tongue inside my mouth. Tasting me. Gliding his tongue against mine in a way that I feel it all over my body.

His good hand is pressed against my back, so I am plastered against him.

He kisses me deeper. I want to engrave this moment in my mind, to savour and know that he is the one who owns my heart.

We are both panting as we separate.

"Why did you kiss me? Remo, you need to stop doing that." I point my finger at him, but the more I talk, the more his smirk turns into a smile. His eyes are lit up like something is funny, like something is worth smiling at.

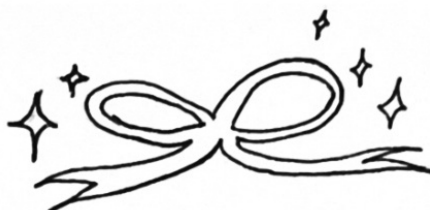
“This is to tell you that I fucking can’t breathe without you, that this”—he points to the space between us—“is forever. Your smiles are like oxygen for me. Your eyes are the sole reason my heart beats. I would leave this world in a wreck if someone so much as touched a single hair on your head.”

His confession leaves me beaming, my heart in my throat as warmth overflows inside of me.

“Never stop smiling, Aurora.”

With my cheeks flaming hot, I turn around and rush out of the house. His faint chuckle follows me. I drive to work with the biggest smile on my face.

AURORA



Aurora: *I have a stalker, Remo. I need you to help me, and I also think he might be the one behind your accident.*

I erase that before trying again.
I've been trying to type something for the past hour, erasing and writing, over and over again. It's not working. Nothing seems right. Each time I have planned to tell Remo, something has come up, I forget, or the timing isn't right.

I fear that his accident is part of that sick man's games.

My computer pings. I open it up and see it's an email from Kamari with an attached file. Once I open it, I realise it's a police report. There's a witness testimony with added notes from Ruel's security head.

The car accident happened near the outskirts of the city, which means the place will have a less-than-normal amount of traffic. The car driver is nowhere to be found. The CCTV footage shows a white van with no number plate drive right through Remo's car. Stolen car is what the police are saying.

I scroll down and read the witness's words.

The van just drove straight into his car. It looked like it had no intentions of slowing down despite the red light.

Maybe the driver was sleeping or drunk. He drove straight into that poor man.

The same thing. Over and over.

Ruel's security head has written it was intentional. He found where the van was left, but it was a car reported stolen just yesterday. The day after the accident

happened.

My phone pings this time, and I look at it. It's a message from Remo. My heart speeds at seeing his name. Instantly, the memories of his rough kiss from this morning comes to mind. He couldn't stay away, and he looked like he was finally given the chance to taste something he wanted for years.

He feasted on me like a starved man, and the wickedness, the beast in him came out. I also smile at how he told me what he used to do as a profession before becoming the CEO of Giorgio Vino.

Remo: *Is my security not strong enough that you had to sign with England's football team's security?*

Now my heart accelerates for a different reason.

Now is the time. Now I can tell him.

With my text already typed out, I take a deep breath, closing my eyes, trying to calm the ringing in my ears, before pressing send and dropping the phone on the table. I move away from it, staring at it like it's asking me for a sacrifice.

What will he say?

He will ask me questions, and I will have to answer them. Honestly. How will I do that?

How will I do that without having a panic attack? How will I keep the horrible memories from surfacing?

I close my eyes, my mind already going back to that dark place. Already going to the eerie, dingy room, the metal walls, and the small squeak of something every now and then.

Aurora: *I've been trying to tell you, but I couldn't. I need your help, Remo. I have a stalker, and I fear he may be behind your accident. I'm scared, Remo.*



10 months ago

Wrapping my arms around my knees, I try to rock myself back and forth, trying to find some warmth. This flimsy blanket looks like a dog shredded it.

It's cold. It's winter, and he took my jacket. This disgusting brown blanket is barely doing its job, the cold air keeps getting through. The cold walls are cemented, and the floor is icy cold.

How did I end up here?

I had security in place. Father made sure of that because, 'no child of mine will be in danger, and if media gets hold of this, it will cause chaos and the share price to fall.' Money. It's about money, but I was still thankful for the protection given to me.

I didn't have to pay for it, unlike most things that I had to pay for.

I left the house that day with burn marks on my neck that still burn in memory today. That was the last time I've asked for something. I'm trying to get my business to grow, but it's hard when my own father has a leash, a hold, on me that I cannot escape no matter how much of a fight I put up.

He clearly didn't like the idea of me leaving when Ambrose doesn't have any interest in inheriting his company. She didn't focus in school much, but maybe that was her preference and she hasn't found something she liked to do yet. Academics is not for everyone.

Maybe if I try to close my eyes and think clearly, I can get out. To just think with a clearer mind.

Before I can come up with anything, the metal door behind me bangs open. I flinch. A stream of light flows inside the cell-like room, my own shadow falling in front of me.

I sit still.

The shoes thump on the floor.

Heavy boots. Possibly a muscled man, but because the shoes don't have a heavy thump, he could possibly be a little leaner. Heavy but lean, then.

Thump.

Thump.

My heart matches his antagonising, slow pace. My breathing shortens to small puffs.

Will my father send help to find me?

Surely, he won't leave me out like this. I am his daughter, maybe not his favourite, but I am his blood, his own daughter whom he should love. Nevertheless, I don't put much hope into it.

Kamari.

She will start a riot and help me. I know she will. Ruel will help her too. They can definitely help me out of here.

“Aurora.” A deep, gravel voice speaks from behind me.

I don’t move an inch while still hearing my heart hammering inside of me. The pavement under me shows the man’s shadow move as he slowly walks around me to stand in front of me.

Skinny legs with black jeans. Neat clothing. Not a single speck of dirt on them. Shoes look like they have been purchased from a supermarket. Almost as if to buy the most average, most common shoes to not raise suspicious or leave behind any trace of his.

He knows what he is doing and has thought of everything.

It was him.

It was him sending the messages I thought some crazy fan was sending me for the past three years.

Telling me I looked beautiful today, telling me I should be his and will be his one day. That he is the man for me, and I left him behind.

He kept sending me all these weird messages that got creepier as days went on.

It seems ignoring them wasn’t what I was supposed to do. I didn’t have concrete evidence about who it was to prepare a restraining order.

It’s too late.

“Look up. You need to see me. I have planned for us for so long, and now the future awaits us.”

Sick. Those words make me sick.

My stomach twists as bile rises in my throat. I bite my lip to keep it in.

He said the same thing in one of the letters he sent me.

Dragging my eyes up, I go past the long-sleeved white shirt he is wearing, maybe to hide anything that makes him recognisable. He wears a full-face black mask with only his eyes visible.

Blue.

Deep ocean that reminds one of the unknown nightmares hidden within it.

It’s terrifying.

My breathing stutters as he raises a hand and runs his finger down my face.

Don’t flinch, Aurora. Don’t react. You don’t know where you are or what could await you.

But I’m scared.

Looking into his eyes as he runs his rough finger over my face, sends a chilling tremble through my body, and I feel disgusted.

No. No. Please don’t touch me.

I hold in the tears and move my eyes away from him.

“Please let me go,” I whisper.

He roughly grabs my jaw and turns me towards him. Gone is the softness, and now all I see is a storm that is about to destroy me.

“Oh, no. We are going to build a life together. This is going to be forever, but you have to be obedient for this to work. Now, don’t make a sound.”

I frantically start to shake my head when he takes out a rope from somewhere and starts to bind my hands together in front of me.

My chest constricts, but I don’t let the tears drop. What good will it do, anyway?

I can’t give up. Not all hope is lost yet.

“Stop fucking moving!”

He slaps me hard across the face. The ringing in my ears and the blackness covering my vision makes me believe that maybe, just maybe, I need to hurry up before he does something even crazier.



Gasping, I jolt up in my seat. My whole body is covered in goosebumps, and it feels as if I was there again. Sitting in the cold dungeon. My body is cold. I’m cold.

Running my hands up and down my arms, I get up, grab my handbag, and walk out of my office. No one is here. When I check the time, it shows lunch time. They probably all went out to eat.

Something is gnawing at me. Telling me not to step out of this office.

Taking deep breaths as I try to get my legs to keep moving out of the building, I know Remo needs to hear the full story from me. He deserves that much.

Except the elevators don’t work. I press the button once more, but nothing happens. Huffing, I turn to the side and walk through the doors towards the stairs, only to stop at the top when I see a figure walk towards me from the right.

“Father?”

His grim face, calm expression and his hands in pockets tell me he had the intention to come here. He was waiting out here for me purposely.

“Aurora.”

That’s when I notice the faint bruising around his neck from under the collar of his white dress shirt. The impeccable suit, the pressed clothes, and power can’t hide his demons and weaknesses.

My eyes fall to his hand, which is still in a bandage.

Something like pride fills me. Something like satisfaction.

All that torture, the tormenting, the abuse, it all came down to one person finding out for him to flip out. Remo didn’t hesitate a second to protect my honour, my respect, and didn’t let me be belittled.

He used violence, and now I understand why. It explains how Remo did it.

With experience.

He can well and truly protect me.

He listens to me. He takes care of me in his own weird way. I thought he didn’t pay attention to me, but he does. I see it in the way he always keeps the nightlights on, always uses the bathroom first so I can lie in bed for longer. He uses the odd big mirror I have purchased so I can use the vanity where my products are but changes over when I need to do my hair or take pictures.

He nods at me every time I make breakfast for him in silent thanks.

He drives me to and from the office without questioning why.

He does so many little things that I’ve finally noticed, and that is all I’ve ever needed.

Someone to fulfil my wishes silently.

I don’t want big gifts, the extravagant parties, the flaunting of money, or even for him to use his money as a way to win me over. No. I need something meaningful, something he has put thought into, because I need someone to pay attention to me. Having absent parents who couldn’t give me the love I wanted is already a weak point of mine.

I love that Remo wants me and only me. He gets jealous, and I wanted that in him.

That’s why him cooking for me and bringing me flowers at lunch is what really moved me. It’s why when him telling me about his day and offering me smaller pieces of himself, made me truly feel like I could take a step towards him.

“You need to accept the new request I made for the increase of shares I want. You are doing well, and with the help of Remo and his reputation, you have a good amount of revenue coming in every day.”

I watch him, puzzled.

“You already own a lot more than anyone. I’m not doing that.” I shake my head.

Before I can move or do anything more, he is in front of me, his hold on my neck so tight that my eyes widen.

My breathing comes to a stop, and I fail to suck in oxygen.

“S-Stop,” I rasp out.

I can’t breathe.

Tears start to form in my eyes.

I scratch at his hand, his arm. I push, but nothing.

“You will fucking listen. I’ve suffered enough because of you. You either agree or else, Aurora.” He grits out, his moustache twitching and his eyes menacing. I have never been this afraid of him before.

I shake my head. My blood drains from my face, and my hands weaken with each passing second.

I won’t give it up. I will never do that.

“It’s him, isn’t it? That fucker is telling you to do this, isn’t he? How good of a wife are you? Opening your legs for him, so he doesn’t want to let you go? What the fuck do you have to offer?” he snarls, and my heart jumps.

I can’t... breathe.

I start to get lightheaded, my eyes slowly rolling to the back of my head.

My vision darkens.

No.

Remo.

I need to get away... from this monster.

I need him to... leave ... me alone.

A sudden jerk makes my body fall back. My feet slip off the edge of the staircase, and I fall. The air swishes around me, then pain explodes in my body. Each concrete step is another burst of pain. My body rolls and topples down the steps. My ribs bruise and the air is sucked out of my lungs.

I try to scream but fail to.

I hit the bottom, and my vision wavers. Energy leaves my body, and I lie limp.

My eyes open slightly, and a small tear slides down my face. Through the blur, I catch sight of my father at the top of the stairs. Then darkness swallows me.

AURORA



When my eyes open, I realise I am lying sideways on the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

Slowly lifting my head, I hold it in my hands as dizziness takes over me.

What happened?

When I look down, I see blood.

Whose blood is that?

It can't be mine. No.

Surely it's—

Another sharp pain shoots through my head, and I wince. I slowly drag myself to my knees, then hold on to the wall to pull myself up. My ribs ache, and every breath takes effort. I look down. My white trousers are dirty and bloodied, and my bag and its contents are scattered over the landing. I look up at the top of the stairs, and it comes back to me.

Letting my forehead touch the cool wall, I hold in my tears.

I hold in a heart-wrenching sob that tries to fight its way out.

How could he do this to me?

Over something so materialistic?

He pushed his daughter down the stairs. He pushed *me* down the stairs.

Wiping away any tears that may have escaped, I take off my heels, then kneel to gather the contents of my handbag. I gingerly slide it over my shoulder and slowly start to descend the next flight of stairs. Thankfully, I work on the seventh floor, and it won't take long to reach the ground floor, but the pain, the ache all

over my body, makes it so hard to take each step.

When I reach the fifth floor, I give up. It can't handle it.

Slumping down on the step, I take deep breaths.

Calm down.

It's okay.

But the tears flow down my face. I can't stop them.

I'm not okay.

It's like every time I think there could be something worth being happy for, something to smile at, the universe thinks it's the time to test me once more. I don't want to be tested. I don't want to fight these battles anymore.

Getting back up after a few minutes, I finally manage to reach the garage this time and get in my car. Throwing my bag on the passenger side, I start my car and drive out. Not knowing my destination, not knowing what could await me, and not knowing if anyone would follow me.

I. Don't. Care.

I need Remo.

I need him to just hug me and tell me it will be fine. That he will stay.

He won't leave me.

As soon as I reach his building, I park my car and get out, taking the elevator from the garage straight up to his floor. When the elevator doors close and I see my face, even more tears form. I don't look like Aurora.

I don't look like... me.

I look broken.

I look tired.

I look like I don't want to live.

No. I *do* want to live.

How will I experience love? Happiness? My friends would miss me and I—

A choked sob escapes me, but I hold a hand in front of my mouth and stop it.

No.

Be strong, Aurora.

You have fought before, survived so much before this.

You can be fine. You *will* be fine.

The elevator doors open, and I see the Amina taking a bite of her baguette sandwich. She looks up, and her eyes widen. She drops her sandwich on the table in front of her.

I weakly smile at her and shake my head. She stops in her hurry to reach me.

"Mrs Cainn, are you okay?" Her worried eyes don't leave me as I limp towards Remo's office.

I don't reply, and I don't have it in me to even feel bad. The lump in my

throat and the agony in my chest make it hard to do anything.

“He’s in there. It’s lunchtime, so he’ll only be eating. I’ll clear his schedule for the day,” she says, and I don’t stop her.

Pushing the handle down, I slowly step inside, my heels in my hands, along with my purse.

Remo is eating some kind of steak. He takes a bite of it as his eyes slide up at me, then he just... stops.

There is a moment of silence, both of us just frozen in place.

I can hear my heart slowly beating inside of me, trying to stay alive but not to feel, because if I did, I wouldn’t be standing here right now. If it for one second tried to feel anything, I won’t survive.

“Hey, handsome.” My voice is weak, quiet, and utterly broken.

I try to smile at him, but it doesn’t work. The smile falls right off my face.

“I...” I struggle to tell him why I came here before going to the police or the hospital.

I don’t know what I was thinking or if I was even thinking.

I hear things drop, papers rustle, then he is in front of me.

Remo is looking down at me, his expression broken, eyebrows drawing together. His face is set hard, his jaw ticking as his eyes sweep over my bloodied figure.

Both of his shaky hands cup my cheeks. He forces me to look at him as he scans over my face, my body, the blood. The bag and heels drop out of my hand as my lips quiver, my eyes filling with tears.

Stop it. Stop crying.

Remo seems to be having a hard time finding words. He opens and closes his mouth, swallowing before trying once more.

“Who—” His voice breaks. “Who the fuck did this to you, baby?”

And the dam breaks.

I let the tears flow, and a sob bursts out of me. A stab of pain in my chest cuts it off.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out, the guilt eating me up. He’s hurt, and he’s worrying about me. I’m the reason for his state right now, and he doesn’t even know it.

He will hate me when he finds out I could have warned him.

“Remo, I’m so sorry,” I tell him again, but he only shakes his head and cradles the back of my head against his chest. My heart soars in my chest, and I feel at peace yet at war with myself.

“I-I know who hit your car, Remo. It was my fault I didn’t tell you, but I promise—” Another choked gasp escapes me, and all Remo does is hold me.

He holds me in place.

“Shh, stop talking, Aurora.”

Closing my eyes, I soak in his warmth, his comfort. His musky, masculine cologne brings a sense of home and safety. I can't help it when I lean closer to his chest.

My arms go around his waist, and I hug him back.

His heartbeat calls out to mine, commanding it to slow down and to find the peace it offers.

Once I have calmed down, Remo leans back and looks into my eyes as he wipes my tears with the pads of his fingers. His eyes hold so much rage that most would be forced to look away, unable to hold eye contact with him.

My eyes fall to the sofa on the side of his office, and when he sees what I am looking at, without any warning, he picks me up with an arm under my knees and the other behind my shoulders. My eyes widen and my mouth parts in shock as he carries me over to the sofa and sits down with me in his lap.

I can't handle my heart this time.

Remo leans back against the sofa, his head dropping back for a second before he looks at me again.

It's like he is trying to stay in control of himself. Like the anger isn't manageable, and he is trying to hold on to sanity for me. His hands shake, and his jaw ticks.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper, trying to find something like revulsion, disgust, anything, directed at me.

But nothing.

His eyes are blank.

Empty.

His hands drop to my waist, his eyes doing a sweep of my body, of the bruises on me.

The hands tighten on my waist.

“Who did this to you? I need names, and I do not want to hear lies to protect the fucker, Aurora.”

I gulp, his words piercing through me.

He doesn't let my eyes waver from him. I can't look away. His darkness surrounds him like it is his worst enemy, yet the very thing that is keeping him alive. His phantom eyes with the shadows swimming inside show me very clearly why he is in such a powerful position.

London elites are nothing compared to Remo Cainn.

His power, his reach, communications, his order and command, is greater than anyone.

He's silent, away from the media and lurks in the shadows, but the mystery

and quietness around him create the fear.

It seems marrying me and getting the inheritance increased his worth, his overflowing bank now bigger than ever.

This man, the one whose lap I am sitting in... I should be afraid of him.

Of his power and how he can destroy me within seconds.

And yet, I am thinking about how much I want his protection, his love, his affection, his best and worse sides.

I swallow, trying to muster up the courage and confidence. I have both. Yet now, I am in the den of the monster who is about to destroy everything in his path. For me.

The monster that caused flowers to bloom in my cracked heart.

Taking a shaky breath, I look him deep in his eyes, tears gathering again as I realise my father killed the last part of whatever was left in me.

"My father."

Silence stretches as Remo's jaw ticks. His nostrils flare in undeniable fury.

"He's the one who pushed me down the stairs."

Remo releases a long sigh and slowly drops his head back against the sofa. A moment later, a slow sadistic smirk takes over his face.

Fear grips at my heart like barbed wire.

A sinister chuckle escapes him.

When he looks back down at me, his eyes are glinting with something unimaginable. Something monstrous. Something utterly sick.

"Thank you for telling me, baby," he murmurs, leaning forward.

His lips skim across my neck, then he nudges my face to the side so he can have better access to explore my neck. My heart explodes.

Right now, Remo looks like a man who is ready to kill anyone in his path. He is quiet and calm and yet couldn't look any more threatening and terrifying.

My thighs tighten around his hips, and he smirks against my neck.

"And who caused the accident?" he asks softly, as if we are discussing the damn weather.

I open my mouth, then shut it.

"My stalker. The one I told you about today. I was coming to tell you in-person about it." My voice isn't quiet, it's clear, and even I am surprised at myself.

Don't think.

Don't think about *his* disgusting hands on your face, on your waist, him kissing you on the cheek.

No. No.

The shadow in the dark looking at me.

No.

Stop.

My eyes are squeezed shut, but a kiss to my neck makes me snap my eyes open with a gasp.

“I’m here, Aurora. Tell me when you want. What you need. But I will need every single detail you have about this stalker. Every. Single. One.” With each pause, he softly kisses different parts of my neck, making me gasp and squeak at each one.

“If you leave anything out, I will find out on my own.”

I shake my head once.

Remo leans back and looks at me. He just *looks* at me.

“I...” I pause and take a steadying breath. “I was getting out of the car, after driving home from work. It was quiet and dark. I’d stayed late at the office to finish work. Someone came and threw a black bag over my head. It was so tight over my head that I couldn’t breathe.” My breathing shortens, but Remo’s hand on the side of my hip, curling and going back and forth, grounds me to reality.

“I was screaming for someone to help me, but at one point, when I was in the back of the car, I hit my head hard against something and I blacked out. I woke up tied up in a cold cell-like room.” Wetness coats my cheeks as I recall the moments when fear overtook everything else. I had never felt so helpless.

“I don’t remember anything after that, only that I found a phone. I turned it on and realised it was my phone just as he came out of the bathroom. He snatched it out of my hand, then he slapped me across the face and took hold of my hair, forcing me to kiss him. Then...” I can’t continue.

I shake my head. He didn’t rape, but it could have happened if the police hadn’t arrived that night.

I can’t remember much, and the few flashes I get in my nightmares are of him just touching me. Calling me pretty and beautiful. The doctors described it as my brain trying to tune out the trauma.

Remo’s eyes don’t hold disgust for me but rather rage on my behalf. It’s a vicious look that I can feel from his lap. Darkness envelopes him as if it were given a reason to rise behind him, his dark lashes creating a barrier for the thunderous intention.

“I promise you—” Remo stops for a second, closing his eyes before opening them again, this time a calmer look in them.

“That nothing will take you from me. I will find him and give him what he deserves. Thinking he can get away with it again? Don’t go to the police. Let me handle this for you, and I promise he will meet his fate by my hands.”

He leans into me, cradling the back of my head as he pulls me against the

warmth of his body.

“I’m about a second away from destroying everything in this office because of what you told me, Aurora. I know you kept this from me because you didn’t trust me, and I didn’t give you anything to work with, either. I pushed you away, and that’s bad enough. I am ready to take hundreds of lives right now if it means you are going to be safely by my side.”

A sweet smile brightens my face.

It shouldn’t be there.

Knowing his past and the strength and force of his body, he is powerful and will act on his words. I know it.

But what makes me happy is someone fighting for me. Someone who is mine. Only mine.

Is this what it’s like to feel deeply for someone? To want them so close you don’t want to let them go? Is this how it feels when you want them to become your whole world and you theirs?

Remo’s eyes drop to my lips.

“There’s the smile I love. I need your smiles to live, baby. It’s not even negotiable because I have become addicted.”

My smile widens.

“Now, how about I take you home? I need to check your injuries and call the family doctor. Or do you want to go to the hospital?”

I shake my head. “No hospital. They ask too many questions, and I don’t like to relive my bad moments. But my side hurts pretty badly.”

Remo nods, but instead of letting me go, he stands up with me.

“Remo!” I squeal out.

“What?” He looks at me nonchalantly, like what he is doing is normal.

It’s not normal. Not for him.

“Put me down. I can walk fine. I drove here and walked up all those st—”

“You what?” Remo’s eyes burn with fury.

I sheepishly smile.

“The elevator was broken in the building, and I didn’t want to call anyone or a taxi in case anything leaks to the papers. And the first person I thought of was you.” I shrug, my eyes on the bookshelf behind him.

Remo doesn’t speak, he just takes his phone and walks out the door, holding me in his arms.

I hide my face in his neck, not wanting to face any of his employees. I close my eyes the entire time he walks, his hand on my mid-back while the other is beneath my ass, making me blush furiously the whole time.

When we get to the house, the doctor is already there. Remo motions a guard

to follow him into the house along with the doctor and places me on the bed in our bedroom.

“I can walk perfectly fine, handsome. You can let me go. This is nothing—”

Remo places a finger on my lips.

I look up at him, confused.

“Don’t speak a fucking word, Aurora. My control is about to snap,”

That’s when I realise that he didn’t strain, nor did his face pinch in pain while he carried me. I guess his injuries aren’t hurting him like I thought they were. He was faking them. This sneaky man.

With a smile and a wink thrown at him, I softly kiss his finger. He frowns, and I laugh.

“Stop it, Aurora,” he warns.

“Or what?” I grin and lift a brow.

Remo’s weight shifts, hunger and brutal desire in his eyes, but the door opens to the bedroom, and the doctor walks in.

He’s a middle-aged man with white hair and few wrinkles around his eyes and cheeks. He smiles at me as his eyes flicker towards Remo, who is staring me down, his hands clenched at his side.

“Don’t mind my husband. He didn’t like my joke, and now he’s grumpy.” I wave a dismissive hand towards Remo, and the doctor nods hesitantly.

Remo runs a hand down his face, shaking his head.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Murat Avci,”

“Mrs Aurora Cainn.” I feel Remo’s eyes bore into me as I say the name, and even I feel the effect of the name. It feels heavy with emotions, with lies and expectations that have been broken.

“I’ll be just looking at your wounds. Is that okay?”

I nod at him, and he starts to examine me.

He asks me each time if I am okay with him touching me, with him looking at my leg where he had to lift my trousers up. I said yes each time but didn’t miss Remo’s harsh breathing and glare burning through the doctor.

At least he’s trying to stay away while he does checkups.

Once the doctor is done, he starts packing away his things and gives me the paper of the medicines and cream to put on my wounds.

“I hope you feel better, Mrs Cainn,”

“Thank you, Dr. Avci.”

His eyes crinkle as he smiles. Remo jerks his head to the door, and the guard standing outside leads the doctor downstairs.

When I turn to Remo, my smile falls off my face.

“Remo, how could you carry me with your stitches in. Let me see. We need to

clean your wounds.” I get off the bed, hiding my smile, and limp lightly towards the bathroom, wincing slightly on the way at the pain shooting up my leg from my ankle.

Taking out the first aid-kit, I turn to Remo, who has taken off his suit jacket, his tie, and his shirt. He is walking towards me with his ripped abs and tanned skin sprinkled with hair on display. Each of his muscles looks so strong, so tight, that I know running my hands down his chest will only make me beg him to mercilessly take me. My eyes fall to the belt looped around his trousers where his V leads. His black trousers only further enhance his big body.

And then my eyes focus on the bandage on his stomach, and my heart sinks all over again.

Remo steps into my space, and I am forced to look up at him.

“You take care of yourself, Aurora. Stop worrying about me. I told you, I can handle this.”

I narrow my eyes at him, eliminating the distance between us.

“And I can, too, but you didn’t let me go at all.”

Remo’s lips slowly turn up into a minuscule smile as he lifts my chin softly with his finger.

“Always fighting back. Always a little stubborn,” he murmurs, his eyes flashing as they drop to my lips.

I huff and put on an act of turning my face away.

“You didn’t even like me.” I shrug, biting back a smirk at the way he raises his eyebrows.

His chuckle catches my attention. His eyes are glowing, looking all over my face until they stop at my lips.

My heart beats louder in my ears.

“Really?” He steps closer to me, and I scoot back, bumping into the marble counter.

“Really.” I shrug, trying to calm my shivering heart.

Remo places a hand on my hip, slowly sliding it around my back, his fingers skimming under the corset I am wearing until his arm goes to the other side of my hip. He pulls me harshly to him.

I release a gasp at feeling his bulge against my stomach.

Remo’s eyes turn dark, and all amusement drains his face.

He rolls his hips slowly, torturously, against me, and my eyes turn hooded. A soft groan that turns into a moan spills from my lips.

He leans down and softly bites my ear.

“You’re right. I don’t like you. In fact, I hate you. I hate your smile, your laugh, your touch. I hate that it makes me want to fuck you for hours, letting my

ruthless side conquer you so you are only mine. I hate the ribbons in your hair, which I want to use to tie your hands up while I fuck you into oblivion. I hate the heels you wear that make me want to run my hands over your legs until I've reached heaven on earth."

With each word Remo says, his fingers skim over my body. My cheeks flush with desire at the pictures he is painting in my head, and I want every single one of them to come true.

Remo's hand comes up to cup my cheek.

Then he kisses me, more like ravishing me. Strong, powerful, and raw desire seeps from the kiss. His hand wraps around my neck until he turns me around, making me face the mirror as he takes hold of my hair ribbon and unties it. My hair cascading down my back, and all the while, he keeps his eyes on me through the mirror.

