

BUTTONS: BOOK ONE

BUTTONS & LACE

HER DEBT. HIS DESIRE.



P E N E L O P E S K Y

Buttons and Lace

Buttons One

Penelope Sky

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Chapter One

Pearl

Winter raged through New York City. A colossal force of nature, the snow caked against the skyscrapers and sprinkled the streets with icy kisses. The Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center still stood tall and proud, but it was quickly blanketed with a white sheet.

The tree stood in the living room, and a string of white lights had been wrapped around it. I always insisted on a real tree in the apartment. That pine smell from the great outdoors really brought the holidays to life. It left pine needles all over the floor and it was difficult to manage, but it was still worth it.

I held the ornament in my hand as I tried to find a place to put it. It was covered with sloppy red paint, and a picture was wedged in the center. It was Jacob when he was eight years old. He made it for a class project and took it when he moved out of his parents' place.

Christmas was difficult for me to understand because I'd never truly celebrated it. I grew up in a foster home, and the one time I was adopted, my adoptive parents quickly took me back when they realized having another child was too much of a financial burden. It was just a few days before Christmas.

A knock sounded on the door, and my fingers almost released the ornament. If it crashed to the floor and shattered, I never would have been able to forgive myself. Jacob cherished his childhood. He had two loving parents who adored him and a sister he battled every chance he got.

I returned the ornament to the box before I opened the door. A man in a black leather jacket stood across the threshold. His long black hair was slicked with grease, and his bushy eyebrows made him formidable. The leather boots on his feet gleamed with melted snow from the sidewalk.

Like he owned the place, he stepped inside. "Where's Jacob?"

"Whoa, hold on." I placed my palm against his chest and pushed him back. "I didn't invite you inside. So keep your ass across that line." I tapped my toe against the metal strip that separated the hallway from my apartment.

His eyebrows furrowed even more.

"Now, how can I help you?" I didn't know this guy, but he sure knew Jacob.

"I want to see Jacob."

"He's not here right now. Who are you?"

“He’s not here, my ass.” His accent was thick, possibly Italian. “I know he’s back there. Tell him to come out, or I’ll make him come out.”

“He’s really not here,” I snapped. “He’s at work. What’s this about?”

“It’s none of your concern.” He shot me a menacing look before he stepped away. “He better pay up. He can’t run forever.”

“Pay up what?” I stuck my head out so I could watch him walk away.

“Just tell him to pay what he owes, or he’ll pay with his life. It’s that simple.” He kept walking, not breaking his stride.

I walked back into the apartment and locked the door behind me. Jacob owed money? For what? Student loans? He told me he paid them off about a year ago.

Unless that was a lie.

Jacob walked inside an hour later than he usually did when he came home from work. He glanced at the tree but didn’t compliment the lights and the ornaments. He tossed his bag on the counter and immediately grabbed a beer from the fridge.

He didn’t acknowledge my existence. “Uh, hi?”

He twisted off the cap and downed half the beer in a single gulp.

Jacob and I hadn’t been the same in weeks. He didn’t kiss me when he came home from work. Sex was limited, and when it did happen, he got off quickly then rolled off me. While we lived together, he was never really there. Every time I questioned him, he told me everything was fine. “Hi.”

I was getting sick of his bullshit. I didn’t have a lot of patience with people when it came to bad attitudes. People needed to get over whatever issues they had and just move on. Whatever hardship he thought he lived through, mine was far worse. “Jacob, what’s your problem?”

In response, he took another drink of his beer.

“You’re like a zombie around here. We don’t have sex and—”

“I got fired.” He finished the beer before he dropped the empty bottle in the sink. It clanked loudly as it spun around until it came to a stop in the drain. He gripped the edge of the sink, his heavy coat covered with snow.

I shut my mouth when his words washed over me. It explained his closed off behavior the second he walked in the door, but it didn’t explain why he’d been so withdrawn all month. But now wasn’t the time to ask questions.

He grabbed another beer from the fridge and twisted off the cap. "I'm going to shower." He downed all of it before he tossed it in the sink. This time, the bottle shattered, leaving broken pieces of glass everywhere. He left the kitchen and headed to the hallway.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I forgot about the strange man who came by the apartment in light of Jacob's bad mood. It didn't seem important anymore. And to bring it up would be insensitive.

He didn't turn around. His back was to me, his shoulders wide and powerful. Even from behind, he looked like a man who had nothing to believe in. Hopelessness radiated from him in radioactive waves. It affected everything in his vicinity. "No."

A week went by, and Jacob stayed home every day. He didn't try to look for another job. He sat in front of the TV and drank beer all day long. His lithe build would quickly change into a hanging beer belly if he kept it up.

I was an engineer working for the city. My job was to organize construction in the surrounding areas. Just six months ago, I worked on a project to repair one of the bridges. Most of the time, I worked during the day, but sometimes, I had to go in during the evenings.

When I came home that day, I had to hide my irritation. Jacob turned the apartment into a mess. The sink was full of beer bottles, and the trash can was overflowing. He didn't acknowledge me when I walked inside.

He never acknowledged me.

"In case you weren't sure, the sink isn't a garbage can." I cleaned up his mess after a long day of work and choked back the harsh words I wanted to say.

"Sorry...I meant to take out the trash."

I changed the garbage and threw out the old one in the chute at the end of the hallway. When I came back, Jacob still hadn't gotten up off his ass to greet me. Instead of waiting for that to happen, I opened the fridge and looked for a snack. In labeled Tupperware were meals prepared for Jacob—by his mother.

I really hated her sometimes.

He was perfectly capable of cooking for himself if he had any wish to get off the couch. When he fell on hard times, she enabled him, making him even

lazier than he already was.

This had gone on long enough. “Jacob, some strange guy came by the apartment the other day. Said you owed him money or something.”

Jacob didn’t react at all. The only motion he made was a quick shift of his eyes. They turned back to the TV almost immediately, like that information didn’t mean much. “I played poker one night and didn’t have the cash on me.”

“So you paid him?”

“Yeah, I took care of it.”

My intuition told me he was lying. Living on the streets during my youth and having to survive a foster home taught me how to read people with unusual precision. “Because he made it sound like you owed him a lot of money.” The guy was six two and rough. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy Jacob would hang out with.

He sighed while his eyes remained glued to the TV. “I told you I took care of it.”

I placed my hands on my hips as I walked farther into the living room. “Are you telling me everything?”

Jacob sat up straighter, rolling his eyes. “Would you get off my ass? I just lost my job and you’re nagging. I hate it when you nag.” He threw the remote and stormed to the front door.

“I’m not nagging.” I followed him. “I just feel like you aren’t telling me everything.”

He grabbed his jacket and walked out. “I told you everything. You’re the one who’s paranoid.”

Weeks went by and nothing changed.

Jacob continued his streak of depression, closing off from reality. He continued to make a mess in the apartment, allowing the dishes in the sink to overflow and the garbage can to reek of leftovers.

Despite my anger, I held my tongue.

We didn’t have sex during that entire time. That put the length of our abstinence up to two months. I wasn’t a sex addict, but I needed to get off on a regular basis. Otherwise, I became grouchy. The fact Jacob didn’t want me

just irritated me. We slept in the same bed, but he stuck to his side. I stuck to mine.

When I came home from work one day, something had changed. The apartment was clean, and the TV wasn't on. Jacob wasn't parked in front of it with a beer in his hand.

"Jacob?"

He came down the hallway with a bag over his shoulder. "Hey, babe." He had a smile on his face, the first one I'd seen in forever.

And he called me babe.

He wrapped one arm around me and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Whoa, what was going on? "Why are you in such a good mood?"

"I got a job."

"Oh, that's great." *Thank fucking god.* I was sick of him moping around and getting fat. There was more housework for me to do, and the place quickly became an inhospitable environment. "I'm so happy for you. What job is it?"

"I'm the new account director of an investment company."

"Ooh...fancy title."

"I start on Monday."

"That's great. You deserve it."

"The pay is great, and it comes with benefits."

"Even better." I eyed the bag in his hand. "What's that for?"

"Well, I thought we would go on a vacation before I start work."

A vacation? Wow. I really liked this new side of him. "I'm always down for a vacation."

"How about the Bahamas? They have great weather in the wintertime, and the flights are pretty cheap."

Going on a vacation of any kind sounded perfect to me. Jacob and I hadn't gone anywhere in a year. The last vacation we took was to Florida, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. "The Bahamas?" I couldn't hold back my excitement. "Seriously?"

"Yeah." His eyes finally held signs of life. He was animated and happy. It was a stark contrast to the lifeless man who'd been walking around the apartment for the past few weeks. "We'll stop at a few islands. First is St. Thomas."

I jumped into his arms and wrapped my body around his. "This is going to be so much fun."

His arms immediately circled my body, and he pulled me close to him. He reacted to me immediately, and slowly, his lips found mine. He gave me the first kiss I'd had in weeks. And it felt so good—just the way it used to.

His arms lifted me from the ground, and he carried me into the small bedroom we shared. Clothes were dropped, and our naked bodies wrapped around one another. He was inside me a moment later, and we moved together on the bed. I hadn't gotten action in so long I knew I would come immediately. It had nothing to do with his performance. I was just that tense. And I was right. I finally had an orgasm that washed over me and cleansed me. It was just what I needed after those weeks of hell.

Exactly what I needed.

Chapter Two

Pearl

The resort was beautiful. Our drinks were always full. The sand felt perfect underneath our bare feet. The sunsets were even more beautiful than the sunrises. It was everything anyone could ask for.

It was a great opportunity for Jacob and me to rekindle our dead relationship. When we first moved in together, we were madly in love. We were one of those couples who couldn't keep our hands off each other. But as time passed, the romance died and we became roommates. The sex was mediocre—if that. I caught Jacob masturbating in the bathroom a few times. I pretended to be only partially offended.

But maybe this vacation would turn everything around.

The sex was never the kind I read about in books. When the guy actually knows what he's doing and how to make a woman come. But if I rubbed my clit during sex, it usually did the trick. I wasn't going to complain because he couldn't make me come on his own. At least I was getting some sex.

We stayed at the resort most of the time. It had everything we needed because the place was all-inclusive. We had unlimited cocktails and food, and of course, unlimited sun.

"I made reservations for this place near the dock. I heard it's nice."

"Off the resort?" I asked.

"Yeah." He buttoned up his collared shirt even though it was eighty degrees outside and humid. "It has great reviews. It's near the shipping dock where they have the cruise ships. I've never seen one in person before. It should be cool."

I always heard bad things about the dock area. It's where the tourists left their ships and ventured onto land. It's also where beggars and thieves corralled unsuspecting people to donate change or steal their wallets. Basically, it was a tourist trap.

"I'm excited." He smiled at me before he examined himself in the mirror.

Since he was looking forward to it, I decided to swallow my protests. We would stick together, and everything would be fine. I would leave my passport and driver's license at the hotel so no one would be able to snatch those things. If someone really wanted my cash, then whatever. It was just money. "Me too."

Jacob didn't want to spend the money on a cab, so we walked to the restaurant. I thought it was a stupid idea, but he insisted it would be fine. I could always burn a few extra calories, but I'd rather spend a few extra dollars for convenience.

Hand in hand, we reached the restaurant without any problems and had a nice meal. We had a table near the window so we could see the ships in the harbor. Palm trees swayed in the wind, and the water glistened from the light of the moon.

The restaurant specialized in seafood, which was one of my favorite things to eat. I ordered mahi mahi along with a glass of wine the waiter recommended. Jacob ordered a seafood platter, and of course, calamari. It was his favorite thing to eat. If any restaurant had it, he always ordered it.

The candle in the middle of the table flickered and cast a romantic aura in the dimly lit restaurant. Other couples surrounded us, vacationing just the way we were. Our relationship had changed over the last few days, and I could feel that in the air. We were getting closer, our friendship solidifying. For a while, I lost faith in our relationship, but now, I was starting to believe in it again.

Jacob wasn't as relaxed as he had been a few moments ago. He started to shift his weight repeatedly in his seat, touch his hair, and check his watch. He checked it five times in two minutes.

"Have somewhere to be?" I teased.

"What?" he asked with a flinch.

"You keep looking at your watch..." I pointed at his wrist on the table.

"Oh." He placed his hand under the table where I couldn't see it. "We're on vacation, so I'm not sure why I brought it." He chuckled awkwardly, and it turned into a cough. He grabbed his wine and downed it like water.

I raised an eyebrow, unsure why he was acting so peculiar. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat then looked across the restaurant.

Was he going to propose to me? Was that possible? He'd been so distant for the past few weeks I wasn't sure if I could believe that. Our relationship had been in a deep rut. If I noticed it, so did he. But why else would he be acting weird?

By the time we were done with dinner, it was completely dark outside. The light blues that touched the edge of the horizon had completely disappeared. The red and orange clouds had vanished under a blanket of darkness. Now, the water was an infinite black pool that reached out to nowhere the eye could follow.

Jacob paid for the meal and we left, hand in hand. I was eager to get back to the hotel and considered calling for a cab. Walking in the dark was just stupid, even if we were together.

"I'm going to call a cab." I pulled out my phone.

"Wait." He pulled me farther toward the dock where the enormous ships bounced in the harbor. "Let's take a look at this."

"I don't think we're supposed to go over there."

"We aren't going to break in to the ships," he said with a laugh. "We're just looking."

"Uh...I still don't think we should go somewhere we don't belong." I turned back to my phone. "Just let me call a cab."

He pulled my hand down so I couldn't see the screen. "Call a cab later. Come on, I want to see this." He grabbed my hand again and pulled me along.

Since he was in a good mood and I didn't want to ruin the progress we made, I let him get his way. "I didn't know you cared so much about ships. We have a dock in New York, you know."

"Yeah, but it smells really bad. Like old fish. Here, it's clean. It always smells like palm trees." He stopped at every ship and stared at the side, looking at the names of each one. "Maybe we can get a boat someday."

"Maybe." Or a jet ski. Those were manageable.

He pulled me farther into the docking area, stepping away from the streetlamps that lit the pathway. We were completely cast in shadows, and I felt a shiver creep up my spine. It had nothing to do with the weather because it was humid as hell. "Jacob, I really think we should go back."

"Wow. Look at that military ship up ahead. Do you think that's a US vessel?"

"Uh..." Even when I squinted, I couldn't tell. "Probably. Now let's go."

"Come on." He dragged me along. "There's nothing to be afraid of. You have me."

"Yeah..." Would that be enough if some homeless man had a knife? "That doesn't mean I should walk blindly into danger like I'm invincible."

“Chill, Pearl.” His hand remained tightly around mine, squeezing it until it was numb. We reached the large military ship and stared at it in awe. “Wow. This is so cool.”

“You know, we could come back during the day when you could see it better.” I couldn’t appreciate what I was looking at because I was too paranoid. I glanced over my shoulder in fear that someone was lurking around. It was a ridiculous fear, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching us.

“I wonder if this is an active ship or if it’s retired.”

Something crunched behind me, like a heavy boot against plastic. I could have sworn I heard it. Perhaps my mind was playing tricks on me, my paranoia in charge of my thoughts. “Jacob, did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” he asked.

I looked over my shoulder but only saw blackness. “Let’s go. I don’t like —” A black sack covered my head and painfully tightened around my throat. I couldn’t see anything, and I immediately panicked. “Ahh!” I swung my arms around and tried to fight whoever attacked me. I felt a massive arm squeeze around my shoulders and hold me in place while the bag was tied around my throat. “Get off me!”

“Pearl!” Jacob’s frantic voice came from a distance away. He moaned when someone struck him, and I heard the sound of a heavy body collapsing on the wooden floorboard of the dock.

“Jacob!” Despite my own situation, I feared for his safety. “Jacob!”

A terrifying and foreign voice entered my ear. “Shut that cunt up.”

I kicked harder, slamming my heel onto the man’s shoe.

“Fuck!” He shook me aggressively then threw me hard on the ground. “Stupid bitch.”

I scrambled to my feet to run, but a heavy body slammed on top of me. “Let me go, asshole!” A needle suddenly slammed into my neck and something was injected.

Instantly, I couldn’t think. I tried to move my arms, but they wouldn’t respond. My head rested on the dock, my eyes growing heavy inside the hood. My legs were unresponsive as my body prepared to enter a deep sleep. “No...Jacob.” I fought the fog as hard as I could, but it swept me away, taking me to a place I was forced to go.

Chapter Three

Pearl

My body shifted back and forth from the constant motion. I swayed toward my stomach then swayed back, rocking to a rhythmic beat. The distant slap of water against a hard surface came into my ears.

I was back at the hotel, listening to the waves crash onto the shore from my window. The sunlight was greeting me, telling me to rise and get ready for the glorious day. I could taste the margarita on my tongue without even taking a sip.

But then harsh reality set in.

The last thing I remembered was being facedown on the dock, Jacob's limp body lying somewhere nearby. The hood was pulled over my head, and I was stuck in eternal darkness. Then the syringe was plunged into my neck, sedating me into a helpless mess on the floor.

Please be a nightmare.

I didn't open my eyes because I wasn't ready to accept the truth. If that's what really happened, then my fate was worse than death. It had to be a nightmare, the result of too much sun and too much to drink.

But I still didn't open my eyes.

What if I was wrong?

Finally, I did. I opened my eyes to see a porthole in the steel wall of a ship. Water covered the hole, and when a wave emerged, I saw the sky. The sight of blue stretched on forever until it was submerged once again.

What. The. Fuck.

I sat up with a jolt and examined my surroundings. My body kicked into survival mode. I was on a ship out to sea, and there was no one coming for me. All I had was myself. And I would figure out a way off this damn ship.

And then I remembered Jacob.

Fuck, please don't let him be dead. Is he on this ship with me? Is he being held somewhere?

What did these people want with me? I had some money but not a lot. They couldn't hold me for ransom because I had no family who would fight for me. The only person who cared about me was Jacob. And I had no idea what had become of him.

Just stay calm.

You can get out of this.

Use that brain of yours to find a solution.

There was always a solution to any problem.

The room was a dorm. It just had the bed in the corner with nothing else. The door was closed and probably locked. I walked to it, thankful I was still wearing the same clothes as the night before, and tried to get the door open.

The handle wouldn't budge. It was tightly locked in place. I tried to jiggle it, but it wouldn't move a centimeter.

Alright, I just have to find something to open the door.

I searched the room but found nothing useful. My bed was just a mattress on the floor with a few blankets. There wasn't a closet or even a bathroom. I was in a room with four walls.

I eyed the porthole with disappointment. Even if I could bash it open, I wouldn't be able to fit through it. All I could hope for was to drown. I had no idea what my future held, so that might be a good choice.

Before I had a chance to think about it further, the door opened.

A man in all black walked inside, a gun on his hip. He had a thick black beard and unforgiving eyes. One look at him told me everything I needed to know. He was ice-cold and relentless. Nothing could appeal to his good nature because he didn't have one. He stared at me with a stoic expression, his thoughts a mystery.

"Let me go before I smash your face in." I wasn't a martial arts master, but I knew a few things. I wouldn't mind breaking his nose and making it bleed all over his clothes.

A smile formed on his lips, but it looked like a sneer. "You're a feisty one." His voice contained an accent. I couldn't make it out right away, but it sounded Italian. I didn't have much experience with foreigners. It was embarrassing to admit that I'd never traveled overseas.

"No. I'm a violent one."

He chuckled, like this conversation was amusing. "Oh, I'll show you violent." He walked farther into the room, his heavy boots thudding with every step.

I held my ground until that moment. He terrified me, and my body automatically reacted. I stepped back until I was on the bed, my back against the wall.

He grabbed me by the throat and threw me hard against the ground.

I slammed into the steel, feeling the bones in my body cry out in pain. A train had just crashed into me, and I couldn't recover. I saw stars even though his push wasn't as bad as it could have been.

Maybe I wasn't as strong as I thought.

He undid his belt then moved for his trousers.

That was the best painkiller I'd ever received. The injuries felt negligent compared to the fight that erupted inside me. This asshole was going to rape me. Well, he was going to *try* to rape me.

I eyed the buckle of his belt, which dangled freely now that it was undone.

My captor watched me carefully, that sneer back in full force. "I'm gonna fuck you in the ass. Then I'm gonna fuck you in the cunt."

"Good luck with that." I snatched the buckle and yanked it out of his trousers. His pants immediately fell to his thighs, and I rolled away with the belt in my grip. I tightened it around my hands then jumped on him, using all my strength to kill this bastard. I got the belt around his neck then fell behind him, pulling on it as hard as I could. I kicked his knees and made him buckle to the floor.

He grabbed the leather and tried to pull it off, but it was no use. My grip was too tight, my hatred unstoppable. I yanked harder, having no guilt about killing this rapist.

The door flew open, and two more guys filed in. They saw the pants around his ankles and the blue tint of his face.

The one on the left pointed his gun at me. "Drop him."

I pulled harder. "Let me go or he dies."

He kept the gun fixated on me. "Now."

I tightened the belt and refused to let him go. "If you want your friend to live, I suggest you tell me where the nearest exit is located."

He shifted the gun to my captor and pulled the trigger.

I heard the sound and felt his body go limp in my arms at the exact same time. My hands immediately dropped the belt, and I gasped, feeling the blood spray onto my face.

The man lowered his gun and entered the room. "Up."

The other guy grabbed the dead body and dragged it out of my cell.

I stared at the corpse as it slid across the floor, oozing blood everywhere. I'd never seen anyone die. I'd never seen anyone shot. I was in shock, hardly able to breathe.

"Up." He slapped me hard across the face, bringing me back to reality.

I got to my feet, suddenly feeling weak. My fearsome stunt accomplished nothing.

“He means nothing. You mean nothing. We all mean nothing.” He gripped me by the elbow and forced me out of my cage. He pulled me along a narrow hallway then made a few turns.

I didn’t pay attention because I was still in shock.

We entered an open shower room. Shower heads hung from the ceiling as water sprinkled the tile. Other women were already there, stripped naked for everyone to see. They were marked with bruises from their treatment. Some had dried cuts on their faces.

What was this?

“Strip.” He pointed the gun between my shoulder blades. “Now.”

The shock wore off at his command. I wasn’t getting naked for anyone. I’d rather be caked in a criminal’s blood than obey him. “Fuck you.” I spit on his face, hitting him right in the eye.

A full second stretched, and he left the saliva on his face. It slowly slid down his cheek. His jaw clenched, and his lip turned up in a growl. With lightning speed, he slammed the gun into the side of my head.

It hurt so bad I actually screamed. I fell to the floor, feeling the worst migraine of my life. The gun was solid and heavy, and it nearly crushed my skull. If that wasn’t bad enough, the man placed his shoe against my stomach and pressed down heavily.

I coughed and tried to breathe.

“Strip.” He pulled his leg back and kicked me hard in the ribs. “Now.”

I rolled over and dry heaved onto the ground. My arms protected my stomach, but the damage had already been done.

He grabbed me by the hair and yanked me to my feet.

That hurt even more after the gun collided with my head. “Okay.” I pushed his arm away. I didn’t want to obey his command, but I didn’t want to be beaten to death either. I slowly pulled my clothes off, feeling my dress fall to the floor.

He stared at me the entire time, the lust burning in his eyes. With every drop of clothing, he grew more intense, like he hadn’t seen a naked woman in years. There were tons of other naked women in the shower, but he was fixated on me.

I took my bra and underwear off, repulsed that I actually did as he commanded. I should have fought harder, but my head already screamed in agony. I wasn’t sure if I could take more than that.

“Clean yourself.” He nodded toward the shower.

I turned around even though I knew he would look at my ass. I got under the water and tried to find comfort in the warmth. The other women didn't look at me, keeping to themselves and remaining quiet.

I could feel the man's eyes on my body. He was staring at me hard, his intentions as clear as a billboard. I'd always been shy about my naked body. Having a stranger stare at me like this just made it a million times worse.

I cleared my thoughts and focused on the water and the soap. I washed my body clean, knowing there was a chance I wouldn't shower again for a long time. Might as well take advantage of the privilege.

When I washed the conditioner from my hair, I heard one of the women sob. She was standing in the corner, her arms wrapped around her chest. She was heaving, her chest convulsing. All her fear was heavy in the sounds she made.

I listened to it and felt despair wash over me.

There was no escape.

Except death.

I had dinner with the other girls in a small room with two tables. There were twenty of us, but we weren't allowed to speak to one another. We weren't allowed to eat with utensils. Three guards stood there and watched us, carrying rifles and handguns.

I wasn't hungry, but I forced myself to eat anyway. I may need my strength to fight someone off, and I needed nutrition in order to do that. The man who watched me shower was there. His eyes were trained on me the entire time. The same lust still burned in his eyes. He eye-fucked me while I ate dinner, thinking of the monstrous things he could do to me.

I felt sick.

I tried to make eye contact with one of the other girls. Maybe they knew where we were going. Maybe they knew of an escape route. Maybe they knew what these men wanted us for.

Based on the other captives, I could only draw one conclusion.

They were traffickers.

They would sell us to the highest bidder, putting us in unspeakable places to do unspeakable things.

I'd rather die a million times.

After dinner, we were returned to our cells. I wasn't sure if I was the only one who had a private room. Some might think it was a privilege. But I saw it as a weakness. There was always power in numbers. Right then, I was totally alone.

And I knew that man would come for me.

He would try to rape me just like the other one.

But he wouldn't succeed.

A week came and went, and the ship still moved at full speed. I felt the ship rock with the waves. Sometimes we encountered tough terrain, and the ship would shake violently. Aggressive dips would happen out of nowhere, and our food would slide across the table during meals. Sometimes it was so bad I couldn't sleep despite how exhausted and injured I was.

During my alone time, I thought about Jacob. I felt sorry for him, despite the fact my fate was probably worse than his. He was probably dead somewhere, floating in the ocean. Or he escaped and was worried sick about me. He was in a foreign country and didn't know the exact protocol for contacting the authorities. He could call home, but how would that help?

Not knowing what happened to me must be the worst thing of all. He probably didn't know I was on a ship. And even if he did know, he had no idea what it looked like or how to identify it. And how would the police chase it down?

Jacob wouldn't come to my rescue.

By the eighth day, I was restless. I was tired of being stuck inside the ship. The motion sickness was getting to me, and I threw up a few times. No one gave me information no matter how many times I asked.

That night, I couldn't sleep. The panic was starting to get to me. I was trapped, far away from home, and I had no plan of escape. All the men on board had guns, and the women were too afraid to fight. If I could communicate with them, I might be able to organize a coup. We outnumbered them, so it was possible. And I would rather die in the attempt than face whatever would happen when we docked.

I would rather die than become a sex slave.

My eyes moved to the porthole just above me. Watching the water lap against it as the ship rocked gave me a small amount of comfort. It was my

form of music, the gentle splash of the waves against the hull of the ship. When I stared, it helped me relax. It stopped my thoughts, and I entered into a tranquil state. Nothing existed at all.

The door creaked open behind me. The sound was so slight no one else would have noticed it but me. Ever since I'd been captured, I relied on my senses more than ever before. Sound was my most critical one. I could anticipate events before they actually happened. I could pick up voices when they were drawing near. I could detect danger with enough time to prepare for it.

I knew exactly who came to visit me in the middle of the night. I'd been waiting for him. He thought I was asleep, ignorant to the hunter who came for me. He thought I was so stupid, blissful in my naiveté.

He quickly undid his trousers and dropped them to the floor. His boxers came off too.

I waited for the right moment.

His knees gently hit the mattress, and he placed his hands on either side of me, prepared to snatch me.

My eyes opened slightly, just to watch him.

And that's when I noticed the syringe in his hand.

That fucker was going to drug me.

I snatched his wrist and twisted it painfully, forcing the syringe to fly off the mattress and onto the floor. I head-butted him and made him snap back, shocked by how quickly I moved.

His dick was still hard, sticking out proudly with lubrication already applied to it.

I made a fist and punched him as hard as I could.

"Ahh!" He fell back and immediately cupped his dick, cringing through clenched teeth. "You fucking—"

I slammed my foot onto his face, breaking his nose with a loud crack.

His hand flew to his face, freeing his dick.

I kicked him as hard as I could, hitting both his length and his balls.

"Bitch!" He snatched one of my legs and pulled it from underneath me.

I didn't stop. I was just egged on by his profanities. I loved causing this asshole pain. I was just getting revenge. I was getting revenge for all the women who couldn't escape him.

I grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head against the floor—over and over. I hit him just the way he collided that gun with my temple. "You

like that, asshole? How about this?" I slammed his head down again then kicked him in the balls at the same time.

"Ahh!"

The guards heard his screams and came running. They broke in to the room and dragged me off him. They didn't smack me around like I expected them to. In fact, they were gentle with me, trying not to hurt me.

The guards didn't help my attacker to his feet. They just kept him off me so he could get his pants on. He could barely walk because his dick hurt so badly. He cupped it with one hand and slowly walked out of the room.

I smiled victoriously, feeling no remorse for the ruthless way I took him down. "Good luck peeing."

"Shut up." The man who had me shook me by the arm, but it wasn't nearly as aggressive as I was used to. "Go back to bed."

"Tell your men to leave me alone and I will."

The guard dropped my arm and walked away. They vacated my cell then locked the door behind them. Their voices trailed away, speaking Italian. When they were almost out of earshot, they laughed.

And I knew what they were laughing at. Their comrade got his ass handed to him by a woman.

I was damn proud of that.

I knew something had changed when the boat stopped swaying. We weren't in open water anymore. The waves became docile, almost nonexistent. It was a big ship, so we were somewhere away from shore but no longer in the middle of the Atlantic.

If I could break out of there, I could've tried to swim to land. I wasn't a strong swimmer, but when it came to life or death, I'd make it work. I peered out the porthole and caught a distant glimpse of land. Every time I tried to look harder, the porthole was covered by water once more.

I just had to think of a plan.

One guard was dead, and another was seriously injured. That meant there were two less guns to get past. If I played my cards right, I might be able to pull this off. I pulled my covers off then stripped a piece of fabric and shoved it into my pants pocket. I could use it to choke someone if necessary.

When I pulled the blanket back, I noticed the syringe tumble down. It rolled to the floor with a quiet tap. The needle extended out, and the base still contained the clear liquid.

The guard left it there the night before.

And now it was mine.

I held it in my hands and started to hyperventilate. Finally, I had a weapon to use. I could take someone down, steal a gun, and then be free. Luck was on my side, and I never thought I'd be grateful that man had tried to rape me.

He gave me a gift.

I carefully placed it in my back pocket, the base sticking out so I could grab it when I needed to. They would come for me soon. Breakfast time was about to be announced.

I stared at the door and waited patiently.

My time was here.

I was breaking out.

I was so close.

The door opened, and a guard walked in. The expression he gave me was full of indifference, not lust like some of the others. He either found me boring or annoying—probably both. “Get up.”

I rose to my feet and kept my arms by my sides. When I was close enough, I would strike.

“Today is your special day.”

What did that mean? “How so?”

“You’re going to the auction. You have no idea how lucky you are.”

Auction? Hell no, I wasn’t. I wasn’t a farm animal. “What’s the auction for?” I kept him talking so I could sneak up on him when he didn’t expect it. I need to aim right for his carotid artery, getting the drug into his system as fast as possible.

“It’s where they sell the beauties. The others will go to the whorehouses. They’ll spend the remainder of their lives drugged.” He grinned like it was a fairy tale.

It disgusted me. I couldn’t wait a moment longer, so I struck. I slammed the needle and pressed my thumb on the lever, releasing the drug instantly.

He reached for his gun, but I was too fast. His eyes became hooded and heavy, confused. He slowly fell to his knees, gripping the needle sticking out

of his neck. He fell back, and his eyes closed. His body went limp as he passed out.

I actually did it.

I took the gun from the holster and felt the weight in my hand. It was a pistol. I didn't know a damn thing about guns other than the fact that there was a safety. I made sure that was unlocked before I went into the hall. All I had to do was pull the trigger, and their brains would be smeared across the wall.

My hand shook from the excitement.

I might make it out of here.

I tiptoed down the hall and tried not to make a sound. The best way to get off the ship was to go up. If I made it to the surface, I could jump into the water. I'd rather deal with sharks than madmen like this.

By a stroke of luck, I didn't meet anyone in the hallway. A stairway was to my left, and I took it to the top. I reached a door with a window in the center, and I spotted two men inside the tower that held the steering wheel. They were talking to each other, not noticing my face directly in front of them. I realized my cell was located at the front of the ship, where the waves were more prominent.

Now all I had to do was wait. When they turned around or left their post, I would make a beeline for the water. All I had to do was jump in and stay underwater for a minute or so.

Then I was in the clear.

I held the gun at the ready, just in case I needed to use it. Then I waited, measuring time by counting the beats of my heart. The closer we got to shore, the easier it would be for me to swim to safety. But the longer I waited, the more likely it was I would meet someone on the stairway.

And then I realized something else.

What about the others?

Could I really just leave them?

They would be sold to a brothel where they would constantly be drugged and raped, and then tossed aside when their bodies gave out. Their loved ones would never know what happened to them.

I couldn't just leave.

I snuck back down the stairs and entered the hallway. There was no one around, so I crept to a door that looked similar to my own. When I peered

inside, I saw a blonde woman sitting on her bed. She looked lost, like there was no hope.

I tried the knob and was relieved when it opened. I cracked it then waved at her.

She turned to me, her eyes narrowing in shock.

I nodded for her to come to me.

She jumped to her feet, hungry for freedom. When she came close to me, she saw the gun in my hand. Instead of being afraid, she was invigorated.

“Let’s get the others,” I whispered. “Do you know where they are?”

She nodded and beckoned me to follow her. She reached a door in the hallway where another cell was located. When we peered through the window, we saw not one woman, but eighteen. They were all housed together on small cots.

Why were they all together but I was alone? Why was the other woman alone?

The woman walked inside then pressed a forefinger to her lips, telling everyone to be quiet. Then she beckoned them to follow us. There was no way we would escape without being noticed. But some of us would get away. It was better than none.

“What the fuck are you doing?” A man grabbed me by the shoulder and jerked me around.

He clearly didn’t know I had a gun because I shot him right in the stomach. I didn’t even hesitate. I’d always thought I was the type of person who could never kill someone, even if it was my life or theirs. But that quickly changed once I was in a life-or-death situation. I didn’t have time to think. I didn’t have time to react. I just did what I had to do to survive.

And I wouldn’t apologize for it.

He clutched his stomach and fell to the floor, bleeding out of his mouth.

“Drop the gun!” Another guard peered around a corner with his gun trained on me. “Now.”

A man emerged from behind us, a rifle in his arms.

We were surrounded.

I should have left when I had the chance. I shouldn’t have gone back.

The man behind me confiscated my gun while the other moved forward. He raised his gun to smash me in the head, his intention to kill me or at least make me black out.

“Stop.” The guard grabbed his arm and steadied him. Then he spoke quickly in Italian.

The man lowered his gun and stepped away. Whatever the other man said was enough to make him stop.

What did he say?

Why didn't they hurt me?

What was going on?

They rounded up the girls and locked them in the room before they snatched me, dragging me down the hallway. I was being escorted to my room where I would wait for the auction—whatever the hell that was.

Why didn't I just shoot myself in the head when I had the chance?

They marched me past my door and kept going.

“Where are you taking me?” I tried to fight their hold, but they gripped me tighter.

“Answer me.” I tried to kick the one on the left but ended up hurting myself in the process. I stubbed my toe under his heavy boot and took a sharp intake of breath.

They escorted me into a white room with a leather chair. It had footrests that opened my thighs. It was the same type of chair I sat in when I visited my gynecologist.

And that wasn't a good sign.

They moved me into the chair and held me down until all the straps were secure. Even my head was locked in place. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Exam,” the guard answered. “Then you'll be gone.”

“What kind of exam?” I struggled against the leather straps even though it was pointless.

“You'll see.” The guards walked out and shut the door behind them, leaving me to wait for the unknown.

A doctor came in a moment later, wearing a white coat despite the fact we weren't in a doctor's office. He was substantially older than the others. He wore a face of indifference, his thick glasses hanging off his nose. He grabbed a chart and browsed through it.

“Who are you?”

“Dr. Wayne.” He had an American accent.

Had he been on the ship the entire time? I'd never seen him. “Where did you come from?”

“Shore. The ship docked ten minutes ago. You're my first patient.”

“Docked where?” This guy wasn’t part of the crew. I could glean that much. Maybe he had information that could help me.

“To shore, like I said.”

“What shore?” I demanded. “Where are we?”

“Does it really matter?” He pulled on a pair of white gloves.

He thought this was boring? Uneventful? “What the hell is wrong with you? I’ve been kidnapped. I’m a slave. And you don’t care?”

He grabbed a pair of scissors and cut my pants off. Then he moved for my underwear.

I fought so hard the straps almost cut my skin.

“No,” he finally answered. “I don’t care. Now let’s get this over with.”

“Get what over with?”

“I’m going to check your sexual health. It’s important information for the auction.”

“My sexual health?”

“Yes. Are you a virgin?”

I gave him a defiant look. Like I would ever tell him.

“Let me put it this way. The more you tell me, the less invasive I have to be.” He held up two fingers.

I knew what that meant. “No.”

“How many partners?”

“Two.” I hated myself for answering.

“Anal?”

“Anal what?”

“Have you ever had anal intercourse?”

Who the hell had? “No.”

He wrote down some notes. “Any STDs?”

“No.”

“Are you on the pill?”

“I was until I was kidnapped.” My voice was more poisonous than snake venom.

He set the chart down then positioned himself at my entrance. “This will only take two minutes.”

“Don’t fucking touch—”

He stuck two fingers inside me and felt around, checking my channel as well as my ovaries. He swabbed a Q-tip inside me and deposited it into a plastic bag. Then he removed his gloves. “Done.”

I'd been touched against my will, and I hated it. I hated the fact I had no rights. I was tired of people trying to rape me all the time. I hated the fact I was so close to freedom, and I made the mistake of turning back. I saw red—deep, crimson red. I wanted to kill every single man on the ship.

If I had a gun, I would do it.

I was drugged before being transported onto land. I had no idea where they took me or how I got there. I assumed we went by car, but I didn't remember feeling the vibration of an engine or listening to the sounds of a radio. A dark sack was over my head, so I couldn't see anything even if I wanted to.

When I woke up, I was in a bedroom. The bed actually had a frame and contained quality sheets. There was a window with closed curtains made of ivory fabric. A dresser sat in the corner, designed with the same color.

Where was I?

I jumped out of bed and immediately headed to the window. I threw the curtains open and prepared to jump out. If it was a twenty-foot drop, I was still going for it. I could crawl down the side, using a drainpipe if I had to.

But when the curtains parted, I saw nothing but metal bars.

I was trapped—again.

The door opened and a woman entered—a beautiful one. She had luscious dark hair, perfect makeup, and a figure that would make all women envious. “I was wondering when you were going to wake up.”

I stared at her in surprise. Sarcastic words wouldn't help me. Idle threats wouldn't do much either. I had no idea what I was dealing with. During my journey across the world, I hadn't come across a free woman—until now. “Who are you?”

“Your stylist. And I'm going to turn this...” She pointed at my hair and my clothes. “Around.”

“Excuse me?”

“The auction is tonight, and we have a lot to do. So let's get to it.”

“The auction?” The one the men told me about?

“Yes. You'll be bought...along with a few others.”

“Uh, I don't think so.” I was getting the hell out of there.

She sighed, like she'd been anticipating this. “Look, I'm just doing my job. Don't make this more difficult for me, and I won't make this more

difficult for you.”

How could she say that to me? This was a worse betrayal than being kidnapped in the first place. “I’ve been kidnapped, and I’m going to be sold so I can be raped. And you’re cool with that? As a woman?”

Sympathy never entered her eyes. “Sometimes we’re the bug. Sometimes we’re the windshield.”

“Then why don’t you be the damn bug?” I snapped.

She held up a remote and hovered her thumb over it. “Don’t make me use this.”

“What is it?”

She pressed the button, and the second she did, electricity shot up and down my leg. It was so hot it burned against my skin. My heart palpitated, and I thought I would have a heart attack and die. I crumpled to the floor, my knees growing weak.

She released the button. “Don’t make me do it again. I’m not like those beasts. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She was a freak just like the rest of them.

“Just do what I say, and let me work on you.” She stood over me, looking down at me in her designer dress. “We won’t have any problems if you listen to me. And the more beautiful you are, the more likely you are to attract a good master.”

“A good master?”

“Yes. The kind that lavishes you with gifts, takes you on expensive trips, lets you have whatever you want—”

“In exchange for opening my legs.”

She shrugged. “There are worse things, if you ask me.”

“Then you’ve never been a slave,” I snapped.

“Actually, I have.” She looked me in the eye, the shame and pain absent. “I’m a slave now. He’s a wonderful man. And I can honestly tell you I love him.”

Just when I thought I met a normal person, she turned out to be a psycho. No one in their right mind would love their master. No one would ever forgive them for turning them into a slave. No one in their right mind would feel thankful. She had a serious case of Stockholm syndrome.

“Now let’s get to work.”

Chapter Four

Pearl

Ten girls were auctioned that evening.

The room was filled with a sea of tables lit by candles. Men sat in their designer suits, their faces covered with masquerade masks that hid their features from view of their competitors. It was so dark in there that the disguise was unnecessary.

Waitresses walked around and retrieved their drinks, wearing nothing but black thongs. The men tucked cash into their G-strings and gave them a gentle pat on the ass as they walked away.

How the hell did I get here?

The other women were beautiful beyond understanding. They looked like models, the kind of people you would only see on TV. A lot of them were scared, their fingers twitching and their knees shaking. But one woman actually seemed excited, like this was the moment she spent her whole life preparing for.

There were so many degrees of sickness.

I was dressed in a short, champagne-pink dress. It had a sweetheart top and was tight around my waist. A necklace of pearls was around my neck, and my hair was done in fancy curls. The last time I got a makeover like this was for prom.

One by one, the girls were auctioned off. Each one went for a million dollars or more.

A million.

That was insane.

Slaves were worth that much?

Would someone actually pay that kind of money for me? Someone was going to pocket a million dollars off my life?

How sick was that?

When it was my turn, I walked up to the stage and awaited my fate. The emcee listed my qualities like he did with the others. I was interested to know what he would say since I didn't have any.

I wouldn't be submissive. I would fight every single day until I was free or dead. I would never conform to sick sexual favors. Every single day would be more work than the last. I would be the worst slave one could possibly have. Sleeping with one eye open would be the only way to survive with me in the house.

“Hostile, unbreakable, feisty.” He continued to list my imperfections. “Fight score is an even ten.”

A collective sound of acknowledgment filled the room. There were even a few whistles.

What did that mean? Was that bad? Was that good?

If no one bought me, would they let me go? Or would they just kill me?

“Two partners.” He read from the piece of paper in his hands. “Engineer. Sexual experience is limited.”

I’m not a virgin. So no, my experience was not limited. But I wasn’t going to argue because that didn’t matter.

“The bidding is now open.” He stepped back to the podium and ran the bidding. He set the price, and it slowly increased as more men bid on me. I was disgusted when I saw the same man who bought another woman bid on me as well. Did he really need two slaves?

The number kept climbing until it reached a million.

Holy shit.

Instead of slowing down, it kept going. The bid rose higher and higher, and testosterone swirled in the room. Someone in there was going to make a fortune off my suffering. He was going to have more money than any person needed—and I would be paying that debt until I died.

“You’re all sick fucks.” I couldn’t keep the disdain from leaving my lips. I didn’t care if I was slapped right then and there. I was a human being, and I was being treated like a farm animal.

One man who’d been bidding on me rose to his feet. He held up his number and said, “Three million.”

What the fuck did I just do?

All the men turned to him, yielding the floor.

No one else challenged his bet. Their markers were set down.

The man who just won smiled. “Three million dollars for the feisty cunt.”

The emcee slammed the hammer down. “Three million to the gentleman in the back. Congratulations. This beauty is yours.”

Like I was a suspect in a criminal investigation, I was handcuffed and placed in the back seat of a black car with tinted windows. I still wore my gown and

pearls. My matching pink heels were uncomfortable on my feet, but I suspected I would be a lot more uncomfortable shortly.

The driver got behind the wheel and waited for his client to join us.

I hadn't seen his face, but I didn't need to. When he outbid everyone so arrogantly, I knew he was an unforgivable beast. If I begged him to let me go, he would refuse. If I pleaded for him not to hurt me, he wouldn't listen.

Hopefully, I was wrong.

He didn't seem like the type of man looking for a beautiful woman to spoil. He didn't seem like someone who wanted to show me off at a dinner party, buying me expensive gowns and jewelry. I detected evil from him.

Pure evil.

He finally joined me in the back seat without putting on his safety belt. He kept his mask on, hiding most of his features.

I stared straight ahead, my hands behind my back. If I could flip my arms forward, I could choke the driver in front of me. Maybe he would crash, and we would all die. Or better yet, they would die, but I'd get out just fine.

It was a nice fantasy.

The car pulled away from the building and merged into traffic. We were on the opposite side of the road compared to what I was used to. The streets were narrow and the car petite. I wasn't sure where we were, but we were definitely in Europe.

When we were a mile away from our destination, my captor removed his mask. His blue eyes were bright and blue, the kind that twinkled under the starlight. For a moment, they made him look innocent. But after a single blink, the evilness in his soul shined through. He stared at me like I was prey and he was the hunter. Tension filled the air, the warning deep in my heart.

He had blond hair that was combed back, revealing his round face. He had thin lips, the kind that were hardly noticeable. His face was covered with a thick layer of hair, reminding me of a lumberjack in winter.

He stared at me coldly, about to pounce.

I held his gaze, swearing then and there I would murder him if he tried to touch me.

"Your name?" His voice sounded just as cruel as it did during the bidding. It was raspy, like sandpaper rubbing against concrete. It scratched my eardrums as it traveled inside my body. Even those simple words were grotesque. My hatred increased tenfold—something I didn't think was possible.

I refused to answer him. I refused to comply. If he wanted me to do anything, he'd have to work for it—without any reward.

He chuckled and leaned back into the leather seat. “You’re going to be so much fun. I love it.”

Fun? The second he shoved his dick into my mouth, I was going to bite it off.

“Your name will be cunt.” He looked out the dark windows and stared at the lights from the passing buildings. He wore a black suit with a black collared shirt underneath, looking just as formidable as he sounded. “Unless you tell me otherwise. Between you and me, I hope you don’t.”

This was bad. Very bad.

His head turned my way, and he watched my reaction. He wanted to see fear. He wanted to see terror.

But I refused to give him what he wanted.

“I couldn’t believe my luck when the emcee said your fight score. It seemed too good to be true. That hardly ever happens.”

I still didn’t know what a fight score was. Was it because I killed someone? I wasn’t innately dangerous. But when I had to run for my life, I’d do anything to survive.

“And then you told the room we were a bunch of sick fucks.” He chuckled to himself. “I’ve never been so hard in my life.”

I wanted to hurl.

“My cock has never soared to life like that. There you stood, a beautiful woman with perfect features in a dazzling gown. And then that mouth turned dirty, and you spoke your mind.” His trousers pressed tightly against him when his cock hardened. His hand reached for my thigh where he gave it a gentle squeeze.

Repulsed, I slammed my thigh to the side so his hand would fly off.

He must have expected that to happen because he pulled away, chuckling again. “I’m going to have such a good time breaking you in. You’re like a wild stallion that no one can saddle. You’re like the bull that can’t be ridden.”

Fear crept into my veins and circulated in my blood. When it reached my heart, I was momentarily paralyzed. Being prisoner to this man would test my full strength. I would be subjected to such cruelty that I may not make it out—with an intact mind. But I couldn’t give in to the fright. I had to keep fighting. Every problem had a solution—and I would find one now.

“When we get back to the house, I’m going to fuck you so hard in the ass you won’t be able to sit for a week. Consider it a welcoming gift.” He looked out the window like his words weren’t as terrifying as he made them sound.

“And when we get back to the house, I’m going to kill you. Consider it a parting gift.”

He turned back to me when he heard me speak. Instead of slapping me for talking back or telling me off, he smiled. It was a grotesque look, like my back talk just made him more excited to torture me. “I like a challenge.”

Chapter Five

Crow

We stood in the alleyway, a single streetlight on in the distance. It was some unearthly hour between sunset and sunrise. No cars were on the streets. No people on the sidewalks. When the light was gone, the monsters came out.

Cane stood beside me, the bag of money at his feet. He glanced at his black watch and checked the time. “He’s late.”

“I knew he would be late.” He always liked to make an entrance, to make people wait in anticipation. It was the only respect he could gain—by force.

My heart was beating dangerously slow. Just before danger, I was always calm. It was written in my blood since birth. Life-or-death situations were the kinds I thrived on. But when I was alone in my palace, that’s when the fear kicked in. The paranoia settled, and I couldn’t shake it off. I needed to break something just to stay relaxed. I needed to cause pain just to feel good.

My men gathered around us and formed a protective layer. The rule for the meeting was to come alone. But no one ever came alone. I wasn’t sure why we bothered saying it.

Cane looked at his watch again, the irritation deep in his eyes. “She’s dead.”

“Don’t say that.” No point in mourning someone unless it was a fact they were gone. I refused to go through the motions of heartbreak when it was unnecessary. It was so difficult for me to care about anything as it was. My body became frozen a long time ago.

And it never thawed.

“She’s dead, and we both know it.” When he looked at me, there was resignation on his face. “Sick fucks like him don’t just let people go. He’s toying with us. I know it.”

“We aren’t the kind of people he wants to toy with.”

“And that’s exactly why he’s doing it.”

Finally, activity happened. Black Hummers pulled up at the end of the alleyway. No one left their vehicles until the lights had been extinguished. Soldiers hopped out of their vehicles, carrying assault rifles.

One of the men opened the back door of a vehicle and out she came.

Vanessa.

Even from here and in the darkness, I could see the infinite bruises covering her body. Her arms were black and blue, scars on top of scars. The

corner of her mouth was caked with dried blood from being slapped so many times. Her eyes were black from being punched. She could barely stand because her muscles had atrophied, and she was weaker than I'd ever seen her.

I saw red.

I couldn't think about what he'd done to her. I couldn't think about the months of torment he made her suffer. All those nights I slept, she was being whipped and beaten.

He was constantly on the move and virtually untraceable. I worked tirelessly to get her back. I put off work just to make it happen. Even when everything seemed hopeless, I didn't give up.

Because she wouldn't give up on me.

The ruthless tycoon hopped out of the vehicle behind her.

My hand immediately went to my gun. It took all my strength not to draw and fire a shot right at his temple. I daydreamed about his blood spraying the soldier behind him. I fantasized about his body hitting the cold pavement. I relished it like a dream come true.

"Crow." Cane brought me back to reality with just a word. "Think about our sister."

My hand squeezed the gun before I released it.

He grabbed Vanessa by her hair as he walked her forward. She was in a flimsy bra and old underwear, covered in dirt and sludge. She didn't look like the same person I remembered. He could be handing over a completely different woman, and Cane and I wouldn't know it.

"Here she is." He pushed her forward, making her fall to the pavement.

She whimpered as her bare knees collided with the ground.

It was her. I recognized her voice.

My spine tightened in ferocity. I was so angry I could breathe fire. I wanted to drop a nuclear bomb and kill us all. It would accomplish nothing but death, but I still relished the idea.

"I brought my end of the bargain." He stood in a black suit with a black collared shirt underneath. "Where's yours?"

I nodded to one of my men.

They placed the bag of cash on a crate with wheels then gave it a hard push. It traveled across the distance separating us until it reached their end of the alleyway.

One of his men opened the bag and counted every single bill, making sure he received each penny that was due. He used a machine to quickly count it and make sure it wasn't counterfeit.

Time dragged on forever.

Vanessa slowly rose to her feet, her knees red from the collision against the ground. The strong and proud woman I used to know was completely gone. She was broken beyond repair. Even though we were getting her back, she would never be the same. She would be fucked up forever after the terrible things she experienced. She looked at Cane and me then started to cry.