Then slowly but surely, he ties my hands behind my back. He undoes my corset and lets it drop down my body. I shiver, my chest bare, nipples erect as the pink tips ache. My breasts bounce when he pulls me back against him using the ribbon on my hands.

"Do they feel achy, Aurora? Should I kiss them better?"

I swallow, unable to talk from the pleasure, and nod.

Remo's eyes land on the new bruises around my ribs, a deep ugly red. His jaw ticks once as he evens his breathing, as if to hide the fact that the sight of them is making him lose control.

His eyes darken as he reaches out and plucks at my nipple. I hiss, trying to calm my heating body, to no avail. Remo assaults my nipples until they are red, then quickly unbuttons my trousers and lets them fall until I stand in just heels and underwear. He hooks his fingers in the sides of my panties, then rips them apart. I gasp.

"Fuck, I've imagined you like this so many times. Tied with your fucking ribbons and at my mercy. Look at that pretty pink flush on your body."

Just seeing Remo's monstrous big body looming over mine in the mirror makes desire pool between my legs as I stand naked in front of the mirror.

I look small, breakable, submissive.

I jut out my chest, a small pout on my pink-tinted lips.

"Remo," I whine, pushing against his trousers. I need him to fuck me.

His dark chuckles follow, then his fingers dip inside of my drenched pussy. He wrenches out an orgasm that leaves me with tears dripping down my cheeks, he denied it for so long, coaxing it out of me before stopping right at the moment. He did it continuously until I was a begging mess. Until he did.

I hear his belt unbuckle before he pushes me against the counter, the ribbon

still keeping me hostage as he lifts my head until we are looking at each other.

"Watch me as I fuck you."

Remo starts out slow before driving into me. My cute ribbons and heels in contrast to the monster behind me. Remo's face is twisted as we both chase our high.

Remo fucks like a monster.

Ruthless. Unforgiving.

We somewhat reflect Beauty and the Beast.

Me with ribbons and a small body compared to Remo's wide and tall body pounding into me, shadows wrapping around him.

The moment comes when Remo speeds up and I fall apart, cries and muffled moans with Remo riding his high with me.

So full. So stuffed.

Remo unties the ribbon and slides out of me. I whimper at the loss, but he turns me around and pulls my arms around his neck. Then he picks me up, rests my ass on the edge of the counter, his huge hands wrapped around my thighs, and slams back into me.

And he continues until we are both spent, both breathing harshly, and with red marks all over our bodies.

Remo's covered in scratch marks from me and has a sprinkling of hickeys on his neck, while I have finger marks on my hips. My wrists are red from the ribbon, and his hickeys decorate my chest.

I look up at him, and Remo smirks, letting his lips brush against my lips.

"I hope that shows how much I hate you."

I smile against his lips. No one would think I wasn't in love because I am. To the point of no turning back, in a way that you can't rip out a tree's root unless you want to destroy it completely. My love for Remo won't waver. His tender touches secretly written love letters in the form of physical touch.

I stand there for a moment, catching my breath. Once showered, I exit the bathroom with a towel wrapped around me, a happy smile on my face and a giddy heart.

I hear Remo's murmur in the hallway, so I follow. My hand is on the doorknob when the words become clearer.

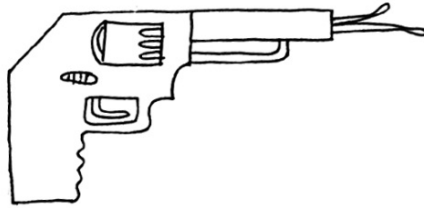
"I need to see Venezia before Aurora finds out. Helia, I need you to get to London right now. It's time. The moment couldn't be better."

My smile freezes, and my heart stops inside of me.

Everything that was finally growing strong between me and Remo withers and weakens.

It's destroying me, and Remo will be left standing above my ashes.

REMO



“Now that is some good news. I’ll be on the next flight out. Make sure to get my guest bedroom nice, warm, and decorated.”

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose as Helia chuckles down the phone line.

Him coming here means only one thing: the plan is going into action, and I cannot delay it any further.

I need to find Venezia, then deal with Aurora’s father and her stalker.

Now, her fearful glances make so much more sense. The way she would grab onto me, looking around frantically, sleep on the farthest side of the bed away from the window, and leaving the night light on.

Asking me to drop her off and pick her up from her office.

It makes so much fucking sense, and I bet the restraining orders are for this very man. This unknown man she doesn’t even know the identity of has turned her life around.

My mind reels back to how I didn’t read the rest of the report on her from ten months ago that it was dated.

I close my eyes, cracking my neck side to side, then open them. I won’t be sleeping tonight.

This injury—especially my hand—puts me slightly back, and the stitches in my stomach are going to be a bother, but not enough that I can’t finish off my job. When I had Aurora under me, I forgot all about my injuries. My control snapped the moment she looked up at me with those twinkling eyes of hers. I was gone.

There was no more holding me back.

I hear the soft padding of feet behind me. I turn around, knowing it's Aurora. She's wearing silk sleeping shorts and a buttoned shirt. Her bruises are out in the open, and it makes it even harder to control my anger.

I always kept it in check. Always took my time with revenge, with destroying, with my plans. But with Aurora, seeing her walk into my office as I read her text, it was like a thirst for blood came over me.

I wanted red to cover every surface my eyes fell on, and that blood would come from the person who hurt her. I could barely hold myself back when the tears started pooling in her eyes.

When the first one dropped, it felt like my heart was ripped out, every vessel torn out with it. And I felt it. I felt the excruciating pain that came from my heart being cut out of me as those tears fell from her eyes.

The words she uttered when she tried to smile at me but couldn't...

A fucking storm raged inside my mind; its force so strong that it would destroy everything in its wake. I wanted to walk out the second she uttered her father's name as the one responsible for hurting her this time, but I didn't.

I don't know how my heart managed to slow down, how it managed to tell me that Aurora mattered the most for now and that she was the one who needed me right then.

For the first time since I betrayed her, she came to me as someone she could rely on, and I don't want to disappoint her. I will give her the world if it means keeping her close to me. Even if it means I have to stain my hands red with blood for her, I will do it.

I will taint my hands for the first time in a decade.

Aurora slides under the covers, grabbing a book from the nightstand and opening it. She looks through magazines, reads books of all sorts, looks at fashion trends, and tries to keep up with them. I see how she gives her company her all.

She works day and night to grow it, and the event she hosted has given her opportunities that I know she is using to her advantage.

I'm glad I didn't choose Ambrose. Aurora knows what she wants from her life, she knows how to get it and is giving it her all. She's a strong woman, and with everything she has been through, it only strengthens my opinion of her.

She isn't afraid of my ways.

Ambrose has been on someone else's eye, anyway.

But I know one thing.

Aurora needs a monster to protect her from her own nightmares, because monsters rule the dark. They own it.

And I happen to be the very shadow everyone fears but never sees coming.

The London elite, the businessmen and women, know me but don't know just how far my reach is. There is uncertainty and a hint of fear all around me.

No one messes with the wife of Remo Cainn.

No one touches what's mine and walks away unscathed.

I change into black sleeping pants and walk out to see Aurora in the same position, now in the middle of the book. She has her hair up like she always does at night-time, even before I noticed her burn marks.

I'm sure it's to keep it out of her face when she reads. She always tells me random facts she finds interesting, and I listen to them. She shows me the book, the pictures, telling me her plans and the new designs she is thinking about.

Over the past seven months of our marriage, despite the disaster in between three months ago, we have fallen into a routine that Aurora has put in place, and I've gone with it. I like this time of the day, when everything else is silent, and Aurora is softly talking to me.

When it's just us.

As soon as I am in bed, Aurora's eyes slide to mine. She shuts the book and gets further under the covers, leaving the small nightlights on. My heart clenches inside of me at the meaning and reason for having them on.

I don't know just how much she will accept me once this whole deception game is over.

Will she forgive me?

Will she still look at me with those eyes that hold big dreams and wishes that I want to make true?

Will she even look at me?

I just got her back, and she just started to let me in her heart. Once she finds out about why I married her, for the safety of a person so dear to me, she will understand, right? She will know why I have been doing what I have.

My plan with Helia involves blood. It involves revenge, blackmail, and betrayal.

I didn't think Aurora would dig so deep inside of me that she found a place in my heart to reside within it.

How will I break my own heart and rip her out of it, hoping she returns to the place she once considered home?

Getting out of bed, I go to my office and turn on my computer, looking at the file Helia sent me three months ago on Aurora. I open it to the date set ten months ago, and there it is.

I don't know what I was expecting.

And yet still, looking at the words, at the complaints and the dismissed

charges, it makes it all so much more real.

She had filed the restraining order against fans, sure, but the rest were against a masked man, and since she hadn't even seen him, except his deep blue eyes, the police weren't really able to do anything.

The next page is of the investigation that stopped in the middle because of the investigator changing, which meant the case had been put on hold. The change in the investigator shouldn't have happened. They need to finish their cases before they transfer, or at least notify the new one.

When I scroll down to read the rest of the report, the words feel like icy knives slashing against my skin.

As I scan over the report, it's like a dagger to my heart. I bleed, and I am helpless to stop it.

The life is sucked out of me, and I am just watching it.

Two weeks. She was kidnapped for two fucking weeks. Just like she said.

Physical violence, torture, assault, loss of some memories within that time-frame due to trauma endured.

Rage fills me like never before. My breathing turns erratic, and my eyes dart around, trying to find something to destroy, because I can't unsee it. I can't handle this.

Why the fuck did no one do anything?

Her friend, Kamari, or that footballer she always has around her. How the fuck did no one do anything faster?

What had she gone through during that time?

Found bleeding with a faint heartbeat. Cabin was hidden in the forest, two hours away from London. Perpetrator not present at the scene. Victim found due to Miss Aurora Torre's phone turning on for two minutes before being turned off. Lucky save but unfortunately lost her memories and recollection of how it happened...

It goes on and on, and I can't do it anymore.

I send the mouse flying across the office. It shatters into pieces with a loud crash.

I get up from my chair, my hands going to my hair as I pull, trying to take deep breaths, but I crave blood. Fuck this plan. I need to go to Mace's house and fucking kill him.

My eyes start to cloud with darkness. I can't sit still knowing what has happened to her.

A crazed thirst for destruction takes over me.

I stalk from my office to our bedroom. Catching Aurora's figure sleeping, I quietly walk closer to her, then drop to my haunches, watching her eyes flutter

every now and then.

She wants someone to protect her, and here I am.

But are my words enough for her to trust me?

No. I need to show her.

I need to show her that she's it for me. This marriage contract is null. She is mine forever. There is no expiration date on this for me.

AURORA



Venezia.
A word that has haunted me and stopped me from dreaming.
It's like something has put a pause on me, and now, I'm wary of everything.

I know both Remo and I agreed to this marriage for our own reasons, but how deep do those reasons run?

Has this caring side of Remo and his small gestures all been a lie?

It hurts knowing it may have.

I can't forget his words about wanting to meet with Venezia and to not notify me of this.

I have never thought liking someone could put me in such a vulnerable position.

I couldn't look him in the eyes and tell him I heard him. That I know he is trying to hide someone from me.

It could be anyone for him, but my heart doesn't know that; it's thinking the worst possible scenarios. I don't know myself.

Remo has said hurtful things before, has tried convincing me this is nothing but a business arrangement. What's stopping him from telling me this was nothing? What's stopping him from telling me these past few months has been a lie?

Was I hoping for too much too soon?

Am I trying to look for love in the wrong place again?

I'm ready, yet Remo is standing there, with his shirt unbuttoned, his tie in his hand as he walks over to me, where I am standing in front of the vanity, and hands it to me wordlessly.

I look up at him and see his expectant face. His black eyes look clear, like the

doors have opened, and he is letting me in for the first time. I search those windows into his soul, trying to find anything that might let me know if he will let me go. If he tells me 'it's over,' I'll be left with my bleeding heart in my hand.

"I just changed your bandage, and your hand seems to be fine. You can do it," I encourage him, unable to stop my smile at his childish act.

He shrugs, looking to the side.

I'm trusting you, Remo.

Please don't break my trust.

With shaky hands and emotions pooling inside of me, I button his shirt, feeling his eyes on me the whole time. Once done, I take his tie and knot it neatly around his neck.

I nod at my job well done, my heart in my throat as the name echoes in my mind again.

Venezia.

The day passes by in a blur. I just can't get rid of the heaviness in my heart. Walking through the quiet hallway of our house and up the stairs to our room, my mind is fixed on the name. It's close to exploding at this point with overthinking.

I reach the top of the stairs, and a scream leaves my lips. A figure stands in the hallway. A tremor runs through my body, and I freeze. Panic wells deep within me.

A hand on my waist pulls me towards a strong chest. I take in a sharp breath, and the scent of familiar cologne puts my heart at ease. Remo. He's got me.

"Who the fuck gave you permission to come into the house when I'm not here?" Remo snarls.

I open my eyes carefully, looking at the man in front of me.

He steps closer. I stumble back, but Remo keeps a tight hold on me.

Take a deep breath, Aurora. Deep breaths in and out.

"It's okay," Remo whispers in my ear, his hand rubbing up and down on my hip.

Taking another step under the light of the hallway, the tall, lean stranger comes into view.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the scar on his face, which starts at his eyebrow and goes through his eye until it stops at the top of his cheek. His nose is long and slender, his hair ink-black to the point you would think you are staring into a midnight sky, and he has deep eyes that are the brightest emerald green I have ever seen.

He is smiling. It seems warm at a glance, but when I really focus, I find it's

taunting, cold.

He seems to be a little older than me, maybe Remo's age. It shows through the sharp edges that mar his face, his strong, tall body, and the way he stands with his head tilted like a maniac under the light in the hallway.

His hands rest in his trouser pockets, and his tight black t-shirt outlines his muscles, which aren't overbearing or too big. Tattoos are scattered on his arms where skin is visible. He looks cruel and menacing, and I fear if I ever wrong this man, he will squeeze the life out of me with a toothy smile.

"Remo, you didn't tell me you were going to be out. Thought I was surprising you, but it seems I surprised your wife." His emerald eyes flick to me. A clinical gesture.

He only gave me a scare because of my past experience with my stalker.

"Mrs Aurora Cainn, pleased to meet you." He takes a step forward, grabs my hand, and places a kiss on it.

His eyes remain glued to me the whole time, not wavering for one second.

"Helia Nashwood. Remo's best friend." The man who wants Glamorous. "Sort of. He doesn't do friends, but I'm as close as it gets." He shrugs, letting go of my hand.

His eyes move behind me, and Remo sighs, as if tired of him already.

"Aurora, this is Helia, a close friend of mine. He will be staying in the guest bedroom. It was so last-minute that it slipped my mind to let you know he was coming." Remo moves away from me, advancing towards Helia, who smirks at him.

"Coming to give me a welcome kiss?"

Remo shoves at his shoulder.

They come to almost the same height, but as they look at each other silently, something passes between them. Helia lets out a soft laugh, shaking his head, then turns and walks into the first door on the right.

Thankfully, our bedroom is at the end of the hallway.

The farthest room.

"I'll see you in the morning, Aurora. I have some exciting news for you." Helia winks at me, then he looks at Remo one last time.

I'm sure Remo is glaring at him, because Helia's eyes darken a fraction, then he is gone.

If Remo trusts him enough to let him in our home, it means I shouldn't be worried, but there is something about him, something... *unsettling* about Helia that sets me off.

When his door shuts, Remo turns around and looks at me apologetically.

"I can't let him stay in a hotel. He may be in too much danger if he does so."

Remo looks at his bedroom door again, then shakes his head.

Nodding, I follow him towards our bedroom. Shutting the door behind me, I walk towards the bathroom. A shower is what I need right now to wash off the tiredness from today and the sick feeling that keeps twisting my stomach. Remo stops me.

“He will leave in a week. Only a few days. Please bear with me on this. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

I turn to look at him and see his eyebrows drawn down in distress.

“Remo, it’s fine. I can handle it.”

Remo looks at me, his eyes troubled.

“He scared you. You screamed. You remembered your... stalker.” Each word he speaks comes slowly, like it’s hard for him to say it aloud. Like knives digging through his throat with each syllable spoken.

“You said everything will be fine, and I trust you, Remo. Helia can stay as long as he doesn’t do anything like that again. Now, let me shower.”

With that, I turn around, avoiding his outstretched hands.

I cave later that night when he wraps his arms around me. I allow it, though I know he is lying to me, keeping me in the dark about *her*. About Venezia.

The next morning, Remo catches me exiting the toilet as he is walking towards it. I should ask him about Venezia, but what if it’s a truth I may not be able to handle? What if I find out that this was all nothing but a lie for him? I will be left wanting a love that no one can give me.

“Did something happen?” Remo asks.

I just smile weakly, shaking my head and walking to the kitchen.

It’s been a couple of days. Each time I have the opportunity to ask him, I can’t do it. Each time Remo touches me, I make an excuse and walk away. I need to clear the air, to stop feeling choked up every time I want to ask him.

When I get to the kitchen, I stop at the entrance. Isabella is frowning and fussing over Helia, who is trying to make some kind of juice in the mixer.

“Stop it, Isabella. I’m not dumb. Look at that, it works.”

Isabella narrows her eyes at him. “Sure. If it breaks, I’m telling Mr Cainn.”

Helia laughs.

Black. He’s wearing black again today, but it’s a suit, as if he is going to an office. Maybe he is. I don’t know.

“Aurora.” Isabella spots me first, then Helia looks over his shoulder at me.

“Oh, Aurora. I’m making green juice. Want to try?” It looks disgustingly green.

“I have freshly made orange juice in the fridge.” I point towards the fridge.

The mixer stops, but Helia is already pouring the orange juice in a cup. He

takes a long sip.

“Thanks, you saved me the trouble of whatever I was making.” His green eyes turn to me, shining in appreciation, and I smile.

“It’s good,” he hums, downing the rest of it.

“I always make it for Remo the day before. I even add a few secret ingredients, which I’m not willing to tell anyone.” I cross my arms, shrugging.

Helia narrows his green eyes, his black unruly hair falling into his eyes, representing a man who comes after you in your nightmares.

Helia may have this dark aura around him, but there is still something immature about him, something that doesn’t compare to how composed Remo is. Remo is the man who calculates his every move, but Helia looks like the one who’ll go feral when his emotions take over while fooling the world around him with his smiles.

“I will make every chef I know taste this and tell me what is in it.”

I laugh, shaking my head, then grab the plates of French toast Isabella has made for both me and Remo.

“Where’s mine?” Helia asks Isabella.

She sighs at the stove, then points at the pan. “I am making it.”

Helia raises his hands in surrender and raises his eyebrows. It’s amusing to watch. Isabella is quite a calm person, but it seems Helia is setting her off.

It’s like watching a mom and her son talk.

“I didn’t know you had such a frustrating cook. She’s really annoying. I was only trying to make green juice, and she wouldn’t let me.” It’s comical the way Helia is talking with big hand gestures.

“Helia. You are coming with me to my office. Finish the fucking breakfast already.”

I look over my shoulder at a glaring Remo. He fills the doorway of the kitchen, a muddy-brown-coloured suit with matching shirt and tie. It looks handsome against his tanned skin, dark hair, sharp cheekbones and jaw. I barely stop my mouth from dropping open.

I am hit with just how hauntingly handsome I have always found Remo. He looks like the most perfect man with his proportional face, his muscles on display through his suits, the way he stands with a hand in his pocket, always showing a hint of a shiny watch, his confident walk.

He always looks powerful, and he’s strict in his professional life. The recent papers feature him firing five people in his company for either wearing dirty clothes, unruly personal presentation, not paying attention in a meeting, and other minor things.

“Your breakfast.” The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop them.

I think Remo feels the shift in me, the small request of the breakfast, because he falters, a crack in his hard demeanour as he silently walks over and sits down at the table next to me.

“Wow. I need to know what drugs you fed him, because he will not listen to me at all. I think I could only make him do a total of two things.” Helia’s eyes turn dim, and it seems Remo gets what he is talking about because his glare is harsh and unforgiving.

“Shut the fuck up, Helia. Get out. Go wait in the car.” Remo’s voice is loud and commanding.

Helia straightens, all humour dissolving. “About that surprise, Aurora. You might want to ask Remo about it.” Then he turns and walks out without another word.

How do they know each other?

What is Helia talking about?

It seems they can’t stand each other and keep taunting each other with things, yet Helia listens to Remo. Whatever it is, they might owe each other something, but with Remo’s power, he may have more control over Helia.

Just from observing their interactions, the harsh way they talk to each other, and their way of doing business, it makes me assume something deep, horrific, and very wrong runs in their past.

I just don’t know what or if I am willing to find out.

“Who exactly is Helia?” I ask Remo, who is still frowning at his food.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s leaving soon. I’ll make sure.”

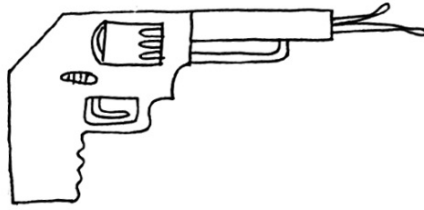
I place a hand on Remo’s arm. He instantly looks at me, and I smile reassuringly.

“It’s fine.”

Yet, something in me tells me that having a man like Helia so close and in our home can only be for an ugly reason.

13

REMO



“How do we do this?”
Helia is standing next to me, staring up at the Torre mansion.
A beautiful but cold structure.

I don’t know how Aurora came out the way she is, how she managed to stay true to her heart. She’s a fucking angel compared to the monsters in this house.

I know Mace is in there. All I need are papers with his signature, signing away what Helia wants, and we could leave.

Except he touched Aurora.

He touched my wife. So now the plan has taken a different turn.

Helia isn’t leaving without watching it all go down.

And I am happily going to put on a show for him.

After being clean for over a decade, I am going to be tainting my hands with blood for Aurora. For the woman who owns my thoughts, my mind. She’s my obsession. I can’t stop touching her, can’t let her go.

At first, it was a sweet deception for the world.

Now, it’s as real as anything could get.

There is nothing, not a single force in this world, that can stop me from keeping Aurora.

“Light it up?” My head snaps towards Helia, who looks at me slowly, a smile on his face.

“Kidding. I know people live in this house. Can’t do that. Your wife will become even more upset than with what we are about to do.”

I turn to look at the big structure in front of me.

“This plan took a big turn, didn’t it? I thought we were going to only threaten Mace with the pictures of Aurora you took. But killing him? Not even going to try to convince him to let the company go? Didn’t think it would take this much of a detour.” Helia shares his unwanted opinion, but I don’t show any reaction.

Yes, the plan did change. Killing Mace was never in the picture until it was necessary, and it is now. He lost the mercy I was going to bestow upon him the moment he put his dirty hands on Aurora.

Forget being blacklisted. He will reach hell sooner now because of his actions.

“It’s of no importance to me, but Ambrose and her mother live in there. No matter the hate Aurora has towards them, she won’t forgive me if I burned the building down.”

Helia doesn’t care, but I see his jaw tick.

Irritation and pent-up anger.

I know why.

Hearing just that one sentence has set a timer on him.

“Ambrose and her mother should be out right now. I have a guard trailing behind them to alert me when they get here. Let’s go,” I inform him, walking towards the house and right through the front door.

It’s open for some reason, but it just makes it easier for us to get inside.

I stroll down the hallway to Mace’s office, passing the kitchen and living room. Once I reach the door, my eyes slide to the right, the direction Aurora ran away during the family dinner we attended. The memory of her teary eyes increases the fury boiling inside of me.

Before I can say or do anything, Helia walks right inside the office. The door banging against the wall makes Mace jump in his chair.

His assistant, a young woman in her early twenties, is standing behind him, holding papers. The one we hired. The one who was extremely useful but now of no need.

Helia doesn’t waste a second. He pulls out the gun hidden on his hip and shoots a bullet through her forehead. Mercilessly. A clean shot.

She drops dead. Mace leaps to his feet.

His frantic eyes turn to me, to Helia, then to me again.

“What is the meaning of this? I’m going to call security!”

“Wouldn’t do that if I valued my life.” Helia shrugs, pocketing one hand while the other holds his gun to the side.

I don’t need to get my hands too dirty; Helia is here for that.

Striding towards Mace, I round the corner of his desk and stand in front of him.

There is a moment of silence as I watch him. His eyes turn red, darting all around the office, and even watching Helia as he raises the hand with the gun and scratches at his forehead, a manic smile on his face.

“Eyes on me, Mace,” I grit out, my hand practically shaking with my need to end his life right now. “Now, let’s be civil and get down to business,”

“You call this civil!? You killed my assistant!” Mace shouts, taking a step back. I don’t move when he presses the panic button under his desk.

I look to my right at Helia. He winks at me, turning around and waiting for the rush of guards.

Mace uses that time to jolt away from me, but I am quick. My fast reflexes come in handy. I grab Mace’s jaw in my hand, so hard and tight that I hear a small crack. His pained howl echoes in the office.

Shots are fired in the hallway, but I don’t move.

“You will sign these papers, Mace, and then I’ll leave. That’s all you have to do.”

Mace’s breathing turns erratic. His eyes are wide, and his body shakes in my hold.

I’m not letting him go regardless of if he complies or not.

“I’ll do it. I’ll do it!” he shouts. His blunt nails scratch at my wrist and fingers around his face.

I shove him back, and he stumbles, then bends over to grab a pen from the desk with shaky hands.

“What? What do I need to sign?”

Another shot fires, but this one grazes his ear. He topples over with a shout. My head snaps up. Helia has four guards at his feet, and his gun is raised towards Mace.

“Just a little fun, Remo.”

Helia throws the papers at me, and I catch them, smoothing them out on the table in front of Mace.

His eyes widen, and he looks up at me from the floor.

There it is. The fear for his life I wanted to see.

A slow smirk makes its way onto my face.

“Get up, Mace,” I say quietly.

He scrambles to his feet and looks at the papers.

“No…” he whispers.

I lean forward, getting into his face. “Yes.”

He hesitates, his eyes flitting between me and Helia once more.

“I’m running out of fucking patience, Mace. Sign the fucking papers,” I growl, slamming a hand down on the desk.

He flinches. His salt-and-peppered hair is unruly, his suit is crumbled, his ugly moustache is twitching, and his shoulders shake.

"I'm sure we can work around this. Aurora fell down the stairs herself. She tripped! I didn't do anything. I'm not signing Glamorous to you!" Mace shakes his head.

I sigh and shut my eyes for a moment. "Helia?"

"Yes, boss?"

I open my eyes and talk while still looking at Mace. "You know how to get people to sign documents, right? Make it happen."

I turn and walk away from Mace. I pull his desk chair away from him and recline in it.

Helia rounds the desk and slams a fist into Mace's face. He grabs hold of his hand, forcefully signing the papers, signing away his magazine company to me.

"NO! You can't do this! This is a crime!" he shouts and thrashes in Helia's hold, but it takes a total of ten seconds to do this.

"No!" Mace shouts.

He turns to Helia and tries to hit him. Helia lets go of his hand and shoots him in the thigh. Mace drops to the ground.

"Helia. Leave," I say, getting up from my chair.

"Fucker," Helia spits out, his eyes so dark, I know exactly what he will do if he stays another minute.

Mace is mine.

Mine to kill.

Helia storms out of the office, and I take out my own gun.

Mace is shouting, pleading. Dragging himself across the floor. Begging at my feet.

"Please, don't kill me. I won't touch her again, I promise. You can take back your money. Keep me on your blacklist. Please. Please. I will not touch her again."

He disgusts me.

"Not enough, Mace," I grit out.

I lean down, grab hold of his collar, and drag him up so his face is in front of mine.

And that's where I spend my next two hours. Hitting him over and over until he is nothing but limp bones. His face and body are bloody, and he barely has any idea about what is happening anymore. The rage inside of me from the thought of him pushing Aurora down the stairs, of hurting her and leaving her there all bruised and broken, makes me ruthless, insatiable for his pain. The fire ignited in me because of Mace cannot be put into words.

He hurt her. He touched her, even after my warning.

“I need to go, but this would have lasted longer, Mace. So fucking long that you wouldn’t even remember your own name.”

With that, I take out my gun and shoot him twice in the heart. My hands are covered in blood, my brown shirt splattered red.

I need to change. Should have worn black.