My sister never cried.

She was made of the same stuff we were. She was hard as steel and ruthless as fuck. You could break all of her fingers, and she still wouldn't crack. But she'd experienced enough to make her break—a million times over.

"You got your money." I placed my hand on my gun. "Now let her go." When she was back to safety, I would take a shot. I didn't care at this point. My blood screamed for murder. I had to do it. I had to annihilate him.

"You heard them, sweetheart." He pushed her forward again. "Go."

She wobbled on her feet before she found her footing. Then she slowly walked away, taking forever. She glanced behind her like she wasn't sure if it was a sick game.

"Vanessa." Power rang in my voice. I needed to bring her back to the present. I needed her to cross the distance between us before that sick motherfucker changed his mind. I pulled my gun out of the holster, just in case.

She turned to me, tears in her eyes.

"Get your ass over here now." We could deal with her problems later. Right now wasn't the time for her emotional abuse. "Move it."

She walked faster, reaching the halfway point. Her arms circled her waist to fight off the chill. Her bare feet hit puddles of water, but she didn't seem to care. Her body was numb to everything.

She was almost there, back on the right side of this battle. We would take her to the hospital and check her in at a mental facility. Without hearing a single word from her, I knew she wasn't the same person. The woman I knew as my sister was dead. Now all I had left was her corpse.

"She's taking too long." He pulled a gun out of his pocket.

“Fire!” Cane reacted quicker than I did and aimed his gun.

I’d been concentrating on her, and his movement escaped my notice.

He pointed the gun directly at my sister and fired.

I had a nanosecond to react. All I could do was charge. I ran to her as fast as I could, the muscles in my legs screaming from the exertion. My hands grabbed her frail body, and I shoved her to the ground.

But it was too late.

Her head jerked forward as the bullet entered the back of her skull, making blood spray through the front. It got all over my face and jacket. Her eyes locked to mine just before the darkness descended. Then she was gone, dead before she hit the ground.

I knew she was dead, but I couldn’t accept it. I shook her, hoping she just passed out. I pressed my ear to her chest and listened for a heartbeat. I listened for a breath. I listened for anything that would tell me she was alive.

There was nothing.

Gunfire erupted around me as the battle raged. I momentarily forgot about the war. I forgot about everything altogether when I saw my little sister dead on the concrete.

The Hummers pulled out of the alleyway and took off, taking their leader with them. Shots still rang in my ears, and some of the soldiers were taken out. We lost some of our own. Maybe a few more of them would have been saved if I hadn’t lost my focus.

Cane jogged to me when the coast was clear. He kneeled beside me and looked at our dead sister. She looked like a beaten whore tossed out after being used. He breathed hard as he stared at her, not shedding a single tear.

I didn’t either. A lifetime in this business made me forsake human emotion. I didn’t understand sadness or despair. I didn’t understand happiness or joy. All I understood was rage.

And that’s what I felt now.

My brother said one word. And that word was enough to tell a complete story. He told me what we would do to the man who butchered our family. He told me what our next move was. “Bones.”

Bones fucked with us. And it was our turn to fuck with him.

Chapter Six

Pearl

He made good on his promise and fucked me just the way he said he would. I fought him as hard as I could, but he tied me down with painful ropes and shoved his dick inside me.

It hurt.

All I could do was lie there and take it.

I felt disgusting.

Dirty.

I wanted to cry, but I refused to. I refused to give him that satisfaction. He didn't deserve my screams or my tears. He wanted to break me because he knew it would be a challenge.

But I wouldn't budge.

When he was finished, he took me again and again. The night passed in agony, and I thought I would rip in half, right down the middle. By the time he was satisfied, I was barely conscious. I could only lie on my stomach because my backside hurt so much. And I knew I couldn't even consider using the bathroom again.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to my ear. "I'm going to do that every single day until you cry for me. And between you and me, I hope you don't." He smacked my ass before he walked out.

When I was finally left alone, I went to the bathroom and cleaned myself up. I was covered in his come, and he'd penetrated me so many times I actually bled. I got into the shower and stood under the warm water because it was my only safe place. I had a bedroom, but it didn't have a door. He could come in whenever he pleased. But whenever I was in the bathroom, he didn't bother me.

Rape was a lot more painful than I realized. I finally understood what it meant when people said it wasn't a crime of passion but one of violence. He didn't get off on being inside me. He got off knowing I was in immense pain.

I knew being in captivity would be degrading, painful, and scarring. But I had no idea how bad it would be. My captor was a psychopath, and he would do a lot worse things to me the longer I stayed there.

It'd only been a few days, and I already wanted to crack.

I wanted to sob my heart out and pray for a miracle.

I wanted to curl into a ball and die.

I wanted to forget who I was and travel somewhere else, drift into a realm where thoughts didn't exist. I just wanted to be there, hovering on a level of semiconsciousness.

But I had to stay strong. I had to follow the plan I laid out for myself. I needed to find a weapon and kill him. That's all I had to do then I could run out of there and return home. I could return to Jacob. I could return to my job. I could return to sleeping soundly at night, knowing I would never be hurt.

You can do this, Pearl.

Just focus.

He can take your body but not your mind.

Eyes on the prize.

He liked to beat me.

I think he liked that more than fucking me.

He loved to play hide-and-seek. I would run off into his elaborate mansion and try to find a place where he wouldn't find me. And he came looking for me—a bat in his hands.

When he found me—which he always did—he beat me until I passed out.

He loved to tie me up and whip me, slash me into submission. He liked to make me bleed, and when he saw my blood ooze from my skin, he made me bleed even more. He got off on a lot of sick things.

I was his plaything. I wasn't human. He treated me like a rag doll he could throw around.

Someone made three million dollars off of this.

He probably had a yacht in the Mediterranean, a beach house in Sardinia, and a Lamborghini in his garage.

While I was smacked around.

When I got out of there, I would hunt him down. I would find him and get that three million dollars. I didn't care about the money. But I earned it. It was mine. No one should benefit from my enslavement other than me.

I just had to get out of there.

I wasn't sure what he did for a living, but he must do something important to own a castle. It was in the midst of a city, but I couldn't determine where. The bars over the windows prevented my escape, but I could still look outside. It was definitely Europe. Without any distinctive

landmarks in sight, I couldn't determine exactly where I was. Maybe France. Maybe Italy. It didn't matter. Either one of those places would have an American Embassy. All I had to do was get there and tell them I'd been kidnapped. Then I'd be on the first plane back to the States. When I got there, I would never leave again.

My tormentor was gone during the day, or at least, in a place where I couldn't access. Guards patrolled the inside of the house, watching all the exits and windows. Cameras were placed in every room—including my bedroom. I didn't have a single ounce of privacy. He watched every little move I made—like a dog.

I spent my time in my room, savoring the sweet hours until he returned from whatever the fuck he was doing. Every day, he took me viciously. The only exception to that was when he was sick. So far, that only happened once.

There were no clocks or electronic devices in the house besides a sound system built into the walls. I had no idea how long I'd been there. It felt like an eternity, but it could have only been a few weeks. A month, perhaps.

But it felt like a lifetime.

Since there was nothing to do during the day, I took a lot of naps. I spent my free time recovering from the injuries I'd sustained. My ribs hurt in all the places he kicked me, and my back was scarred with welts. He took off his belt and beat me with it, marking up my ass most of all.

I noticed he never hit my face—at least not hard enough to make it bruise. And he never injured me from the knees down. My shoulders and arms were spared too. My back and ass took most of the damage.

Perhaps he didn't want anyone to know what he did to me.

There was some hope in that. If a visitor came to the house, I could tell them I was being held captive. I could show them all my marks and bruises. They would call the cops for me. No one could hear that and do nothing.

I knew he was home when his voice shook the house. "Where's my little cunt?"

What a cute nickname.

A moment later, he walked into my bedroom, wearing a crisp suit like he just left an honorable business meeting. He must make his cash from criminal activities. That was my best guess. No one had that kind of wealth unless they were breaking the law.

He approached the bed and grabbed me by the ankle, forcefully dragging me to the edge until I was underneath him.

I hated how strong he was.

“Miss me?”

“Even if you were dead, I wouldn’t miss you.” I kicked his hand away and pulled back.

Every time I defied him, he seemed to like it. “I’ll lash you for that later. But for now, there’s something we need to discuss.”

This should be good.

“Francine.” He snapped his fingers like he was beckoning to a dog.

A young woman obediently walked inside the room. She wore designer clothing and had silky smooth hair. She reminded me of the stylist who gave me a makeover before the auction. “I’m ready, sir.”

“My little cunt, this woman is going to get you ready for tonight. I’m having a dinner party and would like to invite you as my guest.”

A dinner party? That meant other people would be there? It sounded too good to be true.

“Cooperate,” he commanded. “Give her any grief, and I’ll hang you until you pass out.”

Been there, done that. It wasn’t fun.

“Got it?”

“Fuck off.” That was my usual response. I didn’t care to change it.

He turned to her, amused. “She’s a bit of a handful.”

“I can see that,” she said with a smile.

Now I turned my glare on her. “You know I’m a slave, and you continue to work for him? You know how easily it could have been you instead of me? You’re sicker than he is.”

Francine swallowed my words without even a slight reaction. They bounced off her expressionless face, evaporating into the air. “She needs a collar.”

Excuse me?

“Otherwise, I won’t work on her.” Francine crossed her arms over her chest and stared at me like I was a nuisance. She wasn’t getting paid enough to deal with me.

I actually felt sorry for her—not.

“You’re right,” he said in agreement. “That works for me.” He pulled a metal band out of his pocket. It looked just like a silver bracelet, unadorned and boring. He clasped it around my wrist then placed a remote against it, locking it to me.

I knew what it was. I'd worn one of these things once before.

Asshole.

He handed the remote to Francine. "She shouldn't give you any trouble now. But watch her. If you plan to cut her hair, tie her down. She'll snatch anything."

Whether she was an innocent person or not, I'd take her out if I had to. She was there by choice, so that put her directly in my way. And anyone in my way had to be removed.

"I understand." She had a lyrical voice, the kind you would hear during a song.

Why didn't my captor want her instead of me? She was prettier. Had bigger tits. What was his fascination with me? Why didn't he just tie her down and keep her as a new toy?

In that moment, I realized I still didn't know my tormentor's name. I never asked, and he never told me. I still didn't care to know what it was. But maybe it would come in handy later. When I went to the embassy, my primary goal was to be free. But my secondary one was to take him out.

For that, I needed a name.

Francine gave me a complete makeover. She changed my hair, cutting the long and dead strands. She supplied an endless line of care products into the layers, giving it a glow full of life. It had a healthy shine, just the way hers did. She curled it at the ends, making everything bend inward to frame my face. After that, she did my makeup. She lengthened my eyelashes and dabbed them with mascara. Layer after layer was applied, and soon I was transformed into a different person. My eyes were wide and distinctive. My lips were painted a ruby red, contrasting against my fair face. With the foundation she brought, she was able to hide every single flaw I possessed. If you looked at me, you would never know I was being raped and beaten on a daily basis. You wouldn't assume how much I suffered constantly. I looked like a normal person.

"I understand his obsession with you." Francine ran her fingers through my dark brown hair. "You really are beautiful. You know, the natural kind. You don't need makeup and nice clothes to look gorgeous. But, of course, it helps."

I glared at her in the mirror. “Wow, I feel so much better now.”

She ignored my sarcasm. “Now we just need to put on the gown, and you’ll be ready for dinner.”

That was the one nice thing about my captivity. He didn’t starve me. I could eat when I wanted and however much I wanted. His goal was to hide my abusive circumstances by keeping my waistline at a healthy level. If I were smart, I would starve myself until death took me. But I was too weak for that. I loved food way too much.

Francine returned with a floor-length gray gown. It had a deep opening in the front, showing off my cleavage. The designer name wasn’t printed anywhere, but I knew it was a one of a kind. Whoever was coming to dinner was important.

“I’m not wearing that.”

“Come on...” She tried to remember my name but realized she didn’t know it. The only name she knew was cunt. “I don’t want to use the Taser but I will. Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I won’t hurt you.”

I eyed the dress in her hands before I glared at her. “When I get out of here, I’m going to hunt you down and kill you for saying that to me.”

Her lips remained tightly pressed together, and her eyes didn’t change. Those words didn’t affect her in the least. “You want to be treated better? It’s not that difficult to make it happen.”

“By escaping?”

“No. You want Bones to treat you better? Then give him a reason to.”

Bones? That was his name? That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. “Damn, could he pick a worse name?” I actually laughed for the first time since being imprisoned.

“They call him Bones for a reason.” She continued to hold the dress, but her patience was waning. “He keeps one bone from every victim. He has an entire display in this house—a reminder to what happens to those who cross him.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat when I pictured that room. I imagined femurs and tibias glued to the walls. I imagined hands and feet sticking out of black chests. The thought was so demented it sent a shiver down my spine.

“Don’t be his next victim. You think he treats you bad? You haven’t seen his full potential.”

How much worse could it get?

“Soon, he’ll break your leg just to make you scream. He’ll make you limp around the house for a week, forcing you to get a glass of scotch or a TV remote just to watch you struggle. Only when he finally grows bored of it will he call the doctor.”

Now I was officially freaked out.

“Yes, it can be much worse. So be thankful.”

How could I be thankful? My captor was even sicker than I realized. It was only a matter of time before he grew bored with his usual torments and graduated me to a new level of pain.

Despite how much it hurt my pride, I asked the question that might save my life. “How do I make him treat me better?”

She smiled, victorious. “You’re a smart girl. I thought you might be, despite that tongue of yours.”

“Are you going to answer me or what?”

She beckoned me out of the chair and pulled the dress over my head. She turned me around and zipped up the back, making it snug around my waist. She smoothed out the layers. It fit like it was made just for me. Then she placed a silver necklace around my throat, perfecting my appearance.

I didn’t recognize myself in the mirror. It was the first time I’d looked clean in a very long time. I took showers every day, but I didn’t have hair supplies. I didn’t have anything that could remotely be used as a weapon. Even a hair dryer was off-limits, so I had to dry it with a towel. The clothes I wore were flimsy and old, like a slave before me had worn them. The transformation was prominent, just like a caterpillar to a butterfly. I was a different person now.

She placed her hands on my shoulders and looked at my face in the mirror. “It’s simple. Make him fall in love with you.”

Bones called for me to join him downstairs for dinner. I wore the silver gown and the expensive jewelry, along with a pair of heels that made me three inches taller.

Francine said I should make him fall in love with me. But could a villain, a psychopath, feel anything remotely close to love? Would he ever care for me? See me as a human being? It would be nice not to be smacked around

and raped every single day. If I made him fall hard enough in love with me, would he let me go?

Was that a possibility?

I walked down the grand staircase and kept my hands on the rail so I wouldn't trip. I wasn't used to wearing heels, and I wasn't used to walking downstairs in them either.

"Ahh...there she is." Bones rose at the head of the table. Four men sat with him, drinking scotch and whiskey. They all wore dark suits similar to the one he donned. They rose to their feet and watched every step I took.

The men looked just as frightening.

I reached the bottom of the staircase and came to his side, being obedient for the first time.

He smiled when he looked me up and down, appreciating what Francine had done with me. She started with nothing and made me into someone who wasn't repulsive. He took my hand, and for the first time ever, he brought it to his lips and kissed my knuckles.

I still wanted to throw up.

"Let me introduce you to my friends." He pulled out the chair next to his and helped me sit down.

I didn't know he had such manners.

"This is Alfonso, Ricardo, Jermaine, and Simon."

Each man bowed his head in recognition when he was introduced.

"You may address her as Slave." Bones poured me a glass of wine. "Because that's exactly what she is."

My face blanched when I understood what he said. He introduced me as a slave, which meant these men knew exactly what I was. They didn't care that I was kidnapped. They didn't care that my life had been taken away from me. They didn't even blink when they heard what Bones said.

Was this the kind of world I lived in?

"Slave just joined me a month ago," Bones said. "She's adjusted quite nicely. She's fierce and combative. It's the first time I've ever seen a slave with a backbone. That's how I knew I had to have her."

Alfonso sat across from me, and he took a long drink of his whiskey as he stared me down. He eye-fucked me just the way that man on the ship did—just before I broke his dick.

"She actually killed one of the men who captured her," he said proudly. "Stole a gun then shot him in the stomach."

Ricardo nodded, impressed. "She's got a fight in her."

There was a knife beside my plate. It wasn't a steak knife, but it still had a serrated edge. I could stab one of them in the jugular and make him bleed out and die. Of course, Bones would be my first victim. But the other men were bound to have guns, and they would take me out instantly.

"She's a beautiful gift," Simon said. "We appreciate it."

"That's how we do business, boys." Bones raised his glass in a salute then drank.

A beautiful gift? What the hell did that mean?

A waiter brought out our dishes and placed them in front of each of us. It was tender veal with rice and vegetables. I didn't care for veal, but I didn't have a choice but to eat it. If I didn't, I'd get slapped.

I couldn't stop thinking about what he said. I was a gift. Did he intend to share me for the night? The idea was even more repulsive than being with Bones alone. These men didn't have limits. They could use me until I was barely functioning because they got to leave right afterward.

But would Bones buy me for three million dollars then share me?

"You'll service them just the way you service me." He pushed the glass of wine closer to me, demanding I take a drink.

Now it was confirmed. "If any of these men touch me, I'll bite their body parts off."

Bones didn't take my threat seriously. In fact, he laughed. "That's sweet. She doesn't want to be with anyone else but me."

All the men laughed together.

This was anything but funny.

"I'm serious," I snapped. "Touch me and I'll kill you."

"Since you're going to be hanging from the ceiling, I'd like to see you try," Alfonso warned.

I stared at his deep brown eyes and felt sick to my stomach. It was the cargo ship all over again. I wasn't just going to be raped by one man but four more. I turned back to Bones, hating him more than I already did. "You spent a lot of money on me just to loan me out. Not a very good investment."

"My slaves only last for a few years." He said it so simply, like we were discussing his upcoming vacation plans. "They usually die from internal injury or illness."

My hand went for the knife at lightning speed. I didn't care if I died tonight. I'd rather die from a gunshot to my head than a hernia.

Bones snatched my wrist like he'd been expecting me to do that. "What a shame. I thought you were learning." He didn't let go of my wrist. He kept it in his grasp, silently threatening me.

The anticipation was worse than the pain itself.

With brutality, he twisted it, causing my eyes to water from the pain. I leaned over the table, trying not to scream as he sprained my wrist with a flick of his own. "You'll suck their cocks until your lips are red and puckered. You'll be fucked in your ass as well as your cunt. And you'll be beaten to within an inch of your life. So enjoy your dinner while you still can." He released my wrist with a forceful shove, pushing me back into the chair.

The men ate like nothing had happened. The violent way Bones just treated me meant nothing to them. Their appetites weren't suppressed. In fact, they looked even hungrier.

My wrist throbbed so much I couldn't even use it.

Bones pointed at my plate. "Eat. Now."

I didn't defy him again. I used my left hand to eat even though I lacked any sort of appetite. I tried to keep my tears back as the horrifying truth settled on my shoulders. I was about to be raped—by four strangers at once.

Chapter Seven

Crow

I sat in front of the fireplace in my study and watched the flames dance. They cracked and popped, sending sparks deep into the hearth. The countryside was covered in fog from the lingering winter. Sunshine was rare.

My decanter of brandy sat beside me on the table, and I poured another glass, putting myself into a deeper stupor with every drink. The brandy was aged and fine, the best I'd ever tasted. Each bottle cost a fortune, but I refused to drink anything else.

Brandy was my only friend.

I stared at the paintings on the wall, the originals that were made just for me. They showed the lush countryside, the hills of grapevines that led to the sun peering over the horizon. Houses made of cobblestones appeared in the distance, ancient as time itself.

The paintings used to make me happy.

Now they just made me miserable.

A soft knock sounded on the door.

"Yes?" My servants never opened the door without my permission.

"Cane is here to see you." Patricia's quiet voice echoed through the door.

I didn't want to see my brother. I didn't want to see anyone. The last few times he came by, I dismissed him, refusing to look at him. Pain was better enjoyed alone.

All I wanted was to be alone.

"Tell him I'm busy."

She remained at the door, pausing.

"What is it, Patricia?"

"He said you would say that...and he also said he's not leaving until you see him."

Cane tried my patience just as he did when we were children. "Fine. Send him in."

"Yes, sir." Her departure was announced by her fading footsteps.

I poured another glass and returned my eyes to the flames. I sat in the luxurious armchair, my favorite space to occupy when the depression swallowed me. No one ever sat in the other chair. I wasn't sure why there were two at all.

Cane walked in a few moments later. His beard was thick from not shaving, and his eyes still burned with rage that would never die. He spotted

the brandy on the table and helped himself to a glass—the same way he helped himself to all of my things.

He sat in the other armchair and faced the fire.

For a while, comfortable silence filled the room. Our brotherly camaraderie battled the pain we both felt. But then reality sank in. Our family started with five then went down to four. And then it went down to three.

We were the only two left.

He broke the silence. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen you either.”

“I’d be surprised if you had since you’re avoiding everyone.”

“I’m not avoiding anyone.” I stirred my glass. “I just don’t want to see anyone. I don’t like anyone. There’s a difference.”

“But you didn’t go to Vanessa’s funeral.”

“What’s the point?” I asked coldly. “I said good-bye to her when her brains splattered all over my fucking jacket. I said good-bye to her when her eyes locked with mine just before she slipped away. Cane, I said my good-byes.” I brought the glass to my lips, taking comfort in the liquid that lit me on fire.

“Mom wouldn’t have been happy.”

“Well, she’s dead too. We’ll never know how she would have felt about it.”

“I just think it was cold.”

“I’m a cold person. Shouldn’t be so surprising.”

His eyes moved to the pictures on the wall, the original artwork that covered most of the walls in my house. They were displayed proudly, magnificent pieces that represented the beauty of the world. “Whatever you say, man.” He turned back to the flames, his fingers constantly tapping on his glass. “I think we’ve taken enough time to grieve.”

I never grieved to begin with. “I’ve been ready for revenge since the night she died. I’ve just been waiting for you.”

“Do you have a plan?”

I spent most of my time conjuring possibilities. I didn’t just take my revenge on the people who crossed me. I mutilated them, humiliated them for the whole world to see. I prepared these things quite delicately, biding my time until the perfect opportunity arrived. “I want to do exactly what he did to us—but to him.”

“And what does that mean, exactly?”

“I want to take someone he loves and torment them mercilessly. I want him to try to sleep every night, knowing we have them. That they are being strangled, raped, and beaten into oblivion. And then, when he thinks he’s going to get them back, that’s when we pull the trigger.”

“Sounds fair. But there’s one problem.”

I already knew what that problem was.

“He doesn’t have anyone. No family. No friends. No wife. No kids.”

“Everyone has someone.” Even I had someone at one point.

He shook his head. “He’s ruthless for a reason. He doesn’t love anyone or anything—except power.”

“It’ll happen. We just have to wait for it.”

“Wait how long?” he asked.

My entire lifetime, if I must. Revenge was a marathon, not a sprint. It took time and planning. It took unyielding patience. It had to be just right. It had to be perfect. “As long as it takes.”

Chapter Eight

Pearl

I couldn't move.

Everything hurt. Some things were broken. There was a lot of blood.

Agony.

I passed out a few times, and they injected a stimulator into my system, forcing me to wake up with a jolt. My heart palpitated so hard I almost went into cardiac arrest.

They were far worse than Bones ever was. They took turns tormenting me, beating my head against the wall before they shoved their hairy cocks into my mouth.

It was the worst night of my life.

It made every other day with Bones actually seem tame.

I couldn't handle any more of it. I thought I was strong. I thought I was unbreakable. But I quickly realized just how weak I was. I was folding under the pressure, caving. My dreams were full of nightmares, and I couldn't even find escape in my sleep. Every minute of being alive was torture.

Suicide was my only option.

Unless I could persuade Bones to care for me. If I could get him to appreciate me, even love me, he would grow so jealous he would never let another man touch me. He would feel terrible for hurting me. Maybe he could see me as an equal. Maybe he could pet me instead of slap me.

Maybe everything could be different.

Bones gave me five days to recover. He didn't stop by my bedroom and demand sex. He didn't shove his big dick into my mouth and demand me to suck him. He gave me peace.

For the first time.

I knew I had to take advantage of his mercy and push it as far as it would go. I had to make my move, to manipulate him into thinking I was something worth protecting, not hurting. But what did a man like that want?

He loved my feistiness. He loved my defiance. I had to keep those in order to make him happy. But I had to change something. I had to approach him differently. I had to prove I cared about him—even if I loathed him.

I came down to dinner one night in a nice dress I found in the closet. Someone took care of my laundry, placing all my clean stuff where it belonged. Every night, they came for my hamper, and every morning, they returned my clothes.

The dress was burgundy, looking good on my skin as well as pairing nicely with my hair. I did my own makeup and hair, trying to make myself look as beautiful as Francine made me look.

I hoped it was enough.

Bones sat at the table with his phone in his hand. He read off the screen, scrolling through it like it was an email.

I took the seat beside him, purposely letting my knee touch his.

He looked up when he noticed me. He eyed me up and down, unable to hide the surprise on his face. "You seem to be feeling better."

"I just needed a few days to recover." A plate was set in front of me, and I ate with the manners of a queen.

He kept watching me. "The guys told me they had fun."

"I suspect they did. But I didn't."

He chuckled. "Not surprised."

"I didn't have fun because they weren't you." I tried to sound as convincing as possible.

"Oh, really?" he asked. "You're just as repulsed by me."

"Yes." I had to keep this story believable. Otherwise, it would never work. "But they didn't do things the right way. They didn't take me the way you do. They were boys with no idea what to do when their dicks got hard." I kept up the act by eating, pretending everything was perfectly normal.

When he fell quiet, I knew he was entertaining the idea.

"When you hurt me, I don't like it. In fact, I hate it. But sometimes..." I brought the glass of wine to my lips. "Never mind." I took a long drink, needing the alcohol to steel my nerves.