I walk out of the dead man’s office but stop at the front doors when I see Ambrose getting out of the car, her mother behind her. She’s wearing a green dress with strappy heels like Aurora does, but something is always off about her.

Like she’s hiding a dirty secret.

When she looks up at me and sees me standing in her doorway covered in blood, her eyes widen and her lips part. That’s when I realise Helia is nowhere to be found, but his gun is on the pavement.

Did he leave in a hurry?

He needs to get back here and fix this mess.

It was his job.

Shaking my head, I walk past Ambrose wordlessly. She stops me, her firm grip on my arm.

I look down at her and see murder in her eyes.

“This better not be what I fucking think it is, Mr Cainn. This better not be anything bad,” she threatens.

I smirk at her, clearly amused. “My deepest condolences, Ambrose Torre.”

Then I turn and walk away. She will need good luck because of what is about to happen to her.

The death of her father is only the beginning of what lies ahead of her. The man who claimed Ambrose is back, and he is ready to throw her into hell.

Getting into my car, I tell my driver to drive to the nearest store and grab me a new brown shirt. Once I have changed in the car, I drive towards my building, knowing Aurora will be coming for lunch soon.

I killed her father.

A sigh falls from my lips. Most of her problems are gone now, and I hope she sees what I have done for her. I hope she doesn’t take a step back from me after I just got her back.

She will understand.

She will.

The minutes tick by as I sit in my office, my eyes on the door.

She’s not here.

Did she find out already?

Did Ambrose tell her?

Another thirty minutes go by and then the door opens. Aurora rushes in, out of breath, like she's been running.

"I'm sorry. I got caught up in work and then Sam came, and he took too long to leave. Then the traffic... It was just hell trying to get here. You don't have a meeting, right? We can still eat lunch, right?" She is huffing and puffing, but all I can look at is how beautiful she looks.

Her hair falls in soft curls down her back in a side part, giving me a glimpse of her dangling earrings and her smooth neck, which still shows faint hints of the hickeys I gave her.

I get up from my desk and move to her, not wanting to tell her I missed two of my meetings waiting for her and that I would wait even longer if she wanted.

She digs into the shopping bag she has and takes out a black box wrapped with white ribbon.

"This is for you."

Taking the box from her, I open it and find a watch. It's gold with diamonds around the face. I know just the right spot for it in my drawer of watches.

"What's the occasion?" I raise my brows, but she is almost bouncing on her feet.

Her smile is wide and excited.

"My dad sold his part of the shares and retracted the percentage he wanted from my sales. I'm so happy, Remo, I could burst. You don't understand how much this will help me."

Without warning, she jumps into my arms, hugging me and squeezing me tightly.

I stand there shocked for a second, then slowly my own arms wrap around her waist, and I pull her closer. A few seconds later, I hold her even tighter. Her warmth and joy dim the inhuman thoughts that were running through my mind.

How can a person who takes lives, who hides his evil intentions and his dirty business, hold such a woman in his arms and be selfless enough to let her go?

"I'm so happy," she repeats breathlessly, backing away from me. She sits down on a chair before my desk and places the white bag on the table.

"Come sit! I bought lunch today."

I wordlessly go over and sit next on the chair beside her rather than the one behind my desk. Then I watch her in fascination.

"I bought chicken wraps. I think you will like it. Have a taste." She opens two boxes.

She will understand, right?

It's only a matter of time before she gets a phone call.

I have a very limited amount of time.

This was going to happen, anyway. It was my plan. I needed his company, but now that Aurora means so much to me, I can't let this all go.

"I have a photoshoot tomorrow. Do you want to come? It's going to be my day off after that, and I was thinking of going somewhere with Kamari and Ruel. They said I could invite you as long as you don't glare at them." She laughs, shaking her head.

Any second now.

She will forgive me.

"I'll go."

She nods at my answer, then takes a bite of her wrap. I start eating too.

The weight on my chest is immense, and I can't breathe properly.

This was planned. Helia knew. So did I. Yet it still feels like I've done something wrong.

I was after the company. Aurora was meant to be a decoy when this shit hit the media, a cover and safety net for me. Sure, it was partially for the inheritance from my grandfather. At least, that's the reason I gave Aurora.

I didn't tell her that *this* was my intention.

How will I tell her about Venezia?

That I finally have her new location once more? That I need to go after her?

I need to get her back home. She's only seventeen. She doesn't know anything about life. My parents sent her to a boarding school where I couldn't locate her, holding her location and well-being over my head for so long. But it is all coming to an end now.

The window of time between giving them the inheritance and them being busy allowed Helia to work non-stop to break down the firewalls of a certain government website and locate her again. He can't continuously do that, so we needed the correct timing. It's all falling into place now.

Helia will protect my wife while I am gone. He is the best person I could assign to Aurora.

All this reassurance, all these calculated moves, but I didn't take into account this woman making me feel like if I have her, I won't need anything else. Everything is coming together perfectly, and still this fear, this uncertainty, is holding me by my throat.

I feel like I might lose her if I leave.

"I'll be leaving for Edinburgh in the next few days. I have to meet someone, but Helia will be here as your guard. He may be slightly weird, but he's the best, and I can't put your safety at risk, okay?"

Her wrap stops at her mouth, and she blinks, then swallows.

There is that look again.

That insecure look she had given me several times over the past couple of days. I didn't want to push to tell me if she wasn't ready, but I've noticed her distance from me.

"To meet someone?" she carefully asks, picking at the paper around the wrap.

"What is it?" I ask, grabbing hold of her chair and dragging it over to me.

She looks down at her lap, holding her hands as if trying to hide that she is bothered by something.

She shouldn't. I would never betray her like that. That's not something I ever did or will.

"I heard you," she whispers.

I frown.

"I heard you talking about going to Venezia without telling me." Her voice is so quiet, yet I hear it.

My heart pounds.

She heard?

She looks up at me, her eyes raw with emotion, and yet somehow, a sliver of trust is still there.

I would never break your trust, baby.

"She's a woman, right?"

I nod.

Aurora sucks in a sharp breath.

"I'm guessing she means a lot to you?" Another question, but why does it feel like she is inserting knives into my heart with the way she is speaking?

"She's my sister, Aurora."

Her eyes snap to me, and all the tension dissolves from her shoulders.

A slow smile spreads across her face, and she nods.

"I was trusting you, Remo. It hurt, but I was going to trust you and not ruin what was between us. Thank you for telling me. I won't ask for more information—"

Her phone rings.

This is it, isn't it?

No matter what her father has done, he was her father.

I left her sister and her mother stranded.

She picks up the phone. "Hello?"

"Yes, this is her." Her eyes snap to me, then they widen, and her mouth opens in shock. "My father is... dead?"

I hope you keep trusting me, Aurora.

AURORA



The house is quiet, like a tomb, and it's making me want to claw at my skin.

The yellow tapes around the house, around the whole property, indicate one thing and one thing only. It was murder.

Of course, it was. My father wasn't the best person ever.

I don't know what I feel. It's a mixture of emotions. Although I'm happy I was handed back my shares of my company, what he did the other day in my office, pushing me down the stairs, it hurt because I knew he would never feel any ounce of sympathy for me.

I don't even know what Mum and Ambrose must be going through.

My heart throbs in longing for Remo, but he told me he had a meeting to attend after our lunch together, and that I should notify him of anything I may find out.

It's not that I *need* Remo, but the safety, the warmth, and this feeling of being home that he provides... I want that. I'm so desperate for him to hold me in his arms and tell me everything is fine; that I'm going to be okay and that he would be there for me.

He always makes me feel safe.

Soft crying reaches my ears when I enter through the foyer and reach the dining room.

My mother comes into view, wiping away her tears as an officer questions her. Ambrose stands behind her, her eyes vacant, like she doesn't feel anything.

Ambrose has always been a no-shit type of woman. She has been one to show you her distaste clearly, wearing her emotions on her sleeve all the time, and maybe I admired her for how she could make someone look away when she

wanted them to.

Now, the fire in her seems dimmed.

For all she has done to me, I don't think I've ever hated her. I dislike her, but I've never hated her. I can't say the same thing about my mother or father.

My mother's head snaps up, and her puffy red eyes narrow on me.

Leaving the officer, she lunges towards me. I take a step back, not wanting her to hurt me any more than I already am.

"Aurora," she whispers, her eyes wide and bloodshot. "You did this? Did your husband do this? He walked out of the house, I saw him."

My own heart stops, my voice lost.

Remo?

No.

"Your husband did this, didn't he? Were you part of it? Is this what we brought you up with? Why would you do that, Aurora? You left us with nothing." My mother continues to throw accusations at me.

Ambrose comes up behind my mother, holding her from around her shoulders, and it's like they've betrayed me. I came here worried about them. And they are forming a wall between us.

My kindness only runs so far.

Tightening my hold on my purse, my face loses all emotions, and I steel my heart against them.

"Right, we can put the blame me on yet again, because it was me who lost millions of pounds down the drain playing bets and in casinos. Am I right? I am the one who dealt with such dangerous people and had to marry someone to save my father, right? I am the one who should give you guys help and still take the blame and insults."

I shake my head, laughing.

"Aurora, I told him not to do that. You were my child. But how could you take revenge with such a disgusting crime? I may not have been present, but I tried to protect you. Then you go and do this?"

How could any child listen to their mother accuse them of murder? How could they not crumble under the words of the very woman who had given them life?

Turning around, I walk out of the house, drowning out my mother's insults because they hurt. So bad.

I don't want to hear it. I won't look back at them. Hearing those words, those accusations, from my mother will forever hurt.

Especially the blame for the death of my father.

Getting into my car, I start to drive back to the house, knowing Remo will be

coming home soon too.

I walk inside and find Helia sitting in the living room on the couch with his laptop. He looks up when he sees me enter and frowns as some sort of realisation falls on his face.

“Are you okay?” he asks, tilting his head.

I swallow, trying to answer, trying to give him something, but my words are stuck. So, I settle on a jerky nod.

Turning around, I head upstairs to my room, trying not to break down.

Once I reach the bedroom, I shut the door behind me and take in short, sharp breaths, blinking away the tears and trying to get a hold of myself.

Dropping my bag on the floor, I close my eyes and try to breathe.

Not my fault. My father had it coming for him. He did this to himself.

Not my fault.

I shake my head, but a tear slips out. I quickly wipe it away.

“Not your fault, Aurora. Mom’s confused. She doesn’t know what she is saying.” I nod at myself, sniffing.

Few seconds later, I am calmer, and only then do I go to the closet and change my clothes. I pull on an oversized t-shirt and black leggings, then I head back downstairs and into the kitchen.

Taking out the supplies, I start to make croissants. In the middle of it all, I also decide to make banana bread. With the croissants in the oven, I start to mix the batter for the banana bread.

I’m pouring the mix into the pan when Helia walks in.

“Whatever you are making, please give me the first bite. My mouth is already watering, Aurora. I’m not even joking.”

I laugh out loud and shake my head as I finish pouring the batter.

Turning around and taking the croissants out of the oven, I place them on the rack and slide the banana bread inside the oven.

“Lucky you, they are done. I just need to add powdered sugar.”

Helia instantly walks over to me, his tall frame towering over me, just like Remo. He looks at the many croissants, then points at one.

“I want this one.”

I take it, place it on a plate, and hand it to him.

He grins like a kid who has been given candy. I laugh once more, forgetting about everything that has been bothering me.

“Do you know when Remo would be home?” I ask distractedly as I sprinkle the powdered sugar on the croissants.

“He’s not coming.”

I freeze, then look at Helia.

“What do you mean?”

Helia tears off a piece of the croissant and eats it. His emerald eyes slide to me, and he shrugs. Something like fear chokes me at the way he looks at me.

Like he knows something, and he could destroy me with it.

The very visible scar running down his face and his whole demeanour, like a man who works solely in clean business, elicits an interesting feeling in me. It's fear, yet it's not.

“How old are you?” I abruptly ask him.

He blinks before huffing out a laugh.

“Thirty-three. Why?”

I tilt my head, studying him.

“You look younger,” I comment.

He smirks. “I know.” He winks, then grabs another croissant and walks out of the kitchen, but not before throwing few words over his shoulder.

“Might want to give Remo a call asking where or when he'll be back. He didn't tell me anything.” He sounds like he is annoyed.

Once the banana bread is made, I let it cool off as I get to washing dishes. Isabella will come in the morning, but I don't want to burden her.

I hear soft murmuring from Helia's bedroom as I walk down the hallway. I shouldn't listen, but I do, and I hate myself for it.

“Fine. I'll be here to keep her safe till you come back. Who knows what other plans you are going to mess up? You can let her go now, you know? It's not hard. Just sign the divorce papers and let her go.” Helia pauses.

My heart stops at his words. His words breaking me beyond repair.

“Remo. You know damn well why you married her, and everything has turned out well so far. In fact, it's so good that we are ahead of our plan. Why string her along? Let her go. She can deal with her stalker, and you won't have to worry about keeping me in your house. I don't want to be fucking trapped with her. I have things to do, too.”

“The divorce papers are ready, like you asked. All you have to do is sign them.”

Piece by piece, my heart breaks. I suddenly can't breathe.

The moments I was looking at with rose-tinted glasses are turning into an ugly reality.

Remo warned me.

He told me not to expect anything from this marriage, but my hopeless heart wanted him. I wanted to give him a chance, despite knowing he'd ruin me.

Kamari warned me. Remo warned me. I warned myself.

What have I done?

What was my mistake in all of this?

To want to love a man because he gave me security? Made me feel safe?

But now that his game is over, he'll let me go, and I'll be left with the reminder of what everyone told me.

How badly did I really want love?

A choked sob threatens to escape, so I slam my hand against my mouth and rush to my bedroom.

It was my wish to love, to experience love, and now that I have, no one told me heartbreak would follow so soon.

I look around the bedroom, trying to keep myself composed, trying to keep my heart from shattering. My breathing quickens, and my eyes sting from tears. My hands fist at my sides.

I tried. God, I tried to not get hurt in all this. I forgave him and gave him another chance... How could he hurt me like this again?

It's my fault, isn't it? For forgiving him so soon? For giving a monster another chance, knowing all monsters do is destroy and be selfish?

I'm trying to hold my heart to keep it from shattering on the floor, but the moment my eyes fall on Remo's side of the bed, it slips right out of my hand.

It drops to the ground. I crumple to the floor with it, a gasp of shock escaping my lips. There is no misunderstanding the conversation I heard. It was so clear, and what exactly could Remo say to fix this?

Just tell me this was all a lie?

What could he tell me when I question if he was merely entertaining my ideas to pass time?

Tears slide down my face. Each corner of this bedroom reminds me of the moments I thought were real.

The memories hit, and I can't hold it in anymore.

A cry rips out of me.

Remo hugging me on the bed, us getting ready in front of the vanity, me picking out heels and him choosing them for me, sleeping with the blinds closed, Remo taking care of me when my period cramps got bad.

I shake my head, trying not to believe it, but I can't avoid a truth like this.

I have been living in a false reality Remo created for me, and I was a fool to fall so easily into his trap.

Was Venezia being his sister a lie, too?

What was real?

Later that night, when I lie in bed, my eyes find the shadows dark and haunting. Taunting me, almost as if to say my saviour, my safe heaven, isn't here to protect me this time.

I feel betrayed and so hurt.

Maybe some small part inside of me still wants to believe the way he looked so deeply into my eyes, the way his eyes watched me with such intensity. I want to believe it all to be true.

How will I move past this?

How will Remo explain this?

AURORA



“Aurora, Sam is here for the lunch you have at two.” Nodding at Claudia, I get up from my desk and make my way outside, only to realise Helia is still here and now he is following me.

Remo still has his guards around me, but Helia is a lot closer, a silent shadow following me.

Helia’s presence reminds me of his words, of this whole plan and this sick game both of them are playing, and how my heart became a victim in all of this.

It’s been three days, and Helia has been following me around, just like he promised Remo.

Why does Remo care what I do? What is the point when he hasn’t changed his plan and will be going ahead with divorcing me?

Surely if Helia is so close to him, he can convince him to leave me, since everything has been a lie, anyway. How could I stop it?

Why would I beg to be with someone who doesn’t want me?

“Where are you headed?” Helia asks as he follows me down the street to the bakery I met Sam at the first time.

“To meet a friend.” I don’t know if he is telling Remo what I do during the day. Remo hasn’t called again. He didn’t bother with a message, with anything to assure me that maybe this is all a misunderstanding.

So many times, I wanted to text him in a rage, but he isn’t here, and I still am in danger because of my stalker. I don’t know who he is, what he looks like, except the horrible deep blue of his eyes. He could be watching me, and I wouldn’t know.

If he wanted me like he declared to me the first day he kidnapped me, then me marrying Remo would have set him off. I know it did. That’s what I am

scared the most about, since so much about us is posted online.

As soon as I enter the bakery, I spot Sam sitting and waiting for me. When he looks over his shoulder and spots me, he smiles and gets up.

I guess forgiveness goes quite a long way, but I am still very skeptical about Sam. I am only meeting him because I walked out on him the last time to make it to lunch with Remo. The day I found out my father died, the day my own family alienated me for good, and the day I found out that Remo has been nothing but a lie in my life.

It's crazy how much can change in twenty-four hours.

Sitting down in front of Sam, I order a green tea. I have had a headache for the past few days, and I hope the tea helps.

"How are you? We didn't get to talk the other day. I keep having to apologise for my behaviour, so thank you for listening to me."

I nod at him, my eyes on the table.

Helia is sitting at the table right behind me, probably listening to the conversation. I notice someone familiar just behind Helia.

"Is that your uncle, Damon?"

Sam looks over and nods.

"Yes, he's waiting for me to quickly finish this lunch, because we have to go to my dad's office together soon."

I nod, and just as I am about to look away, I catch him turning and looking at me. I bet he is wondering why Sam wants to meet with me.

"I got you a gift as an apology. I hope you accept it."

Lifting a bag from near his feet, he places it on the table. I don't react much. It's a yellow designer bag. A jewellery brand. I am guessing it's the only thing he can gift me, since he doesn't know my size or preferences.

I smile at him, and his face lights up.

My heart doesn't jump at the sight of the gift like it did when Remo gifted me a mere pink rose. Nor do I feel the need to smile brightly at him and thank him properly.

"Thank you." Moving the bag to the side, I make space for the waiter to place the tea in front of me.

"How are you these days? I see you more often in the tabloids nowadays. I guess being married to Remo Cainn does that."

The mention of his name makes my heart throbs in pain, and a frown makes its way onto my face. I quickly hide my expression.

"Yes. He's amazing inside, too. He takes care of me and makes me feel safe," I whisper, my eyes lifting to his face.

He doesn't look like Remo.

He is so different from Remo.

Why did Remo have to betray me like this? Why keep me in the dark and string me along? Was it me who was pushing his boundaries? Why does it hurt so much that tears won't stop? Does that mean that I didn't merely like Remo, but it was so much more?

Was it... love?

"He makes me feel loved. His small caring actions and his little words and touches make me feel like the most precious woman on earth." I swallow the lump in my throat. "I love him just as much. It was never a loveless marriage, like you have implied." I shrug, taking a sip of the drink only to find Sam looking at me with a sad smile.

"I know I didn't get you, but I am happy you got someone who loves you like that, Aurora. I know how much you wanted that kind of love."

I smile back at him, my eyes betraying me when a tear falls free. I quickly wipe it away.

"Are you—"

"Sorry. This eye has been watery all day. I think I should get it checked by the doctor." I laugh it off, and Sam doesn't push me.

He gives me a small escape as we talk about old memories, and it takes my mind off my current situation, yet the ache never leaves.

"Thank you. I hope we can meet again, if your husband doesn't mind, of course."

I shake my head. "He doesn't, I promise."

Taking the gift bag with me, I get up from my seat and turn to walk out, feeling Helia behind me again.

We walk down the sidewalk in silence until Helia breaks it.

"You love him, don't you?" His voice is quiet, a whisper on the wind.

My heart stutters.

"What?" I gasp, turning to look at him.

He doesn't look at me, and his tall figure puts me in his shadow.

"You talk about him with more emotion than someone who would be faking it. Don't do that. Don't let your heart get caught up in this deception, Aurora. You deserve much better." His words stop me in my tracks.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I grit out, my hold on the bag tightening.

Tell me. Speak it aloud so I can hate you both.

"Remo isn't who he says he is. Do you know about his past, Aurora?" He finally looks down at me. The hate and grim expression on his face knocks my breath out of me.

"Yes. He told me he was a boxer but left quite early on for the inheritance his

parents wanted. He could only access the inheritance by marrying me and continuing his grandfather's legacy." I cross my arms, narrowing my eyes at him, daring him to tell me even this is a lie.

He nods.

"And the lines in between? Do you know the gaps in the story that don't make sense? He's going to hate me, but why should he keep you for nothing?" he mutters, then sighs.

"He married you to buy time from his parents. He was feeding them the inheritance while he looked for his sister, whom they kept hidden from him. He was a boxer because he loved it. He loved the thrill, the danger. All of it. Have you seen the scars across his body? It was from his time in the ring. But it ended too soon after his parents forced him to step up and take over the collapsing company. And he agreed, though he never does anything anyone tells him to. His parents made a mistake with his sister. They gave her away. Put her up for adoption and made sure there was no trace of her. Remo has spent many years looking for her, only for his parents to change her location, then Remo would lose her all over again."

Helia rolls his eyes.

"He never planned to get married early. He picked you because of the dirty work your father did. A little blackmailing, and it worked. You were a small chess piece, Aurora, and you need to realise that is all you will ever be for Remo. He is going to let you go the second he comes back."

I try to breathe, try to think through the pain, but words are stuck inside of me.

"Th-That's good that he cares about his sister. He wants to save her, bring her home. Why are you telling me this?" I knew this, but I didn't the how or why.

Helia leans down and smirks as his face comes incredibly close to mine. His strong gardenia cologne and musky masculine scent wafts around me. Darkness spreads all around me.

Fear starts to filter into my body.

"You were the sweet, forgotten daughter of Mace Torre. Who would care what happened to you? Who would think twice about the daughter who is barely in the media? Powerful, entitled enough, yet still away from the spotlight. You were the perfect candidate."

A soft gasp chokes out of me. My chest hurts. His words rip me apart from the inside out.

"You made this too real thinking Remo would want to keep you. It's done. The murder, the game, the deception. It's over. He's ready to let you go, Aurora."

No.

No.

His words pierce right through my heart, and I clutch at my chest, willing the hurt to go away.

The murder? What murder?

Is he... talking about my father's death?

Blinking through my tears, I want to scream profanities at him, to force him to take it all back, but what is the point when I know he is telling the truth?

Sucking in a sharp breath, I straighten up my spine despite the tears pooling in my eyes. I hate it when people see so much of me.

"I'm telling you this, so you don't expect anything else. Don't get hurt, Aurora. It's not worth it. It's not something you should go through." He shakes his head and straightens like he didn't just destroy my world.

"Let's get you home. It's too dangerous out here. I don't like that Sam kid. Don't go near him or his family again. Remo strictly advised against it, but I allowed it as a favour for you."

I silently wipe away silent tears the entire way home and work on shutting myself away.

When the car stops in the driveway of the house, Helia turns to me.

"He's coming back tomorrow."

Without another word, I get out of the car and call Kamari as I make my way to the house.

She picks up instantly. "Aurora? Hi."

I stop at the front door, and my eyes going over the house I once felt safe in.

"Can you come pick me up?" Even I can hear the quiver in my voice.

"Tell me where you are right now. I'm coming. Just ten minutes."

I nod as I bite my lip, placing a hand on my mouth to stop the sobs from escaping me.

I'm at fault.

I'm the one who is at fault.

Soon enough, she is here, and I get into the passenger seat. Helia is in the house, so he doesn't catch me leaving, but the security car follows us.

As soon as we both are inside her apartment, my hand lets go of the gift bag and my purse, and I drop to my knees in the middle of her living room.

A small cry rips out of me, my voice cracking as I feel my heart burn. It's up in flames inside of me.

"Aurora!" Kamari shouts, rushing in front of me, pulling me into her arms.

I hold on to her and cry into her shoulder. I cry, trying to tell myself that it's my fault, but what can I do when the betrayal has hit me so hard?

"I was even about to tell him I loved him, Kamari. I was falling for him, and

within a day... everything is up in flames.” I sniffle.

I need to ask Remo myself, but the ache, the fear of hearing him repeat the same words everyone has always told me, doesn’t let me. I’m scared he will say he used me, and I will break all over again.

It’s like the very thing that is keeping me alive is burning me. My heart.

“What happened, Aurora?” Kamari asks, but I can’t repeat Helia’s words now. I can’t do it.

“It’s my fault for thinking he would fall for me. It’s my fault I ever thought anything more could happen. My stupid fault. How could I be so delusional to think he would like me back? Love me back?”

“What did he do?” Kamari whispers after my tears have dried up and I am much calmer, just lying in her hold.

“He didn’t like me at all, while I gave him my everything. It was going so well, Kamari. He made me feel like... like it’s only me. Like I was the very reason he wanted to smile. He got me flowers, asked me tie his tie just for the sake of it. He kissed me like he was going to keep me. He kissed me as if he would give me the world if I asked. His kisses made me believe in a happily ever after, after all,” I choke out.

I look up at Kamari. She is watching me with tears in her own eyes.

“Was there never such a thing as love written for me? Was it all just an illusion meant for me?”

Kamari shakes her head, reaching for my hands. “No, Aurora. You deserve everything. More than what Remo has done. More than anyone in this world, you are the one person who deserves love.”

“Then why didn’t I get it?” I whisper, my eyes pleading. “I was just trying to care for him, until I was in too deep to realise that I should stop myself. He was using me because I was easy and could be forgotten when he killed my father. He chose me, not because of my beauty or that he was forced to, but because no one would look twice at me after he destroyed my life. I don’t care about that, though.” I shake my head.

“What I care about is that he lied and told me that he wanted me. He wanted to make all dreams come true, and he wanted me to give him a chance. What was the reason for him telling me all this when he could have stayed away?”

“Where is Remo, Aurora?”

I look down at my hands.

“He wants to divorce me when he comes back after getting his sister from Edinburgh,” I whisper.

Kamari gasps, her hands flying to her mouth.

“He went after his sister. It seems he found her in Edinburgh. He was looking

for her all along. I guess the only woman he actually cared about was his sister. He couldn't open the doors to his heart for me,"

That night was the last time I cried.

I went about my day the next day, acting like nothing happened and continued doing meetings and designing the clothes.

Something inside me felt lost. It felt empty.

I have lost everything and gained nothing in return.

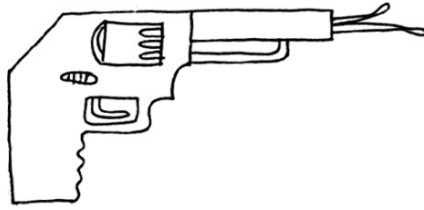
At the end of the day, when I was walking to my car in the darkness in the garage, I didn't notice the figure creeping behind me. I didn't realise someone had been following me obsessively since Remo left.

I didn't realise danger and lies were about to turn my life around.

Everything was slowly burning, and this *sweet* deception was quickly turning *bitter*.

16

REMO



Age twenty four

“Fuck! Fuck!”
I hit my gloved hand over and over at the wall in front of me. The rage at Mum and Dad for hiding their own daughter, whom they called a fucking mistake, was overwhelming.

“Sir, you will injure your hand if—”

“Shut up!” I roar, wanting to punch the living shit out of my useless excuse of an assistant. He is a skinny little kid whom I took on without thinking much about it. His hesitant gaze wandering all over this dirty place shows he isn’t made for this world.

But the news he came bearing as I waited for my biggest fight yet has ruined everything. I was starting to enjoy these fights, maybe even thinking of a career in MMA and leaving this part of me behind; but fuck if my whole life didn’t just come collapsing down.

“Would you like me to organise a meeting with them?”

I turn around so fast, he blinks and stumbles back.

“A fucking meeting to discuss my sister with the parents who gave her up? What do you think this is, kid? A happy little family with parents that will happily accept what I have to say?”

He opens his mouth.

I shoot my hand out and grab at his jaw. “Don’t open that mouth. Fuck off.”

As soon as I release him, he scrambles away, looking back at me once more before running away.

I knew he wasn't going to last.

I drop my head back, gazing up at the dark sky of London. Car horns and the shouts and screams of people mingling about outside the underground stadium fill my ears, but I can't focus on any of it nor the fight waiting to happen in just under ten minutes.

Possibly the last fight of my life.

My phone rings in my shorts pocket. I pick it up instantly.

"Remo? Where are you? You need to show up at tomorrow's board meeting," says Ivano Cainn, my father and the man who has sunk so low that he disowned his own daughter.

I hang up the phone straight away, knowing the profanities that will come out of my mouth if I speak to him.

Ivano and Camilla Cainn, my parents, have always been power hungry, but I didn't think that was a problem until now.

Running a frustrated hand through my hair, I groan. I may not know what to do, but one thing I do know, I won't abandon my sister like they did. I didn't even know she existed. How could they so easily keep her away?

A younger sister who will look up at me, calling me her brother. I can imagine her smiling up at me, asking me to pick her up, asking me to buy her things, and I would shower with all my affection.

But they ruined it.

"Stressed?" My head snaps to the side at an unfamiliar voice, only to be greeted by a guy as tall as me. A hood covers his face, and the only thing visible is his deep green eyes.

"Fuck off." I turn away from him, not wanting to talk.

"It's okay, I understand. Having problems is just human nature, but you seem to be exaggerating." He leans against the crumbled red brick wall, the bass of music and people's shouts a soft hum in the background.

"Maybe I can help. What do you need? A massage? A little blow out with new hair colour? I'm up for both, maybe a mani-pedi—"

"I said, get lost. I don't need you here. You've got the wrong person."

He doesn't budge, no matter the harshness in my voice.

His laughter booms through the empty wet alleyway I am standing in. The light just outside on the street does nothing to show his face; in fact, he is standing in a way that the glow of his eyes is the only thing visible.

"I could, but I decided to do something nice today, so I am giving you the chance to get back at anyone with my help."

I turn to him with narrowed eyes and see him turn his head to look at me. His eyes are a terrifying green colour. A colour that I had never seen before on any

human.

“What would you want in return? Money? For what? For you to go fight in my place?” A humourless laugh escapes me as I get off the wall and start to walk away.

“All I ask is for you to support me while I destroy the very people who hid your sister. Your parents. I can get rid of them, or I can help you find your sister.”

I stop in my tracks.

His voice gets closer and becomes more certain. “Take it as an offer from a new friend of yours. They are Mr and Mrs Cainn, so they will have more than enough resources to hide her very well. I can be of help. I only ask for one favour in the future in return when the time comes. How does that sound, Remo Cainn?”

My back stiffens, but his offer doesn’t sound so bad.

Except he knows my name.

I glance at over my shoulder. His head is tilted, still covered by his hood.

“And what do you possess that I can’t obtain with my money?”

He seems to think for a moment. I can see the hesitation in the small twitch in his hands.

Carefully grabbing his hood, he lowers it, revealing a big scar running from his eyebrow to the top of his cheek. His face, which I guess would usually have sharp lines, has been beaten black and blue.

“Skill. I understand computers. I understand the very language that can destroy humanity, a skill that is too good to be left on the streets like this. How should a hacker introduce himself, anyway?”

Something about his gritty tone, in his vengeful eyes and the haunting look in them, makes me falter. I stop myself from rejecting him once more and weigh the options. I watch him for anything to indicate he could be sent by my parents to distract me from this fight, but... nothing.

He looks like he has lived on the streets. His clothes are tattered and ruined except for the hoody. His jeans and shoes are plain. His knuckles are busted, and the bruises on his face are a stark contrast to the ghostly colour of his skin.

He stands confidently in front of me, in front of the heir of Cainn empire, in front of the future of a big empire—one I almost didn’t take. This opportunity is a chance I need to take.

We both want something, and I can be sure he isn’t affiliated with my parents. And I take the chance.

I house him, give him food, enough money to get by while he tracks down my sister over the next course of weeks, under my full supervision.

I accept my father's position in the family business, and the papers labelling me as the rightful heir to the Cainn empire. News headlines drop one after the other with pictures of me in the board meeting, speaking in an auditorium as I take the big step in my life.

All for my sister.

As the days get closer to me graduating university, Helia Nashwood finds my sister, but when I reach the house in Dublin, she isn't there. Apparently the security my parents had on her realised someone was trailing her and moved her.

Helia removed the security, but my parents kept finding new ones. Constant kills, yet they still didn't give up.

Helia and I were forced to craft a careful plan to bring Venezia Cainn home and hidden from my parents' eyes.

All under the disguise of me being the perfect heir they want, ready to inherit Grandfather's money of one hundred million pounds, which will be handed over to them within the next upcoming years. I just didn't realise there was a small clause that required me to get married.

And that took a couple of months of deciding, meeting, and analysing the best fit for our purposes.

Slowly but surely, the plan was coming along well. Finding Venezia was still ongoing, no matter how hard they tried to hide her.

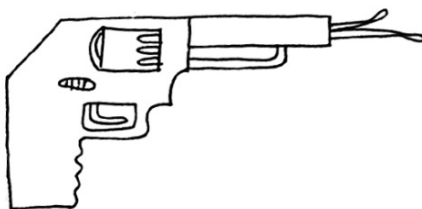
A few years pass, and I scale Vino Corporation. The towers of my success stood before me as a monstrous sight of what I had become. A dirty businessman of London, slowly entering the Elite social class.

Then I finally placed the first chess piece.

Blacklisting Mace Torre a year before I go to ask him for his daughter.

And that's when Helia decides to cash in his favour for helping me find my sister.

REMO



Two days earlier

Flying out to Edinburgh without notifying Aurora was a bad decision, but I am putting hope that she will wait and let me explain properly.

Finding Venezia was easy except for the interference from my parents, but as soon as I got the inheritance just last month, I had transferred it to my father's bank account. That had occupied enough to move their focus away from Venezia, and I was able to track her down once more.

Although my whole life wasn't exactly focussed on finding Venezia, most of my recent years have been. I kept in contact with Helia, knowing he would come in handy despite his manipulating and fucked-up ways.

I need this to be quick before Helia breaks and tells Aurora something he shouldn't, especially with the way he twists things to work in his favour.

"She will be out in one minute, sir."

I nod at the lady at reception and wait on the ugly white plastic seats.

I'm at the private girls' school my mother and father have placed Venezia in. At least it's guarded heavily and protected enough, but as I sit in the haunted hallway of the old building, I realise that everything is coming to an end.

I will be able to have both women in my life and keep them. I can provide a better, free life for Venezia, and I can finally tell Aurora that I don't plan on letting her go and that she has dug deep inside of me and nestled within my heart.

I have never felt the strong urge to protect and keep someone as much as I want to with Aurora. I want to keep her soft touch and smiles for myself. I would

go to great lengths to protect her. I have killed for her.

I have blood on my hands once more.

For her.

She looked back at me, smiled, and I created a safety net for every step she took.

For her happiness, for her smiles, I have done so much, changed so much.

I will walk on hot coals, on broken glass, even kill an entire army just to see her safe.

The throbbing in my chest makes me want to rub at it. The tinge of pain with the soft beating of my heart makes me take deep breaths.

She's becoming my everything, and she doesn't even know the extent of it all.

Footsteps draw near, and my head snaps up. My eyes collide with familiar black ones.

It was Venezia's birthday just this past week, and she turned eighteen.

I notice the similarities in us, her long golden-brown hair that is left down with a side part, her inky black eyes that are focused on me, her tanned olive skin that matches mine because of our Italian blood.

She's taller than the last time I saw her when she slipped from my grasp two years ago. The last time I found her.

The receptionist lets her go and goes to sit behind the desk, but my eyes stay on Venezia.

She's here.

She can go home with me.

She walks slowly towards me, clutching a small duffle bag and watching me with curious eyes.

"Venezia," I whisper, lifting my hand. I drop it quickly, not wanting her to feel uncomfortable.

"Are you ready?" My eyes search for some sort of hesitation.

Did she read the letters I sent her? Did the guards around this place tell her about me like I had told them to, so she was prepared, and this wasn't much of a big shock?

She opens her mouth, hesitates, then shuts it and nods.

"Let's go." Turning, I head towards the front doors, walking right beside her and stealing glances.

I'll protect her from our parents. She doesn't need to know about—

"You took too long." Her hoarse voice stops me.

Her knuckles are white where they clench the handle of her bag, and her jaw is tight, as if she's holding in her anger.

"I couldn't reach you, Venezia. Father and Mother did their best to keep me

away from you, but they didn't know I wouldn't let go of my sister."

Her eyes flash, and I try not to go into too much detail about them.

"They told me you would never want me. That you didn't want a sister and that no one would get me out of there. That I didn't deserve to live except for being a piece they needed in their game for keeping you under their control." She takes a sharp breath at the end. "Is that all true?"

I stiffen. "Only that you were held against me to make me do what they wanted."

I turn away from her and look out at the empty land in front of me. A wide parking lot stretches out in front of the boarding school, and nothing but trees surround this place, making it hard for anyone to run away.

"Those guards? Those letters? Was that you?"

I nod. I sense her stop next to me, and we stand side-by-side, looking out at the expanse of the forest in front of us.

"Did no one ever stop you? Are you married? Did no one ever question you looking for me?"

Lifting my left hand, I show her my wedding ring, and she gasps softly.

"What's her name?"

A small smile plays at my lips. "Aurora Torre. Aurora Cainn now."

Venezia chuckles at my side.

"Like the princess. I'm hoping you love her with the look on your face."

I don't answer. I don't want to deny it, but at the same time, what would factor in the word love? Because if it's this obsession with keeping her to myself, with wanting her to only look at me, for me to leave bloodshed behind her to keep her standing, then yes, I am in love. If it means that I was ready to break my rules, to change my plans for her, and change the whole direction of my life, then yes, I am in love.

"Will I be able to meet her?" Venezia whispers as we make our way towards my black Porsche Cayenne.

"Yes."

Her lips quirk up at my answer as she slides into the back of the car with me, and we drive to the airport.

For the hour we are on the plane, I keep feeling like a heavy weight has been placed on me. As soon as we land, the feeling gets worse. It's nighttime in London, and when I get a phone call from Helia, I instantly pick it up.

"About time you picked up your damn phone."

Venezia and I climb into the car that will take me to my house. She's tired, and her head bobs against the window of the car.

"Is there something wrong?" I glance outside at the city going by in a blur.

The tall buildings and the bustling lights of the city are a reminder that I am here in the same city as my wife after so long.

It doesn't matter if it's been just two days.

How did Aurora sleep? Did she sleep well, even if the shadows scared her?

She slept with the light on, right? Helia is right next to her, so she shouldn't worry.

"What is wrong is that you left me, Remo. The least you could have done was fucking tell me before you left. Just because I agreed to stay with Aurora for a while doesn't mean you can go on about this plan yourself,"

"Helia. Know your fucking place. I'm giving you shelter from MI5, so shut the fuck up and deal with it. You know damn well that if you are spotted anywhere, it's over for you, so don't give me attitude. Your recklessness can only get you so far," I bark, my voice laced with burning anger.

My eyes snap to Venezia. She's fast asleep, so I lower my voice.

"You cleaned up the murder, you did your job, but if you want to continue to live in London, you need to stay fucking put. You need to handle the magazine company before you leave. I don't know what is going to happen with Ambrose or whether she'll reach out to Aurora, but if she does, she will be under your supervision, so she doesn't speak or fuck up anything until I tell Aurora myself.

"Keep an eye on her, Helia. Ambrose is a loose thread, a time ticking bomb that could ruin us both. I need her taken care of, and I know you won't be opposed to this. I'm nearly home, anyway."

There is silence on Helia's side for a moment.

"Fine. I'll be here to keep her safe till you come back. Who knows what other plans you are going to mess up? You can let her go now, you know? It's not hard. Just sign the divorce papers and let her go."

Let Aurora fucking go? What the fuck is he on?

"I'll deal with Aurora. You do your part in this, Helia. Don't fuck it up."

"Remo. You know damn well why you married her, and everything has turned out well so far. In fact, it's so good that we are ahead of our plan. Why string her along? Let her go. She can deal with her stalker, and you won't have to worry about keeping me in your house. I don't want to be fucking trapped with her. I have things to do, too."

"Helia. Don't. Fuck. Anything. Up," I grit out, my hold on the phone tightening.

"The divorce papers are ready, just like you asked."

I never needed them. I only mentioned it to him when we were planning this whole thing, but that is out of the question now. Helia is following the plan procedure, but I don't need it anymore.

“Remember your place, Helia. You need to protect Aurora in return for what I’m giving you.”

“Yes, boss,” he grumbles.

“And Helia?” There is silence, but I know he is listening. “Burn those fucking divorce papers. They are of no use to me.” I hang up.

As soon as we are in front of the house, I get out, but my phone rings. Thinking it’s Helia, I pick it up, only to falter when I realise who is on the other end.

“Yes, Emilio?”

“Sir, there has been a fire at the warehouse near the port. I think you should come see it because it seems suspicious. I already notified our security, and the investigators are on it, but I need you to come see the damage. It’s not a pretty sight.”

How could one walk past our security and light fire to such a big warehouse?

“Are there any casualties?”

“Nothing serious, sir, but three men are injured by the burns.”

“How did this even happen? Who the fuck could have done this?” I mutter, trying to think if I have anyone on my back, but I don’t.

“Okay. I will be there in a few hours. I’ll get my jet ready.”

“Okay, sir.” Emilio hangs up.

“Fuck!” I run a hand through my hair.

I could leave Venezia in the house. Aurora will be happy to welcome her, but their stories won’t add up, and it will make Aurora question me.

Helia is in the house, too, and I don’t trust him to mess with their heads just to gain an upper hand with me.

I knew keeping him in my house was a mistake, but now it’s necessary.

No one will protect Aurora better than him, and I need Venezia hidden before I do anything. If I go to Italy and leave Venezia in my home, it could prove to be dangerous for her if my parents get a whiff of her presence.

“To Heath Manor,” I say to my driver, my eyes trailing back to Venezia’s sleeping figure.

The selfish thoughts roam my mind. No matter what I do, what kind of tainted person I am, I want my own happy ending; no matter if I have to leave corpses behind me, nothing will stop me. Aurora is a rare soul who has lit a fire in front of me and provided me the warmth I was missing all along.

It’s not that I lived an emotionless life before her, but I lived with a single purpose, and I didn’t have a plan after finding Venezia. I didn’t ever think of marrying, to keep a woman in my life when I knew I wouldn’t give her the attention she wanted me to give her.

But Aurora stuck. She is stubborn and didn't leave me until she found the key to the doors of my heart in pitch darkness. Even when I gave her nothing, she offered me everything, and now it's my turn to return the favour.

It's my turn to show her how much I can give her.

Including feeling safe within my arms.

I suddenly want to hold her, to feel her soft body wrap around mine.

Taking my phone out, I drop her a small text with the small moment of silence I have.

Me: *I might return later than planned. There have been some problems I need to suddenly take care of. If Helia bothers you, tell me. I will handle it.*

The car comes to a slow stop. The lights of the mansion are on, the soft yellow glow casting shadows of the surrounding trees onto the driveway.

I shake Venezia, making her jolt awake. Her eyes grow wide as she observes the surroundings and the mansion in front of her.

We both get out, and she just looks up at it with big eyes, despite the sleep on her face. I watch her carefully as she observes the wide doors under the cream archway. The windows are shut, and security is tight around this manor. It's on the outskirts of the city and has a vast space around it. There could be danger lurking in the shadows at night, even if this home is currently the safest place for her.

"Is this where you live?"

"No. I just had a few things come up. You will stay here until I get back and then we can go to my actual house. I need you safe and away from where Mother and Father can get to you without me there. It's for your protection, Zia." I stop in my tracks when the nickname slips from my lips.

Instantly, my mind goes to Aurora and how I secretly love when she calls me handsome and husband. The first time I called her princess—I shake my head to get rid of thoughts of her.

They keep coming.

She keeps coming into my mind, and I can't help it at all.

"It's okay. I know," Venezia assures me from beside me, surprising me.

I walk her inside the house, where the butler and the cook are standing ready, their hands in front of them, along with the ten guards I have gathered.

I introduce them all to Venezia.

"You provide everything she needs and protect her with your life, as you would for me."

They nod, and I turn around to head out once I make sure they all know

their duties.

“Remo?” I look over my shoulder to see a tired smile on Venezia’s face for the first time.

“Be quick. I want to meet Aurora soon.”

With a jerky nod, I head to the airport to fly to Capri.

Hours later, after looking at the damage to our smallest warehouse near the port in Capri, I watch the footage, then send in investigators. This isn’t something to be taken lightly.

Who would want to destroy a warehouse full of wine, even if it belongs to an international company?

Not just anyone.

I sit in the car in front of the burnt warehouse and call the mayor.

“Mr Remo Cainn.” The man’s gruff voice makes me sigh.

“I need you to allow me access to everyone who had entry into Capri over the past twenty-four hours and possibly two days before that.”

The mayor chuckles on the other end, as if I just said the funniest joke.

“Something funny, Mr Mayor?”

He sobers up instantly. This city is under my control, no matter who is sitting at the top, and he knows it.

My wine production brings in money, my name and fame bring in a lot of tourists to visit the factories that show how our wine is made, and even without that, my grandfather’s name runs in whispers along the city.

“Right. I will get that sent over in the next six to seven hours.”

I nod. “I’ll be in touch soon.” With that, I hang up, then step out of the car.

I look down at the ashes close to the port of what used to be my factory. My hands fist in my trouser pockets.

“I will be here to oversee this. I just need the funds to get this cleared and back up and running,” Emilio assures me, still juggling all the papers I asked him to gather.

Why did this happen, and who did it? The security footage showed a hooded figure. Which is such bullshit information. What am I going to do with a damn hooded figure picture?

I nod at Emilio to acknowledge him, then get back into the car and head to the villa.

When I get to the villa and the staff bring me coffee, I dismiss it and find myself calling Helia again.

“Why would you call me at this time?” His voice is clear, because he doesn’t even sleep properly.

“As if you sleep.” I sigh.

He chuckles on the other end. "Okay, you caught me. Now tell me, is it something to do with the fire in your warehouse?"

Of course, he knows. I told him to keep tabs on my business in case something like this happens.

"Aren't we a little over favours now?" he asks me, referring to us being even now.

"I suddenly remembered that Aurora's sister could work under me since her father's company is on the brink of bankruptcy, and I might be her only chance at survival."

Helia mutters something beneath his breath. "You're such a dick. I'm staying with your princess, aren't I?" Then he hangs up.

Moody motherfucker.

This is why I don't maintain regular contact with him. He is unhinged, and there's nothing he can't do with the tap of his fingers. There is way too much mystery around him that I don't want to unravel, not to mention the lengths he would go to get what he thinks is his.

If Helia is unhinged, then I can declare myself as the giver of death. I have kept my hands clean for the sake of the business, but that doesn't mean they were clean all my life.

Helia owes tons of shit, but for now, I am keeping that under wraps.

What my connections mean, where they come from and who they are, they remain a secret because being that monster in the business world means keeping my image clean while working with my hands dirty.

A secret called blackmail and a little fairy godmother whose name is Helia.

I wake up the next morning on the couch in the living room of the villa. Sofia is walking towards me with a steaming cup of coffee yet again, and this time I accept it.

I realise I told Aurora about my sudden trip here but didn't check what her reply was, but I need to look at another warehouse, get the products transferred here, get the production line set up, organise compensation for the injured, and way too many things to count. The media must have got a whiff of this incident already.

And that's how I find myself out of time and working in Capri for the next week with no contact with Aurora.

I have seen her messages asking me where I am, but each time, as I am about to reply, something comes up and it gets forgotten.

I haven't slept at all this past week, and it's finally getting to me.

When I am in the car back in London, driving towards the house during mid-day, I rub my face. I need a good night's sleep. Nothing more. I couldn't cancel

meetings, but I am hoping to get home early from the office tomorrow.

When I enter the house, there is silence until I see my phone light up with a message.

Helia: *Your princess is at her office.*

AURORA



I am entrenched in my work, when my office door bangs open, then shuts with a loud slam. I jump and look up to find a fuming Remo standing in front of me.

I slowly get up but stay where I am. He stalks towards me, his steps angry, his shoes thumping on the floor until he is in front of me.

And the hurt returns.

His eyes are on fire as his vein pulses on the side of his neck.

Why?

“What are you doing at your office?” he growls.

I look down at the papers on my desk as if to point out that I am, in fact, working.

He shakes his head.

“No. You should be at home, sleeping. Why are you out and about when I haven’t yet found the man who is stalking you?”

Because I needed to take my mind off everything.

“Don’t make this difficult, Aurora. Let me help you.”

I don’t need help anymore.

I picked myself back up again, and I will do it again without his help.

“You can work in my office if you want to,” he offers, but I shake my head.

“Remo, please leave.” My voice is quiet.

Remo’s eyes widen, and his brows pinch. “What?”

“Remo...” I feel myself grow tired.

Tired of all this.

Tired of this life that keeps pushing me down. Bruising me, making my heart bleed.

"I am tired, Remo. I don't... I don't want this, but I'm trying." The plea falls from my lips before I can stop it. My body drops a fraction, and my tense shoulders fall. My eyes feel heavy.

Remo keeps looking at me, then glances around the office, as if trying to make sense of what I am saying.

"You filed a restraining order against someone, and it got erased. You have been abused by your father, walked away from him, and survived. You don't have to do this alone now," he assures me, taking a step closer, holding out his hand.

He recites my life events, not realising they are the smaller part of it all.

They get worse once you go back ten months in my life when I forgot what happened to me, yet my dreams and nightmares remind me every day. The small snippets that are on repeat in my dreams are all I could remember. Them and the fear of having a stalker. The exposure because of marrying Remo has made it worse for me.

My anxiety is getting worse.

But last time I held his hand, he walked away.

I sit back down at my desk, but Remo walks around my desk, turns my chair to face him, grabs me by my waist, picks me up, and places me on his lap so I'm facing the desk, then he slides back so I'm right by the desk and leans back.

Stubborn. He is being stubborn, just like me.

"Remo, I need to do work." I look at him over my shoulder.

He just shrugs. "Then work."

I throw a glare at him for trying to disrupt my work, but a small smirk forms on his face.

He leans forward, his inky black eyes falling to my lips before glancing back up at my eyes. Just the intensity of his gaze makes me squirm in his lap. This is the man who stole my heart, broke it, and is now trying to mend it without even knowing what is wrong.

"I missed you, baby." He nestles his face into my neck, kissing a spot on my throat that makes my stomach flutter.

Loving him hurts, but what is worse is that I can't stop my heart from still wanting him despite the hurt I feel. His words, his actions, they hurt too much before.

Who can guarantee that he won't keep saying all that to me?

"Stop moving, or you might not get anything done tonight. Can't say I am against using this desk to fuck you, wife." His words make my breath hitch, my

own pulse throbbing between my legs all of a sudden.

I feel hot, warm all over, because of his honest words. I don't doubt him for one second.

Remo leans closer, his big body almost engulfing me whole as his arm wraps around my midsection, pulling my back flush against his front. Slowly, his hand skims up my ribcage, up, up until he reaches the bottom of my breast.

I gasp, rocked by the sudden desire coursing through my veins.

"Remo, don't. I can't do this again with you."

Remo shakes his head, carnal desire brewing in his eyes as he looks at me.

A predator now being hooked by its prey. A monstrous dark shadow falls on him, and the Remo that I saw the first time outside my office comes into my mind.

A dark figure hidden amongst the wealthy of London. A powerful figure who has his eyes set on me.

One I wanted to fall in love with me yet got hurt by in the end.

"Remo, let me go."

There is a beat of silence as Remo looks into my eyes. We both know what I mean by this.

Let me go for good.

A harsh hand grabs at my breast, making me gasp. Remo's hold brings me so close to him that I feel every single plane on his chest, every single muscle.

"That is something that will never happen." His words are harsh, as if he is angry at something. Maybe himself.

He scrapes his teeth on the side of my neck before nipping, making me bite my lip to hold in a moan. He quickly laps at the bite, then places soft small kisses there.

I'm so weak, it's disgusting. How can I keep away?

"You. are. Mine." I shake my head.

"Your husband is here, Aurora. I'm fucking here now to protect you." With that, he grabs my face, turning me to side so I sit with my legs across from his. He goes to kiss me, but I turn my head, so he kisses my cheek.

He reels back, as if I stabbed him with a knife. But what about what he did?

I turn around, quickly open my papers with shaky hands, and get to work, trying to avoid Remo.

It's hard when I am literally sitting in his lap, and it gets worse, because I can feel his arousal for me.

Yet he doesn't utter a word.

Claudia walks in as I am getting ready to go home and notifies me of dinner plans with Sam and that she's finished the work she stayed late to do. I didn't

even realise I had plans with Sam.

“He’s here now, actually. Do you want me to call him in, or do you want to meet him outside?”

Remo’s head snaps up, his cold glare directed at Claudia. She fidgets in her place.

“No. Tell him I’m busy.”

Claudia nods, her eyes flickering over at Remo for a quick second before she turns around and runs out.

As soon as the door shuts, Remo gets up and settles me on the desk. His hard eyes are set on me, watching me, daring me to move away, and that same electrifying pull for him returns.

The same feeling of safety, the same burning desire and affection for him.

Opening my desk drawer, I take out a stack of papers and drop it on the desk in front of him and head for the door.

A firm grip on my arm stops me.

“Aurora. Why are you avoiding me?” His tone is pleading. He clearly didn’t read the papers I just placed on the table.

My breathing starts to get faster at his close proximity, at the warmth seeping from his suit into me.

My own head starts to get lighter, and I almost lose myself in the sensations he brings me.

“Were you going to divorce me when you came back from Edinburgh, Remo?”

He stills behind me, his whole body going rigid.

“What?” His disbelief makes me want to flee. I don’t want my heart broken if he confirms it.

“Helia told me you were going to divorce me, Remo. After all these moments, after making me the centre of your life and giving me so much, you were going to let me go?”

This time, I turn to my left and look at him at my side, my heart quivering.

Remo’s face tightens, his towering frame creating shadows around me once more, giving me a comforting feeling when it should be anything but.

“Aurora.” He turns me around, so he is in front of me, and his hands cup my cheeks, his thumb softly stroking back and forth.

“I married you to distract my parents, you knew I had a reason. If Helia told you I wanted a divorce, then surely, he couldn’t keep his mouth shut and told you the rest, didn’t he?”

I slowly nod, and he sighs, dropping his forehead against mine.

“Aurora.” My name sounds like the prayer he’s whispering to the highest heavens. “My beautiful, beautiful Aurora. My wife, my woman.” His words hurt, but they hurt so good. They cut me open, yet he is pouring cold water on my burning heart.

It hurts, Remo hurts, and I still can’t let go.

“The reason I chose you was because of you, Aurora. I chose to marry you out of everyone because you caught my eye the first day I saw you at your father’s house, smiling and wearing a beautiful white dress. Even though it was drenched from the rain, you were like this glowing angel within my dark world, and there was nothing that could stop me from caging a beautiful flower and keeping her locked away for my eyes only.”

A gasp leaves me. This declaration is raw, more poisonous and more harmful to my heart than anything else he has ever said to me.

“Aurora, I chose you, for you. Not for your father’s financial position, not for pictures, not because you were easy. Helia can’t stand that I chose you and that I want to keep you, and he obviously tried to do anything he possibly could to ruin it so he could have the upper hand, but he doesn’t know who owns him. I own Helia, not the other way around. You have to believe me, Aurora. Not him.”

I look up at his eyes. Those smoky black orbs stare deep into my own.

“Fuck if your silence isn’t the most heart-breaking sound my heart has ever heard.”

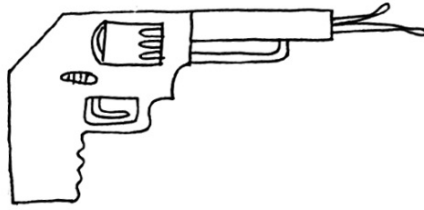
My lip trembles, and I tuck my head into his chest, trying to hold it together. I take a deep breath, then step away from him. His face falls.

“If what Helia has said is correct—even if what he told me may be twisted—answer this one question for me, Remo.” I pause. I know, I just know, his answer will absolutely wreck me.

“Did you kill my father? Did you commit murder?”