"No," he whispered. "What?"

"Sometimes...it feels good." I only managed to say that by my determination to survive. I had to do this in order to protect myself. I had to do this if I wanted any kind of future where I wasn't being whipped.

His eyes darkened with lust.

I cut into my meat and ate quietly. "They aren't real men. They aren't what I'm used to."

His hand moved to my thigh under the table.

I turned to him, a glare in my eyes. “You aren’t going to let me finish eating? Are you that barbaric?”

He smiled before he pulled his hand away.

He actually pulled his hand away.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“About me?” He never asked me questions before. The only time he did was when he asked for my name. Other than that, he had no interest in me as a person.

“Yes.”

“There’s not much to say. Ever since I became a slave, my extracurricular activities have gone downhill.”

He chuckled, amused. “What about your life in America?”

“I worked as a mechanical engineer for the state of New York. I helped with building schematics and bridges. I graduated from NYU and lived with my boyfriend for the past year. I don’t have any family because I was taken from my parents and put into protective services when I was ten. I grew up in a foster home until I became an adult.”

“What an interesting life.”

“I guess. Or some might think it’s pathetic.”

“Pathetic?” he asked.

I looked around the dining room. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, made of pure crystal. The wine glasses we drank out of were lined with gold. The silverware and plates were fit for a king. “I’ve never known luxury like this. I’ve never known wealthy people or pretty things. My life must be dull in comparison to yours.”

“Probably,” he said in agreement.

Asshole.

“But I think you’re interesting.”

“Because I have tits and an ass,” I said harshly.

He smiled. “Yes. But for other reasons too.”

“Like what?” I kept eating and tried to hide my excitement. This plan was working. He was forming a bond with me, an affection. I could feel it.

“You’re the first slave I’ve ever had that fights back. All the others give up the second they walk in the door. You have a fire inside you that keeps me warm. You have an intelligence in your eyes that makes you special. You definitely wouldn’t have been trafficked unless you were tricked.”

Unless I was tricked? What did that mean? I held my question back because I didn't want to go on a tangent. This conversation was going so well, and I didn't want to hinder it. It wasn't worth it. "Do you believe in fate?"

"I believe we make our own fate." He drank his scotch.

"Sometimes I think I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. But would that have happened unless it was meant to happen?"

"Under that assumption, that would mean you were meant to be a slave. And I know how much you hate it. It doesn't seem like your belief in fate served you very well."

"But what if I get something out of it?"

"Like what?" he asked incredulously.

"I know you do something illegal." I looked him square in the eye. "I know you make your living doing dishonorable things. What dishonorable things do you do?"

He leaned forward, intrigued. "Why do you ask?"

"Living here has made me drawn to power. I hate being the victim. I hate being the slave. All I wanted to do was hurt Francine. Not because she hurt me but because she thought she was better than me. Everything has made me realize I'm not any different from you. I'm just on the wrong side."

He studied me closely. His eyes searched my face, looking for something I couldn't see.

I hoped he wouldn't call me out on my grandiose lie and beat the shit out of me right there. My body was still healing from the trauma those men put me through. I couldn't take any more torture. I would snap.

But he didn't accuse me of anything. "You like power?"

This was going somewhere, and I had to keep pushing. Instead of answering, I just nodded.

"You want what I have?"

I nodded again.

"Why?"

I didn't have an answer, at least not one that would make sense. "There's no reason. Power is a state of mind. Power is the ability to control people. It's a high you can never come down from. It's a medal you must constantly work for. It's a title that can be stripped. It's just...fascinating. I know I'm stuck where I am, and there's no way I can get out of it. But sometimes...I

picture myself beating someone. Sometimes I picture myself enslaving someone. Sometimes...I get high off just the thought.”

His eyes were glued to mine, and he hardly blinked. Something happened deep inside him. His opinion of me changed, but I had no idea what it became. He downed his scotch before he placed the cup beside his resting hand. “There’s something I want to show you tomorrow.”

“What?” Was it a torture room?

“You’ll see.”

Bones didn’t come to me after dinner. He went into his study and did whatever the hell he did in there. I was left to my own devices, spending the evening in my room alone.

It was nice.

I think something good happened tonight. I think I said the right thing to make him look at me differently. Maybe my hunger for power and my false respect for him changed his opinion of me.

Or maybe he was even more pissed off.

Maybe he planned to take me somewhere horrible the following day. Maybe he planned to take me to work so he could screw me in front of all his employees in the center of the room.

Maybe he planned to kill me and leave my body somewhere.

And then he’d take one of my bones to keep.

Ugh. So disgusting.

The following morning, one of his many servants arrived at my door with an outfit. It was a long-sleeve black dress, heels, and a thick winter coat. “His Grace would like you to be ready to leave in one hour.”

His Grace? They actually called him that? “Okay. Thanks.”

He walked out.

I looked at the outfit Bones bought for me and tried to figure out what we were doing. It came with a coat, so that meant we were going outside.

Outside.

I had a chance to escape. If the chance became available, I was sure as hell gonna take it. Even if he put a bullet in my head, I would have no regrets. I’d rather die trying to escape than sit in this hellhole.

The dress was sleek and thick enough to keep me warm despite the winter chill. The heels weren't appropriate for outside weather. Maybe we weren't going outside after all. Maybe we were just going from one building to the next.

I got ready and tried to make myself as attractive as possible. I didn't want to look sexy—but beautiful. Maybe he would come to respect me if I showed myself off in the right way. He might see me as a partner rather than a pocket pussy.

I met him downstairs near the entrance, the fur coat keeping me warm in the already heated house. He came down the staircase a moment later, wearing the exact same suit I always saw him wear. He never deviated from his wardrobe. It was always a black suit with a black collared shirt underneath. A gray tie was the only contrast in his usual attire.

I tried to keep my face between a mixture of hatred and respect. If I blew too much smoke up his ass, he would know I was full of shit.

He came to my side then grabbed his jacket from the coat rack. He was young to be so wealthy, probably around forty. There didn't seem to be a wife or kids in the picture. But that was a good thing. Who would want to be part of this—voluntarily? “Are you ready?”

He never asked me questions. He just told me what to do. “I am.” He suddenly grabbed me by the chin and directed my stare on his cold eyes. His fingers gripped me tightly, reminding me just how brutal he was. In the past six days, I'd been given a break from his evilness. But now I remembered it was just as paramount as ever. “If you run, I'll fuck you so hard you'll wish you were dead.”

The threat shivered down my spine and made my body cold. I tried not to be afraid of anything, but that statement terrified me. I understood what it was like to be fucked so hard you actually bled. I knew it all too well. I nodded, moving his fingers with my face. “No running.”

He pulled my face to his and gave me a hard kiss on the mouth. It was forceful enough to bruise me. He quickly pulled away then stepped out the front door.

He'd never kissed me before—even in a violent way. Hopefully that counted for something.

We sat on opposite ends of the car.

Bones didn't wear his safety belt when he went places. It was one habit I picked up on. He either thought he was invincible or was prepared to jump out of the car at any instant.

I watched the building pass as we drove into the city. I tried to read the signs and labels I saw everywhere, in an attempt to figure out where I was. I didn't see the harm in asking. He allowed me to leave the house so the circumstance should permit it. "Where do we live?" I worded my question carefully so I would stroke his ego rather than agitate it.

"Alessandria." His eyes were glued to the road.

That didn't help me. "France?"

"Italy. But we're close to France."

I wished I had a map to determine where I was. I didn't even know where the embassy was. I doubted there were several of them. There was probably just one in a major tourist area. "When I was on the cargo ship on the way here from America, I killed that man with a gun. I didn't feel bad for doing it. There was no guilt or remorse. And when I actually enjoyed it, I realized there was something wrong with me."

He turned his head my way, intrigued by the confession. "Taking someone's life is the greatest sign of power."

"One of the men tried to rape me. So I punched him in the dick, and I'm pretty sure I broke it. I doubt he'll ever be able to take a piss again without being in pain."

He laughed quietly, and his hand moved to my thigh. "That's why I like you so much. You're strong. You aren't weak like all those other pathetic women."

Just because they were scared didn't mean they were pathetic. It infuriated me that he spoke of my own kind that way. Women had not been treated as equals for as long as time. But I held back my anger and pretended his words meant nothing to me. I had to focus on what was important. Escape was the priority. I could get my justice later. "What do you do for a living?"

"How do I make money?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm an arms dealer."

I wasn't sure what that meant. Did that refer to weapons? It wouldn't surprise me.

Even though he stared out the window, he understood my confusion. “I create weapons and sell them to the highest bidder. Each weapon is exclusive, so whoever buys it is the only one who has one like it in the world.”

That was a morbid twist of morality.

“People pay me more for the exclusivity.”

I truly was in the presence of a maniac. He was a solicitor of drug warfare. He was the kind of man the United States was always hunting. He was right under my nose. He was the man thrusting inside me.

Disgusting.

“Impressive.” I kept up the façade. “I’m not even sure how to begin an empire like that.”

“It takes time,” he explained. “And money.”

I looked out the window and felt my longing increase. I hadn’t been outside in months. I wanted to feel the breeze in my hair as I moved down the sidewalk. The sunshine needed to touch my skin. I wanted to smell coffee right when I walked into a café. I placed my hand against the glass just to feel the coolness of winter. The mansion I occupied was warm with central heating. But I longed for the frostiness. I longed for the snow.

After twenty minutes of driving, we pulled into a sea of warehouses. They were gated off and inaccessible unless you checked in with the guard up front and provided a code. The guard practically bowed to Bones when he provided his clearance information.

How did a twisted freak like him accumulate so much power? Did money really provide anything you wanted? Would people look the other way for the right price? Is that what the world came down to? Money?

We drove into the complex then arrived at one of the warehouses. It was deep blue and unmarked. There wasn’t a sign or a single address located anywhere. Each building looked identical to the next. How did he tell them apart?

“Come with me.” He extended the crook of his arm.

I eyed it, unsure what to do.

He extended it farther, watching me with disapproval. “Disobey me, and I’ll beat you right here.”

I slipped my arm through his, keeping my eyes averted in a gesture of submission. My hesitation didn’t stem from defiance. I simply didn’t

understand what he wanted. He never gestured to me like that. The only times he wanted me to touch him was when I sucked him off.

We entered the building and saw the factory hard at work. A conveyor belt brought in bits of metal before it was forged and painted under a heavy fire. It went to the next stage where workers assembled pieces together. Like ants within a hill, they worked silently.

I tried to hide my shock, but my face wouldn't cooperate. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was no way this was legal. How did the Italian authorities not understand what was going on? How did they not catch him? The only explanation I could come up with was a bribe. He must have paid them off.

Bones walked me farther into the factory, not acknowledging his employees as he moved. They didn't look at him either, even though they knew exactly who he was. We passed different assembly areas, weaving through several sections. The heat from the factory was uncomfortable. My coat felt too heavy as the humidity stuck to me. Ash was in the air, and it burned my lungs with every breath I took. The workers were in the poorest conditions I'd ever seen.

We rounded a corner and reached a room where men sat along a table. With small brushes, they painted every detail on the metal of the assembled guns, touching up imperfections and making them available for distribution. Masks covered their faces so they didn't inhale paint fumes. Since there was so much filth in the air, what did it matter?

One man sat with his head down at the table. He didn't seem to be tired, but broken. His hand still gripped the brush while the other rested in a bowl of black paint.

Was he okay?

Bones spotted him, and the mirthless glare he showed was enough to get everyone's attention. The men glanced at him but kept working, doing their best to keep their heads down and go unnoticed.

Bones left my side and approached the man slumped over the table. He grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked him harshly. In Italian, he screamed in his face.

I didn't speak Italian and couldn't recognize a single word. But I didn't need to understand the language to know what was being said. Bones's face turned blood red as he screamed into the man's face. It reminded me of the times he screamed at me, just before he smacked me hard across the face.

Bones grabbed him by the collar and dragged him onto the ground. He pressed his dirty boot against the man's head and forced it against the concrete.

Like nothing was going on, the other men continued working. The sound of machines working never faded from the background. The pistons still compressed air, and the conveyer belts still hummed. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

Bones pulled out a pistol and pointed it at the man's head, still screaming in Italian.

My first reaction was to intervene and protect the poor man lying on the floor. But that would blow my cover and probably get me killed as well. There was nothing I could do but stand back and hope this ended in a nonviolent way.

But it didn't.

Bones shot him right in the head. A pool of blood instantly formed underneath the body, and the man's eyes remained rigidly open.

I flinched slightly as the sound echoed off the walls. I felt sick to my stomach. The nausea burned up my throat, and I wanted to pass out. My mind was disturbed, more disturbed by murder than all the terrifying things he did to me. But I had to keep a straight face. I had to keep moving forward. Otherwise, I would never get out. I had to focus on survival.

He blew on the smoking gun before he inserted it into the back of his waistband. He stepped over the body like it wasn't there then returned to me, appraising my face for a reaction.

I held his gaze and remained as stoic as possible, unsure what kind of reaction he wanted.

"That's power." He spoke over the sound of the factory, not caring about the other workers eavesdropping on what he said. "I felt no remorse or guilt. I pulled the trigger and felt good doing it." He echoed my own words back at me, but he missed the context entirely.

I shot someone to survive—not to be a fucking asshole.

He nodded to the workers who didn't break their stride during the commotion. They focused on their tasks, ignoring the dead body oozing out blood. "And they keep on working because they know what happens when they step out of line."

That wasn't power. That was ruling by fear. Big difference.

“The road to absolute power isn’t an easy one. But when you get there, the world bows to you.”

I will never bow to you.

He grabbed my arm and guided me from the room.

I let him take me because I wanted to get away from the body. I wanted to get away from the smell of death. This imprisonment was making me realize just how weak I really was. I always thought I was strong like steel, but now I understood the truth.

I’d never really been tested until now.

When we returned to the mansion, Bones followed me to my room. With every step closer, I feared what would happen next. He’d left me in peace for nearly a week now. Did I have a false sense of security from being spared for so long?

He walked in behind me and removed his clothes, shedding each article onto the floor.

The fear crept in.

Maybe my plan didn’t work at all. Maybe it just made him more obsessed with me. Made him want to hurt me even more.

He came behind me and pulled my jacket off, tossing it on the floor along with his things. Then he unzipped my dress and yanked that off viciously, not caring how expensive it must have been. Money didn’t mean anything when you had enough of it.

He grabbed me by the neck and threw me hard on the bed.

We were back to normal.

He climbed on top of me and smacked me hard in the ass. But it didn’t have the painful bite all the others had. It stung, but not unbearably so. His large hand yanked my underwear off then he shoved himself inside me.

I lay on my stomach and tried to remain calm. The more I fought, the more it hurt.

Bones thrust inside me but not in the violent way he’d done before. If anything, his strokes were gentle. He rocked into me like waves hitting the shore of a lake. He pressed his chest into my back and rested his face in the crook of my neck. He breathed in my scent and moaned as he buried his dick in me.

It was the tamest sex we'd ever had.

I still didn't want it. That was clear by how dry I was. I couldn't mask my repulsion of being taken against my will. His long dick was inside me, and I hated every second of the intrusion. But it was different, somehow.

It was bearable.

I wasn't slapped with a belt or punched in the face. I wasn't fucked in the ass or the mouth. I was taken gently, with fragility. I was a warm body to get off to, but I wasn't a punching bag.

He'd never treated me this well.

Did I succeed? Did I make him look at me in a different way? Would I be shoved around less? Would my existence be more tolerable? If I waited long enough, could I convince him to let me go?

The thoughts swirling in my head distracted me from my current position. I didn't focus on the way he grunted every time he shoved himself inside me. I didn't pay attention to the sweat of his chest as it rubbed against my back. All I thought about was freedom—and how close it was.

Chapter Nine

Crow

I left the path through the olive trees and turned to the dirt road leading up to the house. My chest heaved with the exertion, and the muscles in my legs twitched from the flow of blood.

My morning run was always exactly the same. I waited until the sun barely crested over the hill, blanketing the valley with intermittent sunlight. The grapes on the vines glinted with juice, and the dew on the leaves sparkled. The air had a hint of morning frost, which burned every time it entered my lungs.

I pulled my hood down as I slowed to a walk. The three-story house made of cobblestones looked glorious under the Tuscan sun. The ancient windows hinted at a different time, and the ivy stretching from the ground to the roof on the eastern side made it a masterpiece in the middle of nowhere.

The only time I left my home was for work. There was simply nowhere else I wanted to be.

I came around to the front entrance then ascended the steps leading to the double doors. One of my guards emerged out of nowhere and handed me a cold bottle of water. I took it with a quick nod then walked inside.

“How was your run, sir?” Lars, my butler, greeted me by the door.

“Good.” I took a large drink of water before I stretched my legs.

“Master Cane is here to see you. He’s in the tea room.”

Irritation sprang out of me instantly. “What does he want?”

“He said it’s private.”

That’s what he always said. “I’ll see him after I shower.”

“Of course, sir. What would you like for breakfast?” He followed me to the staircase and took the empty bottle of water from my hand.

“Black coffee. Egg whites.” It was the same thing I ordered every day, but he still insisted on asking.

“It’ll be ready when you return.” He drifted away, the plastic bottle still held in his hand.

“Thank you, Lars.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

I took my time getting ready just to avoid him. My rage had been worse this week than ever before. The nightmares came for me every time I closed my eyes, and Vanessa's dead face was always the main star.

Lars told me to stay active, to exhaust myself out of my dreams entirely. But it didn't matter how much running, boxing, or swimming I did. My dreams always turned out the same—my sister dead in my arms.

I entertained myself with thoughts of the way I would kill Bones. It had to be executed perfectly. Men like us were difficult to break, but I would find a way to make him crack like all the others. Perhaps I would skin him alive. Maybe I would insert needles into his eyes until he was completely blind. Maybe I would chop off his dick and make him watch a pack of hounds eat it—if there was enough to go around.

None of my actions took place without being carefully plotted. I wasn't impulsive or impatient. I needed to wait until I was absolutely certain of my tenth move before I made my first.

I was a bit controlling.

I entered the tea room and saw my brother sitting in the armchair near the fire. Right on cue, Lars brought breakfast and coffee for both of us, silently setting up the table with both grace and speed. He walked out a moment later, shutting the doors behind him.

I took a seat in the other chair but didn't touch anything on the table. We both waited until Lars was gone until we spoke a word to each other. I trusted my employees to take my secrets to the grave, but that didn't mean I gave up information willingly. "What do you want?"

Cane poured himself a cup of coffee and rested his ankle on the opposite knee. He wore a suit and tie because he just left the facility. Despite our genetic link, we looked vastly different from one another. His face wasn't as carved as mine, and his thick muscles made him burly. I was the opposite. My features were clear and distinct, and my body was ripped and toned. I preferred the lean and strong look. I was faster, quicker, and packed a lot of strength in a single punch. If you asked me, my brother's bulkiness made him slower, his reaction time prolonged—which was why I always kicked his ass in a fight. "Are you always this grouchy first thing in the morning? I feel sorry for Lars..." He drank his coffee black, holding the cup by the stem like he was from royalty.

"I'm always this grouchy when I look at you." I poured my coffee and drank it black just the way he did. There was no other way to savor the rich

beans. I'd told him I wanted to be alone—several times. The only person I could stand was Lars. He didn't ask questions. He didn't feel entitled to explanations. He did his job without passing judgment. He just existed alongside me, there when I needed him and absent when he wasn't welcome.

"How was your run?"

I hated small talk. "Is there something you wanted to discuss?"

"Always right to the point..." He pulled a folded piece of paper from the pocket inside his jacket. "I got some intel on Bones."

"Anything helpful?" Maybe he had a special relationship with one of his servants. Maybe he had a soft spot for one of his employees. If there were someone he cared about, we would know.

"Actually, yes. It seems as though Bones bought another slave right after..." He didn't finish the sentence because neither one of us needed to hear it. We didn't wear our hearts on our sleeves because neither one of us had one. "She's American."

"What's your point?" I didn't care who Bones's next victim was. Hopefully, she had a quick and painless death.

"One of our guys on the inside said he brought her to his factory in northern Italy."

I was about to sip my coffee but quickly changed my mind. "He showed everything to her?"

He nodded. "Apparently, he executed a man who had passed out from a seizure. What a show-off." He chuckled and examined the paper. "But that's not the most interesting part. He has tickets to the opera this Saturday. Guess who he's taking with him."

I didn't need the answer. Bones had kept slaves throughout his entire career. They stayed in the house, never to be seen by a witness. He did what he wanted until he discarded them. He never displayed them publicly or treated them as anything but dogs.

This one was different.

"What do you think it means?"

"I'm not sure," Cane answered. "But I can only assume he has a special fondness for this one."

I was drawing the same conclusion.

"You'll never guess how much he paid for her."

I'd never heard anything over a million. "One point five."

He read off the paper, a smile on his lips. "Three."

I held the mug in my hand but didn't take a drink. Steam rose into my face, but I didn't notice it. All I could concentrate on was the sound of my brother's voice. "Three million dollars?"

He nodded. "He went all out for this one."

I couldn't wrap my mind around that. It was the largest bid I'd ever heard—for a slave. It didn't make sense to spend so much money on a slave who would just die in a few years.

"My sources say she's unnatural."

"Unnatural?"

"She's exquisite. Divine. Gorgeous. Something out of this world. One of my guys said she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Long brown hair, blue eyes, and she has legs that stretch on for days." He whistled quietly. "Now I need to see her for myself."

Beautiful women came and went. I'd seen my share of them. I'd fucked my share of them. There was no such thing as a woman so beautiful she would be worth that kind of cash. Perhaps I was just a hard man to impress, but I wasn't mesmerized easily. My heart was made of stone, and it only beat to keep my blood circulating. Even in the throes of passion, my heart beat dangerously slow. My body wasn't interested in love. It was hardly interested in sex. I was only interested in destruction. "I'm sure she's nothing remarkable."

"Well, there must be something remarkable about her," he said. "Even a rich man like Bones hoards his money. He wouldn't shell out that kind of cash unless he had a good reason."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." It didn't matter what Bones's opinion was. We were both evil—but in vastly different ways. Just because he thought this woman was worth something didn't mean I would agree.

"I think we should get a peek ourselves."

My brother's fascination with beautiful women was irritating. His hard cock in his trousers constantly drove him forward. I kept my thoughts to myself, guarding my privacy like it was a treasure full of gold. In my line of business, there was no room for feelings or attachment. When I cared about someone, they usually wound up dead. "I couldn't care less what this woman looks like." Pretty or hideous, it didn't make a difference to me.

"I want to see them together," Cane said. "See how he treats her. That should give us a clue to how he feels about her."

That wasn't a bad idea, actually. If she were just another slave, she wouldn't be there at all. Would she sit beside him like a person? Or would she bow on her knees the entire time, showing off her obedience? Would she fetch him drinks all night? Why would he bring her when he could have one of his many servants serve him? The questions were gnawing at me from the inside out. "Where are they sitting?"

"Left balcony." He read off his notes. "It's private, so even better."

"Is he registered under a pseudonym?"

"Yep."

"Then he won't suspect us." We could just send one of our men to take care of this, but Cane and I were personally invested in this endeavor. We needed to see Bones in action with our own eyes. We needed to see everything. We were the only ones who could make the right call.

"Nope. That fucker won't have a clue."

Chapter Ten

Pearl

“We’re going to the opera tonight.” Bones opened the closet to reveal the gorgeous gown I was supposed to wear. “After dinner, we’ll head over there. They’re performing one of my favorite productions.”

I got to go outside again.

I couldn’t believe my luck.

I got to leave this stuffy mansion, with its boring pale walls and lack of decoration. The carpet wasn’t soft under my bare feet. It was thin and cheap. I’d get to be around other people, listen to them speak Italian—one of the most beautiful languages I’d ever heard. Maybe I could tell someone I’d been kidnapped. Maybe I could ask for help. What if there were police there? Could I make a run for it? “I’ve never been to the opera.”

“You’ll love it. Very tasteful.” Despite his rugged physicality and sick ways, he had a cultured side. He shot someone in the head last week, and now he wanted to listen to a woman sing.

“Thank you for inviting me.” I kept up my façade, pretending to tolerate him but still maintaining my feistiness at the same time. He loved the fire within me. He loved to be the one to blow out my flame.

“I want to show you off to the world. You’ll make even the Italian women here look ordinary.”

It was the first time he’d given me a compliment—and not about my cunt or tits. It was almost sweet, in a twisted way. He wanted to show off his slave to the other aristocrats of society. But he probably wanted to pretend I was his willing date—not a captive. “I don’t know about that...but thanks.”

“Get dressed and we’ll go.” He marched out of my bedroom, which still didn’t have a door.

“Okay.” It hurt my mouth to agree with him, even if he didn’t command me to do anything. But it scarred me to act as his plaything, to do his bidding, even if it was part of my plan.

I had to swallow my annoyance and keep going. When I got to the opera, I would figure out a way to get free. I would figure out a way to run. All I had to do was focus on that to hold my tongue. Telling him what he wanted to hear and pretending to respect him was going to save my life.

I could keep doing it.

We arrived at the opera and were escorted to a private balcony. No one else was there besides the two of us, and a butler stood in the back, ready to get us anything Bones asked for.

I surveyed the people in the audience, looking at all the women in their gowns and the men in their tuxes. The collective conversations filled the auditorium, a few laughs bouncing off the walls. I concentrated on the sounds of their voices, on the accent of their Italian words. I'd never heard a more beautiful language. The only foreign language I heard in the United States was Spanish. While Italian was similar, it had its own unique qualities.

Bones turned to me, watching my expression. I wore a diamond necklace he gave me, along with a teal gown that complemented my fair skin and dark hair. It was long and made of satin, feeling soft against my legs. "What are you thinking?"

I kept my eyes on the room, looking at the sea of people. "I'm listening to them."

"Why?"

"I love the way their accents sound. I love listening to the language."

He switched from English to Italian, saying something to me I didn't understand.

I stared at him blankly, unsure what he was trying to say.

When he saw the confusion in my eyes, he switched back to English. "I can teach you, if you like."