His spine straightens, and his hands fist at his side. His jaw ticks, and his eyes go hard. And that’s all answer I need.

REMO



“I did.”

I didn't ever think accepting the fact that I've committed the most heinous crime would taste bitter on my tongue.

Aurora's soft face stills as she releases a quiet breath. Her eyes go hard as steel, and the warmth and softness around her disappears.

Coldness washes over me, and this home I considered warm and my only safe heaven suddenly feels all too empty. I see the moment Aurora detaches herself, see the moment her eyes lock up and the small step she takes away from me.

I never wanted to tell her this so soon, but it's a part of me. I've made enemies, and I've killed people who crossed me and did it with no mercy.

Helia will be taking the blame for this one. He doesn't know it yet, but he will pay, and it won't be a pretty look. I'll need to keep him undercover.

It doesn't matter that he told Aurora. It's good she knows who she married and who she was starting to develop feelings for. She needs to see my ugly side to be able to love me fully and accept me.

My mind may be blank, but the silence isn't so noticeable when Aurora is around me.

She's the loud to my quiet.

She's the reason for me changing the whole course of my life. I want her to accept me and keep me.

“Why?”

My heart drops, then stutters.

“I—”

Aurora's phone rings, stopping me from telling her it was all because of Venezia. For saving my sister, Helia wanted her father's company. And the rage took over me when Mace pushed her down the stairs.

All these words get left behind when Aurora picks up her phone, walking around me and to the door of her office, with me following behind her.

"I'll see who she is. I'm sure Remo knows her," she says to the phone, her eyes on me as we hop in the car.

"Aurora, let me explain to you."

Her eyes are red-rimmed, and tears pool inside of them. I can't fucking see her like this.

"Please stop crying. Each and every single one of your tears is another piece of my heart being torn apart. Each tear you shed because of me is another knife wound to my heart. Stop crying, *amore mio*," I plead, my hand rising to wipe her tears, but she looks away, and that hurts more than anything.

When I enter the house behind Aurora, I spot Venezia standing in the living room with Kamari and Ruel talking to her.

When Venezia catches my eyes, she looks between Aurora and me, and her eyes widen.

"What did you do?" Venezia asks, placing her books away and walking over to me. She grabs my arm and drags me to the kitchen.

We both stand in silence, and I can't even care that Venezia shouldn't be here. Kamari will tell Aurora that Venezia is my sister, but—My hands drop to my sides as I look out at the pitch-dark garden.

The silence is loud. Venezia's eyes bore into my own. Waiting.

"Did you know I was a boxer before you were born? I did it until I was twenty-four, and I loved it. I wanted to go to higher positions, fight in bigger matches and make a name for myself in the industry, except our mother and father weren't supportive of it. I didn't know about you then, but the night I was having my first ever big match, was the day I found out about you."

Venezia merely tilts her head.

My mind plays my memories like a reel on repeat.

"My personal secretary at the time told me he just got notified that I had a sister. She was eight years old and living in a fucking orphanage. Imagine my surprise when I find that my parents were the ones who put her there." I let out a dry laugh and shake my head, knowing damn well that when I thought my life was going up, it started going down.

"I couldn't go to them. I couldn't ask them personally, couldn't get to you, and certainly couldn't leave the match. I was stuck. Suddenly I was under all this pressure, under all these responsibilities that came on my shoulders in a matter

of seconds.”

I take in a shuddering breath, my hands shaking as everything feels like it’s collapsing around me.

Everything is slipping through my fingers when all I did was try to save my sister and keep the only woman who wanted me and showed me her love.

My knees weaken as my eyes burn, trying to remember the boy who killed himself and put on a mask to walk through this dark society.

I did everything I wanted, I played with power, played with the lives of people, but now... nothing seems to be worth it.

I’m losing everything.

“What did you do that night, Remo?” Venezia’s face doesn’t change. Maybe she will hate me just like Aurora has started to since she heard I killed her father.

“I killed two men that night.”

No change in her expression. “I want to hear the explanation.”

I let out a shaky breath, my eyes dropping low, but not because I am embarrassed. I know it’s never going to stop. I won’t stop. It’s embedded in me now.

The fear of losing the two most precious girls in my life grips me hard.

“I walked out of there before that fight, and there in an alleyway where I was punching the wall in pure fury, I met a guy with the most dangerous green eyes, and a pact was made. A plan was made, and I started to unravel exactly what our family had been doing. Helia and I have worked together for the past ten years. There is nothing we haven’t done, and we have not stopped at any line.”

Venezia has a glint in her eyes that has me questioning exactly why she is being like this.

“I’m not going to stop, because that is how I gained power, but Aurora won’t forgive me. Especially not since her father was my most recent victim.”

She gasps loudly, her eyes going wide. “Remo! What did you do?!”

“It was going to happen, anyway. It was part of the price to pay for helping you, Venezia. Helia wanted his company, and the only way that was happening was if he signed his company over to me, gave it to his daughter—which wasn’t happening—or he died.”

Venezia shakes her head. “Remo. That is unforgivable; no matter the circumstances. He was her father. Aurora seems like a woman who wouldn’t agree with your lifestyle. This isn’t right. Why did you do that when you knew she would react like this? Why did you do it knowing you were going to keep her as your wife?”

I run a frustrated hand through my hair. There was only one reason.

For her.

For her safety.

“Did you tell her this?”

I raise my head and look at her.

“Tell her what?” I ask.

“This story. Why you killed someone before, why you killed her father, and how indebted you are to Helia for me. You know what? Let me meet her. Let’s go tell her right now.”

She grabs my hand and pulls, but I stop her.

“She won’t listen. I’m trying, but it hurts knowing she could say no any time and walk away from me, leaving me behind bleeding,” I rasp out, my eyes finding Venezia’s.

It feels like my heart is burning to the point where I am accepting that all that will remain are ashes of what I feel and the scars around my heart caused by the woman who I would do anything in this world for.

“Doesn’t matter, Remo. Let’s go before you lose her.”

Those words break me free from the pity party I am having, and Venezia walks us towards the living room.

As soon as I stand in the living room doorway, Venezia beside me, my eyes instantly find Aurora among the people.

She’s wearing a coral-orange silk dress with thin straps and a neckline that dips down to hint at her cleavage. The dress reaches her calves, and her white heels have straps that wind up her legs. Her hair is half pinned up behind her head, and her gold jewellery shows off her collarbones and her gorgeous features like her wrists, her slim fingers, and her neck. A beautiful smile graces her face, too.

She’s a goddess whom a monster wants to steal for himself.

She’s mine.

Nobody else.

If Aurora didn’t like me and hated me like she is starting to imply, she wouldn’t be so bothered by this revelation of mine.

She feels something for me. That is why she is angry at me.

This is confirmed by the way her eyes lock with mine. An electric current runs through the atmosphere, and I feel the pull in my body to get closer to her. I feel her emotions rush towards me, and gravity seems to tilt towards her, while my heart starts to beat for her.

I’ve lost all control to her. I placed it all in her hands.

I feel a nudge on my side and blink, realising that Venezia is next to me when Aurora’s eyes slide next to me.

“Aurora, meet my sister, Venezia Cainn.” I nod my head towards Venezia, who smiles and nods at her.

I think Venezia also did this so she could meet Aurora. The sneaky little shit.

“Hi, I am so happy to meet you after hearing so many things from Remo about you,” she offers, hugging Aurora, who smiles at her and hugs her back.

My eyes stay on Aurora, who is still looking at me. Her eyes slowly become vacant of emotions, but I can still see the dim fire behind them.

I will make that fire burn brighter than ever, Aurora.

There is no dimming of emotions for me.

You are my lifeline now.

I take slow steps until I stand in front of her, ignoring the stares of her friends on me. Venezia manages to distract them enough for me to lean towards Aurora and place a kiss on her cheek. She narrows her eyes suspiciously at me in return. I face Kamari, who looks close to murdering me, and Ruel, who is calmly sitting on the lounge. His arms are crossed, and his muscles show through the black long-sleeved tight compression shirt he is wearing.

He raises a single brow at me, and I can basically hear the silent threat.

Walking past them all, I go upstairs to take off my suit jacket and talk with Helia about any updates. When I get into his room, the video on his computer screen makes me stop in my tracks.

He’s watching Ambrose running around in an office. What is she doing there this late?

I take a step closer and watch her set a pile of papers on her desk. She sits, looks at the watch on her wrist with a sigh, then opens the first file.

“Did you hire her?” My question doesn’t startle him.

I hear his empty laugh before he turns around in his chair, his sharp deep-green eyes focusing on me.

“Yes. Any problem? I’m the CEO of Glamorous, after all, am I not?”

I grit my teeth my control snapping.

“Not for the public yet.” I grumble just as I lunge for him..

I grab at his shirt, then yank him up and out of the seat. I throw him to the floor, drop on top of him, and land a punch to his face.

“How fucking dare you—” Another punch to his jaw. The force of it makes his head snap to the side.

“Try to play your fucking twisted game—” I grab his jaw in my hands, kneeling above him, but he only looks at me with a lazy smile despite his bloody state right now. His lips are cracked and bleeding.

“And try to destroy what I have?” I grit out, my voice low but malicious as my desire to bleed him dry turns more dangerous.

“I should kill you for what you did, Helia.”

He coughs, and blood dribbles out of the corner of his lips.

“We were supposed to tell each other when plans change, why didn’t you tell me?”

I frown. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

He huffs, shoves my hands away, then moves to sit against the wall.

“You fell in love. That’s what happened. You decided to kill Mace instead of me doing it and didn’t tell me why. I would have stayed away.” He raises his brows, wiping the blood from his lips. His right eye is already swelling.

“You, an unemotional fucker, wanted to hear me talk about sappy feelings?”

He shrugs, looking to the side.

“Fine. Yes, I love Aurora. No, I will not be divorcing her. And yes, I will keep her. There is no if or buts. It’s a definite. Happy? Now stop this madness and get the fuck up.” Straightening, I take few steps back to let him get up.

My eyes catch on his computer screen once more as he pulls himself up.

I keep watching him, trying to see if he knows about what Ambrose did, and when a twisted smirk forms on his face, I know there is nothing that escapes him; and when that smirk turns even darker, I know something happened.

“What is it?”

Helia tilts his head, showing the tattoo on the side of his neck, and his black hair falls to the side.

Twisted.

That is what Helia is.

Unhinged and not my problem.

“I found some interesting answers to this whole mess. Want to win over your wife first or have me catch this fucker now and finish the job?”

I take in a deep breath, realising he’s caught her stalker, or at least has his eye on him now.

“Who?” My question comes out clipped.

Helia’s defiance of my orders will have to wait while I deal with this mess.

My hands tighten into fists, and I have to restrain myself from going over and killing him with the snap of his neck, or to punch him until he isn’t recognisable.

He touched what was mine.

He tried to ruin me.

He tried to play games with me.

Me.

Remo Cainn.

He is foolish to think he would get away with it all while trying to erase all Aurora’s records and get her investigator changed mid-job to get them off his

back.

He has Remo Cainn and Helia Nashwood on his back now.

From what I have heard, despite his words, Helia did not sleep while trying to keep an eye on Aurora while I was away. He was there every second of the day after the incident, and I suspect he may be falling into her sweet charms.

Helia doesn't realise it, but he cares for Aurora in his own way.

As long as he stays the fuck away and keeps his emotions in check.

"Name, Helia," I press harder, and when he smiles like the answer is stupid or pleasing, I know I am about to fuck someone close to me up.

"Ready?"

AURORA



What do I do?
How can I seek safety from a man who takes the lives of others?
How can I be okay with it?

How could I even be considering of the possibility of accepting him? Where does that leave me?

Falling in love with my father's killer? I should be disgusted.

But I am... not.

And the sick realisation has me in a chokehold.

"Did you know that Remo didn't want to give you white roses?"

I look over at Venezia who has been nothing but a sweetheart. The resemblance between her and Remo is very strong. Their dark hair colour, their slightly tanned skin, and the beautiful features that are definitely Italian. They are two beautiful siblings.

I wonder how much Venezia knows about Remo and his life.

"Why?" I ask, because the last time I felt happy with him, he gifted me a pink rose. A pink rose that is still in the bedside drawer, hidden. Now, there's a bouquet of white roses.

Over the past few days, Remo has been sending flowers of all kinds, especially in pink and white, to my office and to the house when he isn't home. He had sweets and desserts delivered, too, knowing I love them.

It feels like I lost a best friend, a person who made my days better. A person who I loved caring for and one whose affection was turning into love.

I feel a deep ache in me whenever I look at Remo.

My morals won't let me look over this.

How can I make my heart accept this?

Just looking at him sitting there makes me ache all over again.

"He said it was too pure for him to touch it. He may not regret anything in life, Aurora, but he knows your worth and where he personally stands. Circumstances have forced him to be this way. Life gets in the way sometimes. I'm sure you didn't have a simple life either, so please listen to him." Venezia slowly takes my hand, and her face falls like she herself is hurting.

"He did this for me, and I won't forgive myself if I let my brother's soulmate, the love of his life, hate him for something he was forced into. I know you won't forgive him easily, but listen to him, okay? Listen to him because there is nothing more he wants than for you to listen to him. Remo isn't bad. He isn't a man who will let you suffer. He will protect you before he lets anything touch you." Venezia's words reinforce my faith.

"This thing called life? It's hard, but it's not going to be kind to you. Especially not the people who follow the right path. You need to realise that life isn't fair, and you need to take it by your hands and steer it in your direction. Good is always fighting evil. And Remo is fighting his battle. He will forever fight for you, Aurora."

"You don't deserve a misunderstanding to tear you apart."

I swallow thickly, my eyes slowly tearing up, and I turn my head so Venezia doesn't see the tears.

"I've seen you in articles and on social media. You always looked so radiant, so full of life. I know you are a beautiful person, inside and out. I know you and Remo complete each other."

Venezia pats me on the hand and walks over to Kamari, who is glaring at Remo, watching him.

I get up and walk to the kitchen.

"Aurora, where are you going?"

I ignore Kamari and keep going. It's too stuffy in there, and I can only find an escape in the kitchen.

My heart is drumming hard against my chest. I feel like I might explode. Remo is taking over all my senses.

What about him wanting to divorce me?

I need him to explain it to me.

I wipe the tears from my face and take in deep breaths, calming my racing heart.

Familiar footsteps sound behind me.

Remo.

“Aurora?” he calls.

All I can think of is the mistake... the papers I have given him.

“Did you see the papers I gave you today?” I croak out, my soft cries echoing around the kitchen. Remo takes a few steps closer to me and then I feel his heat on my back.

A soft feathery touch grazes my shoulder, but it’s so faint it could have been a fragment of my imagination.

“I did. Don’t think I will let you go, Aurora. You have to accept me the way I am. You have seen more of me than anyone else has. I have shown you sides of me no one has seen, and you’ve slowly crept closer to my heart, strengthening how I feel about you.”

Wrapping my arms around my midsection, I try to hold on to my sanity as I feel myself slowly slipping.

“I wanted you while I was too busy trying to get Venezia home. The favour Helia asked for in return for his help in finding Venezia was your father’s company, but your father wasn’t willing to give it up. Not even your pictures budged him and then he went and threw you down the stairs. I will not stand by and watch my wife get mistreated. I won’t let anyone who hurts you continue to walk on this earth.”

“Stop!” I choke out, taking steps forward and away from him just so the distance can help me think clearly.

“No. I won’t stop, Aurora. There is nothing I won’t do to keep you safe.”

I shake my head despite hearing the desperation in his voice. I *can’t*.

I can’t place my heart in his hands when he so mercilessly killed my father.

My mother and sister blame me for it, but that isn’t what bothers me. It’s that Remo did this while I was imagining a future with him. A permanent future.

I don’t turn around when silence falls upon us.

If I do, I will sacrifice all my morals for him, and I’ll forgive him for an unthinkable crime.

“I can’t do it, Remo. How could I possibly look past this?” I cry, feeling tired. My body is slowly giving out.

Taking a deep breath in, I slowly will myself to turn around, just to see him, just to see how much he cares for me. I lose the battle with myself and look back.

The emotions on Remo’s broken face make me stumble back. The vulnerability, the sadness, the utter ache on Remo’s face as he looks at me. The small frown on his face as he looks at me makes me want to run into his arms and stay there.

“Aurora... please.” The heartbreak written all over Remo’s face makes my

heart clench in my chest, the pain unbearable.

“If your father didn’t deserve it, I wouldn’t have taken that step, but the moment he decided your life held no value to him, he was dead to me, and I won’t take that back.” Remo takes a determined step towards me, his eyes now hard.

“If you are choosing your dead father, that good-for-nothing man—”

I shake my head. “I’m not,” I whisper.

Everything stills. The buzzing of the fridge, the murmur of voices from the living room, the silence. Everything just tunes out as I keep my eyes on Remo’s pleading ones.

We both stand there for what feels like an eternity, gazing at each other with hurt, with an ache deep in our hearts, and yet our morals don’t align. Our goals are keeping us from taking that last step towards each other and accepting it all.

One is ready to give up everything, and one is ready to walk away the second this takes a wrong turn.

Would I leave all this behind in the name of love?

Am I ready to throw my morals out for the man I love?

Remo takes another step closer to me. And another. Until he is right in front of me.

Slowly lifting his hand, he uses a finger under my chin to lift my face. Our eyes connect with such intensity that I can feel my heart wanting to jump right out of me. The kitchen shrinks and disappears until it’s just him and me. My skin burns with need for him, my heart already deciding that it wants Remo. My harsher breathing mixed with Remo’s irregular breathing makes me feel light-headed. My eyes grow heavy as Remo slowly pulls me closer to him with a hand on the small of my back.

A soft gasp leaves me when I fall against him, my hands instantly grabbing at his waist. I look up and find Remo’s eyes filled with an emotion I’ve long-desired to find in someone’s eyes.

Love.

Deep, burning, and eternal love.

Where else will I find love like this?

Have I not desired it all my life?

Wanted it?

Slowly but surely, Remo’s face lowers to mine, his eyes seeking permission from me. All I can do is slowly close my eyes, letting him know that, yes indeed, I am giving in once more. I am weak. So weak at the hands of this man.

Remo rests his forehead against mine.

His hands slowly creep up my body until they rest under my jaw, his thumb

slowly and softly going back and forth on my cheek.

“It’s you for me, Aurora.” Remo places a hesitant kiss on my cheek, making my hands tighten on his waist.

“You.” He kisses the other cheek.

“It was, is, and will always be you, because the possibility of you not being in this life with me is frightening. The thought alone makes me want to destroy everything in this world. It’s a dim, colourless place without you, Aurora. You slowly took my bitter pieces and turned them sweet for you.”

I lean up and close the distance between us before Remo can say another word, sealing our fate with a kiss that kicks my heart into a frenzy. The current rushes through my body, making me tingle with the effects of this rushed kiss.

It’s like we are running out of time. Like this could be the very last kiss we have. Our hands roam over each other as tears stream down my cheeks. I’m doing it. I’m leaving behind what I’ve known my entire life for Remo.

I am choosing Remo over myself and my morals, and I can’t help but let the tears flow as the thought of not loving Remo, of him not being with me, hurts me. It pains me.

Kissing me deeper, Remo grunts, then he presses his body against my own, making me moan.

“Aurora,” Remo whispers.

The whisper is so full of hope, and I feel myself slowly smile into the kiss. Everything feels so much lighter. It feels like everything can be fine if I just have Remo beside me.

“I lov—”

A loud shot booms through the kitchen. I scream and grab my ringing ears.

I open my eyes in an instant and look at Remo in panic. His eyes are wide in shock, looking behind me. The sliding kitchen doors are shattered, and a hooded black figure stands there, a gun pointed in our direction.

The blood drains from my face, and I feel cold shudders run through me as I comprehend what has happened.

I look back in panic at Remo, only to find crimson blood leaking through his white shirt under his brown suit jacket.

The realisation is too horrific for me to accept it.

“Remo!” I scream.

AURORA



I can't breathe. Remo's dark eyes narrow on the intruder, his hands clench into fists at his sides. It's like the bullet barely touched him, despite it being fully embedded in his abdomen. Remo's features turn twisted. He looks menacing.

He is the monster everyone in London is scared of. The monster that causes people in Capri to shiver in fear from the mere sound of his name.

Remo is the epitome of a gentleman styled in a suit with the charred heart of a monster. A being that cannot feel any remorse if he so much as decides to kill you, to harm you, or to interrogate you.

Remo shoves me behind him, then punches the hooded figure.

The intruder's face snaps to the side, but he quickly recovers and goes to punch Remo. Remo blocks it. The intruder's next punch lands right on Remo's wound, making him stumble back.

I scream again. Footsteps rush to us from all over the house.

The figure shoots Remo in the arm, but Remo doesn't go down. He grabs a knife off the kitchen counter and slashes at the intruder, splitting open his arm.

"Aurora!" I hear Kamari's frantic shout just as she and the others crowd into the entrance of the kitchen.

The intruder kicks Remo to the side, and he stumbles and falls to his knees.

No.

What is he doing?

Why isn't Remo fighting back?

The intruder instantly leaps for me. I take a few quick steps back and escape

his grasp. Remo rises from his hunched position, whips out a gun from the back of his trousers, and shoots the intruder right through his head from the back, his aim sharp and precise.

The figure drops to the floor, and I stumble but leave the body right there. I lunge for Remo. He keels over to the floor, his energy leaving him as a pained guttural sound emits from him. Blood pools beneath him.

“Remo!” I shout, dropping to my knees next to his head.

My hands flutter in the air above him. What happened to him to make him collapse so quickly? I suddenly notice a syringe in his side. Emptied.

What did he put in him?

What did he do to Remo?

“Remo, please open your eyes,” I cry out.

I can’t do this.

Not again.

I can’t lose Remo.

I was ready to accept him, ready to give him a chance.

This wasn’t how fate was supposed to steal it all away from me.

No.

No.

Please no.

I faintly hear voices speaking. Someone grabs my shoulders and soothes me as I hear the blast of sirens in the distance, but I can’t focus on anything but Remo’s unconscious body and the blood coming out of his wound. I lean forward and press my hand on the wound on his stomach, but the other wound is on his arm, and I can’t reach both.

“He’s losing blood. Kamari, he is losing blood,” I frantically tell her, not knowing if she is even here or not.

“No, Remo, you are not leaving me like this, okay? I can’t live without you. Please,” I sob, my eyes stuck on his closed ones and his blood-soaked shirt.

Someone pulls me back. They try to take me away from Remo. I try to fight, but I fail. They’re too strong. Remo is put onto something, and they take him away. People walk about, but my eyes stay on Remo.

Where are they taking him?

“Hospital. I need to go with Remo.” Shrugging the hands off of me, I leave them all behind as I run outside towards the ambulance where Remo is being rolled into and I climb in behind everyone in the ambulance, ignoring their protests.

They rip apart his shirt and place pressure on his wound. Everything feels like a blur to me.

“Please, Remo, don’t leave me like this,” I cry, my face wet with tears. “I wanted to do so much more with you. I’m sorry for not trusting you enough, for not letting you explain yourself. Let’s kiss under the rain, let’s bake together, let’s go to dinners, let’s do everything you promised to, please just... wake up.”

“Please...” I whisper, feeling the eyes of the paramedics on me.

The ambulance takes a sharp turn, throwing me against the side of the vehicle.

I gasp at the sudden way it knocks my breath out of me, but when I realise that the two paramedics who just ripped Remo’s shirt aren’t actually doing anything else, I finally look up. One is unconscious, and the other is looking at me with a mask over the lower half of his face.

Black hair.

Dark ocean blue eyes.

No.

No.

I frantically try to look around the ambulance, but Remo is unconscious, and I can’t risk him getting any more hurt. I scream internally. *He* is here. Sitting so close to me. How many people did he rope into working with him for this?

Shivers take over my body as my brain starts to throb in pain.

One attacked me, and the other one is lying unconscious while the other is driving us towards somewhere that is definitely not the hospital.

Just feeling his disgusting gaze run over me makes me shiver, because this is my exact nightmare in front of me. This is the very man who has been after me for three years before being able to kidnap and assault me.

I shake my head as I look at the door on my left, at Remo in front of me, at the equipment all around the ambulance.

No.

Think, Aurora.

You need to save both of you.

How can I when my hands are shaking uncontrollably and my stalker’s eyes are on me? I can tell by the small lift of his cheek that this is a victory for him. This can’t be happening.

Kamari doesn’t know, and neither does Ruel. They think we are going to the hospital, but we aren’t.

My breathing comes out in short puffs, and I feel lightheaded despite trying to blink my eyes and get rid of the black spots covering in my vision.

Think.

Remo needs to be safe.

He’s here.

He did it again.

My stalker laughs when I reach forward and place Remo's ripped shirt over the wound on his stomach. My hands shake as I desperately try to save my husband.

How could I doubt he won't keep me safe when it was all Remo wanted to give me?

He made me feel safe, and when he actually was getting rid of dangers, my father included, I doubted his ability to do so.

Venezia just got her brother, her family, after so many years, and I found the meaning of love through Remo. I can't lose him.

"Stop trying to save him!" The stalker shoves my hands away from where I was pressing on Remo's wound. I yelp at the brutal force and stagger back, trying to mould myself to the side of the ambulance.

His harsh voice and rough rumble slowly bring back memories that feel like white shots of absolutely nothing, because I still can't recall the memories. I can't see or remember what exactly he did to me. All I know is that he made me feel disgusting and left me with a skin that felt like a prison.

The white clothes can only do so much to help me.

"This husband is of no use to you and me," he speaks, but I avoid looking at him.

Remo went to get his sister, but then went to Italy. The papers have said his warehouse burned down. That's why he went to Italy? Because my stalker made that happen?

My eyes are stuck on Remo, and tears pool in my eyes once more. I feel drained and tired.

So tired of it all.

What else did he do to get me here?

Why? Why is he after me like this?

Why can't he leave me alone?

I try to think of a plan, try to work out how I will get out of this situation. This time I have the responsibility of saving Remo, too.

"Surely only I can love you like this, Aurora. Why did you run away from me?" His voice is calm, and I don't react nor look at him, because his eyes make me feel repulsed.

"Why?" he shouts, slamming his fist against the side of the ambulance.

I flinch.

I look around the ambulance, trying to ignore the horrifying blue eyes. My body trembles, but I clutch my arms tight and visually search for a weapon of sorts, something to help Remo and delay this whole thing.

How will I send a signal for help?

I don't know how far away from London he'll take us. I close my eyes when I realise I may need to play into his fantasies to survive this, but I won't be able to go far.

My heart thunders inside of my chest. Will I survive this? The invisible rope wrapped around my neck is pulling tighter and tighter, choking me.

"So the silent treatment? Is it because your fake husband is here? Should I throw him out? I have no use for him now, anyway."

My eyes snap up to him, my expression angry. He laughs. It's dark and utterly terrifying.

"No, no. I won't do that, sweetheart, because how else will I make you comply with what I say if not for inflicting few little injuries on Remo here?"

No, I won't let that happen. I tighten my hands into fists, so I don't do something stupid.

The ambulance takes another sharp turn, jerking me forward, but I brace my hands on the stretcher. Something pierces my finger, and I suck in a sharp breath. I look down to see a silver tool stuck into my skin. Blood seeps around the wound.

While keeping my hands on the stretcher and taking deep breaths for show, I slowly wrap my fingers around whatever poked me. It's a small scalpel.

I sniffle and act like I am wiping my tears as I bring the scalpel up towards Remo's trouser pockets and lean my head on his thigh. I hear a scoff from the stalker and quickly hide the scalpel in Remo's pocket before leaning back, slightly assured that I have something to help me at least.

The ambulance soon comes to a screeching stop, and my heart falls to my stomach.

The doors open, and he grabs my arm and pulls me out with him. I struggle, trying to snatch my arm away, but his grip is tight, and he is much stronger than me.

"Bring him inside."

I look in front of me and stop breathing.

It's the same place.

Same place.

The same place he brought me nine months ago.

Not this place. Please.

Nausea builds inside of me and the blood drains from my face. The sight before me evokes dark flashbacks of my barely conscious body being dragged in there by him.

How could that happen in the first place?

How did he do it?

I look behind me at the ambulance, and my eyes instantly catch onto the expanse of the trees. It's the only thing visible in every direction, and my anxiety only gets worse.

How am I supposed to fight him alone?

Tears blur my vision, but I take deep breaths and try to blink them away. It doesn't work. Maybe I have a weak heart. Maybe I am too weak for it all.

Maybe... maybe I can't save Remo.

I shake my head at that.

Remo is being dragged out on the stretcher by another man with the same blue mask on the lower half of his face. I sigh. At least they aren't doing any more damage.

I quietly follow behind my stalker, looking around and trying to assess the situation and what I could do despite a small voice in the back of my mind telling me that I will freeze and won't be able to handle anything once I go through those doors.

It's a wooden house, a cottage with barricaded windows and a thick door. There is a small chimney at the top where a plume of smoke is rising from, but overall, it looks like an average house in the middle of woods.

We get closer and closer, and I look back at Remo once more to make sure he is here.

I look at the man dragging me and wonder how he could do this to a woman. How could he have no mercy? But then I think about my father and realise that no relationship would matter if you don't care enough about someone.

My gaze drops to the hand holding my arm and catches on the small blue bracelet. A simple blue band with gold rimming around it. I stop in my tracks, making the man stop with me, too.

He looks back, probably wondering why I stopped, but the realisation... it hits me all at once.

My eyes snap up, and I see those awful ocean-blue eyes fixed on me. His brows dip, then his eyes fall to where I was looking.

The bracelet.

I don't breathe or blink as I slowly stretch out my shaky hand. The shock of it all, the trauma coming back, and the revelation all hit me at once.

"No, no, no, no!" I keep shaking my head, but my eyes are stuck on the man in front of me.

"How... How could you do this to me?!" I scream, the agony ripping through my chest.

The hurt, the betrayal.

“How could you, Sam!”

AURORA



He took one look at my face, at the heartbroken expression on my face, then he swore under his breath and dragged me even faster inside. He locked me in a room and threw Remo in here with me.

I am sitting with Remo's head in my lap, and I keep softly crying despite constantly telling myself to be brave, to be patient, and to not cry so much, but I can't help it. I can't help it.

I can't stop it when the love of my life is lying almost lifeless in my lap, and I am back in the place where I wanted to end my life.

I cradle Remo's face closer to me, holding onto him as I hold on to the hope of life, because how could life be so cruel to me that it put me back into the hands of the very man who almost ruined me?

"I'm trying, Remo. I promise I am trying so hard," I whisper, letting my head drop onto his neck as I hug him closer to me.

"I wish I had told you how much I love you and how much you mean to me before any of this happened." I sniffle, trying to keep myself brave and talk to him. "You have such a big wound because of me. What should I do, Remo? What should I do to get us out of here before things get worse?" I place a kiss on his cheek while constantly checking his pulse.

It's beating faintly, and that's the only thing keeping me sane.

"You never broke my heart, baby. You never hurt me, either. I was lost in myself because I didn't know what to do. I wish I trusted you enough because where else would I go if not to you?" I place a hand on the other side of Remo's neck, feeling his pulse as I speak.

The darkness in the room is too much. I can only feel Remo and see him very faintly. There is nothing in this room except the small window at the top of one wall. It's barricaded, but a small sliver of light is filtering through.

The night passes slowly, and the morning dawns with weak light streaming through the window.

"I wish this never happened. I wish we could live happily, but I didn't know that my past would be so close to me and hurt me in a way I couldn't imagine."

I look down at Remo's wound. I'd bandaged it with a strip of my dress, which I cut off with the scalpel before hiding it back in Remo's pocket. I also bandaged his arm, though I didn't try to remove the bullet. I didn't want to cause problems and even more blood loss.

I need a plan to get out of here and get rid of Sam before I can do anything.

I have to put trust in myself.

Energy drains from me with each minute that passes. My eyes slowly shut on their own, my hold on Remo's neck slowly faltering.

Unconsciousness takes me and everything shuts down.



My eyes snap open as I am placed on a chair at a table.

I blink at the bright light above us.

The table is decorated with a plain white cloth with some food on it, but I don't pay attention to that. My attention shoots toward the figure slumped on the floor at the far end of the big living room.

It's Remo. His head hangs forward, and his hands are tied behind him, but he is bandaged up properly, his abdomen and his arm, too.

Surprised, I look at Sam, who is sitting in front of me, watching me.

A moment passes, and my stomach churns when he removes the mask.

A gasp gets stuck in my throat when he slowly lowers it.

It's not Sam.

It's Damon.

His uncle.

"I did it for you," he tells me, just a few lifeless words, leaving me confused.

"What..." I trail off, but he shakes his head.

"Eat first. You need some nutrition in your body,"

"Damon. W-what are you doing?"

He takes a deep breath, then looks at me through his lashes. I fight to contain my shudder of revulsion.

"The bracelet was just a little something I stole from my nephew to keep the suspicion away," he murmurs as he looks up at me.

I had never imagined that my stalker would be someone who was so close to me yet such a stranger.

It all comes back to me now.

Him giving me that note in Capri; him coming to my event and scaring me, making me more aware of his presence than ever. His question on the talk show... He was in every corner of my life, and I didn't even know it.

He was so close to me, and I didn't realise.

"I am giving you food, Aurora. What else?" His eyes are so empty and so bottomless; it's absolutely terrifying.

"Will you... give food to..." I trail off, not knowing if he will get triggered if I say Remo's name, but I look over at his hunched figure.

Him looking all beaten up, his broad body leaning against the wall, makes bile rise in my throat. Remo shouldn't look like that.

"How long has it been since I fell asleep?"

Damon sighs, looking at his watch.

"Four hours, and he won't get food. Me bandaging him up for your sake is already a stretch."

I want to argue, but I hold it back.

I nod wordlessly, pick up the fork, and examine at the spaghetti in front of me.

I should say no, I should not eat anything in case he mixed something in it. I can't trust him at all. But... I can't. I absolutely can't.

"Only a few bites. I feel really nauseous."

Damon's eyes snap up to me. The glare on his face makes me reel back.

I feel the acidic, roiling feeling in my stomach, and grip the table tighter. I don't know what is coming next.

"Are you fucking pregnant with that bastard's child?" Damon shouts. He gets up so fast and throws his plate at the wall. The food splatters everywhere and the plate shatters on the floor. I flinch and shut my eyes.

Something touches my cheek, and I shriek and jerk away from it. My eyes fly

open and land on Damon's worried face. He's towering over me, a hand resting on the table.

I feel too enclosed. Like everything is closing in on me.

I can't... breathe.

I take shorter breaths, but I can't. I shake my head, but Damon nods and picks up my fork. He twists some spaghetti on the tines and tries to feed me. I keep my lips pressed together and shake my head.

"Eat, Aurora. You will get sick if you don't. I can get you medicine to get rid of the baby. It's okay. We can live happily without this devil child in you."

He keeps shoving spoonfuls of spaghetti at my mouth, ignoring my tears and panic attacks. He seems so oblivious to my struggles and the fact that I want to get away. He keeps a tight hold on my jaw and forces me to eat. It's disgusting, and I can't do anything to stop him.

I take it all while my eyes stay on Remo's unconscious figure on the floor. The tears stream down harder than ever.

I wish these weren't the circumstances.

I wish someone heard my prayers.

I wish someone heard my cries.

I wish loving wasn't so difficult.

I wish I had believed Remo. Hadn't doubted him.

AURORA



I shut my eyes and tilt my head back, trying to think, when a groan hits my ears.

Damon locked me in the same room again, but without Remo this time. He went out to get medicine to get me to ‘abort the baby.’ Damon doesn’t want to believe that it wasn’t a baby, but his touch, his presence, and this place makes me sick.

I perk up, my eyes instantly going to the door, and my heart rate climbs.

Please let it be Remo.

Remo won’t know where we are or why I am trembling here in this dark room, trying so hard for my memories to not give me an anxiety attack.

I stop breathing as I listen for that sound once more, a painful groan.

Waiting, I fist my hands and hold my breath.

A second passes.

Then another.

And then I start losing hope.

Another groan sounds, and I scramble from my position on the floor and run towards the door. I press down the handle and find it open. I try not to cry tears of joy. I run from the room and look to my right where I last saw Remo. He’s blinking and looking around.

I breathe faster and faster, not knowing how to react except that I want to fall into his arms.

“Remo,” I choke out, tears falling down my face as I try not to drop to the floor.

His head whips towards me, his eyes landing on me. They widen ever so slightly as he looks over my bruised body, probably cataloguing the marks around my jaw, from how ruthlessly Damon held me, and the scraped knees beneath the shredded hem of my dress.

His eyes turn dark. I feel the tension in his body as he slowly sits up, his hands still tied behind his back as his jaw works. His breathing is irregular, probably from the pain he's in, but all I can focus on is this big muscular man in front of me. My husband. I was so scared while he was unconscious.

Life rushes back into my bones as my body hums in acknowledgement. I feel electricity runs through my fingertips, my body pulling me to him.

I couldn't carry on much longer, and I don't know what I would have done if he didn't wake up.

"Remo." A whimper leaves past my lips as I slowly walk the final few steps towards him, dropping to my knees and wrapping my arms around his neck.

Sobs wrack my body as I pull him closer.

They rip from inside my chest, my heart crying with me as I try to hold on to sanity in this place.

His large body forms a big barrier that I know will protect me from the world and its horrors. He is my husband. My protector, and there is nothing but love in my heart for him.

I shake my head as my arms tighten around him, but I can't find it in me to do anything other than hold him and find comfort in him.

The first time I was kidnapped, I didn't have any hope or will to live anymore, and yet today, this moment right now, I have him.

I feel the sobs kill a piece of me as I hold on to Remo. I have been driven crazy in love.

"Aurora." Remo's voice is scratchy. Only then do I remember that his hands are tied, and I should give him some water.

Letting go of him, I take out the scalpel I hid in his trouser pocket, cutting through the tight rope; all the while, tears stream down my face. I keep trying to wipe them to see clearer, but they keep coming and coming.

It's like I can finally let go, finally let myself feel weak, and the tiredness is taking over me as I realise Remo is finally awake.

As soon as the rope is cut, Remo doesn't waste a minute hugging me to him. The tears keep coming. I feel like I can't think of anything but being close to him.

"Fuck!" I hear Remo mutter, his big arms caging me.

"Aurora, are you okay?" Remo leans back, cupping my cheeks in his hand.

All I can do is shake my head.

No.

I am not okay.

And for the first time, I accept I need someone.

Remo's face drops for a second, pure anguish and pain written all over his face, before his mask of indifference snaps back into place. He looks like he is thirsty for blood, his eyes turning a bleak black that has no depth.

The eyes of the monster my husband truly is.

A monster I need here with me today.

"Fucking sedatives. The syringe. He dropped me unconscious. Did he hurt you, *amore*?"

What *didn't* he do to bring back my trauma?

As I look into Remo's eyes, I realise there is nothing he won't do to avenge me. He'll kill all of these monsters for me, the people who have destroyed my life.

I realise that Remo may have killed my father, but Mace Torre was my father by name only. *He* was the murderer of the little girl inside of me.

So, wiping tears from my face, I sit back, grab hold of his hands and hold them in my lap tightly, fearful to let go.

And I tell him.

"Remo, it's... Damon. It's him," I tell him about coming here, finding out who he is, that this is the exact same place he brought me the first time, and that he was behind the fire in the warehouse in Italy. Damon's money and connections made it easier for him.

By the end of it all, Remo is fuming, his lips flattened as his jaw ticks.

"We need a plan. We need to get out of here before I am in too deep into my mind, because it's a scary place, Remo. I don't want that again." I swallow thickly, tears in my eyes again.

"Oh, I'm crying again. I'll stop, I promise, but I can't be here too long."

Remo has been silent this whole time, and when I look up at him, I find him frowning at me.

He cups my cheek, pulling me closer until I am across his lap, his other arm going around my back.

"Never forget, Aurora, that you have me at your disposal. My hands weren't dripping with blood for no reason. My suits hide it, the dark colours help me blend in, but this blood doesn't just appear on my hands without a reason,"

Remo keeps eye contact with me as he says the next words. "You are my reason for living now, *amore*. You are the only person who can make me drop to my knees in worship to you, the only person who can stop me or kill me." Taking one of my hands, he places it on his racing heart.

“This doesn’t stop until yours does, Aurora. This beats for you and will kill for you. I may be a gentleman of sorts—”

A soft laugh escapes me at his words, and I catch the small tilt of his lips.

“But I am not going to stop today. Are you with me? Are you hearing me? He touched what was mine, and this is not going to end well for him.” Remo’s features take on an unhinged look, revealing to me the part of his persona that he’d tried to hide from me in the past.

I am starting to truly see the man I married, and I am finally letting go of my morals, of the restrictions I put on myself.

“I am not letting the man who touched my wife walk on this earth any longer, because you are too precious for me to not cause mayhem for.”

I sniffle, his words only making my heart melt more.

What kind of person am I that I’m so touched by my husband’s crude and murderous plans?

“Do you understand me, Aurora?” Remo asks, his eyes focused on me completely.

I nod.

His features relax for a fraction of a second, then he lets me go and looks around the place, his eyes scanning over every item.

“I forgive you, Remo,” I whisper, looking up at him while I say this.

He stills, his whole body going rigid.

He looks at me like he doesn’t know what to do, his mouth parted slightly.

Then he blinks and wraps both arms around me, his face nestling in my neck.

“Aurora, you don’t understand what this forgiveness means to me.”

I wrap my arms around him.

“If you aren’t keeping me safe, if you aren’t with me in this world, what am I supposed to do, Remo? How many years of prayer would I have to do to get you in the next lifetime, too?” My voice is muffled because of my face being buried in his hair.

“You won’t have to. I don’t know what I did in this life or the last one to deserve you, and yet I will be begging to the heavens to be with you, be it hell or heaven. I will want your soul to be attached to mine, your heart to beat in rhythm with mine, and your mind to only remember me.”

Letting go of me, Remo’s face rises to mine. Our breath mingles in a soft, warm cloud. I cannot imagine ever being without him again.

This anguish, this hurt, this heartbreak, this utter pain that love has caused me is all worth having this man love me like this.

“*Te amo, Aurora.*” He dips his head and places a quick kiss on my lips. “*Te amo abbastanza da morire per te.*” His Italian confessions will always leave me

breathless.

It's a breathless kiss that makes my stomach churn and my hands to grip at him tightly, trying to hold on to the very thing I've abandoned my morals for.

My intensifying love for Remo.

We back away, and Remo looks down at me with dark phantom eyes. At this moment, I know, I just know, fate has chosen the best of kind of love for me. He was created to destroy my nightmares, to shatter the visions of my horrors. The fates made him darker and worse than the people who tried to harm me. And yet, his arms make me feel warm. And safe.

"I love you enough to die for you," he translates.

Grabbing his hands, I press a kiss to both of them.

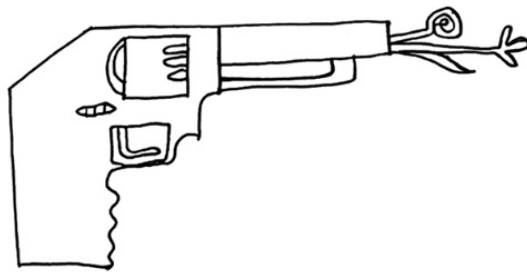
He swallows, his eyes fixed on mine.

"Ready?"

"Yes." I nod.

Let the horror begin.

REMO



It's time I put a stop to Aurora's nightmare.
As I am looking through cabinets under the kitchen, keeping an eye out for Aurora, I find something on the bottom shelf. Grabbing the big wooden handle, I drag out the heavy object and realise it is a machete.

A smirk makes its way onto my face as I drag it out with me and place it on the floor. Aurora glances back from where she is keeping a lookout from the small space between the front door and the wall. A small space but enough for her to at least try to look outside.

"What is that?" Her sweet voice flows through my ears like a soft melody that I want to hear every second of the day.

Her voice, her presence, it brings a calmness over my body as if I just died and woke up in heaven despite my actions leading me anywhere but paradise.

It's an unfamiliar feeling because it's like experiencing being in heaven while still being on earth.

"A machete. I think this is enough for me."

Aurora walks over to me, her steps precise, her dress cut at her knees, the scraps and dried up blood on her knees on display. Her bruises and scarring makes me clench my hands once more.

The first time I saw her like this, the moment my eyes landed on her all bruised up, I felt rage build inside of me, the hot fire blazing inside of me to destroy everything and anything that touched her.

I always have a backup plan, always know how many traitors are in the world.

“Where did Damon go again?” I ask Aurora as I look around the cabinets once more, not looking for anything particular but seeing if maybe I missed any cameras or voice detectors.

“He went to buy medicine.” Her voice is quiet, but I hear her soft steps approach me.

“What for?” I ask, looking into the top cabinets above the sink at the end of the kitchen.

“To abort the baby.”

I freeze, and my heart drops to my stomach.

That makes me fear what happened when I was unconscious. If what I think happened, I would not be able to live with myself.

I would wish death upon myself. I would wish I had died before I had to see this day where I couldn’t protect Aurora from this.

I turn around to look at Aurora and see her eyes filled with tears. A few weeks ago, I didn’t think there would be a day where I would see tears in Aurora’s eyes again, where she would openly show her emotions to me. Yet today, in this place where her trauma began, she is crying as if there is not a saviour in sight.

As if she is losing hope.

No.

God, no.

“He force-fed me food, that’s how I got this bruise.” She points to her cheek where angry red marks mar her perfect skin. She looks up at me; those soft brown irises that hold my entire being in them look at me, seeking help.

“I didn’t want to eat, so I said I felt nauseous, but he took it the wrong way and thought that I was pregnant with your child. He got mad and hit me, then force-fed me despite my refusals and panic attacks.”

Every single word out of her mouth weakens my knees.

I take a step closer to her so I am within her reach, then I slowly lift my hand and softly brush over the bruises on her face, my thumb tracing back and forth. Aurora closes her eyes, and silent tears slide from her eyes.

I circle her waist with my other arm and pull her closer. Her eyes snap open, and she looks at me.

“I’m sorry. This is my fault...”

Aurora shakes her head. I tuck her hair behind her ear, my fingers lingering there, then sliding down her neck. I feel her shiver against me.

“It is, Aurora. I love you, and yet I failed to do the one thing you needed from me. Keeping you safe. How could I forgive myself when we are here?”

Aurora rises to her tiptoes, her hand on my cheek as she rests her forehead against mine.

“I wish I could tie you to me. I wish you could see what I see. I wish you could experience what you make me feel. Am I not your beloved, Remo?”

I swallow, nodding.

A slow smile spreads on her face, her soft body moulding to mine.

“Then trust me when I say it’s not your fault. We can get out of here. We can do this. I fought back once. I will do it again, but this time, I have you by my side. I’ve fought too many battles, Remo, now I am tired, and I hope you can fight this one for me.” Her hand goes to the nape of my neck, tugging me down, and she hugs me to her.

An electric current shoots through me, up my spine, lighting up my nerve endings.

Bending down, I hoist her up and wrap her legs around my waist. Then I walk over to the machete on the floor and pick it up. I take it with me as I walk to the attached living room, then I sit down on the couch facing the door.

Aurora snuggles closer to me. I hold her while the thirst for blood and the need to have another murder on my hands smoulders within me.

I wish I could torture him.

Helia told me.

He told me his name, and a few minutes later, Damon attacked before I could carry out my plan to kidnap him.

I have Aurora with me, but I will make sure his death is the worst humankind has ever seen. Damon’s remains will be on the news tomorrow morning. They will be on every channel in London, warning the public what will happen if someone goes after Aurora Cainn again.

The wife of Remo Cainn.

The evidence won’t be there, but the result will for sure be.

A brutal murder by an unknown killer.

You don’t attack London’s most well-known man, the centre of the elite circle, and walk away unscathed.

Minutes turn into an hour, then the second hour passes by. Aurora has fallen asleep in my arms, my hold on her getting tighter and tighter. This only proves how far out we are from London if it’s taking Damon this long.

Just after a few minutes over the two-hour mark, I hear the rumble of a car, and Aurora shifts in her place in my lap. Slowly detangling her from me and placing her on the sofa facing away from the open plan of the house, I pick up the blanket I found folded on the far end of the sofa and drape it over her sleeping body.

I straighten and wipe all emotions from my face as I grab the handle of the machete and go to stand right in front of the door. My feet are spread slightly apart, my balance centred, my hand gripping the machete, my eyes intent on the door in front of me.

The car stops, then a heavy set of boots steps out. A moment later, the car door thunks shut.

I tighten my hand on the machete, and a sick, twisted smile makes its way onto my face. It's been long since I have used a weapon other than a gun.

As the steps get closer, I see Aurora shift positions from the corner of my eye. My gaze snaps to her, but she sighs and doesn't move again, so I look back at the door.

I strain my ears to hear how he will open the door.

A lock turns, and I realise it's locked by a mere key.

One swipe with the machete and the door could open, but I need to face Damon. He needs to be bleeding crimson red in front of my eyes for me to get past this.

The click of the door sounds in the silence of the cottage, and the door swings open.

He's wearing clean black loafers, a blue pressed suit with a white undershirt, and glinting cufflinks on his wrists. His black hair is pushed back, styled, and there's a smile on his face and a white plastic bag in his hand.

The medicine he was going to force my wife to take.

Not a fucking chance.

"Welcome home," I drawl, my stance easy going.

Damon whips out a gun from the back of his trousers and points it at me. His tall, lean figure isn't a match for my body. He thought sedating me was going to work. He thought all of this was going to work, but he doesn't realise the extent of my abilities.

A mistake may have been made on my part, and I might be injured, but no more.

"What are you doing awake, and where is Aurora?" His eyes frantically dart around. I let him look, because he is not passing by me. I won't let him take a step towards her.

Then he finds her asleep on the sofa, and his features relax.

Then those sharp blue eyes snap to my black ones.

"Do you want to explain yourself, or should I go ahead and just leave?" I raise a brow.

His eyes keep looking around.

Not so brave now, are we?

I chuckle out loud, and Damon looks at me like there is something wrong.

“What happened, lover boy? Lost your obsession? Found a hole in your plan? Things didn’t go according to said plan?” I take a step closer to him with each question despite him pointing the gun at me.

I drag the long machete behind me. It makes a screeching sound, and even Damon cringes.

“I will shoot, Remo. This is none of your business. I won’t shoot if you just drop that machete.”

I tilt my head, running a finger over my jaw as I size him up.

Too easy. Too fucking easy.

“Damon...” I sigh, shaking my head. “You shouldn’t have targeted my wife. That was a mistake on your part. Not once but twice. You had the nerves to do it twice. To follow her around too? Not good.” I take another step closer until there is a mere metre between us.

“I said, stop!” He shakes the gun in my direction again. His voice sharp, yet the slight waver in it doesn’t go unnoticed by me.

“I didn’t target her. She was mine the day I saw her at her first event. I was there, her first supporter for when she started her business, and I’ve remained there for years. Just because you married her out of convenience doesn’t make her yours.” He flings the gun around.

“Shoot me, if you want to shoot me. I won’t complain, I promise.” I shrug, but when I catch him looking over at Aurora *again*, something in me snaps.

Be it my patience, my anger, my sanity, or the very thought of him just looking in Aurora’s direction...

Lifting my leg, I kick the gun from his hand, then swing it back and hit his chest. He drops to the ground, and I stab the machete through the wooden floor right next to his head.

One of my hand wraps around his throat as he shouts, but his voice is strangled, his vocal cords now in my hand.

“Oh no. You don’t get to act like this was a fairytale for you when you lit up my warehouse to keep me away, and you set up your own fucking son—”

“He wasn’t my son!” he chokes out. I loosen my grip slightly. “My wife cheated on me, and that bastard was the result of that affair. I will not have you call him my son. He was foolish thinking I would love him for pulling that little stunt at the event for me. Making him inhale poison was so easy when he was begging me to help him with his debt.” His laugh is deranged. It’s twisted, and it’s making me realise just how fucked up this man is.

He killed his own son, no matter the affair, and used the boy’s yearning of love to his own advantage for his own obsession with a woman who is more than

ten years younger than him.

“No, Damon. You touched my wife. You touched what was precious to me and expected nothing in return. You touched what wasn’t yours, and you will not survive this. When I’m done with you, your lips won’t even be able to move to beg for mercy, let alone even say her name.” The threat falls from my lips, laced with venom.

The pure fury awakens my whole body and pumps adrenaline through me.

Damon tries to struggle, his hips bucking behind me. I shake my head.

“What will you like? A clean cut to the neck or a little fun over the course of a few days?” I hum close to his face, letting him see the psychotic look that comes over my face.

“Fuck you! Let me go! I told you I will let you go!”

“You won’t get her. Do you understand me?” I grit out.

Damon tries to push at me with his hands, smacking and punching. But he fails. Instead, I throw punch after punch at his face until he is bloody and bruised. His head tilts to the side, the blood coating his face in a very satisfying way.

The force of my knuckles hitting his skull breaks his nose, the crunch a satisfying noise to my ears. My brutal punches make a monstrous mockery of his pretty face.

Rising to my feet, I drag him up and force him to stand in front of me. He tries, but he keeps tripping over his feet, unable to see or comprehend what is happening.

“Come on, Damon. Don’t give up so easily.” That gets him blinking his blue eyes open, and I am reminded exactly whose parents I will be pissing off, but I don’t give a fuck right now.

He tries to take deep breaths in, but the broken nose doesn’t allow it, forcing him to open his bloodied mouth and breathe. The sight makes me smirk, and satisfaction burns inside of me.

Picking up the machete, I stand in front of him, ready. I even throw his stupid little gun at his feet. He could pick it up, but once he bends over, he won’t be able to stand back up.

Instead of punching me, Damon laughs out and spits blood.

Then he runs out the front door.

He’s trying to lure me out.

The faint sound of more than one pair of footsteps makes me laugh.

I follow him, the machete in my hand, as I exit the house into the night, and there he stands, behind five men who all hold similar machetes in their hands. Black masks cover the lower halves of their faces, and they all have black caps

and all-black outfits.

“Aw, got little helpers, Damon?”

“Get him!” he shouts instead, heaving.

Before any of them can come at me, I shut the door behind me, taking my stance in front of it so he can’t get to Aurora.

The first one runs at me, his machete held high, as to slice through something. I use my own blade to stop him. I hit the weapon out of his hand and slash across his abdomen. His blood sprays my face in a hot, wet blast.

The next one darts in quick, and I swipe across his neck. Blood splatters me again.

The third one uses his machete, but he telegraphs his intentions. I catch his movement just in time and plunge the tip of my machete into his stomach. He drops his blade to grab his stomach. His knees weaken, and he drops to the floor.

The last two hesitate. They look at each other, then lift their machetes and come at me at the same time.

The faint pinches of pain from the bullet wounds make me wince but not enough to stop me, nor does the sight leave me uneasy. Instead, as they pick up speed running towards me, I grin. Blood drips down my face, and my clothes are wet from it.

“Last of the two, Damon,” I call with a laugh as they both swing at me, one from each side.

I duck, slashing their ankles, then kick them to their asses.

One lifts his machete once more, but I kick the weapon away, then stomp on his injured leg. He screams, then passes out.

I lift my head, and my crazed eyes catch Damon’s. The clearing between us is filled with blood and dead bodies.

I stand on one end and Damon on the other.

I approach him with slow steps, still grinning, wiping the blood away with my sleeve, smearing it on my cheek.

“I’ll even drop this machete for you.”

I open my fist, and the blade falls to the ground. My stalking footsteps are silent. My head is tilted slightly, and a wide smile tugs at my lips.

“Hurry up, Damon. I have a wife to attend to,” I coax.

Damon runs towards me and throws his first punch, but I step back, and he misses. He comes at me with one weak attempt after the other.

I keep dodging them, not actually hitting him, to tire him out so he’ll feel every moment of the torture I will be inflicting upon him later.

He touched Aurora. He used his dirty hands to hurt her, mark her, and he will not walk away without consequences.

Just as he tries to throw one last punch at me, I hear the familiar roar of a car I know very well.

A smirk curls my mouth. I bare my teeth, fully aware of the ghastly image I am right now.

“Time’s up.” With that, I throw one last brutal punch to his face, dropping him unconscious but not dead.

The car pulls in, and Helia climbs out. His deep emerald eyes look over me as a smirk of his own forms on his face.

“Looking good, Mr Husband.” he whistles, then his eyes go right behind me.