It was hard to believe he could be so refined after the harsh things he did to me. All week, he took me in the evening. He still hit me, smacking my ass to get off, but he didn't make me bleed like he used to. He still fucked me in the ass because he knew I hated it. He did unforgivable things, but they were never as bad as they were before. And when Alfonso came by the house for business, Bones refused to share me again.

I was most grateful for that.

This plan was working. Even if I couldn't escape, at least my situation was better than it was before.

He continued to stare at me, waiting for a response.

I finally found the words. "I would love that. I would love to understand what people are saying."

"The language is more beautiful when you don't understand what people are saying," he said with a chuckle. "English, Italian, French...it doesn't matter. All people talk about the same things. They're all evil."

He was one to talk.

A butler approached us with one hand behind his back. “Wine? Champagne?”

I was never allowed to order for myself. Bones took care of everything. “We’ll have two glasses of wine. Nothing from the Barsetti vineyards.” His voice turned cruel when he said that last part. “Red.”

“Yes, sir.” The servant disappeared behind the curtain and retrieved the drinks. He was back a moment later, pouring an Italian bottle for the two of us to share. “Anything else, sir?”

“No.” Bones waved him off with the brush of a hand.

The servant left without another word.

I grabbed the glass and took a drink, needing alcohol to steel my nerves. I had to figure out a way to slip out of there. If I could leave his side for just a moment, I might find a way to escape. But I couldn’t rush it. I had to be patient. “Why don’t you like the Barsetti vineyards?”

“Because it’s horse piss.” He threatened me with just his tone, recoiling at the subject. “Now shut up and drink your wine.”

I tried not to flinch at his hostility and kept my gaze down. I’d broached a subject he didn’t like to discuss, and I would lock that information away for another time.

It might be useful.

Chapter Eleven

Crow

“The lights are off, and the curtain just opened.” Cane peeked through the small divider in the ceiling. “We’re good to go.”

I pulled the panel and slid it across the rest of the ventilation duct, opening a foot of space. We looked directly over the people in the audience, on the left-hand side of the stage. The opera singer’s loud voice echoed right in the passage, making our ears ring.

“She sounds like shit,” Cane said. “I don’t get opera.”

I liked it. If I didn’t hate people so much, I would go more often. “Shut up, and let’s do this.”

He pulled out the extender with the camera at the end. He dangled it outside the panel, over the crowd but flush to the ceiling so no one would notice.

I pulled out my phone and checked the screen, seeing the feed from the camera in real time. “More to the right.”

Cane hit the buttons on the extender, adjusting the camera.

“Zoom in.”

He focused the lens, capturing the balcony where Bones and his date sat.

“A little more to the right.”

He growled under his breath and made the adjustments. “It’s good, right?”

I changed the light settings on the screen so the picture was a better quality. When I got them both in the frame, I froze. I hadn’t seen Bones since that evening, and when I looked at him, I was reminded of the rage bottled deep inside me. I pictured how he pulled that pistol out of his jacket and shot Vanessa right in the back of the head.

My hands shook.

“It’s good?” Cane repeated.

My eyes shifted to the woman beside him. In a teal gown, handmade by a designer himself, it fit her slim body like it was made just for her. She had petite, rounded shoulders and arms that were thin but toned. She did some kind of activity in her spare time, archery or mountain climbing. The balcony enclosure hid most of her lower body from view.

My eyes moved to her thin neck. In the hollow of her throat was a huge diamond on a white gold necklace. It was too lavish and expensive to be

something she'd bought herself. It was a gift. And Bones didn't give gifts to his slaves—he took them.

I looked at her face, seeing blue eyes that lacked any interest in what she was looking at. Her mind was elsewhere, thinking about something in a different world. Her lips were ruby red from the lipstick she wore, and her eyes glowed from the makeup. Her hair was in lustrous curls, framing the contours of her expressive face. She was just as beautiful as people claimed.

But I still wasn't impressed.

“Crow!”

“What?” I turned on him, annoyed with the outburst. “Shut the fuck up or someone will hear us.”

“Is the camera good or what? I've asked you twice now.”

“It's fine. Here.” I handed my phone to him.

He held the extender with a single hand and my phone in the other. He whistled to himself just as he did last week.

I rolled my eyes.

“Damn, she's fine.”

I looked down at the stage and saw the singer belt her tunes out, her chest expanding with every note she hit. The music was sad. I could understand every word she said, and the song echoed with pain of love and loss. I knew that feeling all too well.

“I'm going to have a lot of fun with her. She's going to suck my dick so hard she'll choke.”

I grabbed the phone again. “Let's think about that later. We haven't decided if she means anything to him just yet.”

“Do you see that fucking diamond around her throat?” he demanded. “That shit was on the Titanic before it sank.”

“But they aren't touching.”

“What does that matter?” he asked. “They're together on a date. We know what he does with slaves. He doesn't take them out for a night on the town. And he's clearly not afraid of her running.”

I watched her chest rise and fall with an invisible weight. Her eyes were glued to the stage, but she didn't seem to be watching it. Without knowing her, I could tell what she was thinking. Her lips were parted for a reason. “She's thinking about running right now.”

“What makes you say that?”

I tapped my fingers against the screen. “Her face is flushed, her breathing is shallow—all the signs are there. She’s nervous. She’s scared.”

“Maybe she’s just scared because a psychopath is sitting next to her.”

“No. She’s going for it.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea... He has guards outside the place. When he catches her, he might kill her. My advice is for her to sit tight until we get her out of there.”

“Like she’ll be better off with us.”

He shrugged. “At least we’re good-looking. She might not mind sucking our fat cocks.”

I eyed the time on my watch. “I’m going to hang in the lobby just in case she goes for it.”

“And what are you going to say?” he asked incredulously.

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something. Hang tight, and let me know when she makes her move.”

“How are you so certain that she’ll do anything?”

I scooted backward through the air duct. “I’m good at reading people.”

“Is that why you hate them so much? You can read their minds?” He chuckled like it was a joke.

Actually, he hit the nail right on the head. “Just keep me posted.”

Chapter Twelve

Pearl

I stared at the bright stage and saw the dancers move around, giving the kind of performance I never thought I'd have the privilege of seeing. The auditorium was ancient like the rest of Italy, full of history's past. The frescoes on the ceiling could only be created by a genius, and the intricate pattern of the carpet made me feel honored just to walk on it.

But all I wanted to do was run away.

The show was halfway over, and I'd wasted all that time sitting there. If I excused myself to the bathroom, I could crawl out the window. I couldn't go through the entrance because he probably had men watching the place. But if I slipped out some other way, I'd probably be able to run somewhere.

I was pretty fast.

But I was terrified. I was afraid to risk our tame relationship if I failed. He would turn on me and be more ruthless than ever before. He might even kill me, angered that he trusted me on some level and I betrayed him. Was the chance really worth it? What if he was testing me? Expecting me to run?

I couldn't make a decision.

I didn't know what to do.

My heart slammed in my chest, and my palms were sweaty. My throat was dry, and it was painful to swallow. I didn't touch my wine because I couldn't keep anything down. Bones was absorbed in the show, ignorant to the argument I was having with myself.

If I went home with him tonight, I'd have to get underneath him. He would shove a dildo up my ass then fuck my pussy. He would probably gag me so my cries were muffled. He wouldn't use lubrication, just to hurt me. The only way to avoid it was for me to rub my clit and try to think of sexy things, to think about Jacob when the sex was good. Then his cock wouldn't hurt so much, but he'd assume I was wet for him—when I was just repulsed.

I couldn't go back to that.

I didn't want to.

I had to get out of there—tonight.

"Excuse me, I need to use the restroom." I rose to my feet and waited for him to stop me. I expected him to grab my wrist and drag me back down.

But he let me go.

I walked away and felt my back muscles tense as I headed to the stairs. I wondered if he was watching me, looking at my ass shake in my gown. I

wondered if he really trusted me.

I didn't have a chance to second-guess it. I kept going.

I reached the end of the staircase and gave a quick sweep of the place. No one looked at me. No one paid attention to me. There didn't seem to be any men hovering around—at least not the kind Bones employed.

And that's when I spotted the man by the bar.

In a crisp dark suit, he leaned against the counter with one hand in his pocket. He wore a gray collared shirt underneath, along with a teal-colored tie. It had a pattern on it, but it was too intricate for me to determine. His black suit reminded me of the men who came to visit Bones. But that soothing tie was something none of the men would wear.

At over six feet, he was a tall man. He had long legs with muscled thighs, and his shoulders were wide like the wingspan of an eagle. He had long fingers, masculine and strong. His body was lean and tight, compacted with muscle, skin, and tendons. He seemed athletic, the type of man who didn't put on weight no matter how much scotch he drank.

My eyes trailed up his neck, searching for danger in his look. He had a strong jaw, rugged and rigid. His five o'clock shadow looked scruffy. If I brushed my hand against it, I would feel the friction. His lips were interesting. They were thin and hard-pressed, making him appear distinctly dissatisfied by something.

When I examined his face, I realized he was looking at me. He turned his moss-green eyes on me, examining me like he knew exactly who I was. His dark brown hair was short, carefully styled to make him look sleek and graceful. Despite how calm and suave he seemed, his eyes were unforgiving.

He was beautiful.

And terrifying.

I turned my head, even though it was too late to act like I hadn't seen him. He didn't seem like he worked for Bones. But that didn't mean he didn't have his own evil agenda.

Was anyone in this country a good person?

I entered the bathroom and felt the door shut behind me. There were no feet under the stalls, and that's when I realized I was alone.

Alone.

I did it. I made it. My hands shook in excitement. I forgot how to breathe because I could taste freedom on my tongue. My plan to trick Bones succeeded, and I was going to get away.

I was going to make it.

There was a window high above the sinks. It wasn't wide, but it was long. If I could crawl up there and slide it open, I could squeeze through. It probably led to the ground above the auditorium. All I had to do was throw my heels aside and run.

Without further thought, I kicked off my shoes.

"Don't do it."

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard him. He locked the door before he came farther into the room. The teal tie matched my dress. If we knew each other, we would look like dates. He only said three words, but his eyes said a lot more.

"You work for Bones?"

He didn't answer me. "This plan is stupid. The second you crawl out that window, his men will see you. And he'll kill you."

How did he know what I was doing? How did he know about Bones's men? Why was he warning me? "Who the hell are you?"

"Do your business then go back."

"Why should I trust you?" I couldn't go back to that terrifying man. I couldn't.

"I didn't tell you to trust me. You should never trust anyone. How do you think you got into this mess in the first place?"

"Excuse me?" I snapped. "Are you helping me or insulting me?"

"I was never helping you. Only insulting. Now do what I say, or you'll regret it."

"Why do you care?"

"I don't." He gave me a look colder than winter then walked out. He shut the door loudly behind him, making it bang.

I stood in front of the sink, my reflection staring back at me. I had no idea what the hell just happened. I wasn't sure if it was real. Did I imagine the entire thing? Was I making an excuse not to run away?

I eyed the window at the top of the ceiling and released a loud sigh. I had no idea who that guy was, but he wasn't working for Bones. Why did he come in here and talk to me? How did he know I was going to run? Maybe he knew Bones in some other way. Maybe he hated him as much as I did. But if he really wanted to help me, wouldn't he have called the police? Wouldn't he have given me his phone?

I was so damn confused.

I gripped the sink as I tried to figure out what to do. That man knew exactly what I was going to do, and I'd never met him. If it was obvious to him, then it was probably obvious to Bones.

I had to go back.

I didn't want to. My blood screamed in protest at the idea. Freedom was so close, just a window away.

But I knew I would never make it.

The sobs screamed for release deep in my chest, but I never let them escape. I kept them bottled inside, refusing to give in to my grief. There was no time to writhe in self-pity. Maybe this plan failed, but there would be another one. And if that didn't work, then there would be another one. I wasn't going to give up. One way or another, I would find my way out.

I returned to Bones like the obedient slave that I was. I walked up the stairs and returned to my seat, pretending I didn't just attempt to escape his greasy hold. All I did was go to the bathroom and touch up my makeup. I didn't meet a stranger who told me to return to the balcony. The last ten minutes of my life were uneventful.

Bones turned his head slightly my way, appraising me. The look was eerie, like he'd been wondering if something more interesting would happen. Maybe it was a test.

A test I passed.

The week passed with redundancy.

He came home from work, tied me up and fucked me, and then returned to his office and spent his time in solitude. I saw him again at dinnertime, and then he fucked me again before bed.

That was my life.

My time had been occupied by my thoughts. Who was the guy who marched into the bathroom like he owned the place? He spoke to me like I was annoying him, but yet, he was the one who chose to speak to me.

It didn't make sense.

Why did he warn me?

He knew what would happen. When I returned to my seat, Bones stared at me with a new look. He'd expected me to run for it. He probably wanted me to so he could beat the shit out of me.

But Mr. Mysterious and his teal tie gave me a heads-up.

It was driving me crazy. It was another problem without a solution. What did he get out of helping me? What reward did he receive? None that I could deduce. When men came to the house, I scanned every one of them, searching for the man with the teal tie.

But he never appeared.

I wouldn't rest until I knew the truth. I needed to know if he was an ally or an enemy. He couldn't have been a friend because he would have called the police. But he couldn't have been an enemy either because he would have let me crawl out that window.

Was I missing something?

We ate quietly together at the dinner table. We were having his favorite dish, lasagna and garlic bread. I hated the living conditions and the man who raped me every day, but I couldn't deny how good the food was. At least that was one thing to be thankful for.

"I thought you were going to run."

The sentence came out of nowhere, and I couldn't prevent my hand from flinching, even if it was slightly. My eyes were glued to my food, and I didn't care to look at him. We hadn't spoken much since the night of the opera. The only time he said anything to me was when he called me a dirty little cunt—his dirty little cunt. "Excuse me?"

"At the opera. I thought you were going to try to run." He kept eating like this conversation wasn't confrontational. In most ways, it wasn't. If it were, my head would be slammed onto the table.

"Why would I do that?" I'd become a great liar since I started living there. When my life was on the line, I did crazy things to survive. "I understand how powerful you are. You showed me. Where would I go? How far would I get until you came after me?"

That was the right response because his eyes glowed in pleasure. He loved to hear me stroke his ego, even if I was just blowing smoke up his ass. He loved knowing he had absolute control over me—everywhere I went. I didn't pretend I didn't want to run. I just gave the explanation he wanted to hear—and it worked. "Good little cunt."

The name still hadn't grown on me.

“You’re smarter than I gave you credit for. That fire still burns in your eyes, dimmer but bright. But your mind makes good decisions. You understand when you’re outnumbered and know when to yield. That’s what smart slaves do. The others were never so smart.”

I wanted to stab my knife into his throat. I wanted to cut his carotid artery and watch him bleed out and die. When he disrespected me like that, I wanted to murder him. But when he talked about his former slaves, about how weak they were, it sent me into a rage. The fact he killed them so easily, tossed them aside like a used condom, just pissed me off. I didn’t just want revenge for what he did to me. I wanted revenge for what he did to all those others.

I knew I needed to respond since he was staring at me in expectation. “Maybe one day you can give me power.”

“Why would I do that?” He chuckled like the idea was hilarious.

“Well, are you going to be single forever? You never think about having a wife? Children?” The more I hated him, the harder it was to manipulate him. The words burned my throat on the way out.

“A wife?” he asked. “Why would that be a position of power?”

“Mrs. Bones?” I asked. “Married to the wealthiest, most criminal man in the world? I think a title like that automatically comes with power. It comes with respect. It comes with privilege. She could walk up to anyone and shoot him in the head without a single consequence. She could raise your children to respect you, to fear you. It sounds like a position any woman would kill to have.”

His dinner was only half eaten, but he no longer paid attention to it. He watched me with interest, replaying my words in his head. “I think I understand now.”

Understand what? Did he know what I was doing?

“You came here hating me. But now, you’re jealous of my wealth. My power. You want to get some power for yourself—even if it means marrying me.”

Whatever keeps him from shoving a dildo up my ass.

“I guess I’m not so repulsive after all. I guess you’ve learned how the real world works.” He drank his wine. “I admire your ambition. Not too many women have that.”

I have a lot of ambition—to kill you.

“I’ve considered taking a wife but haven’t found a woman worthy of the position. Maybe I’ve finally found her.” He clinked his glass against mine in a toast.

I drank out of the glass, hoping this was going somewhere I wanted to be. If I were his wife, would he treat me as a slave? Would I be allowed to leave the house on my own? Because then I could definitely escape. “Indeed.”

Chapter Thirteen

Crow

“Now we know where he’s staying.” Cane placed markers on the map. “Two entrances. One in the front, and one in the back. I say we blast the front gate with grenades and hit him hard.”

“You don’t think grenades would be too obvious?”

“How else are we going to get in?”

“How about climbing, fat-ass?” My brother didn’t think anything through. He went for the simplest way, the most destructive way.

“And thirty men are supposed to climb the gate without being noticed?” he asked incredulously. “No. We bomb the gate down, drive in with the cars and take out all the men at the front. That shit will happen so fast they won’t even know what hit them.”

“And it’ll give Bones a chance to run.”

“Not if we get in there immediately.”

I leaned back in the chair and rested my fingertips on my lips. “What if we bomb the entrance just like you said? The guys rush in and take out the guards in the front. But we climb the fence from the side and break in at the exact same moment.”

“Like a diversion?”

“Exactly.”

“Not bad.”

“We’ll snatch the girl and run.”

“What about Bones?”

I stared at him in silence, waiting for elaboration.

“Kill him or what?”

The idea was tempting. After what he did to my family, I wasn’t sure if I could pass up the opportunity. But if he died, that would be too easy. He wouldn’t suffer. He would just get shot in the back of the head. That was too good for him. “No.”

“Really?”

I shook my head. “I want him to worry about his slave every single day. I want him to throw up just from thinking about the horrific things we’re doing to her, the same things he did to Vanessa. I want to ruin his investment, depreciate her so much he won’t even want her back.”

Cane nodded, a smile forming on his lips. “I like it. I like it a lot.”

“Let’s get this plan straightened out. I want to do this as quickly as possible.”

“Yeah,” he said in agreement. “I want to fuck that slave of his as quickly as possible.”

Chapter Fourteen

Pearl

I didn't want to be Mrs. Bones.

Damn, that was an ugly name.

When the police asked why I went through with it, I would just explain I didn't have a choice in the matter. It was necessary for him to trust me. Once I gained that trust, I would take off.

And haul ass.

My life around the mansion became even more boring. I had nothing to do while he was at work. I didn't have Internet, games, or even books. All I did was lie in bed and pass the time.

I watched the sun move across the sky, trying to figure out if I could really see it move or not. I tried to measure the progress with my thumb and one eye closed, but that didn't work either.

I missed my life back at home.

I missed working. I missed the city. I missed Jacob. I hoped he was okay. Those men just wanted to traffic me, so I doubted they did anything worse to Jacob other than mug him. He probably made it home—safe and sound. I just hoped he didn't waste all his time worrying about me. There was nothing he could do for me, so he may as well not think about it.

That night, Bones and I had dinner together like we always did. We didn't really talk, so I wasn't sure why he wanted me there. He didn't tell me about his work. The only information he gave me was from that day in the factory. I knew he made weapons and sold them to people.

But I didn't need to know more than that.

As far as I could tell, he didn't have any friends or family. There were no photographs on the walls or picture albums tucked away on a bookshelf. There were hardly any signs of life in the house at all.

I had to wonder how he became this way. He was a monster, but had he always been a monster? Was he a normal person once upon a time? That was an answer I would never get. It wouldn't change anything anyway, so there was no point in asking.

He cut into his chicken and ate slowly, his eyes on his plate the entire time. He sipped his wine as he ate, usually downing three or four glasses every night. It was harder for him to get off when he was drunk—which prolonged my pain even more.

I stared at my own knife and seriously considered stabbing myself with it. Who knew how long it would be before I had a chance to escape. What if I never escaped? What if I lived there for the rest of my life? I'd definitely prefer death over that.

I grabbed the knife by the hilt and held it steady, thinking about how it would feel to die. People said it was scary and painful, slipping into the darkness for eternity. But I thought it would be peaceful.

Bones eyed my hand, watching my movements. He still didn't trust me. Maybe he never would. "What are you—"

An explosion shattered every single window and made the ground beneath our feet shake. The plates and silverware fell onto the ground, and the candle tipped over and caught the table runner on fire.

"What the fuck?" Bones jumped to his feet and reached for his gun in his pocket.

I'd never been in a gunfight before, but I knew what to do. I tipped the table over and used it as a shield to protect myself from the bullets flying across the room. Men shouted and screamed as the war raged on. I didn't know if it was coming from inside or outside the house. It erupted all around me, swallowing me whole. I placed my hands over my ears because the gunshots were so loud.

More gunfire and screaming erupted. Bones gave his men orders, and another man rounded up his soldiers. Without looking over the table, I knew it would be a bloody battlefield out there.

Please kill Bones.

Please.

"Where the hell is she?" a man shouted.

"You think I know?" another responded.

Were they looking for me?

Was someone here to save me?

Did Jacob contact the authorities, and they kept up on the trail and followed me here? Was I being liberated? Was this the end of my captivity? It was too good to be true.

A man appeared on my side of the table with a pistol in his hand. He had dark brown hair and hazel eyes. His bone structure was prominent and his jaw rigid. Within an instant, I recognized him.

It was him.

"Come on." He shouted over the gunfire. "Now."

I didn't think twice about it. This man was there to save me. He'd been watching me at the opera to get intel on my captor. He worked for the Italian authorities. Or maybe he was CIA. I didn't care. He was getting me the hell out of there, and that's all that mattered.

I came to his side, and he grabbed my hand. It felt so good to be touched in a normal way, not to be sexualized or forced. It was a hand of aid. He was there to help me, to set me free.

I wanted to cry.

He peeked over the table until the coast was clear. "Alright. Let's move." He dragged me with him, his gun held at the ready if he needed to take someone out. Most of Bones's men had been exterminated, but the man was still in a rush to get out of there.

We left from the side of the house, and he opened the back door of an SUV. "Get in."

I jumped inside and kept the tears back. I was going home. I was returning to Jacob. I was returning to my friends. Everything was going to be okay. Living with that fiend was torture, but I somehow made it through.

"Step on it," he ordered.

The driver took off and headed to the street. With a quick turn, he skidded onto the road and hit the gas.

Bones's house was no longer in sight. It was gone from my vision, just a distant and painful memory. I could breathe again. Never again would I have that disgusting thing on top of me. Never again would I have to take his cock in my mouth. I was a free woman again.

I was free.

"Thank you so much." I was so happy I leaned over and hugged my savior. He was brave for breaking in to that home just to save me. That type of heroism was rare. I appreciated it more than words could say.

"Get the fuck off me." He shoved me aside, repulsed by my touch.

"Sorry..." I didn't mean to piss off the guy who just risked his neck for mine.

"Don't thank me."

At least he was humble. "You saved me. How can I not thank you?"

He pulled a pair of cuffs from his back pocket and clamped them on my wrists instantly. "I didn't save you."

Panic erupted in my heart all over again. I stared at the metal on my hands, unable to understand what I was looking at. What the hell was

happening?

“You just left one monster to be with another.”

I tried to slip them off my wrists using my own sweat. I started to scream, hyperventilating. What the fuck was going on? Why did people keep treating me like a mule? Why did people think they had a right to do what they wanted with me? “Let me go now.” I kicked his leg as hard as I could. “I’ll break your dick the first chance I get.”

He pulled a syringe out of his pocket and pulled off the cap with his teeth.

No. I hated being drugged. I hated not knowing what was happening to me. I hated losing all sense of control. “Stop. Stop.” I shifted away against the opposite window. “I’ll be quiet. Just don’t put that in me.”

He put the cap back on and shoved it into his pocket. “Make a sound, and you get the syringe.” He stared out the window with relaxed shoulders. After all the mayhem at the house, he seemed bored.

First, he warned me about Bones, but then he broke me out to keep me himself. How did these criminals get away with this? I had so many questions, but I couldn’t ask any of them, not without fear of the needle going in my neck.

I looked out the window and tried to remain calm. Tears burned the back of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. This man couldn’t be worse than the man I just left. It wasn’t possible. Wherever I was going would be better than the place I came from.

I just had to keep telling myself that.

And try to believe it.

Chapter Fifteen

Crow

She thought she'd been saved.

Idiot.

She thought Bones was bad? Wait until she spent some quality time with Cane and me. We would show her what a true nightmare was. We would show her what evil looked like in its purest form.

She'd probably change her mind about the syringe.

She stayed on her side of the car and didn't make a sound, quiet as a mouse. Her handcuffed wrists rested on her legs, and her eyes were focused out the window. Slight tremors shook her body. She was scared but trying to hide it.

If she thought she was scared now, she was in for a surprise.

We arrived at the base an hour later and pulled into the compound where prying eyes couldn't follow us. We'd hit Bones and his men hard. They were too disoriented to come after us. Most of his on-site men were killed, so he'd have to call for more backup.

We were safe—for now.

The SUV parked, and we jumped out of the car. I walked around to the other side to retrieve our new captive. I got the door open and yanked her out.

She almost fell to the concrete because her steps couldn't keep up with me. She hissed under her breath at my ferocity but still didn't say a word.

I gripped her by the back of the neck and escorted her inside. The other men removed their bulletproof vests and set their rifles down, the danger gone. Cane and the rest of the guys came in right behind us, a spring in their step from the victory.

"Fucker didn't even see us coming." Cane walked in and immediately poured himself a whiskey. "Fucking asshole. I shot him in the arm just to make him scream. It was awesome."

The woman stood in the center of the room with her hands cuffed in front of her body. She watched all of us in detail, trying to find an escape route. She kept a cold look on her face, refusing to show any fear.

I unlocked her cuffs because there was no reason to keep her in chains. There was nowhere for her to run. Nowhere for her to hide. If she tried to escape, it would be an interesting spectacle.

When I came near her, she gave me a venomous look. If she had the chance to kill me, she would. There was no apprehension in her eyes. She

loathed me, possibly loathed me more than her old master.

Like I gave a damn.

Cane downed his glass in a single gulp then wiped his lips with the back of his forearm. He stared at the woman with longing, his thoughts disappearing into his trousers. The other men stared at her as well, like she was the main course of a feast.

Cane pressed the back of his forefinger against her cheek and slowly dragged it down. "Wow. Aren't you pretty?"

She slapped his wrist away instantly. "Get the fuck away from me."

"Whoa," Cane said in surprise. "This one's feisty. After a raid, I usually like to unwind. I'm going to take a round with her." He grabbed her by the wrist and pinned it behind her back. "See what Bones is so obsessed with."

"Have fun." I poured a glass of whiskey. "Let the boys have a go afterward."

"I don't know," Cane said as he squeezed her. "I might be a while." He turned around and marched her toward the bedroom.

Her breathing escalated, and she went into panic mode. She stomped her foot as hard as she could on Cane's boot, making him scream out in pain and momentarily release her.

Then she grabbed his knife from his belt and immediately went for the soldier closest to her, slashing him across the chest with such ferocity she looked like an assassin.

The men scrambled for their guns, needing to put this bitch down before she did some serious damage.

One of the men jumped on her from behind and grabbed her by the wrist, but she head-butted him then flung his arm down, breaking it at the elbow. Her knife slashed him, making him bleed.

Damn.

She sprinted at full speed for the door.

Cane gripped his wound. "Fucking bitch. Get her!"

The men chased after her, disappearing down the hallway. Their shouts carried to us in the main sitting room. Even now, she was a handful.

"It's a goddamn circus." I slammed my glass down and joined the men, needing to saddle this wild bronco. I jogged through the hallway and followed the sound of their voices. A dead soldier lay on the ground from a stab wound to his chest. I kept going until I reached the entrance hall.

The woman tried opening the window, but it was locked. All of them were locked. The front door was bolted shut. The men tried to lunge at her when she got too close. They didn't use their guns because we couldn't kill her—yet.

I pushed through the men and reached the front of the mob. "Enough."

Her eyes scanned the room, searching for something she missed. Desperation marked her face. She needed to leave but couldn't find a route. Her eyes quickly turned to the knife, and I knew what her next thought was.

"Stop," I ordered.

She grabbed the hilt and aimed the knife right at her heart.

"None of these men will touch you. I give you my word. Stop."

She pressed the knife against the neckline of her dress. She lacked any ounce of hesitation. She accepted her death as an old friend. She wanted to leave. She wanted to bleed out and die. It probably sounded better than the alternative. "Like your word means anything to me."

"It means the world."

"You told me to never trust anyone."

"I'm not asking you to." I held up my hand then slowly lowered it. "Drop the knife. Come on."

"I'd rather die than be a slave. I'd rather die than live another moment in this hell." Her bottom lip quivered from the emotion, the destruction of her life. Her eyes still carried their fire, their hatred. But she'd had enough. She'd been pushed too far, and now she cracked. Her wrist moved for the blow, ready to say good-bye to the world.

My thick legs propelled me forward and got me there just in time. I threw her wrist down and knocked the knife out of her grasp. It clanked against the nearby window then dropped to the floor.

"No!" Her knees collapsed underneath her as the anguish took over. "Just let me die. Have you no mercy?"

I caught her as her body slackened and crumpled. She fell against my chest, aiming right for the floor. I wrapped my arms around her then scooped her into my arms.

She lay there as a limp corpse, no longer caring what happened to her. She didn't care about anyone or anything. I could hold a knife to her throat, and she wouldn't blink an eye over it.

I carried her into the main room.

“You knocked that bitch out?” Cane poured vodka on his cut then bandaged it up.

I walked into the bedroom and set her on the mattress. There was one window in the room, but it was covered with metal bars. The room lacked any decorations and didn’t have any furniture. The bed was just a mattress on the floor. A bathroom connected to it, but it was just as plain. It was a prisoner cell—with some privacy.

The second she was on the mattress, her body came back to life and she crawled away from me, sitting as far away as possible. Her arms crossed over her chest for protection, and she refused to look at me. She eyed the window with heartbreak. Her tears never fell, but I knew they formed. “I’m not a slave.” The strength of her voice reverberated off the walls, amplifying in my ears. “I may be a prisoner, but I’m not a slave. You can try to do whatever you want to me, but I’ll fight back—every single time. When you least expect it, I will kill you. And that’s a goddamn promise.” She finally turned her gaze on me, and her eyes were colder than the arctic winter. Her promise burned bright like a star. She wasn’t afraid of me. She wasn’t afraid of my men. She would get her retribution one way or another.

“I’m a man of my word.”

“You’re a criminal. A kidnapper. A rapist. Your word means horseshit.”

My body tensed in response. My heartbeat quickened, and I felt the burn course through my blood. Her fight, her ferocity, shined like a beacon right into my soul. It set my body on fire, making my cock hard in my trousers and my hands desperate to touch her.

I pulled out the syringe.

She eyed it, immediately turning cold. “If you think I’m letting you stick that inside me, you have another thing coming.”

“I’m asking you.”

“You’re asking me?” she asked incredulously. “Like I would ever agree.”

“If I leave you here, which was my original plan, you will be fucked constantly. The men will take turns, and you will never have a break. They won’t even let you sleep. If you think Bones is bad, you have another thing coming. We are the men who make up night terrors, not nightmares. We are the men who give evil a definition.”

She tightened her arms in response, taking me seriously.

“I may be evil, but I have a few rules. The first one is, I always keep my word. If I tell you something, it’s law. Alright?”

She clenched her jaw tightly, refusing to agree with me. She needed to be defiant, to oppose me whenever possible.

"I'm giving you this syringe because I need to transport you. I can't do that if you're conscious."

"Fuck. You."

The insult aroused me, not offended me. "If you don't cooperate, I'll have to leave you here. And if I leave you here, you're going to wish you were with Bones."

She shivered noticeably. "And where do you want to take me?"

"My home."

"Why can't I see it?"

"I don't want you to know how to get there. I don't want you to know how to leave." I held up the syringe. "Do we have an understanding?"

She eyed the syringe, her lips pressed tightly together. "I think you're just drugging me so you can fuck me without a fight."

I chuckled because she couldn't be more wrong. "I want to fuck you with a fight. That's how I like it."

Her face paled.

"What's it gonna be?" I spun the needle in my fingertips.

"If I go with you, you're going to hurt me. You're going to rape me."

I held her gaze and didn't deny any of those claims. "Or you can stay here and be fucked in your mouth, your ass, and your pussy all at the same time. Your choice." I was the lesser of two evils, and we both knew it.

She hid her reaction, but a whirlwind of emotions swept through her. "Blindfold me. Don't drug me."

"No."

She narrowed her eyes when she didn't get her way.

"I've seen what you can do. You'll run the second you get a chance. You'll grab the steering wheel and drive us off a cliff. And I don't make compromises. Like I said, my word is law."

She pulled her knees to her chest.

"I'm growing impatient." I stood up and pocketed the syringe. "If you want to stay here, that's fine. But this offer won't come again. If you choose to stay here, you'll remain here for a long time."

Her eyes shifted frantically back and forth, unsure what to choose. Either decision brought her pain. But what would bring her the least amount?

I turned to the door because I didn't have time for this. If she wanted to be stupid, she could be stupid.

"Okay. I'll go."

I stopped by the door and slowly turned around.

"You give me your word you won't touch me when I'm...drugged?"

Now I understood her darkest fear. She hated the lack of control. She hated the inability to participate in her fate. Most women would prefer the drug. They were tortured and raped without having to experience it. They just had to suffer through the soreness the following day. But that's not what she wanted. "Yes."

She swallowed my words before she scooted to the edge of the bed and pulled her hair aside. "If you lie to me, I'll make you regret it." She exposed her neck, submitting to me.

I got harder at the thought of overpowering her. She was a rival opponent, a woman who couldn't be easily tamed. She wasn't like the others that I met. She didn't bow to my feet and behave as an obedient dog. She had a backbone, and she fought mercilessly. The fact she made a sincere threat when she had no way to execute it was oddly charming.

I sat beside her on the bed and placed my hand around her neck, feeling her powerful pulse underneath my fingertips. A thrill shot through my spine at touching her. She allowed me to come close. She allowed me to do something to her. Now all I could think about was fucking her hard on this very bed.

But I wouldn't break my word.

I inserted the syringe and gave her the drug.

Her eyes immediately fluttered then drooped. She reached for the mattress and slowly laid herself down, unable to fight the spell that pulled her under. She battled to keep her eyes closed, but she quickly lost that war. Her eyes closed, and she fell asleep.

A minute passed while I stared at her. I watched her chest rise and fall slowly. Her lips parted slightly as she fell into a deep sleep. She looked helpless when she was unconscious. The fiery woman I just met was no longer present.

I scooped her into my arms and carried her out.

"What are you doing?" Cane asked.

She was light in my arms, soft like a feather. Her arms hung limply by her sides as she remained asleep. "She's coming with me."

“What?” Cane demanded. “Why?”

“Because I’m the only one who can break her. You just saw what happened. One of our guys is dead, two are injured, and you’re still bleeding.”

“I still want my turn with her.”

“Not today, Cane.”

“Well, I will get my chance. Even if it’s in your bed.”

If I weren’t holding someone in my arms, I’d punch him in the face.
“Keep talking to me like that, and you’ll never get your chance.”

Chapter Sixteen

Pearl

When I woke up, I was in a new place. Sunlight filtered through the open window, and the sound of chirping birds filled my ears. Several of them spoke to each other, communicating in their own language that I would never understand.

The light warmed my skin, making me forget the coldness of winter. It pounded past my eyelids, beckoning me to wake up even though I was still exhausted.

My eyes finally opened, and I took a look around.

The shutters of the window were pushed out, welcoming the breeze into the bedroom. Beige curtains were pinned back, contrasting against the brown painted walls. The top of the window curved like an oval, making me think of an ancient arch.

I studied the rest of the room. A brown circular couch curved around a circular table. The furniture was white and accented with gold pillows. A TV hung on the wall with a cobblestone fireplace underneath. A white vanity sat against the wall with brushes and antique containers of makeup. The room was large enough to be a house. The door in the corner must've led to a private bathroom.

It was the first time I'd woken up peacefully since I'd been kidnapped. It was the first time the delightful sound of birds acted as my alarm clock. I hadn't seen an open window in months, and I didn't really appreciate how good that felt until now.

I got out of bed wearing the same dress I'd been wearing the night before and headed to the window. The shutters were wide open, and I could see endless rows of vineyards. It led to the hills in the distance. Not a single house was in sight. I was isolated, away from the nearest city.

The sun was high in the sky, and it touched every piece of earth as far as the eye could see. I stood on the second story and saw grass at the bottom. It was lush and dark, darker than the leaves on the vines.

My fingertips rested on the windowsill, and I felt freedom course through me. I could jump out the window and run as fast as I could, getting lost in the rows of grapes. The idea was so tempting and easy.

But why was it so easy?

I turned around and examined the contents of my room. There were shelves full of classic books and a pile of magazines on the shelf underneath

the table. I spotted the case with a single red rose. It was fresh, just picked that morning. Underneath it was a handwritten note.

Don't run.

There was no name, but I knew who left it.

I investigated the bathroom. It had pristine tiles, and the vibrant decorations hinted at Italian culture. Even though it was a glorified prison, it was beautiful. I could only dream of living in a place like that.

I left the bedroom and approached the doors that closed off my bedroom from the rest of the house. If the bedroom window was open, then I assumed that meant I could venture into the house.

I opened the doors and stepped into the hallway. A grand staircase was to my right, while the hallway continued to the left.

A voice appeared out of nowhere. "Good morning, miss." A butler appeared in a full suit. He held himself with grace despite his older age, and friendliness lingered in his eyes. He seemed harmless, even sweet.

"Who are you?" I blurted.

"Lars. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

That didn't answer my question.

"His Grace was just about to sit down for breakfast. Would you like to join him?"

Did I have a choice? I was hungry. And I did want answers. "Okay."

"Okay?" he asked. "My question requires a yes or no."

I gave him an irritated look. "Sure."

"Good enough. Follow me." He led the way, taking the staircase to the bottom floor. The same archway of my bedroom window mirrored the doors and other windows. The tile was shiny enough to be brand new, and the area was spacious in its luxury. My captor didn't just live in a mansion. He lived in elegance. Bones's home was bland and ugly—just like him. This place had taste.

Lars escorted me into a dining room. A large window took up one wall, highlighting the vineyards on the opposite side of the house. The mahogany table was big enough to seat sixteen people. Did he regularly invite sixteen people to dinner?

Lars pulled out the chair for me then scooted me in after I sat down. "He'll be here shortly." He walked out and left the double doors wide open. The sound of moving dishes echoed from the kitchen as he prepared breakfast.

I sat absolutely still and focused on the glorious view in front of me. Despite my fear, I couldn't deny how beautiful the image was. I'd never seen anything like it in my life, and I suspected I never would again.

A moment later, he walked through the door in a deep navy blue suit with a violet tie. He looked just as glorious as he did the first time I saw him sitting at the bar. He carried himself with confidence, his shoulders broad and powerful. Even when he was silent, he commanded the room with just his presence. He was terrifying but hypnotizing at the same time.

The moment he sat down, Lars entered the room like he'd been waiting for his cue. He placed an egg white omelet with mushrooms, tomatoes, and spinach in front of him, along with a black cup of coffee and the morning newspaper.

The man said thank you in Italian. At least, that's what I think he said.

Lars placed the same meal in front of me, along with a newspaper in English. Then he departed, closing the doors behind him.

My captor sipped his coffee and opened the newspaper, acting like I wasn't there at all. He didn't even look at me. His behavior suggested we'd done this before—several times.

I ate my food quietly, loving the taste. Everything tasted fresh, like it was just picked that morning. The vegetables didn't taste like they were from the supermarket. They were obviously organic. The coffee was better than the stuff at my old prison. Everything was better, actually. A copy of the *New York Times* waited in front of me, the headline in words I could understand.

He still didn't acknowledge me. He turned the page and kept reading.

"So...what am I—"

"You can speak to me when I'm finished reading." His eyes didn't break their focus as he read. He took a few bites of his food and a sip of his coffee.

What an asshole.

Thirty minutes later, he finished the paper from front to back. He folded it back to its original condition and set it on the table. "Yes?"

I read my paper in protest, ignoring him just the way he ignored me.

He sipped his coffee and watched me. "Spiteful, aren't you?"

"I don't like being treated like a dog. It's pretty straightforward."

"Well, I hope you change your preferences soon." He snatched my paper and set it on top of his.

This man was infuriating. I wanted to stab my fork in his eye, but I knew I would miss.

“You got my note this morning.”

I hated it when he asked a question in the form of a statement. It was arrogant. He acted like he owned everything—including me.

“It would be pointless to run.”

I wanted to know why but refused to ask out of defiance.

“I inserted a tracker in your ankle. I’ll know where you go and when you go. The nearest town isn’t for thirty miles. You wouldn’t make it there in time even if you drove.”

My hand automatically moved to my ankles until I felt the bump in the right one. “You freak.”

“I can remove it if you wish.”

“Then do it now.”

“But you’ll be confined to your bedroom at all times. Bars will be placed over the window and meals will be brought to you. If that’s what you prefer, then I’ll remove it.” A ghost of a smile was on his lips.

Fucking asshole.

“What say you?”

I looked away, refusing to verbally give my answer.

“That’s what I thought.” He sat perfectly straight in the chair like he was in a business meeting. He made the suit look comfortable rather than constricting. Every time he moved, his actions were graceful. He was a killer when he needed to be—and a diplomat the rest of the time.

“Why am I here?” When I woke up that morning, I didn’t detect any soreness. He seemed to have kept his word and didn’t touch me against my will. And he didn’t let anyone else touch me. I didn’t want to trust him or to feel gratitude for his moment of mercy. He was still evil. He was still my enemy. When I had the chance, I would kill him. And I would enjoy it.

“Because I want you here.”

“Why did you stop those men from having their way with me?”

“It was the only way to get you under control.”

“But you had me. You got me before I could end my miserable existence.”

He sipped his coffee again.

I waited for an answer.

He never gave one.

“Uh, hello?” I snapped. “I just asked you a question.”

“You can ask whatever you want. That doesn’t mean I’m going to answer you.”

I wanted to slap that handsome face. I wanted to make that perfect complexion redden under my touch. “Why did you steal me from Bones?”

“Bones is my enemy.”

“Okay...but what does that have to do with me?”

“He values you. He cares about you. It’s far easier to hurt someone by hurting someone they care about. I could cut off every single one of his limbs, and it still wouldn’t hurt as bad as what I’m about to do to you.”

My blood went ice-cold. I stupidly assumed this man was less dangerous than the others. Maybe I made the wrong decision. This house was beautiful, but that was just a mask for the devil’s playground it truly was. “You’re wrong. He doesn’t care about me. He won’t lose any sleep over my absence.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve seen him with you. He’s never taken a slave to his factory. He’s never taken one to the opera. And he’s never refused to share a slave with his colleagues. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

How did he know all of that?

Somehow, he could read my thoughts. “I was watching you together at the opera. I told you not to run because you would screw up my plan to extract you. I wasn’t helping you. I was helping myself.”

The great mystery had been solved. “Now what? You hold me for ransom?”

“No. I’m never returning you. There’s not enough money in the world to make me return you.”

My situation was becoming bleaker by the second.

“So...that means I’ll be your slave forever?”

“No.” He set his coffee down and looked me straight in the eye. “Just until I kill you.”

Chapter Seventeen

Crow

My hatred grew with every passing day.

I hated that woman.

I loathed her.

I wanted to break her open and yank all her insides out. I wanted to cause her as much pain as possible. I wanted to make her life unbearable. She deserved a nightmare. She deserved a terror so absolute she couldn't stop shaking. She deserved pure and utter hell.

And I would make that happen.

I knew I scared her with the final words I spoke to her. I told her what my plan was. She'd be used over and over again until I snapped her neck. She knew exactly what was coming, and the fact I said it so effortlessly frightened her even more.

Good. That's what she deserved.

A week went by, and I didn't see her once. She didn't join me for meals, and even though she was free to enjoy the different sectors of the house, she never emerged from her hole. She stayed out of sight and out of mind, hoping I would forget about her.

How could I forget such a pain in the ass?

There was nothing but destruction in my heart. I got off by hurting her. I wanted to make her scream, make her cry, and make her bleed. Pure agony was bliss. Pure torture was the type of shit that made me come.

After a week had come and gone, my cock was eager to make my fantasies come true. The wait must have been the most agonizing part of the situation. All she could do was wait for me to come for her.

And now I was ready.

It was late in the evening, and the rest of the staff had gone to bed. I walked into her bedroom without turning on the light. The bedroom window was still open. The Tuscan heat still filled the night even though the sun had been gone for hours.

She immediately sat up in bed, jolted by my appearance.

I shut the window so no one could hear her scream.

She scooted back until she was against the headboard, as far away as possible. Her chest rose and fell with her fright, but her eyes still burned with strength. She wouldn't go down easy.

That's what I was hoping for. "Slave, come here."

She refused to obey me. She refused to speak.

“Do what I say or it’ll be worse.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Fuck you.”

“I was hoping you’d play it that way.” I lunged for her instantly and dragged her across the bed by the ankle.

She screamed bloody murder and clawed at the sheets, trying to grab a hold of something to get away. She fought with everything she had, survival mode at full force.

I tucked her legs between mine and held her down on her stomach. She was no match for my weight even though she kept fighting. I grabbed her sleeping shorts and yanked them off, taking her panties too.

“No!” She tried to turn over to slap me, but she couldn’t move.

I kept her pinned while I got my pants and boxers off. My cock sprung free, thick and long. I stared at her perfect ass, loving the crack between her cheeks. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to fuck more, her ass or her pussy.

“Stop! Please.”

I turned her over so we were face-to-face, and I pinned her down with my mass. My thighs kept her legs apart, and my hand pinned her hands above her head. Her nipples were hard, and her eyes were wet.

“Please don’t.” Tears came into her eyes, the first ones I’d ever seen. She was frustrated to her breaking point, exhausted from the criminal treatment. Her tears turned me on even more.

But they also made me feel like shit.

“Let me go. Please.” She tried to push me off, but her strength was useless against mine.

My cock was near her entrance and eager to feel her cunt. I wanted to stretch her until she sobbed. I wanted to wreck her beyond repair. I wanted to torture her without mercy.

“Please...” The tears rolled freely down her cheeks.

My body suddenly shut down. My arousal wasn’t the same anymore. These were a different kind of tears, not the kind I wanted. Something was pulling me back, stopping me from doing this. I had every right to go through with it. After what happened to me, I deserved this. But I couldn’t. I didn’t see revenge when I looked into this woman’s eyes. I only saw my own reflection—a beast.

I got off her and pulled up my boxers and pants.

She continued to lay there, unsure what was happening.

I didn't look at her again before I walked out. I stormed out of her bedroom and headed down the hallway. I was too worked up to sleep, and I was no longer aroused to jerk off.

I was just angry.

Angry at myself.

She didn't come out of her room for days afterward. Lars brought her food and attended to her needs.

I steered clear.

I concentrated on exercising and work. I kept busy outside the house, running the vineyard at the distribution site and taking care of business. And of course, I had to take care of my other business with Cane.

The fact she didn't come anywhere near me said she was still terrified of me, as she should be. That night could have gone quite differently. Perhaps I'd had too much to drink or wasn't in the right state of mind. I chickened out, but I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

When I came home from work one afternoon, Lars greeted me by the doorway. "Your Grace, Cane is here to see you."

My body went rigid. "How long as he been here?"

"Fifteen minutes. I told him to wait in your study."

I knew he wasn't in my study. I knew exactly where he was, and I felt sick to my stomach. I took off at a dead run and sprinted up the staircase, two stairs at a time.

"Everything alright, Your Grace?" Lars said.

I ignored him and moved as fast as my feet would carry me. I sprinted to the bedroom and broke down the door with my shoulder, knowing it would be locked without even checking. It crashed down, and I saw exactly what I feared.

Cane had her stripped naked and tied to the bed. He was naked with his hanging cock hard and ready to go. A belt was in his hand, and he had just whipped her thighs.

I saw red. "Get. The. Fuck. Out."

Cane turned around. "Want to give it a try?" He handed the belt over.

I snatched the belt out of his hands and yanked it around his throat, choking him out until he convulsed in my arms. He tried to kick free but

couldn't. I cut off his air supply instantly, making him drift off.

I dropped him to the floor and came around the bed, ignoring my hard-on in my trousers at the sight of her, tied up and ready to be whipped. I pulled out my pocketknife and cut the ropes free, releasing her from her captivity.

She immediately pulled the blanket over her body, hiding her nakedness from view.

"Are you alright?"

Wet tears were still in her eyes. They glistened like diamonds under the sun, rare and flawless. She wouldn't look at me. She purposely turned away, avoiding me.

I wrapped my brother in a blanket then dragged him out of the room. She no longer had a working door, so her privacy no longer mattered. Lars came upstairs, concerned about the commotion.

"Fetch me a glass of water," I ordered.

Lars obeyed immediately.

When he returned with the water, I splashed it on Cane's face, waking him up instantly.

He coughed before he sat up, the water dripping off his nose. He ran his hand through his hair, slowly coming to. "What the fuck happened?"

Now that he was awake, I gripped him by the throat. "Don't touch my slave again." I jerked him hard, hard enough to snap his neck in two. "Do you fucking understand me?" I slammed his head into the ground just to make my point.

"Your slave?" He scooted away from me, rubbing his temple. "What the hell is going on here? We agreed we were going to fuck her and torture her, do exactly what Bones did to Vanessa. But I come over here, and this girl doesn't have a scratch on her—at least not a new one."

"Don't worry about it."

"No, I am worried about it," he snapped. "That's what we agreed on. She's been here for two weeks, and you haven't done anything with her."

"I've had my way with her plenty of times." It was easy for me to lie when I was this pissed off.

"You're full of it, and we both know it. I can tell just by looking at her."

"Get out of my house, Cane. And don't touch my slave without permission."

"Who decided she was *yours*?" He stood up with the blanket wrapped around his waist.

“I did.” I decided the moment I saw the fight in her. She wasn’t like the others. She didn’t crack under harsh punishment. She didn’t snap in two like a twig. She was resilient. She was strong. My interest in her piqued, and I haven’t stopped thinking about her in that way ever since. “Deal with it.”

Cane didn’t hide his disdain for me. Like a child, he didn’t like it when he didn’t get his way. He was spiteful, vengeful. This wouldn’t be the end of this argument. It never was. “Who made you king of the world?”

“I did.” He was afraid of me, and I knew it. I may talk less, but I was far more ruthless. He’d seen me do unforgettable things. He’d seen me do things that made strong men hurl. He liked to push me but only so far. “I’ll buy you a whore to entertain you. But stay away from mine.”

“I can buy my own whore.” He pointed at the broken-down door. “Next time I come over here, she better be fucked up and blue. She better have scars on top of scars. She better bow to my fucking feet when I walk through the door. That was the plan, and you better stick to it. If you don’t take care of it, I will.”

“Don’t worry about it. I will.”

He searched my eyes until he found my agreement. When he found what he needed, he finally turned away. “Black and blue, Crow. I mean it.” He grabbed his clothes and walked out.

I stayed on the balcony until I heard the front door shut. When I was alone, I finally walked back to the bedroom, stepping through the broken door.

She was exactly where I left her, curled up in the blanket where her tits couldn’t be seen. Her fierce expression had returned. Like no one had violated her ten minutes ago, she held her head high like a queen. “You gave me your word.” The hatred hummed in her voice.

“Did he rape you?”

She stared out the open window.

“I asked you a question.” I came around the bed and approached her.

She still wouldn’t answer me.

I snatched her by the hair and jerked her face toward mine. I held her in place, daring her to hold her silence. “Don’t make me ask you again.” My mouth pressed against her cheek. My teeth wanted to nip at her collarbone. I wanted to suck the skin of her neck until it bruised.

“No.”

“Then I kept my word to you.”

Her eyes finally found mine, watering and full of emotion.

“Did he hurt you?”