There is no way Aurora slept through all of that. She is still too paranoid, and she’s a light sleeper. I look over my shoulder. She’s standing with the blanket wrapped around her and covering the lower half of her face as she looks at me.

Her eyes flick to Helia, then she looks back at me and leaps away from the doorway and runs right into my arms. I don’t hug her back because of the blood on my hands.

“Hug me back, Remo. I don’t care. Hug me back right now.” Her muffled words confuse me, but I slowly curl my arms around her.

I tighten my hold, and she sighs.

I look up at Helia to find him looking up at the sky and smirking.

“You are ruining me, Remo. You’ve ruined me in the best way possible.” Her whisper is soft, but I manage to hear it.

“How dare you make me want you in this state, with my stalker’s blood on your body? How dare you make me love you so hard that I feel happy you have done this for me? How dare you turn my sweet love into something dirty yet deep and stronger?” Her words not only finally give me my answer, but they also tell me exactly what Aurora feels.

It must be hard and confusing for her to accept me the way I am, but there is nothing I can do to change this part of myself.

“I love you and your sick ways, Remo.” She leans back, her eyes stuck to my hands as she raises them between us. The blood on them is drying, staining my hands.

“Such brutality in them, and yet I still trust them to protect me.” Her voice is hoarse.

She wipes my face and lips with the blanket, then nods once she is happy that my face is clean.

Her eyes lift to mine, and the love in them almost blinds me. I grab the back of her neck and smash her lips against mine. Fuck the blood on my hands. Forget Damon at my feet or Helia standing right there. The only thing that matters right now is that my wife has accepted me.

She has accepted what kind of love I have to offer, and I couldn't be a happier man right now.

She leans back, her eyes filled with love and trust in me. I need to cherish her with everything I have. I almost lost her so many times because of my own foolish decisions.

"Okay, that's enough. We need to get out so I can fix this mess and you both can get checked by a doctor," Helia interrupts us.

Grabbing her hand, I walk towards Helia's car.

Beside Helia's deep green Porsche is Damon's black Audi. With no number plate. Of-fucking-course. An ambulance stands off to the right side, but other than the bright headlights of Helia's Porsche, the only thing I can see are trees and greenery.

Aurora tightens her hold on my hand as she looks around, but nothing is visible to the naked eye. It's too dark.

"Let's go."

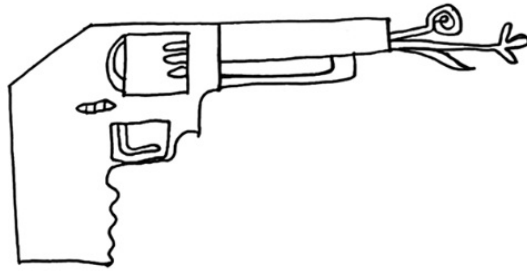
Pulling Aurora closer to me, I open the back door for her, and she slips in before I shut it. Walking around the car, I get in the passenger seat as Helia quickly goes back inside the cottage.

A few minutes later, he comes back out with a wicked grin on his face, and I know what he has done.

Incapacitated Damon and secured him. After he drops us home in London, he'll come back here, then take Damon to his house on the outskirts of the city.

Helia gets inside, rubbing his hands together, smiling. "Ready, Aurora?"

REMO



There is only silence in the car, and shortly after we are on the road, Aurora falls asleep again.

“Took you fucking long enough,” I tell Helia.

He laughs, shaking his head.

“Had to make sure my fighter can still fight.”

My eyes snap to him and narrow. Not only was he putting my safety at risk, but Aurora’s, too.

“Calm down, boss. There was traffic in London. You wanted me to come over in a private jet to avoid the traffic? How about a helicopter?”

I let my head drop back against the headrest as I stare out at the empty road.

“Did you leave Venezia alone?”

He shakes his head. “Told her to stay in the house and made sure security knew to not let anyone in the house. Especially Ivan and Camilla, who have been ringing the house phone.”

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Don’t go looking all sad now. I left them a little thank you note for being so easy.”

When I don’t ask him to elaborate, he sighs loudly and dramatically.

“Fine, since you are so curious to know; I left a note that in a few days, their accounts may freeze if they don’t withdraw the cash. The bank thinks it was fraudulent money, due to the funds being transferred so quickly. You know, since

you didn't leave behind evidence that there was any inheritance from your grandfather and his wine company."

A satisfied smile blooms on my face.

"Ah, there we go. See how happy I make you? Once they try to take the money out, they will be caught in a case of money laundering. Now isn't that fun?" His enthusiasm to do things like that to twist one's life always manages to leave me wary of him.

"When do you want to be announced as the CEO of Glamorous? Aurora doesn't want anything to do with it, and I assume you handled Ambrose's part in this."

He nods. "As soon as you can. Mace's murder is staying low for now, but when they actually get close to me, I will be able to say that I have been working closely with you and Aurora to get the CEO position and that it wasn't me at all. You will handle this, right?"

I hum, mentally noting it all down.

"I wanted this position as a front for what I do. My position and job won't be questioned when it's that public. The offshore account is already set up for my money to transfer to when I get the position. I just need to be publicly announced as the placeholder," Helia explains.

It's the last step to this whole plan.

While Mace's death was written, seeing Ambrose so worked up over this wasn't, but it doesn't matter since I told Helia to keep an eye on her as quietly as possible. When he is announced CEO, he can keep her closer and make sure he instils fear in her that if she speaks out on this matter or even tries to fight for the position as the rightful inheritor, she will burn.

Soon enough, we reach home. I get out, slowly lifting Aurora from her sleeping form and carry her into the house. Helia stays outside as he takes out a cigarette and watches me leave.

I nod at him, and he nods back through the smoke. His bright green eyes meet mine for a split second, and I am reminded of the boy who approached me.

We both sought help from each other, and years later, we still find ourselves doing everything possible for each other. Turning the impossible into possible.

Shutting the door, I quietly go up the stairs, passing a door that is slightly ajar on the left of the hallway. I stop and look in. Venezia is asleep in the bed. I nod to myself, then continue to the end of the hallway to our room and slowly place Aurora on the mattress.

Pulling the covers back, I tuck her under them before placing the cover on her. I quickly take a shower, then get under the covers next to Aurora, my arm going around her waist and pulling her close to me.

Her brows furrow, and she tries to shove my arm to move away. I let her go, not knowing what she needs right now. The frown gets deeper, and her nails claw at my arms. I move back, but she starts to whimper, her pained cries growing more frequent.

That's when I start to freak out.

"Aurora."

Nothing.

"Aurora," I say louder, shaking her.

"Aurora!"

Her eyes snap open wide as she looks over at me, frantically looking all around the room.

When she sees me sitting up, her lower lip quivers before she wraps her arms around my shoulders and hugs me, her sobs filling the dark night. My own arms wrap around her, and I know I will be asking for her forgiveness every day for the rest of our lives.

During the marriage, the beginning, I said things to her that I know have hurt her, and yet she stayed true to herself. Not once did she let a tear drop from her eyes. She kept the hurt in her heart, all while being afraid of a stalker who has been haunting her for over three years.

I didn't know.

God, I didn't know.

And now that I do, I know I can't change the past, but the future is in my hands.

Certainly, I can control that.

"Remo, make it stop, please," she sobs in my arms, and my heart clenches painfully inside of my chest.

"Shh, I am here," I whisper, not knowing exactly what she needs.

Her sobs fill the silence. Her arms never leave me, and I watch over her all night long as she falls asleep in my arms.

The night goes by, and this time, Aurora doesn't wake up with another nightmare. Even if something is bothering her, she doesn't show it as she gets ready in front of the vanity.

The doctors came and left, scheduling an x-ray to check the situation with the bullet wounds. Aurora wants to be left alone, so she's going to her office and will meet me at the hospital later.

I have my suit on, and I am watching her silently, my eyes raking over her body. She shouldn't be going to work, but she hasn't said a word all morning, and I am afraid I may have lost her.

Walking up behind her while holding my tie in my hand, I stand right behind

her and look at her through the mirror.

Our eyes collide, and my breath is knocked out of me, just like every single time her world collides with mine.

Her eyes speak hundreds of things at once, and yet, not once did I see a sliver of doubt in them. Those beautiful eyes of hers spark and hold deep emotion that I know that my own eyes now mirror.

Without a word, I lift my tie in her view. Her eyes slide to it, and a weak smile spreads across her face. Over such a minuscule thing.

Taking the tie from my hands, she turns around, and I lower my head, so she is able to reach better. Then she starts tying the tie.

And I watch her in silence.

“He was here again, and he was telling me that I am all he ever wanted.” She swallows thickly but keeps her eyes on my tie as she tells me about her nightmare from last night.

Her cherry scent fills the whole room. It swallows me whole, and I feel myself getting drunk on the very sight of her. This woman who is my wife is broken, and it is my job to fix her.

“He isn’t here anymore, *amore*. He can’t hurt you ever again.”

“I know,” she whispers.

I place a finger under her chin to lift her face up to me, then wait until her eyes are on me before leaning down close to her. My heart only ever beats at this rate for her. Only she evokes this reaction from me.

“Don’t worry about him now. You are here. Safe. There is not a single soul that will touch you again, and the headlines tomorrow morning will tell you exactly why.”

Seeing the change in my expression, her eyes burn. They watch me with such intensity that I feel like I’ve tainted her.

Maybe I have.

I regret nothing.

“Don’t look at me like that, Aurora. Now that you are here in my arms, there is nothing stopping me from claiming you, and we have business to get to.”

Her mouth drops open in a soft gasp, her plump pink lips making me want to bite them, so they bleed crimson. Her soft body leaning against my hard one makes me want to forget responsibilities and make her forget she ever had any reason to doubt with me.

“Remo?” Her voice is a low hum to my ears, and I am eager to hear what she has to say.

“How can I keep going when he haunts my dreams like this?” Her face turns ashen, her hold on my shirt suddenly tightening.

I need to show her definitively that Damon is gone.

“Because, *amore*, I am not someone who should be crossed,” I tell her before taking a step back. She might want a distraction right now, but I am not the distraction she needs.

“Do you promise to stay?” she whispers, her eyes wide, beseeching. “Do you promise to love me? Do you promise to wrap me in your arms and protect me from the world? Do you promise, Remo?”

Her words make my eyes sting. I place my hands on her shoulders, then slide them down her arms to capture her delicate, small hands in mine. I catch her eyes, which are flooded with insecurity about her safety, about her future, and about me.

I can’t have my wife feeling like that.

I release her hands, then shed my jacket. Grabbing hold of Aurora, I gently pull her behind me towards the bed, then sit her on the edge of the bed.

She bites her lip, her eyes unsure as she watches me lower to my knees before her, holding her hands in my own.

She’s wearing a blue plaid-patterned dress. Her hair is only brushed, not curled or straightened yet. Her face is bare, and her skin is pale. The bruises on her legs are on show, but I try not to linger on them. Now is the time for softer emotions.

“Aurora.” I take a deep breath. “Listen carefully.”

She grasps my hands tightly.

“There is no one after you for me, okay? There was no one before you, either. You are the only woman in my life. The only one. Do you know what that means? You have my unconditional love, you have my obsession all to yourself, and I have never shared any kind of love like this with anyone.”

“I will be here every step of the way, and we will work through our problems together. In the future, we will have kids—as many or as few as you want—and we will trip over their toys and love them together. We will attend any events you want in any matching outfits you find. We’ll even get pets if you want. Anything, everything, you want, I will make it happen.”

Her cheeks lift a fraction, and a tear slides down her pale cheek.

I lean forward, wiping it.

“*Te amo*, Aurora,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion, then drop my head into her lap, letting myself be vulnerable in front of her.

I press a light kiss to her thigh, then lift my head. Aurora looks at me with love flourishing in those chocolate orbs. Love. I want to see that in her eyes for the rest of our lives.

“I want more than two kids. I want us to match in a pink outfit. I want a pet

cat. I want us to go on holidays in a hot country, so I can wear pretty dresses,” she whispers, leaning forward, her hands sliding to my cheeks, pulling my face to hers.

“Anything for you, *amore*.” Closing the distance between us, I kiss her, my hands softly caressing her legs.

It’s slow, tentative, careful, and full of love for her.

I coax her lips open and let my tongue slide into her mouth, exploring. My hand grips her thigh while the other dips into her hair. A soft moan of need falls from her lips, and I kiss her deeper.

I feel myself growing firm with want. I want to touch her, to kiss her, but I shouldn’t want that right now, not in the morning after a traumatising day.

I will myself to move away from her.

Breathing heavily, I rest my forehead against hers.

“Don’t let me kiss you like this again; not until you are ready,” I rasp out, feeling my heart thunder inside my chest.

“Please, Remo. I need this right now,” she pleads, desperation in her eyes.

“Aurora—”

“Stop trying to be a gentleman right now.”

She stands and pulls at my shirt, bringing me closer to her, then presses soft, slow kisses on my lips, pulling my lips into her mouth.

I groan. “Fuck!”

Pulling her up, I reach behind her and pull down her zipper. Her dress falls down her body, pooling at her feet as she stands there in just a white bra and matching underwear. The bruising on her body is a collage of purples, blues, and greens, and I have to take a deep breath to control the rage the marks evoke in me.

She takes a step closer, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me. My own arms wrap around her waist, being careful so I don’t hurt her. I move forward, forcing her to take step back until she drops onto the bed, looking up at me.

I take hold of her chin as I trail kisses down her cheek to her neck, and her hands fist at my shirt.

“Remo,” she whimpers.

My hand travels down her waist to the waistband of her underwear. I yank them down and drop to my knees once more.

It’s crazy how many times I have fallen to my knees for her, how easy it is for me, and just how much I love being here, below her, letting her have power over me.

“Lie back, Aurora, let me make promises to you.”

I push at her stomach, and she falls back against the bed. My hands wrap around her thighs, and I pull her legs apart by her knees. My eyes falling to her dripping cunt, and desire clenches my stomach. I need to taste her.

I press my lips against her knee, then feather kisses up her thigh until I reach her pussy. My tongue swirls around her wet entrance, and her hands scramble to find a hold in my hair as she moans loudly.

“I promise to always love you, Aurora.”

“I promise to kill anyone who causes you harm.” I slowly kiss her, taking my time to bring her to the edge. With every movement of my tongue against her, with every brush of my lips, she writhes above me. Her whimpers and mewls of need fill our bedroom like a beautiful soundtrack.

“I promise to fuck you until you can’t even walk to the bathroom.”

“I promise to kiss you until you’re breathless, and when you do breathe, every breath will carry my name in reminder of the mess I leave behind.” I plunge my tongue into her.

“Remo, stop it,” she whines, her nails scratching my scalp.

I smirk against her and withdraw my tongue, licking my lips to catch every drop of her sweet arousal. I thrust two fingers into her and pump hard and fast. She tips over the edge with a scream. She is beautiful in her release. So open and uninhibited. Mine.

“I promise to always remind just how much you are mine by impaling you on my cock. I promise to fuck you so deep your body only hums my name.”

I watch the woman I love madly fall apart at my hands, feeling my love for her deepen. She was made just for me. Every part of her body fits right into my hands, like she has been sculpted with me in mind.

“Remo, Remo, Remo,” she chants, her face scrunching.

“That’s right, *amore*, your husband; the one who has a villainous obsession with you.” I scrape my teeth lightly against her clit.

And I take it all. I lick every single part of her, not wasting a single sweet drop of her release. She shivers above me, her knees pressing against my head, her back arching.

She is the only woman I will ever touch. I have never felt desire like I do for Aurora. Lust and desire weren’t a distraction for me until Aurora. Since I’ve met her, I find myself constantly wishing to kiss her, to taste her, and I want her in my arms every second of the day.

I rise and grab the back of her head, then I kiss her, letting her taste herself on my lips and in my mouth. She hums in delight and wraps her legs around my waist, her arms going around my neck once more. She leans into the crook of my neck and presses soft, lazy kisses against my throat.

“Help me clean up,” she murmurs.

I groan. “You’re a fucking tease.”

In the bathroom, I help her wash up, cleaning her body, washing her hair, and combing my fingers through every strand as she watches me with a grin.

And I smile back, feeling the lift of my cheeks for only her.



“I got you your favourite tacos, Aurora!”

I sigh as Kamari walks into the house for the third time this week.

I told Aurora not to go to work for at least a week, and I took off work, too. The company won’t collapse without me for just a week. And I took care of her. I have stayed through her nightmares. I held her at night, kissed her, and made her feel loved, so she didn’t have time to question whether I am staying or not.

There is no leaving.

Venezia has been of great help, going to my office during the day just so she can have something to do. She comes back late in the evenings, buzzing with energy, and helps Aurora and me cook.

Over the span of a few days, she and Aurora have grown closer.

Venezia’s maturity at the age of eighteen leaves me baffled. She speaks with such expertise that it makes me want to dig deep into her to know why she is the way she is.

For now, I am letting her be.

Helia has his own shit to take care of now. Like keeping Damon alive until I am ready for him.

“Stop sighing, Remo. Just because you are her husband, doesn’t mean you know everything.” Kamari lifts her chin, walking past with a smirk towards the kitchen, where Aurora is baking strawberry cheesecakes today.

“Kamari, oh my God! Are they tacos from Carlos’s?”

“Yes! I got enough for us to stuff our stomachs.”

Their voices muffle as they get on with whatever they’re doing, and I focus on my laptop screen as I check my emails.

“Remo?” I lift my head to find Venezia standing in the doorway of the living room.

She’s wearing a black dress with black tights, and her hair is straightened. She must have just came back from the office, or else she would be wearing sweatpants and a hoodie.

“Can I ask you something?”

I nod, watching her carefully. “Did you do something? Did you mess up at work?”

“What? No.” She scoffs, walking towards me, and drops next to me on the couch.

“Did you contact Mom and Dad? At all?” Her eyes blink up at me.

“You know I don’t talk to them or visit them at all. In fact, the only visiting I will be doing is to let them know who put them in there.”

She tilts her head in question.

“I kept this out of the public’s eyes, but I put them in gaol. A friend of mine helped me get them out of the way. They’ve ruined too much of my life and yours,” I grumble, looking away.

I know she doesn’t miss them or want to see them, so this curiosity about them is a little questionable.

“Do you think... Can you put your and Aurora’s names down as my guardians? Even if I am now eighteen, I still only want both your names as my guardians and emergency contacts.”

My hands still on my keyboard, and my heart rate picks up. I hear it beat painfully as I swallow. That action feels like nails on a chalkboard. A sting touches my eyes. To think she feels safe enough with us even after such a short time is heart wrenching, even for me.

“Yes.” I nod curtly, unable to react to what she has requested.

“Will Aurora agree?”

Turning to look at her, I take in the little girl who got abandoned for so many years. She wants a sense of safety over her head. She wants to be assured we will be there for her.

“Ask her, but I know she will say yes. You know she already loves you so much. You’re like a sister to her, and you being here has helped her stay away from her dark memories.”

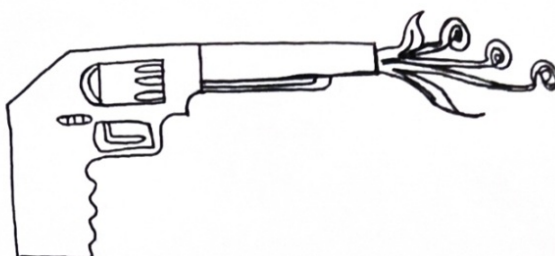
We told Venezia what happened to Aurora, both in the past and recently; not because we needed to, but because we didn’t want to keep her in the dark. We wanted her to know she is our family, that she can also share her struggles with us. And we wanted her to know the truth of who both Aurora and I are, so she’d never doubt our loyalty to her.

“I love her, too. She’s amazing, and I hope she recovers well, because I want to see you both happy and healthy.”

“Aren’t you turning a little too emotional?” I tease, lifting a brow.

She laughs and pushes at my shoulder.

REMO



“You haven’t eaten.” I point at the pancakes I had Isabella make for Aurora.

“I don’t feel hungry,” she tells me blandly, looking at the food in front of her.

Seeing her so lifeless like this, it kills me. God, it’s like my own heart is losing life and I can’t do anything but watch it.

“You need to eat, Aurora,” I press a little, but she just gets up from her seat and stands there waiting for me. Her eyes are on me, but they aren’t really focused on me.

I quickly drink the orange juice, but the flavour stops me. It’s a lot more bitter than it usually is. I place it back down on the counter and make a note to tell Isabella that whatever new recipe she tried or whatever she did doesn’t taste nice.

I cough and shake my head as I get up when I notice Aurora’s small smile directed at me. There’s a knowing glint in her eyes.

“What is it?”

She just shakes her head and turns around to walk outside.

This continues for the next few days. Aurora is quieter, her nightmares filling her dreams at night, and all I can do is hold her close to me. I consider talking to her about seeing a therapist. For what has happened to her, for what she has been through, so she can talk about it, grow stronger than ever, and battle these nightmares that live inside her mind.

Telling me may help her lighten up, but she needs professional help, and I cannot do that myself.

With this news today, I go to Aurora's office where she has spent most of her time since the incident. She did, in fact, see the news. Damon is officially missing. But she didn't want to look at it; she didn't want to talk about it or remember it, so I let it go.

I walk through the office door and see her on the floor, piecing together a new design. She glances at me over her shoulder, giving me a small smile before going back to her work.

I bend down near her, and she glances back up at me again.

"Remo," she breathes out, and God does it hit me right in the chest.

"No kiss?" I ask her, a teasing glint in my voice.

"Why are you being so needy today? Did you hit your head too hard?" She tilts her head, making my lips quirk up.

Give me more, Aurora.

"Seems so. Will you kiss it better?"

She narrows her chocolate eyes at me. "No."

I chuckle at her answer. "I was thinking only of you when I came here."

Her eyes flare up at my words.

"I have a question for you, a little favour. I've found a therapist for you, to help you heal and become stronger. Will you go and see her, Aurora?"

She looks down at the papers I am holding. I've included the information on the therapist, including a signed Non-Disclosure Agreement, ensuring she will remain tight-lipped and not utter a single word about anything to anyone.

She stares at it for a second, taking a deep breath, then nods.

"I will," she whispers. "Ask Claudia to schedule her in my timetable."

I smile, proud of her.

"What are you making?" I ask her, sitting down on the floor with her.

Her voice strengthens as she explains how she is making a skirt. I don't understand a single word, but watching her talk with such love about her profession is the most rewarding and best feeling I had ever experienced. It's why I love coming to her office at the end of each day and listening to her talk about what she loves the most.

I am sitting at her computer when Aurora walks over to me and opens the side drawer of her desk. She takes out the papers she needs and shuts it, then turns to me instead of straightening up. My eyes fall on the off-shoulder dress she is wearing today, a simple purple dress that dips down low, showing her cleavage; and the shameless man I am, my eyes drop to trace the tops of her luscious breasts.

When I catch her eye, she blinks and her eyes glaze.

She needs time. I know she does, but I can't help my eyes from dropping to her plump lips, the ones that caught my attention the first day and hooked me by the heart.

They have a soft red-coloured lipstick on them, and her scent of cherries surrounds me, my heart pounding inside of me at the mere thought of kissing her.

"Aurora," I murmur, my eyes stuck on her lips. It's too hard to stop myself from asking this.

"Yes?" Her voice is soft, sultry. The tone of her voice, the seductiveness dripping from each letter of that word, makes me look up at her and see the lust absolutely drowning her.

Her cheeks have a tint of pink to them, the blush going down her neck to her chest.

When she blinks slowly at me, I snap and get up.

My hand reaches out and wraps around her throat. I gently pull her to me for a deep kiss. My tongue invades her mouth, ravishing her, eating up the soft desperate moans she makes for me. My other hand goes to her mid back, and I draw her against me, feeling her soft, plush body melt against my hard one.

Her hand fists at the collar of my shirt, pulling me down towards her, and I desperately follow like a starved man.

I turn so her ass hits the edge of the desk before lifting her up and placing her on it. She instantly wraps her legs around my waist and kisses me deeper. Her flowy dress spills all around us, and I slide my hands up her thighs, letting the fabric slide over my wrists in a soft waterfall. I lean close and bite her lip. I want to see them painted red because of the way I kissed her, because of the way I claimed what is mine.

I take one last step closer to her and press my cock against her pussy. She gasps and squirms against me.

"Aurora," I grit out, my hold on her thighs tightening, possibly leaving behind marks, but I don't care.

She's killing me, and I have to try to be considerate.

Slowly, she leans back, her chest heaving just like mine. Her doe eyes look up at me like she will utter words that will destroy me in the best way.

I'm obsessed. I'm addicted in a way I've never been before.

I never knew this feeling of love, of obsession, was so deep I couldn't stay away from that person. From Aurora. From my wife.

I never thought that she would be the one to destroy my plans, to reside within me so I can't even force her out.

She's destroyed everything I've ever known, and yet I can't help but want to fall on my knees for her. To praise her, to kiss her, to tell her that she's the one who has made such a sweet deception become such an obsession.

"You're fucking gorgeous, and I am going to abandon all my nice thoughts right now," I tell her.

Before she can react, I bring my face closer to her, holding the back of her neck so her lips are tilted up, and brush against mine as I say the next words.

"Fuck giving you time, Aurora. Fuck thinking about you needing space, because there is absolutely no way I am walking away without hearing you scream my name. Right here, right on this desk. I want to feel this pussy drip for me and hear my name on your tongue."

Her flush deepens, and I keep my eyes on her as I grab some of the dress in my hand and slowly lift it up.

I give her time, but the only thing she does is breathe even faster, her chest rising and falling in anticipation.

The sun outside the glass wall shines right behind me, the blue skies painting a perfect picture of her flushed in front of me.

I see the need, the desire in her darkened eyes.

"I'm going to fuck you today, Aurora, while I tell you exactly why you are my perfect match. You will be writhing under me, asking me for mercy, but there will be none. You will be asking for me to go harder, and I will. And you will be screaming one thing, and one thing only." I lean down so my lips are next to her ear, my lips grazing the shell.

"My fucking name."

A shudder goes through Aurora. Then she turns her head and places a kiss on my cheek.

"I was yours the day I saw you, but I will be happy to scream your name, handsome."

I kiss her harshly while my hand reaches its destination, then push her underwear to the side and dip a finger in.

Her head falls back with a moan as I thrust one more finger in, feeling her squeeze around me, strangling my fingers. When I speed up, her nails dig into my neck, clawing at me. I want to destroy her and watch her fall apart in front of me.

And I do.

AURORA



I was supposed to ask questions about the therapist Remo found for me, but instead I found myself dripping on my office desk, with all my staff outside, as he finger-fucked me into oblivion. I don't regret it, but I know this conversation can't be avoided.

I tried to be rational, and instead let my husband bring me euphoria. The kind only he has ever been able to give me.

My love for this man expands each day, leaving no room for anyone else. I have tried loving other people, but the way I feel for Remo is nothing compared to what I thought love was.

It's been a rough day, with my mind always thinking someone may be watching, with my body aware at all times. I couldn't even focus, so all I did was read and reply to emails. I couldn't even be bothered to touch the materials or draft up a new design.

My mind briefly goes to Ambrose and what her current position may be. But the thoughts of Damon rule my mind and don't leave me, and I find myself a lot more tired than usual.

I have tried calling Kamari, but she isn't available to answer her phone for some reason. Why is she not answering?

When I am ready and packed to go home, the door to my office opens and in walks Remo with two cups of coffee. His eyes instantly find mine as he leans against the door, his gaze raking down my body while I walk towards him.

He certainly isn't going to let me go, and I am sure he will love me and keep me. His declaration of love, his confession, has left me desperate for more.

Remo nods towards the door, so I gather my purse, grabbing the cup he offers me, before walking towards the exit. I can feel Remo behind me as he follows, his deep voice soothing some of my tension.

“Make sure to send pictures to me. I’ll be coming in the morning hours. He’d better be ready to answer my questions once I do.” Remo speaks on the phone as we drive home.

When I enter, I hear a soft feminine voice talking to Isabella. It’s Venezia, Remo’s sister. Without looking back or waiting for Remo to reach me, I walk towards the kitchen where the lights are on.

My lips part as my eyes slide over to the dining table to the right. Candles grace the table, scattered amongst white and pink flowers in crystal vases. The dishes of food are set in the middle of the table, and there are six plates on the table.