She pulled her knees to her chest under the blanket. “I’ve had worse.”

I was about to do something I’d never done before, let alone to a slave.
“I’m sorry.”

Her cold eyes searched my gaze incredulously, like she expected this to be some kind of cruel joke.

“I didn’t know he was here. That’s not how I run this house. I promise I won’t let him come near you again. I promise I won’t let anyone touch you—besides myself.” My hand slid down until it reached her neck. I felt her faint pulse underneath my fingertips.

Her gaze moved down to her lap. She silently excused me, wanting to be alone to lick her wounds in private.

I didn’t have a chance to see the welts because of the commotion, but I was certain they were painful. “I’ll fix your door and have Lars bring you something for the welts.”

“I heard what you said.” Her voice came out as a whisper. She still sounded strong despite the quiet way she spoke.

I eyed her lips, watching them part when she took a breath.

“Black and blue.” Slowly, her eyes moved back to mine. “You’re supposed to rape me then hurt me.” She begged with her eyes, telling me not to do it. She told me she’d been through enough. All she craved was peace.

My fingers glided through her hair slowly, and I pressed my face against hers. Our foreheads touched, and the heat of her body warmed me in distant places. It was the first time she didn’t pull away. She allowed the touch to linger.

My lips found hers, and I gave her a soft kiss. The simple touch made my core burn in longing. When I first saw this woman, I thought she was ordinary. But in the two weeks she’d been with me, all I thought about was her. I wanted her underneath me. I wanted her to cry for me.

She kissed me back initially, like that was her instinctive reaction the second she felt my mouth. But she quickly pulled away, retracting her lips. Her forehead was still pressed to mine, but the kiss was off the table.

“Yes. I will do all of those things to you.”

Chapter Eighteen

Pearl

When I woke up that morning, the swelling had gone down. Lars brought an ointment that soothed the skin, and he brought a few painkillers to top it off. I was never allowed to have pain meds with Bones. That was one perk about being with Crow.

Crow. Now I knew his name.

It was peculiar. But for him, it made complete sense. His dark brown hair and hazel eyes made him seem sinister. He was definitely a manifestation of the dark, a nightmare you would picture in a graveyard. The one thing that kept him human were those eyes.

They were beautiful.

Sometimes when I looked into them, I forgot what he was. Sometimes I forgot he was a fiend who implanted a tracker in my ankle. Sometimes I forgot he was the man keeping me there against my will.

I left the bed and walked to the window. The best feature of my room was that window. When I opened it every morning, I looked across the valley of a glorious vineyard. With a sky as clear as the sea and hills that looked manmade they were so perfect, it didn't feel like a prison anymore. Sometimes I could pretend I was there by choice. Sometimes I could pretend I was there on vacation, and one day, I would go home.

With the breeze on my face, I felt gratitude wash over me. With Bones, I never had this kind of privilege. I was a glorified dog on a leash. Every move was micromanaged in detail. But there, I had some freedom.

My eyes scanned the horizon, and I noticed something moving through the vineyards. When the image came closer to me, I recognized the dark hair and five o'clock shadow along his jaw. Shirtless, he jogged. The sweat on his chest glinted under the sunlight, highlighting every line of muscle. He had a powerful chest, the kind that was just as thick as the Great Wall, and he had toned abs. Each one was prominent in its definition. I counted eight.

His thin hips had the noticeable V shape that I'd seen on underwear models on billboards in Manhattan. Whether he wore a shirt or not, he really was extremely handsome. When I first saw him in the bar, I thought he was a blessing. I thought he represented hope, that there were beautiful and ordinary people in the world. That not all men were maniacal criminals who bought and sold people for profit.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

He approached the house, his jog coming to a brisk walk. He wore black running shorts with black running shoes. He had a thin and toned body, powerful but sleek. It was in direct opposition to his brother, who was burly and bulky. Some of their facial features were the same. I knew they were brothers the second I was in their captivity.

He reached the lawn and walked past my window as he headed to the front of the house. His head turned my way, either because he expected me to be there or he wanted to look for his own reasons. His eyes found mine, and he stopped walking altogether. He stood still, staring at me.

I'd been caught, but I didn't look away. I stared down at him, trying to figure out this enigma who held me prisoner. He threatened to rape and hurt me, but when he attempted to make good on his word, he didn't follow through. He protected me from his men and his brother, bringing me to this beautiful mansion surrounded by vineyards. And when his brother tied me up and tried to rape me, he protected me. He could have just turned a blind eye or let it happen.

But he didn't.

He kissed me last night. It wasn't the aggressive kind that Bones gave me, where he shoved his tongue in my mouth without having a clue what to do with it. This was unusually gentle—even fragile.

My lips automatically moved against his. I didn't think twice about it. It just happened. But when I realized what I was doing, I pulled away. This man was a psychopath—why the hell was I kissing him?

He threatened to keep his promise to his brother—that he would make me black and blue. He said he would rape me, take me however he wanted. But those threats didn't mean as much as they did when I first came here. Three times he'd done something to help me.

Maybe he wasn't as evil as I thought.

He held my gaze with intensity, not blinking despite the sun hitting him right in the eyes. It made the green color of his eyes brighten, like the lush grass of his lawn.

I wanted to walk away, but I was glued to the spot, infatuated by his appearance. His strong body still glistened with sweat. In the back of my mind, in a very dark place, I wondered how it would taste.

Without warning, he walked back to the house like he hadn't spotted me at all. His powerful body had the most beautiful complexion. It was fair, pale

like mine, but it was flawless. He didn't have tan lines along his arms like most people did. Perhaps because he wore a suit when he left the house.

When he was out of sight, I walked into my bathroom and got ready for breakfast. Lars usually brought me a tray that I enjoyed in private. But I was tired of being cooped up in the room. I was in a beautiful mansion but hadn't seen much of it.

Crow had finished half his breakfast when I walked inside the dining hall. He wasn't sweaty and shirtless anymore. Now he wore a black suit and a yellow tie. The collared shirt underneath was a beautiful teal color. Despite the vivid colors he wore, he made the outfit even more masculine.

I took a seat and looked at him across the table.

He still held his newspaper with one hand, but his eyes drifted to my face to greet me silently. He gave me a single look before he turned back to the paper. He still didn't want to be disturbed during his morning meal.

I didn't have anything to say anyway.

Lars brought my breakfast, an Italian delicacy that featured grape tomatoes, mozzarella cheese, and basil. He also brought a side of fruit, mixed berries and bananas.

"Thank you."

"Of course, m'lady." He gave me a sweet smile before he walked away. Lars was the first man I met on this adventure who didn't seem cruel. When he looked at me, he saw a person, not an object.

Crow dropped his paper. "What's your name?"

The intrusive question came out of nowhere.

"I'm sure Lars would like to know how to address you."

"M'lady is fine," I said. "I didn't think anyone spoke like that anymore."

"I can have him call you slave, if you prefer."

I narrowed my eyes on his face, feeling my fire rise. "I'm sick of your act. I'm not buying it anymore."

Now he narrowed his eyes on me.

"I'm not your slave. You don't treat me like one. You let me walk around like a human being. You haven't raped me, even though you said you would. When someone else tried to hurt me, you stopped him. I don't think you're who you say you are."

“Foolish.”

“No. I think you’re foolish for thinking I was going to fall for this act. Now tell me why you’re keeping me if you have no ill will toward me.”

He rose to his feet in one swift move and slammed his fists down on the table. The collision of his palms made my spine coil in fear. Every dish shook at the violence, crashing with a collective sound. Lars didn’t come running in, probably understanding what caused the disruption. “There’s nothing I want more than to tie you up and beat you senseless. When I saw those welts on your thigh, I got hard. When I think about making you cry, it makes me come in my trousers like a teenage boy. No, you aren’t safe with me. Yes, I have every ill will toward you. When I’m through with you, I’ll bury you in the soil of my vineyards so my next harvest will be even more fruitful than the last.” He slammed his fists down again. “I’m a beast. And you know what beasts do in the dark.”

I spent the afternoon outside on the back patio. I had a book and a pitcher of iced tea beside me. Lars attended to my every need, fetching me lunch when I never asked for anything and supplying an umbrella when the heat became too much.

I felt like royalty.

“Lars?”

He came to my side, his hands behind his back. “Yes, m’lady?”

I shut the book I was reading. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course. Whatever you need, I can take care of it.”

“Well...I was curious about Crow—”

“Mr. Barsetti.”

I didn’t know his last name. He never told me. “Yes. I was wondering what kind of man he is. I mean...do you know what he wants with me?” Servants knew every piece of gossip in a household. At least, that was true according to *Downton Abbey*.

Lars didn’t react in the slightest. “I don’t understand your meaning.”

“I mean...does he normally have slaves around the house?” Was I the first one? What kind of business did he do with Cane? Why was he enemies with Bones?

“I can’t answer that. I’m sorry.” He walked away before I could ask any more questions.

I should have known Lars would be loyal to his employer. I would get nothing out of him. The only person I could ask was Crow, but I doubted I would get anything out of him. Sometimes he was calm and soft, like a rose petal across the skin. Other times, like this morning, he was a psychopath.

I spent the afternoon reading and enjoying the movement of the sun through the sky. The mansion was isolated from the rest of the world, and the view was so beautiful a part of me never wanted to leave. If Crow wasn’t insane and Cane didn’t have the ability to stop by, I might actually like it there.

When the sun was about to sink below the hill in the distance, I knew evening had arrived. There would be dinner, and then I would return to my room to read by my bedside lamp. The window would remain open as I listened to the sounds of the open land.

“I’ve heard you had a relaxing day.”

I shut the book with a jolt. I didn’t hear him approach me from behind. His footsteps were silent because he walked with impeccable grace. He didn’t disturb the atmosphere around him—because he commanded it. “Why do you creep up on people like that?”

“Why don’t you pay attention to your surroundings more?” He pulled the legs of his trousers up before he sat in the chair beside me. His suit was just as crisp as it was that morning. It was molded to his body, fitting him better than being naked.

I kept the book on my lap and stared at the hillside. It was better than looking at him. The final thing he said to me that morning left me in a jittery state. I wasn’t sure what to believe. What not to believe.

“Did you have a good day?”

“Yes.” I refused to look at him, wanting him to disappear.

“Lars told me you’ve had a curious mind lately.”

What a tattletale. “I wouldn’t have to ask him anything if you answered my questions.”

He rubbed his wrist just below his watch. He possessed large hands with long fingers. He oozed grace mixed with masculinity, looking like a model that would be on the cover of *GQ* magazine. “What do you want to know?”

“Have you had a slave before?”

“Me?” he asked.

“Was my question not clear?”

A soft smile formed on his lips, like he was amused with my anger rather than threatened by it. “No. I’ve never had a slave before.”

“Then why do you want me?”

“You know what they say.” He rested his arms on his knees and returned his gaze to mine. “Always go for the new experience.”

I hated his vague responses. It was worse than no response. “Why did you capture me to hurt and kill me? How does that affect Bones?”

“It’ll piss him off—to say the least.”

“You overestimate his fondness for me. I can assure you he’s already replaced me with some other poor girl. Hurting me won’t hurt him. I can promise you that.”

He stared at me with erected walls, absorbing my reaction but not giving one of his own. “Three million dollars.”

My pulse weakened.

“Three million dollar is a big investment—even by his standards.”

“He was drunk when he bought me.”

He chuckled. “Nice try. We both know he wasn’t. The most he’s ever paid for a slave was a million. That’s three times the amount.”

“Maybe he got a raise.”

He ran his long fingers along his jaw, feeling his five o’clock shadow coming in. “He showed you what he does for a living. You only do that with an equal, not a slave. And he took you to the opera, knowing people who recognized him would see the two of you together. You meant a lot to him—a great deal.”

He had a funny way of showing it.

“And you know what I think?”

Now I looked away, annoyed with his arrogance.

“I think you made that happen.” His words hit my ears like a pin drop in a silent room. It amplified in my head simply because it was true. “I think you manipulated him like a mastermind to improve your situation. And to find an opportunity to escape.”

I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of being right. I’d take that truth to the grave.

“And that is immensely impressive.”

I didn’t react to the compliment. My eyes naturally wanted to look into his, but I stopped that from happening.

“You’re a fighter. You don’t stop until you get what you want. That was why I spared you from my men. Deep down inside, somewhere that I can’t really understand, was respect. I respected you. Still do.”

He hadn’t hurt me—not once. He made promises to hurt me, but they were just threats to keep me in line. I believed this man wasn’t as cruel as he claimed. I believed there was a chance he would let me go—if I played my cards right. “If that’s how you feel, why won’t you release me?” I turned back to him, stopping the plea from entering my eyes. No matter how beautiful this place was, I wanted to go home.

“My need for revenge is stronger.”

“Stronger than letting an innocent woman go home?” I asked incredulously. “Do you have any idea what I’ve been through? As a man, you’ll never understand what it’s like to be held down while you’re violated like an object. You’ll never understand what it’s like to belong to someone else. You don’t get it, and you never will.”

“I do get it.”

I searched his eyes and waited for something redeeming, something pure.

The look in his eyes hadn’t changed once during our conversation. His eyes were soft like satin sheets, but his jaw was hard with cruelty. “I just don’t care.”

I didn’t join my captor for dinner, because I didn’t want to look at him right now. The last thing he said to me sent me to another place with rage. Once upon a time, I thought the world was a beautiful place. There were bad people in it, but there were also a lot of good people.

But I realized I was dead wrong.

Every person served their own interests. Every person was selfish. Every person didn’t care whom they hurt on their path to get what they wanted.

It was despicable.

I hardly touched my dinner despite how delicious it was, and I left the half-eaten tray outside for Lars to pick up. At least my room was a safe haven. No one bothered me in there. It was beautifully decorated, and it had something that meant the world to me.

A window.

Sometimes, I could pretend I was free. I shouldn't feel gratitude toward Crow for treating me better than Bones, but I did.

Even though I shouldn't.

I got ready for bed and placed my book on the nightstand. The bed was comfortable, the best I'd ever slept on. The sheets were made of Italian finery, and the comforter kept me warm and cool at the same time. It healed my aching back and sore limbs. Being away from Bones for so long gave my body time to heal from the things it endured. But I wondered if there would ever be enough time to heal everywhere.

I fell asleep and was taken to my nightmares. I usually dreamed of Bones doing sick things to me. No matter how hard I tried to block those images out, I couldn't. They were a part of me, another scar he inflicted. Even though I got away, he still won. Now that he was gone, I still thought about him. If that wasn't a victory, I didn't know what was.

I felt the ground move beneath my feet, and the temperature of the air increased. My body shifted, and I felt my bottoms come off. Bones was undressing me, preparing to enter me with abrasive force. I wished he would disappear. I wished the nightmares would stop.

I felt my top come off, and my tits were exposed to the cool air. They became rigid and hard, pebbling at the intrusion. Then a mouth pressed to mine. It wasn't hard and sloppy. It wasn't full of random tongue that penetrated my mouth like a wet hose.

It felt nice.

He sucked my bottom lip gently, rubbing it against his soft lips. Then he kissed me again, the hair on his chin rubbing against me slightly. Breath filled my lungs when he breathed into me.

My dream changed, and Crow was the one kissing me. He was shirtless and sweaty, exactly as I saw him that morning. He kissed me softly and dug his hand into my hair. He showed the gentle side of him, not the temperamental man that snapped at the slightest irritation.

Fingers rubbed against my clit, and I felt my knees fall away because it felt so good. I hadn't been touched like that in forever. Bones just shoved himself inside me harshly, only taking pleasure and never giving it. I must be touching myself without realizing it, but I was aware of my hands on the mattress. I could feel the cool satin underneath my skin.

Alarm shot through me when I realized this wasn't a dream. This was real. My eyes opened, and I saw Crow's face pressed to mine as he continued

kissing me. He was naked on top of me, his hard cock pressed into my stomach.

“Get off.” I shoved him harshly in the chest.

He recoiled back, but his fingers stayed between my legs. “You liked it a second ago.”

“Because I was asleep, you idiot.” I slapped his hand away.

“Yeah?” He leaned back on the balls of his feet, his glorious body looking just as good as I remembered. His thick cock hung out, proud and hard. “And who were you dreaming about?”

Did he know? That wasn’t possible. He might be able to read my expressions, but he couldn’t read my mind. “I wasn’t dreaming about anyone. And that doesn’t matter. Don’t touch me.”

His lips fell in a slight smile, like I just challenged him. He moved back on top of me and pinned both of my arms up with a single hand. He kept my wrists bound together and returned his body to mine.

I struggled against him, but he was too heavy. He was all muscle and strength, twice my size and a million times stronger.

“Fight me, and I’ll hurt you.” He squeezed my wrists tightly together, warning me.

“I’ll fight you until you kill me.”

Now he smiled completely, loving that response. “Baby, you’re sexy.”

“You’re into some sick shit.” I bucked my hips against him.

“Right now, I’m just into you.” He leaned down and kissed the skin of my neck. His tongue ran along the area where my artery was located, and he nipped me gently, just enough pressure to make it tingle but not make it bleed. His lips traveled to my ear, and he kissed the shell gently, breathing into my canal. His arousal was heightened in his breathing, and I could hear the distant growl.

His free hand moved to my chest and palmed one tit, squeezing and massaging. He released a quiet moan into my ear. “Beautiful tits.”

I lay there helplessly, unable to do anything but let him take me. My nipples hardened at his touch, and I felt my breath hitch. I didn’t feel scared like last time. My heart didn’t drum like it was life or death. My body was oddly relaxed, oddly charged.

Crow kissed my collarbone before he gently bit it between his teeth. Then his mouth moved to my other tit, and he sucked it hard, making me wince in

pain. He nibbled it gently before he sucked again, his back tightening in arousal.

I knew I wouldn't be able to stop him this time. If I said no, he would just keep going. If I tried to fight, I would get slapped across the face—probably worse.

He licked the valley between my breasts then kissed my stomach, kissing every inch of me while his cock lay against my belly. It oozed with pre-come, ready to be inside me.

He moved back up to my face then returned his fingers against my clit. He rubbed the nub in a circular motion, hitting it with the right pressure and the right speed like he'd done it a million times.

It felt good.

And I hated that. I hated the way my knees naturally parted to accommodate him. I hated the fact I wanted him to suck my nipples again. I hated the fact his kiss felt so incredible.

He looked into my eyes and watched my expression, his face darkening with sexual need. His fingers worked me aggressively, firing off arousal to the rest of my body.

“Stop.”

Two fingers moved to my entrance while his thumb stayed behind.

“No.” I locked my knees so he couldn't get inside me. I didn't want him to feel. I didn't want him to know what lay between my legs.

He jerked my knees open with his thigh then inserted two fingers.

No.

The instant he was inside me, he froze in place. He felt the moisture that accumulated there. He felt just how wet I was—how soaked I was.

Shame slammed through me in waves, and I was mortified. My body betrayed me, and I was embarrassed by how easily it gave me away. I was wetter than I'd been in a long time. My body woke up from its hibernation, and it was desperate for relief.

Crow wore a victorious expression. His arrogance increased tenfold. His fingers moved inside me while his thumb massaged my clitoris. He curved his fingers so he could hit the sensitive tissue, eliciting waves of pleasure that made my tits harden further. “You're soaked.”

“From my dream...” I fumbled for an explanation, not wanting him to assume he was responsible for what happened.

“You were dreaming about me.” He said it with pure conviction, like there was no possibility for an alternative answer. “You said my name.”

Goddammit.

He continued to slide his fingers in and out, working my clitoris at the same time. He pressed harder and moved faster, making my body betray me even more by pushing me toward an orgasm.

I didn't think I could even have one.

He slowly pulled his fingers out then inserted them into his mouth. He sucked my juice off before he grabbed the base of his cock and pointed at my entrance. “No need for you to suck me off when you're this wet.” He pressed his head against my entrance.

My arousal died when I realized what was about to happen. Maybe I was attracted to him and maybe he did turn me on, but I still didn't want to be raped. I still didn't want to be a prisoner. I wanted my life back. “No, stop. Please.”

He pushed his head inside slightly, stretching me apart.

“Stop. Please. I'll do anything.” Tears fell from my eyes in waves. I hated crying because it was weak, but I didn't know what else to do. I was tired of being used over and over again. I was tired of not having a voice. I was tired of everything. “Crow, please.”

The sound of his name broke through the sexual fog in his mind. He heard my plea and looked into my face, the head of his dick still partially inside me. The fight raged on behind his eyes. He wanted to keep going because his dick wanted to get wet, but my tears meant something to him.

“Please...” I pulled my hands away from their hold, relieved I had the freedom to move. I pressed them against his chest and ran my palms up and down, feeling the hard muscles of his body. I was coaxing him into cooperating, appealing to his good nature. He wasn't evil like his brother. He had some good in him. “Don't do this to me.”

The fog lifted completely, and he pulled his cock away from my entrance.

Gratitude washed over me in waves. I'd never been so grateful for anything in my life. I had some control over my destiny. I had some control over what happened to me. My pussy got wet for him, as embarrassing as that was, but he still didn't do it. He could justify it by saying I wanted it, but he didn't.

He moved off of me and sat at the edge of the bed. His sweat pants and boxers were on the ground, and he scooped them into his hands. His defined

back was chiseled, obvious even in the limited light of the bedroom.

I shouldn't feel anything good for this man, but I did. I didn't see him in the same way I saw the others. He may be rough around the edges, but he was honorable underneath all of that callousness.

I moved to his side of the bed and cupped his face. His five o'clock shadow rubbed against my fingertips as I felt him. I loved the feel of his stern jaw. It was rigid and strong, directly counteracting the soft beauty of his eyes.

He turned his face toward mine, watching every move I made. His wide chest expanded with the quiet breaths he took. He glanced at my lips before he returned his gaze to my eyes.

Without thinking, I leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. I kissed the corner of his mouth before I felt his upper lip. His thin lips were delicious against my tongue, and I loved the feel of his mouth. I never thought I could enjoy kissing anyone after what I'd been through.

But I loved kissing him.

The area between my legs was still wet, and his cock was still hard. I didn't want to invite him back to bed, so I ended the embrace before I changed his mind. When he looked at me with those intense eyes, I dropped my gaze. "Thank you..." He could do whatever he wanted to me, and I had no say in the matter. But he let me go. He listened to me. He treated me more like a person than anyone else. The night could have gone quite differently. But he gave me a choice. He gave me freedom.

He gave me a voice.

Chapter Nineteen

Crow

The fire roared in my office even though it was a warm day. I liked the sound of the crackling flames inside the hearth. It was my form of music, the natural sound of dancing fire.

I kept my mind fixated on work, but that brunette kept weaving her way into my thoughts. Last night, I had her underneath me. She was naked. I was naked. My cock was harder than it'd ever been, and I wanted to ram myself inside her slick pussy.

She liked my kisses. She liked my touch. Her soaked pussy said she liked the way my fingers rubbed her clit. It liked the way I sucked her nipples until they were raw. It liked the way I clenched my teeth against her collarbone, bringing her a little pain in the midst of pleasure.

There was no mistaking her body language—she loved everything.

But she still said no.

I should have kept going. I shouldn't let this tiny woman tell me what to do. But when she pleaded with me, begged me to stop, I automatically obeyed.

I couldn't believe it. I actually *obeyed* someone.

I wanted to cause her pain because it got me so hard. But I wanted her to want to be in pain. I wanted her to like it. And the despair she showed me last night wasn't what I craved. It was different. I couldn't explain how.

A knock sounded on my door. I recognized it because I heard it so many times. All my life, I'd been listening to those rattling knuckles.

"Come in."

Lars walked inside with a black folder under his arm. "A man dropped this off for you. He said you would know what it was about." He placed it on the end of my desk. "Is there anything I can get you while I'm here?"

"Yes. How is she?"

There was only one other person in the house I could be referring to. "I haven't seen her, sir. She had breakfast and left her tray outside."

She ate something. That was all I needed to know. "Thank you, Lars."

He nodded before he walked out.

I opened the folder the moment the door was shut. I hired a guy to get intel on my houseguest. I wanted to know everything about her without asking any questions. I wanted her to know I was God—and I knew everything.

I flipped through the pages and discovered her name.

Pearl.

I loved it. I loved how pure it was. I loved how beautiful it was.

I skimmed more information and found out how she'd become trafficked. She was in St. Thomas when it happened, accompanied by her boyfriend. The idea of her being with someone before me, voluntarily, sent me into a rage of jealousy. I continued reading on so the ferocity would disintegrate. I just got to a piece of information that made it even worse. I reread the words because I couldn't believe what I saw. My hands shook I was so angry. My hatred nearly matched what I felt for Bones for mutilating my sister—almost.

A knock sounded on the door, interrupting my rampage. It wasn't Lars, I knew that much. And that meant it was only one other person—Pearl.

She opened the door without being invited and stood there awkwardly, waiting for permission that she wouldn't get.

I closed the folder and left it on my desk. She caught me at a bad time. If she were anyone else, they would take off as quickly as possible. Even Lars would leave, understanding my rage better than most people.

She entered my office and eyed the fireplace against the opposite wall. She wore one of the Tuscan dresses Lars picked out for her. It looked perfect on her, like she was born and raised on the beautiful hillside. "Are you busy?"

Her beauty wasn't enough to distract me. "I'm always busy."

Her eyes showed her disappointment, expecting the same gentle man she saw the night before. He wasn't constant. He came and went—gone more often than present. "I was hoping we could talk. It can wait until later if that's more convenient for you."

"Or we could not talk at all. That's the most convenient option." I hated myself for going soft on her. I hated myself for being anything but ruthless. I had revenge to plot, and I was dropping the ball.

She stared at me in bewilderment, having no idea what triggered this anger. "Did I do something?"

"You're talking. That's what you did."

Her eyes fell in sadness, the fight inside her gone. "I just wanted to say thank you for—"

"You already did. Now go." I just wanted her out of my office so I could soak in my rage peacefully—and alone.

“You’re a better man than you give yourself credit for. I just want you to know that.”

“Don’t care.” *Just leave.*

Her fire roared to life when she became fed up with my hostility. “What’s your problem? I’m in here giving you a compliment and respect, and you’re being a bitch-ass.”