When I look towards the left, where the kitchen is, Venezia is beaming at me as she brings over napkins to put on the table. Kamari is here, too. She’s placing utensils on the table, while Ruel is talking with Isabella at the stove.

“Aurora, come on. I made something for you guys today. Isabella helped me, but I made most of the things.” Venezia places the tissue on the table and walks over to me, but I can’t talk.

My throat is closed up, my eyes watering at this sight.

The soft golden hue around the kitchen, the chatter, the sight of the most important people in my life, has tears gathering in my eyes.

A soft hand is placed on my mid-back, and I look up through watery eyes at Remo, who nods at Venezia.

“Remo, food is ready,” I hear Venezia, but my eyes are set on Remo.

My heart is racing, my emotions making my knees weak.

Is this the family I’ve always wanted? I look back at the kitchen, the comforting atmosphere, the easy conversation and laughter.

Without thinking, and unable to handle the rush of emotions, I push Remo out of the way and rush towards the living room, wanting a second to myself. As soon as I sit down on the sofa, the tears burst out of me.

Placing both hands on my face, I let them fall free as I cry for what finally having what I’ve wanted for so long. Seeing it today for the first time, seeing a different family take care of me, want me around and love me like this? It’s *everything*.

God, it was hard keeping myself together, but now that I am in the living room, I finally let go of the hurt I had wrapped around my heart.

It doesn’t matter that my parents didn’t care for me; now I have my friends, Remo, and even his sister. The love in their eyes, the adoration, the respect,

means the world to me.

“Aurora?”

Slowly lowering my hands, I see Remo hunched in front of me, his eyes concerned.

“Why do I think I don’t deserve this, Remo?” I ask, my lips quivering.

“You deserve everything, Aurora. If there is someone who deserves a loving family, people who look up to her, love, and happiness, it’s you, Aurora.” His words wrap softly around my heart and squeeze hard.

“But... I never thought I would get this. I thought I wasn’t deserving. Everyone in my life has told me so, including you, and it’s hard to believe it all.” I shake my head, my eyes looking away as Remo’s own flicker with hurt, along with regret.

“I know I fucked up, Aurora, and having you forgive me is already such a big step. I will prove myself worthy of your love. Give me time. I will prove myself. I know how conflicted you must have been, but you deserve everything, *mi amore*.” Remo takes my hands in his large ones and places a kiss on both of them.

Slowly, but surely, Remo lowers his knees until they hit the floor. A gasp escapes my lips as I watch him kneel, and his hold on my hands tightens.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for the way I treated you, Aurora. Fuck, I’m so sorry, baby. Forgive me for that, for everything I did and said. But know that my love for you will never waver. It will never dim nor lessen. It will only bloom and blossom, never withering.”

He raises his head, looking at me as a dark shadow falls on his face. My hands tremble in his hold as he begs for forgiveness.

His words, his promise, it all wreaks havoc inside of me.

“You grow and shine while I water the very soil you are planted in. You glow and sparkle, and I guard you from the shadows. You smile and laugh, and I cherish it. You love me, and I will give it right back to you. Because if you don’t exist, neither will I. If you aren’t with me, there is no use of me. You live, and I’ll protect you, Aurora.”

I open my mouth, but no words come. All I can do is sit in shock.

I look to my left and see everyone crowding around the entrance of the living room, shock painting their faces as they see Remo on his knees for me, but Remo doesn’t look away from me.

Such a prideful, powerful figure, London’s richest man, on his knees for me.

A flash goes off, and I hear someone say they will definitely post this.

Swallowing thickly, I stiffly nod.

Because I love this man, and I cannot imagine myself with anyone else.

Seeing that he wants to ask for my forgiveness, on his knees, and that he wants to be deserving of my love... I know he wouldn't do anything to hurt me intentionally again.

Rising to his feet, Remo wraps a hand around my throat. My pulse throbs beneath his fingers as he brings his face close until his lips are next to my ear.

"Remember how I told you earlier today that I will fuck you tonight? Take it as an act of repentance from me," he whispers hoarsely.

A shiver of anticipation dances down my spine, and my lips part. He lets go, and a smirk takes over his face.

"Let's go eat now, shall we?"

"Yes, the food will be getting cold," Kamari says from the doorway.

My attention remains fixed to Remo beside me at dinner, my eyes not leaving him.

I listen to the conversation, but my mind is on him and him alone.

"I cooked the steak and shrimp. I loved cooking at boarding school. It was one thing that helped keep me occupied in my freetimes there," Venezia points out as I take a bite of the steak she has cooked.

"It's amazing," I comment as the flavours burst in my mouth. The texture is just right, too.

She smiles at me, her beautiful brown eyes glinting at me in happiness.

"How was boarding school for you, Venezia?"

She shrugs. "It was good. Not the best, but not the worst, either. At least I wasn't in foster care, you know? It could have been so much worse, and I am thankful that Remo made sure to be in contact in any way he could to let me know he would get me out."

I look over at Remo and see the warmth that shines through them as he looks at Venezia.

I can clearly tell Venezia loves her brother. She loves that he devoted so much time to get her out.

"Did you have friends? I'm sure they were sad to see you leave," I comment, taking another bite of the steak. My eyes dart to the sliding doors of the kitchen. They've been repaired and are shut, but my heart quivers remembering what happened in this kitchen.

Venezia laughs, shaking her head.

"Yes, she was. I only had one friend because I came off a little too harsh for other girls there. I'm not sure why or how, but it wasn't like I was going to hurt them."

I smile, finding it amusing, because I can see what Venezia means. She has this maturity around her that you can't ignore, like going to these private

boarding schools has toughened her up. Whatever the reason, I hope it's nothing that affected her mentally.

With her long chestnut brown hair, her tanned skin, and slender figure, I'm sure she will gain any lost colour back as she lives with us here, while she tries to adjust and decide if she wants to continue staying here or move out.

I know Remo is going to give her this choice. He knows how much her life has been spent with others making the decisions for her, and now that she is legally an adult, old enough to make her decisions, he will protect her from afar while giving her the freedom she wants.

"I wasn't attached to anyone there." She smiles, her eyes flickering with a distant memory.

The dinner goes by fast enough, but my stomach twists with a heavy feeling, knowing what is about to come. Venezia goes up to her room, the one farthest away from ours. Thankfully, I don't think Helia will return at all, as he hasn't come around.

"Remember what I told you?" Kamari whispers in my ear as she and Ruel say their goodbyes.

I frown, but the confusion lasts only a second.

"They are demanding things from me, Aurora, things I don't want to do. Things I would rather—" She bites her lip.

"Do you want to stay with me? Or should I come to your apartment?"

She shakes her head.

"Kamari, please let me—"

"Mum and Dad are coming in two months, and they will ask what the problem is or the occasion. You know it's not right to do so, not until they are gone, and—" She stops herself and takes a step back.

"Kamari, call me. Please call me when it gets too much or you need to talk. You know I will never let you go down this route. You need to follow your heart."

She gives me a tired smile and nods.

"Yes, of course I will."

"Kamari, let's go," Ruel shouts from where he is standing near his car.

Kamari hastily wipes under her eyes, and I quickly hug her once more, my arms tight around her neck. She wraps her arms around me, too.

"I'm happy you forgave him, Aurora. With the dangerous world we live in, Remo will be the one to protect you through it all. He gave up so much for his sister; imagine the lengths he will go for you."

I nod, my heart lighter than ever.

Like killing five people with his machete without breaking a sweat.

The crushing weight that was killing my flowers is gone, and the sun is back up in the sky, making my flowers bloom. Making my heart bloom.

“Thank you for being here, Kamari.”

When I get to the door of my bedroom, the lights are off except for the one light from the bathroom, so I head into the closet and change into the silk black dress I have designed for a new collection. Thin straps and a deep V-neck, the fabric is loose and flowy around my body, reaching my knees. Feathers line the bottom of the dress. It’s perfect for sleeping on the hot summer nights.

As I walk out of the closet, I spot Remo standing in the middle of the room on his phone. The light from his screen shines on his face, highlighting his sharp features. He is wearing no shirt and loose plain pyjama pants.

I think he hears me, because he blacks out the screen and turns around. His eyes fall on my dress. It’s the first time in weeks I’ve worn something I like instead of shirts and shorts. I’m finally stepping out of the small dark cave I retreated into, and although it’s not a fast process and never will be, I do know that being in Remo’s company has always made me feel safe, and that is something I will never forget.

Remo’s mouth opens ever so slightly before he shuts it, making me hold in a smile.

“You look beautiful in that dress. Did you make it?” he asks as he closes the distance between us.

I stay rooted in my spot and nod, looking down at the dress and running my hand over the fabric as shyness takes over me and the anticipation sets in.

“Yes. It’s beautiful, right?”

A second passes.

“Yes.” His voice is deep and soothing.

Lifting my chin with a finger, he makes sure to look right into my eyes. Blazing desire and lustful thoughts whirling in his dark depths, his intention clear and evident.

“*Te amo*, Aurora. It’s not enough to put into words, and this may not seem clear tonight, but I do love you. Don’t forget that.”

My breathing picks up as his finger travels down my jaw until it hooks under my dress strap. He lifts it, his eyes on my skin and the goosebumps he’s elicited across my whole body.

“Do you love me, Aurora?” He leans his head close to my ear. “Tell me.”

He lowers the strap down my arm and does the same with the other, and just like that, the dress easily slips off. I gasp, only for Remo to quieten me as he kisses me.

“I-I love you,” I murmur against his lips. I crave Remo more than ever.

My breasts press against his chest, and his hand on the small of my back presses us closer. The kiss turns desperate. The kiss burns every part of my body, and my hands slide down his chest, feeling his heart thunder under my touch. I shiver, knowing I have this effect on him.

Remo picks me up and drops me on the bed, making me squeal, but when he pounces on me, his eyes heavy with desire, the flames hot and burning, I feel my smile stretch on the face. It takes over me. I feel happiness like I've never felt before, and having sex with Remo isn't something I feel unsure about.

"Fuck if you aren't the only woman who has caught my eye and the only woman I will kill for." He leans down, his mouth pressing kisses on my neck and slowly making his way down.

"I broke my rules for you." Another kiss on my shoulder blade.

"I killed for you." Another kiss just above my breast.

A shiver washes through my body at the knowledge that these hands that are touching me have taken lives, and yet they are touching me so softly.

But I don't want soft. Not tonight.

"Remo." I gasp, grabbing his arms, the tendons in them visible as he holds himself up. "Don't make love to me. Don't treat me with care. Not tonight."

A smirk takes over Remo's face as he smiles. The twisted look he give me makes me believe that maybe I did unleash a beast.

"I wasn't going to, *amore*. You will be my wife in front of everyone, treated with utmost respect, but here, right now, behind closed doors, you are mine to fuck ruthlessly. I will own your body and know every part of it."

He places an open-mouth kiss on my breast, then takes a nipple in his mouth. Just as I think it's a soft kiss, he sucks so harshly I arch off the bed, a moan leaving me.

He worships my body, his hands roaming and exploring, bringing me pleasure in a way I have never experienced before. And knowing I love this man, knowing he is the monster who is willing and ready to protect its princess, assures me more than anything else ever could.

When Remo's hands slide between my legs and he makes stars align for me, he tends to the flowers he bloomed, acknowledging them as he plucks them from within me, praising them. When he kisses me in places that only he will ever rule over, it can only be described as him ruling over my body. Remo's harsh sucks, his brutal kisses, and his hickies... It is the most pleasurable feeling ever.

I grin at his ruffled black hair, knowing I did that to him. I'm quickly distracted by the carnal desire in his eyes for me as he slowly pulled my legs apart and kisses the side of my neck. He whispers a few words in my ear, then he slams into me.

His name is the only word on my tongue.

“You’re fucking mine. You’re my sweet Aurora, the one I fuck however I like, and you take it like a good fucking girl,” he grits out as he hits a deeper spot within me.

My eyes roll to the back of my head, and my mouth falls open.

His animalistic speed, the carnal desire in his black eyes as he watches me take his fucking, is all I’ll ever want.

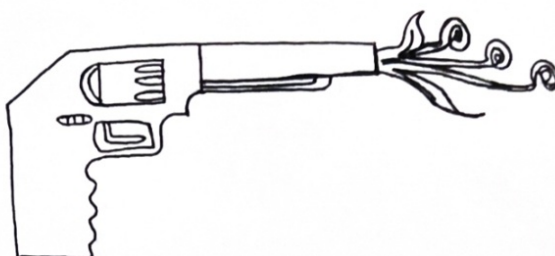
“Is that right?” he growls, but I can’t even comprehend an answer.

“Is that right, Aurora?” he snarls.

I frantically nod.

“Yours. Your good girl.”

REMO



I did not let Aurora go to work for the next couple of days, and with Venezia taking visits to my office, I took advantage of this time to grab Aurora any chance she went past me. Fucking her into the hallway, dropping to my knees as she sat on the stools in the kitchen and sucking her clit into my mouth until she came, following her into the shower and fucking her from behind as her legs weakened. Dinnertime came, and Venezia came back. We ate all the while Aurora tried to avoid eye contact with me, knowing she'd find lust in my eyes and she'd forget what she was talking to Venezia about.

Then I fucked her more during the night; her body was tired, but her moans didn't stop.

I couldn't stop. She is so addictive, and she takes me so beautifully.

This week, she started going to work after taking a much-needed break from everything. Her visits to the therapist have been regular, and her improvement is clear. The light behind her eyes is brightening again, and I'm getting my Aurora back. I still went to her office during lunch sometimes to check on her and get my fill of dessert as she sat above me on the desk and I made her scream while on my knees in front of her.

"What did you say? Who released them?"

I don't care, but the thought that Kamari even did that makes me confused. I didn't think she would go ahead with it.

Venezia places her iPad on my desk and shows me the picture of me on my

knees in our home, Aurora's hands in mine as I begged for forgiveness. I run a hand down my face to hide the stupid smile.

"You know who." Venezia smiles, her eyes on the picture and the article that is titled 'London's richest man on his knees for his wife'.

The story is very vague and not what it actually is, but I know Kamari would never reveal anything like that, even if Aurora didn't tell her what happened. It only says that even London's most powerful man is on his knees for his wife and what stops others from doing the same.

"I love the pleading look on your face. Suits you." Venezia clicks her tongue.

I glare at her, and she laughs, shaking her head as she walks away.

"Do you want me to get rid of them?" she asks over her shoulder.

I shake my head. "No."

Venezia has started working, or more so, training and spending her free time in my office within the finance department, but she comes over to me every now and then to bother me, to show me ridiculous articles she has seen, or to bring over food or something Aurora has packed for her, and she shows off that I haven't gotten any.

I shouldn't get jealous over my sister getting baked desserts from my wife while I don't, but I fucking do.

"Mr Cainn, Mr and Mrs Chamber are here," Amina tells me, her eyes a little troubled.

"Sam Chamber's parents?"

She nods, showing me her tablet. "It's about his brother, Damon Chamber, who went missing. They think you made it happen."

A laugh booms out of me as I sit back in my seat.

"I see. Call them in but don't enter unless I say so and stay on guard. While they are here, I want you to send these pictures I am going to send you to the press."

She nods, then walks out.

A few minutes later, Mr and Mrs Chamber are sitting in front of me, eyes full of anger and attitude. The smirk on my face won't leave, and I'm not even trying to be nonchalant about it.

"Where is my brother, Damon, Mr Cainn?" Mr Chamber asks, his blue eyes the same ocean colour his brother has.

I have to keep myself in control. They are two different people, and I shouldn't wipe out a whole influential family for no reason, even if I can.

I need to be strategic about this.

"Is he related to me? Is he my friend that I would know where he is?" I raise a brow, making him frown.

He is alive. For now. But no one needs to know that.

“No, but he wanted to be your partner and needed your investment, so you obviously decided to wipe him out, as you did with everyone before him who crossed you.”

“Are you assuming things about me, Mr Chamber? Because what I may do in retaliation will not be a good look on you.”

He leaps to his feet. “Are you threatening me? Do you know the power I hold?”

I nod, crossing my hands in front of me.

“And do you know *my* power, Mr Chamber? My reach?”

He shrinks ever so slightly but doesn’t back down.

“My brother is missing, and the last person he called was you. If that isn’t suspicious, then I don’t know what is.”

Opening my drawer and taking out a file I had just created, I place it in front of him and his wife.

“Have a look. I think what would be classified as suspicious would be how your brother has been stalking my wife for years and kidnapped her—twice. And you helped him to wipe evidence and get the inspectors on her case changed. Yet you claim I am the one who is suspicious?”

Helia has certainly helped me with this, but knowing Damon did this, it never fails to build rage inside me that will only dim once he is no longer breathing.

Which will be soon. As soon as tonight.

“What? These are accusations, false statements, and fabricated evidence.” He takes the papers out of the file, rips them up, and throws them on my desk. My patience snaps at his disrespect.

I dart out of my seat and wrap my hand around his neck in a vise grip. His wife screams. She grabs my arm but fails to move me even an inch.

“Let him go, please!” she pleads, but I smile at Mr Chamber’s face.

“Get away from me before I release these to the press. Then we’ll see who burns first.”

He tries to shake his head as his face turns from blue to purple, but he can’t move. My hand is too tight around his neck.

I throw him to the ground as I straighten my suit.

“You can leave. Amina, please guide Mr and Mrs Chamber out.”

Amina walks in and doesn’t even blink an eye at seeing Mr Chamber on the floor. She waits as they collect themselves and walk out, avoiding eye contact with me.

When night falls, I send a message to Aurora, telling her I will be coming home late, then I head towards Helia’s house, where he has Damon in his

basement. Technically, the basement is not attached to the house. It's outside, but it's one of the safest places.

"Remo, what a nice surprise. What would be even better is if you finally kill this fucker so I don't have to keep wasting money on food for him. I've had enough." Helia emerges from the shadows of the room as my eyes fall on Damon, who's tied to the chair in front of me.

"Wake up." I slap Damon.

He jerks awake, blinking his eyes as he looks around. His face is unrecognisable because of what Helia has done to him while I was busy trying to bring life back into my wife. The wife he almost killed and left as a shell of herself, an empty woman with no bright flowers blooming in her eyes, no scent of her own to carry throughout my house.

Forgiveness is not enough for a man like Damon.

He mumbles something, but his bruised and cut lip doesn't allow him to speak clearly.

"Now that you're awake, any last wishes?"

Helia steps close to me, handing me a gun. I check the amount of bullets and see it's full, perfect for me to empty it out on him today.

"W-what?" he whispers, trying to open one of his eyes. It's swollen and a deep, ugly purple.

"My brother, he won't l-let you." His speech is broken, and he gasps in short puffs. His head hangs as his lips stay open. He's dehydrated, and this limp body is of no use to me. Not worth keeping.

"Oh, which brother? The one who ran away the second I mentioned the possibility of ruining their image in society? The one who quite literally disowned you the second I stood up in front of them?"

Damon tries to shake his head, blinking some more.

"No..." He keeps mumbling, but I grab him by his jaw, tilting his face up.

"You made one mistake in your life, and it will cost you your whole existence; and that was targeting my wife. One mistake, and you are going to be sent to the grave early. Say your last fucking prayers."

With that, I hold the gun to his forehead. Just as his eyes widen in realisation, I shoot.

His body drops back as I let him go. Another shot destroys his heart, and I aim another right in the same spot.

I have kept him alive to suffer for over a month. Now this chapter is over.

Giving the gun back to Helia, I turn around and head back outside, knowing I made a good choice by wearing black today.

I hear the wind shift ever so slightly, the atmosphere around me getting heavy,

and that tells me Helia is walking behind me.

“Anything I need to know?” His voice is soft and quiet, as if he is the most innocent man that there is.

“What?” I slide my hands into my pockets as I lean against my car and turn to see him throw his cigarette to the ground and step on it.

Then his emerald eyes slide up to my face. “I see you haven’t lost your touch, even after ten years. Am I free to go now?”

I smirk, amusement filling me at his request. “And you are asking me this because...?”

A chuckle escapes past his lips, the sound crisp and clear but haunting in a way that sends chills down most people’s spines. Except I am used to Helia. Used to the way this man is empty of emotions. You won’t find anything inside of him if you ever looked.

“Because I want to know if being addicted to someone means you will be leaving dead bodies around like this often.” His tone goes quieter as he mutters this, his eyes looking away from me for the first time ever.

“Don’t be fooled. You can’t afford to get tangled in a case now, not when police and the investigations are on,” I say.

He nods absentmindedly.

“Take care of the new company I handed to you last week.” I nod at him, getting into my car.

This only means something is brewing in Helia’s brain, and it’s about to be a chaotic ruin wherever his attention has stopped.

Leaving him behind, I drive back to my house, the only place where I have ever found peace, and that has been because of my wife.



“Remo, the news!”

Aurora stands in the living room, her lips open in shock as she watches the blurred pictures of Damon’s body being shown on the morning news. The reporter is calling it the most heinous murder she has ever seen. The body has

been sent to the forensics team to figure out exactly what happened.

“That can’t be... did you...” she trails off, her eyes slowly sliding to me, but I stand there, still, not moving an inch as I watch the storm, the conflicted emotions in her eyes.

She bites her lips, blinks, then she shuts off the TV.

“Are you mad at me?”

She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “No. I’m not, but I think I should be. He has haunted me for so long, for so many years, and I always kept looking over my shoulder. I kept thinking he would be hiding somewhere in the shadows, watching me. And now... it has ended. He’s gone, and this sense of relief I suddenly feel shouldn’t be there, but it is, and I know, in your own way, it was you keeping me safe.”

She steps closer to me; her gaze locking on my own.

“This love that fills your eyes is all for me,” she whispers as she places a hand on my cheek. “This love is so tainted, so sweet, yet so rough. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She rises to her toes, placing her forehead against mine.

“I love you Remo. I love that you have kept me safe. I cherish the love you feel for me, this fairytale that you have given me, no matter the hard edges around it, no matter the thorns. I love you, and there is nothing that would ever change it. Nothing.”

My heart, I feel it racing inside of me, the hard beat almost painful. I want to consume the words Aurora is telling me. I want them to be scribed so I can hear them and see them over and over, knowing this is the day she fully accepted the ugliest, darkest part of me.

“You made me wait so long to hear those words. I desperately wanted to hear them come from you,”

She smiles against my lips, placing her lips over mine and kissing me.

It’s a kiss of victory.

A kiss of success. I’ve finally, fully won over the woman who has taken control over my life, the one who has completely made me hers.

EPILOGUE

AURORA



8 Months Later

“I think you should invite her.”
I bite my lip, not knowing if it’s a good idea, but it’s been close to two years since I have been married, and I haven’t heard from my mother at all since my father was killed.

Venezia may be right in thinking I should invite her to this dinner where I celebrate my new collection launch, but no one in my family ever cared about me or what I did.

Smiling sadly at Venezia, I shake my head.

“She won’t show up. It doesn’t matter that it’s a new launch. Kamari is here with her parents, Ruel is here, and so are Remo and you.”

She smiles at me, nodding in understanding and dropping the topic, but every so often, I do find myself wondering how they are doing. Maybe out of curiosity or worry, but whatever the reason, I do think about her and Ambrose, although I never give voice to the concern.

“Aurora?”

I look up to see Remo making his way towards me through the crowded hall where my new winter pieces are on display. My team has grown in size, and that means I can release bigger collections. With the increase in revenue over the past year, I was able to make exclusive pieces that will be on auction, too.

Remo frowns at a person who bumps into him but relaxes his face instantly when it’s one of his subcontractors who handles the distribution of his wine in Asia.

“Hi.” I smile up at him.

His eyes catch on my lips. Then he leans down and brushes a kiss across

them.

“I’m still here, by the way,” Venezia announces.

I laugh, but Remo ignores her and kisses me again.

He finally pulls away and says, “Yes, we know, Venezia. We know you are always here.”

He is joking, but Venezia just makes a face at him before turning to me.

“I’ll be around, but if you need me, just ask me, okay?”

“Her husband is here for that,” Remo replies flatly, making her sigh and rub her temple.

“I know she is your wife, Remo, but calm down, please. Her being pregnant doesn’t mean you can stop her from talking to people.”

I glance down at the small bump I have that is showing through my dress. I’m currently six months along.

Remo wraps an arm around my waist before turning his sister around and pushing her a few steps away from us.

She gasps and erupts into laughter. “Okay, okay, I’m leaving.” She walks away, shaking her head.

“She is so overbearing,” Remo mutters.

I laugh. He thinks *she*’s overbearing? He scowls at my amusement.

“What?”

I shake my head as I run a hand down his chest. “You look handsome, husband.”

His eyebrows rise, and a slow smirk takes over his face. “Really?”

I nod.

He leans down until his lips brush my ear, then murmurs, “Do you want a reward for being such a good girl tonight?”

Biting my lip, I nod once more, my eyes solely on him now, forgetting everyone around us for a minute. I have been wanting him to touch me, to kiss me today, but he denied it all, telling me I had to be good and get through the event first. He wanted me to do my best, but now that it’s close to being over, I need him. Being pregnant has increased my hormones, and I want Remo constantly.

“Yes, please,” I plead, my voice small.

Remo leans down, placing soft kisses on my cheek, my jaw, and behind my ear, making me giggle.

Tugging my hand, Remo leads me into a small, dark storage room, making me giggle.

“Shh, quiet, *amore*.”

I bite my lip when I see a wicked glint in Remo’s eyes.



“Happy Birthday!”

Venezia laughs, her hands going to her mouth as she looks around the garden, taking in the decorations we put up for her.

I am in the last week or so of my pregnancy, and with Venezia turning twenty, Remo and I threw the party for her despite Remo being reluctant because of the timing.

“Oh my God!” She gasps. Her gaze flits around the room, seeing everyone here, but when her eyes land on me, she runs towards me and hugs me.

“Careful, Venezia,” Remo warns her, but she just squeals and hugs me tighter, making me smile.

“Happy twentieth birthday, Venezia.”

She pulls away from me, beaming. “I know it was your idea, despite being so heavily pregnant. We could have celebrated late.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s completely fine. You know I love doing these things.”

“Yeah... Happy Birthday. Let her go now.”

Venezia rolls her eyes at Remo before she goes to meet everyone else, which isn’t many people since Venezia didn’t want a grand party. She’s very private about her life, and Remo and I respected that.

Later that night, after the sky had grown dark and everyone left, my screams of pain and Remo’s panicked shouts filled the night. The next morning, I was holding a beautiful baby girl whose dark eyes matched my husband’s. The rest of her features were all mine.

“You little troublemaker. You kept us up all night long,” Venezia mumbles, then yawns, as she holds her in her arms.

Lavinia Caimn.

Our own little princess.

Remo places a kiss on my forehead as I slowly let my eyes finally close after being in labour for so long. I can finally rest, knowing my daughter is safe and

healthy, knowing our protector, my husband, is here for us.

“Get some rest, Aurora. I will make sure Venezia doesn’t snore too loud,” Remo says, brushing the hair from my forehead.

“Hey!”

I laugh at the offended look on Venezia’s face, and my eyes slide to Remo, who is looking at his daughter with love like he looks at me.

I let my eyes slip closed, content that Lavinia will have a father who will never let anyone harm her. Within Remo, I’ve found love and within him I’ve found that this sweet deception we had has turned real.

“Aurora?” Remo says softly.

I hum in response.

“My sweet deception, I will never regret keeping you.”

The biggest smile ever blooms on my face.

Life has gifted me a flower called love, one that Remo watered until it bloomed, then covered with clouds to protect me and sent winds to blow so I would stay strong.

The End



DEAR READER

We have come to the end of Aurora & Remo's love story, if you loved it, consider leaving a **review**, sharing your thoughts on **Bitter Deception**. Even couple of words, it makes a huge difference to an author.

You can post your [review here](#), on Bitter Deception's Amazon page.

To keep up with the next release in the Deception series, you can follow me on my social media below:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish I can sum into words about everything I feel having come to the conclusion of Aurora and Remo's love story. This book should be dedicated to all my readers for having supported and loved my stories and continue to do so. To my family for standing behind me as I press publish on each of my books and being proud of every small or big milestone I reach.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Akwaah K is an author living somewhere in the UK while trying to finish a degree and write all the same. From bookstore trips when any inconvenience happens, to writing about soft morally grey characters just to see them fall in love. When not writing, an iced drink and a shopping trip heals it all for her.