Both of my eyebrows rose when I heard what she said. “*Bitch-ass?*”

“Yes. That’s exactly how you’re acting.”

When she told me off, it just made me hard. I wanted her to slap me across the face then kiss me on the lips. I rose to my feet and walked around the desk, feeling anger course through my veins—a different kind of anger than I felt before.

She didn’t flinch at my approach, assuming she was safe with me after last night.

I grabbed a handful of hair and yanked her head back aggressively, exposing her lips for my mouth to take. I kissed her hard, practically bruising her lips. My arm circled her waist, and I pulled her flush against me, wanting her to understand just how much my cock wanted to fuck her small cunt.

Her lips were unresponsive at first, but she kissed me back a moment later, moving her lips with the same aggression and hostility. Our teeth rubbed together by mistake, but I liked it. She did too. Her arm hooked around my neck, and she dragged her nails into my skin.

My hand gave her ass a firm squeeze before I pulled away. “Talk to me like that again, and see what happens.”

“I don’t get you.”

“I don’t care.”

“I came in here to tell you—”

“You came in here to manipulate me. You think I’m wrapped around your finger because I won’t strike you or rape you. You’ve completely misinterpreted me. I’m the kind of man who will still bury you in my fields. I’m the kind of man who will kill innocent people just because they’re standing in my way. You can’t come in here dressed up and expect me to fall to your knees. The only person who will be falling to your knees is you.” My hands moved to her waist, and I squeezed her so tightly she tried to pull away. “I’m not letting you go. Not now. Not ever. The only escape you’ll find from this place is when I kill you. Do you understand me?”

Her eyes lacked any fear. She stared at me in disbelief, not believing a word I said. She shoved my hands off her body, fighting for dominion over the argument. “You won’t hurt me. You won’t kill me.”

“You’re stupid, you know that?” I hated it when she stood up to me. But I fucking loved it at the same time.

“When Cane comes by and demands you put a bullet in my head, you won’t do it. When he wants to pull the trigger himself, you’ll take the bullet for me. You aren’t fooling anyone, Crow. You’re a good person—”

I slapped her across the face. I didn’t use much force because the collision of my hand against her cheek would be enough to shut her the fuck up. “Don’t talk about me like you know me. You don’t know anything about me. I will strangle you with my bare hands and watch the light leave your eyes. Stop rewriting my story. Stop trying to change who I am.”

She turned with the hit and cupped her cheek, feeling the sting of the slap long after the collision ended. She kept her back to me, recovering from the shock of what I just did.

“I’ll do it again.” *And I meant that.*

She turned around, her hand still on her cheek. Instead of tears in her eyes, there was just surprise. She truly didn’t expect me to lay a hand on her, like a goddamn idiot. With the speed of a viper, she slapped her hand across my face—as hard as she could.

My face turned with her hand, and I felt the redness flush my cheeks. It didn’t hurt, not in a painful way. It set my nerves on fire, bringing forth the beast deep inside me. My cock was hard in my trousers, and my mouth ached for hers. I wanted to twist her nipples until she screamed.

I turned back to her, my nostrils flaring. I wanted to bend her over my desk and fuck her right then and there. No woman had ever slapped me before—unless I commanded her to. This woman had a razor-sharp edge I wanted to cut myself on. She had a spine harder than most of my men. She had a fierceness that rivaled my own. I’d never been so fucking hard in my life.

She pointed her finger in my face. “Touch me like that again, and see what happens.”

Now she was just baiting me. “If you don’t want to be spanked and fucked against my desk, you better walk out right now.” My shoulders were tense, and my hand started to shake. The beast inside me was tearing through my restraints. My blood screamed for hers.

She turned around and headed to the door—making a wise decision. But she stopped when she noticed the paintings on my wall. There were at least twenty in the room, all made by the same hand. Some were more unique than others, created mostly out of buttons.

Like she forgot about our argument altogether, she stared at them. Her eyes focused on one in particular. The hills of the valley were in the distance, painted with watercolors. The vineyards receded into the background, and each row was created from an array of buttons. The art was unusual but beautiful with its originality.

She turned back to me, her lips parted to ask about the paintings on the wall. But when she saw the livid look on my face, the desire for blood still in my eyes, she thought better of it. She walked out the door without a backward glance, saving herself from a rough fuck that would leave her so sore she wouldn't be able to walk for a week.

I returned to my desk, my cock still rock-hard and throbbing. If I didn't fuck her soon, I'd have to entertain myself with my hand, which wasn't nearly as much fun. My eyes drifted to the jar sitting at the edge of my desk. It was an old antique found at the flea market years ago. A collection of buttons filled it to the brim. Some were brown with tinsel, others were ivory with lace woven through the holes. Each one was unique, handmade and imported.

And they gave me an idea.

I sat down to dinner that night. As I expected, she didn't join me. She was avoiding me after the way I slapped her. And she was probably a little afraid since she slapped me back. She tested me, pushed me to my limit. Now she knew there really was a beast behind my hazel eyes. "Lars, tell our guest to come down for dinner."

"Yes, Your Grace." He left the room and ventured upstairs.

I stayed at the table where the food was laid out. Zucchini lasagna sat in the center of the table along with a garden salad. Homemade bruschetta sat alongside it, every Italian's favorite appetizer.

Lars returned a moment later. "She declined the invitation."

My irritation didn't blossom immediately. That was the answer I expected. "Inform her there will be consequences if she disobeys." It was a

power play. I was exerting my dominance, and she fought it every single step of the way. I loved the challenge. I loved the fact she wouldn't submit. She just made me even more dominant than before.

Lars nodded before he left the dining hall. He returned to her room and shared my message. Then he came back without my guest beside him. He just looked at me.

I tried not to smile. This was the exact response I was hoping for. "Thank you, Lars. I'll take care of it."

He walked out of the room and retreated to the kitchen, knowing whatever was about to happen next was something he didn't want to be a part of.

I walked up the grand staircase then entered her bedroom. She was sitting on the couch reading a book, still wearing the same dress as before. She didn't look up when I entered, as if she knew I was coming. "I'm not hungry."

I stepped closer to her, my hands in the pockets of my suit. Without saying a word or raising a hand, I threatened her. I conveyed all the horrific things I would do to her if she didn't comply. Every time she resisted, I just pushed her harder. I loved an opponent who could match me. I loved that she wasn't scared to oppose me. Her bravery was amusing.

When she felt me approach, she couldn't hide her unease. Her fingers gripped her book in anticipation, waiting for my palm to collide with her cheek.

I grabbed her by the neck and pinned her to the back of the couch, jolting her even though she'd been expecting something. I leaned over her, my face pressed close to hers. "Get your ass downstairs. Don't make me ask you again." I squeezed her throat, almost constricting her air supply. The more she fought me, the sweeter the victory. My desire got the best of me, and I placed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. Despite the aggressive way I grabbed her, she released a breath at my touch. Her thighs squeezed together. I aroused her. She could try to hide it, but it was a wasted effort. "Do I need to ask you again?" My lips brushed past hers when I spoke, and I looked at the fear in her eyes.

She tried to speak, but most of her words never came out. Only one did. "No."

My cock twitched in my trousers when I won the battle. Every war we fought was challenging, but that made my victory all the sweeter. I pressed

my mouth to hers and gave her a soft kiss, a gift for her obedience. “Good girl.”

She sat across from me and ate her dinner quietly. She pulled her brown hair over one shoulder, revealing the slender neck I wanted to bite. The skin was so flawless, somehow escaping a scar from Bones. I wanted to make my mark on the virgin flesh, to scar her so every man would know where I’d been.

She kept her head down and didn’t make conversation. She was a sore loser. We went head-to-head, but she lost the battle. I went to her room, conquered it, and then dragged her back down with me.

The jar of buttons sat on the table, acting as a table setting. I waited for her to acknowledge it, to ask about the strange piece of decoration that clashed with everything else in the house. She seemed curious earlier that morning.

“I’m willing to let you go.” I finished my food and concentrated on my wine, the grapes that my company harvested and pressed. Nothing beat the exquisite quality of my harvest. I wasn’t the biggest winery in Italy without reason.

She stopped eating when she heard my words. In fact, her fork was dropped on the plate, making a distinct clatter. The words must have sounded too good to be true because she asked, “What did you say?”

“I’m willing to let you go.” I repeated my sentence word for word.

Her hand immediately went to her chest, right between her curvy tits. “You’ll let me leave? You’ll let me go home?” Her voice cracked in exasperation. Her desperation was heavy, and her true desires shined through. She wanted freedom more than anything else. She wanted it more than food or water. She wanted it more than good health.

“I’ll let you go. Whatever you decide to do with that freedom is at your discretion.”

Her eyes watered and her breathing increased. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I knew you were a good man. I knew you were—”

“I’m not finished.” There was nothing more insulting than telling me I was a good man. I knew exactly what I was—and an honorable person wasn’t

one of my qualities. It rubbed me the wrong way, like the head of a toothbrush against carpet.

Her mouth immediately shut, and the tears in her eyes froze in place.

“I’m not giving you freedom. You’re working for it.”

Not understanding, she continued to stare.

“By letting you go, I’m losing something invaluable—my revenge. You can’t put a price on that. You can’t make up for that. I lost men when I captured you from Bones. I’ll lose the respect of my brother if I let you go. You need to pay me for that.”

“I...I have some money. But I need to—”

“I don’t want money.” Money meant nothing to me. I had more than I would ever need.

“Then what do you want?”

I grabbed the jar of buttons and turned it over, spilling every single one onto the table between us. I righted the empty jar and set it on the table. “I want you.”

She stared at the buttons between us before she reached out and grabbed one herself. She felt it between her fingers, sliding her thumb across the smooth surface. It was ivory with four open holes.

“Every time you please me, one goes in the jar.” I grabbed one off the table and dropped it in the vase. “When it’s full, your debt is repaid. And you’re free to go.” At least three hundred buttons fit within the jar. It would take her a long time to work it off, and it would be long enough for me to lose interest in her by the end.

She threw the button on the table. “And what if I say no?”

She wouldn’t say no. She loved it when I touched her. She loved it when I kissed her. She wanted me but refused to have me out of principle. I was giving her a way out, giving her a justification for the means. And it allowed me to control the situation at the exact same time. “Nothing will change.”

“Meaning?”

“You’ll live here indefinitely. I’ll put you to work around the house with the other maids. I’ll never take you against your will or let anyone else do the same. You’ll be comfortable, taken care of, and safe. But that’s all your life will ever be. You’ll never return home. You’ll live out the remainder of your days in this house. You’ll die here.”

She surveyed the buttons. “There must be hundreds...”

“Three hundred and sixty-five.” The exact number of days in a year. “That comes out to one year of servitude.” That was more than fair, if you asked me.

“I’m not fucking you for my freedom.” She grabbed a handful and threw them at my chest. “I deserve to be free because I’m a human being. I deserve respect for the shit I’ve been through. I deserve—”

“You don’t deserve anything unless I give it to you.” I rose, the buttons falling to my feet. “I’ve given you a choice. Take your only way out or be my prisoner for the rest of time. Live out your days in my vineyards and wait for your heart to stop beating. Or pay off your debt and be free.”

“I don’t have a debt.”

“You don’t get it.” I gripped the edge of the table as I leaned forward. “I have to sacrifice more than you could possibly understand. I have to let something go that will haunt me forever. You do owe me a great debt. In fact, you owe me a lot more than this.” I pointed to the jar, the vase that could hold an infinite number of pieces.

“How do I know you’ll really let me go?”

“Because I’m a man of my word.” I may be a criminal, but I also lived by a code of ethics. Every organization had rules. Even pirates had rules. It made order. It expelled chaos. “If I tell you I’ll let you go, I will.”

She searched my eyes, looking for a lie. “You promise me?”

She was going to agree. We were just steps from sealing the deal. “Yes.”

She came to a stand, her eyes moving to the buttons scattered across the dining hall. “I have to think about it.”

No. I wanted her now.

She left the table and headed to the door.

“Take all the time you need.” *Hurry the fuck up.*

She walked out without saying another word, leaving me alone.

With three hundred and sixty-five buttons.

Chapter Twenty

Pearl

Three hundred and sixty-five buttons.

That was a lot of buttons.

That was a lot of sex.

That was more sex than I'd had with Bones even though he took me several times a day. That was an enormous debt I had to repay. Every time I got underneath him, I would become an object—his object. I'd have to spread my legs anytime he commanded and give him whatever he asked.

Could I really do that?

I was attracted to Crow. When he kissed me, I felt a longing deep in my gut. When I felt his chest with my fingertips, I was impressed by his strength. When he rubbed my clit, he took me to the edge of an orgasm, something I'd never thought was possible after what I'd been through.

And he ignited a spark within me.

But it was still wrong. What he was asking of me was illegal. He wanted me to willingly be his slave, to accept his terms and give myself up. It was wrong to the very core. It was unacceptable.

But it would lead to my freedom.

With every fuck, I was closer to going home. I would constantly be working toward something, loosening the shackles around my wrists. I would be gaining my rights back, closer to returning to America and my home. I would be closer to returning to Jacob. He would understand my decision. If it were the only way out, I would have to take it.

Crow was a criminal, but he was honest. If he gave me his word, he kept it. That was something I thought I could rely on. He told me he wouldn't let anyone have me, and he stood up to his brother to accomplish that. Despite the way he slapped me, I believed he was better than the other riff-raff I encountered. There were still some redeeming qualities inside him. There was still a light of goodness. There was still hope.

I had to trust him.

If not, I'd have to settle for being a prisoner forever. While the mansion I lived in was beautiful, it wasn't enough. I needed freedom. I needed power. I needed more. I would never marry and have children if I stayed there. I would never go back to work or buy a house in the city.

I would be stuck there forever.

I hated the choice he laid out before me, but I couldn't argue with which one I needed to choose. It made me respect myself even less, but I also knew I had to do it. I had to do whatever was necessary to survive.

And I would never apologize for that.

I took a week to think things over. I didn't want to discuss it with him until I had an answer. He respected my solitude and didn't come to me. He didn't ask if I'd come to a decision. He didn't send Lars to ask me either. Patiently, he waited.

After he ate dinner, I knew he stayed in his study. He either worked or did something else. The only time he went into his bedroom was when he slept. I approached the door and rapped my knuckles against the wood.

"Come in."

I stepped inside and saw him sitting in a red armchair in front of the fire. He wore gray sweat pants and a black t-shirt. It was the only time I'd seen him in regular clothes, other than the evening he broke me out of Bones's place. The shirt fit tightly against his powerful chest. His shoulders were outlined as well, along with the impressive muscles of his arms. A hardbound book was in his lap, and he set it off to the side when I entered. "Can we talk?"

He nodded slightly to the armchair beside him.

I took that as an invitation and sat down.

The table beside his chair held a glass of scotch. Square ice cubes slowly melted in the cup. He drank coffee in the morning, wine with dinner, and usually scotch in the evenings. It was a pattern I'd come to notice.

He refused to speak, his eyes looking at the flames in the hearth. When we didn't see each other for a while, he closed off again, putting up his walls and refusing to let me in. Every time we came together, we had to start over.

"I've thought about your deal."

He turned his face my way, listening to every word.

"I have some questions."

He propped his elbow on the armrest and ran his fingers along his jaw. He gave another slight nod.

"Can you do whatever you want to me in exchange for a button? Do I have a say in it?"

He dropped his hand from his chin and placed it on the armrest. "Of course, you have a say in it. Ever since you've arrived here, you've had a say in everything. I would hope you'd appreciate that by now."

His anger could be triggered by anything, even by harmless words. "So I can say no?"

"You've said no plenty of times in the past. Why would that change?"

"So under this agreement, I can say no?"

"Yes."

"So we'll never do something I don't want to do?"

"Correct," he said in a bored voice.

"Will you hurt me?" That was bound to be a part of the agreement. Even though he hadn't hurt me up until that point, I knew he wanted to.

"Yes."

"And do I have a say in that?"

He nodded.

Now that my curiosity had been quelled, I understood what I was getting into. The fact that I had some rights in the situation, had some control, made everything a lot easier. I could do this. I could do this three hundred and sixty-five times so I could go home. "Okay."

He turned his gaze my way, the crackling flames reflecting in his eyes. The room darkened noticeably even though the flames burned hotter. His body tensed in desire, his hands anxious to grab me now that he had permission. "We have a deal?"

I refused to let myself think about it too hard. I had to do what I had to do to get out of there. I could work through it with a therapist when I was back at home. "Yes."

We entered my bedroom, the place where I slept every night. The moment I said yes, Crow wanted to get down to business. He'd been eager for my answer even though he never showed it. Now, he couldn't hold back his patience. He was ready to ignite.

"Can I make one request?" I'd come to love this room. I'd come to love my little window that looked over the fields. The couch sat next to the fire, the place where I read in peace.

He hadn't touched me yet, but his arms hung impatiently by his sides. He gave me a dark look, annoyed that I had something to say.

"I love this room. Can we do this somewhere else?" It was my safe haven, the closest thing I'd had to a home. Bones used to take me in the bed I slept in, so I never felt safe. But this little room meant the world to me. I didn't want to taint it with what we were about to do. Every time that door was shut, I wanted to know this was my space, and no one could take it away from me.

Crow must have understood because he didn't ask for clarification. He accepted my words without question and walked out, moving down the hall until he entered an unoccupied bedroom. It was similar to mine, with a large bed and a beautiful window. It was a little bigger, with a desk in the corner. Even though it was clean, it seemed like it hadn't been occupied in a decade. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah."

He shut the door and strode into the room. He shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out a button. He held it up for me to see before he flicked it on the bed. It was his first payment, the first dent in my massive bill.

I felt like a whore.

But at least I didn't feel like a slave.

I went close to him, unsure what he wanted to do, if he wanted me to do anything. The room was dark because we hadn't turned on any lights. He stood in front of me, towering over me with his height. His breathing remained even. He was calm, like he'd already done this a hundred times.

I knew I should take the lead and get it over with, but I couldn't. I was frozen to the spot, scared of the moment. He kissed me before, and I enjoyed it. He touched me before, and I liked that too. But I still couldn't move.

Crow noticed my unease and dug his hand into my hair. He pulled me close to him, our faces touching. The touch was so gentle that it felt familiar, as if he'd touched me like that for years. It was even soothing, just to be held. "I've wanted to fuck you since the moment I captured you." The words were harsh, unromantic, but he made them smooth. "I've been thinking about it every moment of every day."

I stared at his lips, watching them move. "Are you going to hurt me?"

He brushed his lips past mine. "No. We'll take it easy."

Gratitude washed over me.

"It's just one button. I'll use the others more wisely."

Three hundred and sixty-four more to go.

“Your safe word is fire.”

“Safe word?” I whispered.

“If you want me to stop, just say that word, and I will.”

I had the ability to stop?

“But if you do, you don’t get a button for the night. It’s revoked.”

I felt immense gratitude that he allowed me to have a safe word at all. Bones did horrific things to me, unspeakable things. I couldn’t have stopped them even if I wanted to. But I shouldn’t feel any loyalty to Crow either. After all, he manipulated me into doing this to begin with. “Okay.”

He brushed his lips against mine again before he gave me a slow kiss. It was soft and sweet, containing the tenderness of young love. He kissed me with fragility, slowly coaxing me back to life. With every brush of his lips, I felt warmth flood into my body. It didn’t feel like a deal. It felt real.

He breathed hard into my mouth before he pulled my shirt over my head. He looked down at me with wide eyes, treasuring my body like a chest full of gold. Old scars still marked my skin from Bones’s abuse, but Crow didn’t seem to care.

He pressed his mouth against my neck and gave me a playful bite with enough pressure to make me wince but not enough to make me bleed. He unclasped my bra at the very same instant, making it slide down my arms.

My nipples hardened as his mouth nipped my neck. He gave me soft kisses before he sucked the skin aggressively, bruising it with his excitement. My hands automatically moved to the crooks of his arms, where his biceps curled. I felt the muscles underneath my fingertips, loving how strong they were under my embrace.

His mouth moved to my ear, and he nibbled on my earlobe, breathing hard into my ear canal. His arousal was amplified. I could feel how much he wanted me. I could feel his desperation in his quiet growls.

His hands moved to my hips, and he undid my jeans before he yanked them off with a violent shove. He kneeled down to help me get them off. My hands moved to his shoulders, and I held on for balance, feeling the muscles shift under his perfect skin.

He pulled my thong off as well, getting it past my ankles before he tossed it aside. When he rose to his feet, he eyed me with possession. I was entirely his because he’d paid me for the night. He could stare and gawk all he

wanted. His hand moved to my leg and touched the old scar Cane had left. His fingers touched it lightly, silently apologizing that it happened at all.

"It's okay," I whispered.

My words brought him back to the moment, and he pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing his perfectly chiseled body. He ran every morning and ate nothing but protein, but he still looked too good to be real. His body was ripped and toned, lines of muscle connecting to new lines of muscle. If he and I met in a different reality, perhaps on the subway during the morning commute, I'd feel much differently. I'd ask him out right on the spot and hope he wasn't already taken.

He removed his sweat pants and boxers next, proudly revealing his machinery. His cock was longer and thicker than Bones's. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

I stared at it, unable to believe I was going to fit that inside me.

His fingers moved to my chin, and he lifted my gaze, forcing my eyes to lock with his. "On your knees." Power radiated in his voice. He'd taken full command of the evening. He was in full dominance, and I was in full submission. He won the sick game we'd been playing. "Now."

I lowered myself to my knees despite the pain of the hardwood floor and waited for him to shove his cock down my throat.

He closed the gap between us, his hard dick right in my face. His hand scooped my hair, and he got a tight grip. "Suck me." His eyes darkened as he waited for me to obey.

I cleared my thoughts and just did as he asked. I grabbed the base of his cock then inserted his head into my mouth. The second it was inside me, I tasted the pre-come. It was salty and masculine. I ran my tongue along the base, feeling the bulging vein. I closed my eyes and took him into the back of my throat. I'd given Bones hundreds of blow jobs. Even though Crow was bigger, this was better. At least he was hot.

Crow released a quiet moan of satisfaction when I picked up the pace. His fingers tightened on my hair, nicking my neck just a little. He thrust his hips toward my mouth, moving with me. "You give good head."

What a nice compliment.

I swirled my warm saliva around him and kept him going, hoping he would just come in my mouth and it would count as one button. I thought it was fair to measure them by orgasms rather than evenings.

The minutes trailed by, and I felt my core tighten. My thighs squeezed together, and I felt the warmth between my legs. It was the same sensation I felt last time we were together, and I hated myself for it. I hated the fact I was aroused by having his dick in my mouth. I hated the fact I got more turned on the more he enjoyed it. Whenever Bones violated me, I despised it. I didn't want Crow to know how my body reacted to him. It was embarrassing, and it would just make his ego bigger than it already was.

He gripped the back of my neck and pulled his dick out. The desire was brighter in his eyes than ever before. His cock dripped with my saliva, and he was ready to slip it inside me. "On the bed."

My knees ached as I got up and crawled on the bed, assuming he wanted me on my stomach. That's how Bones wanted me. He never wanted to look at my face.

Crow came behind me and grabbed me by the hips. He twisted me, turning me over until I was on my back. A piece of string was in his hand. It was yellow lace. I wasn't sure why a criminal man owned a piece of yellow lace. He tied my wrists together before he secured me to the headboard. My body was displayed for him to enjoy, and I couldn't move my hands even if I tried.

He held himself over me and separated my thighs with his. His cock throbbed impatiently, wanting to slip inside me. I hadn't had a man inside me in over a month, and I wasn't sure how well my body would handle it. It preferred abstinence.

Crow pressed his face close to mine, giving me a kiss completely different from the one he gave me earlier. This was fiery and hard. He crushed his mouth to mine, practically bruising me because he was so insistent. His fingers moved to my clit and rubbed it at the same time, giving me that same feeling he gave me last time.

I hated the fact I liked it.

He slipped two fingers inside me without warning.

And I was soaked.

Goddammit.

He moaned against my lips when he felt how wet I was. When he slipped his fingers out, they were coated with my moisture. A string of stickiness formed when he separated his fingers. "You want me as much as I want you."

My immediate response was no, but I couldn't say that. It would just be a lie, and we both knew it would be.

He rubbed his wet fingers against my clit, creating stroking sounds as the moisture rubbed into me.

I shivered because it felt so good. My hips automatically rocked because he elicited uncontrollable emotions within me. I loved it when he touched me like that. He did a better job than I did.

He gave me a slow kiss. "You like that."

I breathed into his mouth, feeling my control slip away as the carnal side of me rose.

He grabbed the base of his cock and slapped his length against my clit, every hit hurting but feeling so good. Then he rubbed it against me, moving through my slickness and applying the pressure of his throbbing dick at the same time.

He positioned his arms behind my knees and kept his face above mine. Slowly, he pressed his head inside me, moving just as far as he did last time. He watched my expression carefully.

The second I felt him, my arousal died. His cock reminded me of all the horrific things Bones did to me. Nothing he did ever felt good. It was always agonizing. And judging Crow's immense size, this wouldn't be any different.

"No. Stop." I felt him sink into me farther. I was soaking wet, and his entry was smooth, but I still didn't want it. I didn't want to feel that pain again. I thought I could handle it, but I couldn't.

"I'm not gonna stop unless you tell me the safe word." He moved farther inside me, half of his length stretching me apart.

That's right. I forgot the safe word. "Fi—"

"I'm not him." He followed my thoughts as they left the room and returned to Bones. "I own you, not him. This will feel good. I promise." He pressed his face to mine and inserted the rest of his length, balls deep. "Stay with me."

I didn't want to stay. I wanted to run.

"Button." He cupped my face and looked me in the eye. "Don't go." He kissed the corner of my mouth.

He'd never called me that before, and I hadn't expected it to be my pet name. But it was. For some reason, it steadied me. His cock was entirely inside me, but I didn't fight it. I kept my body relaxed, feeling him stretch me wide.

Crow rocked into me slowly, his cock moving out until only his head remained inside. Then he pushed it back in, moving through my slickness.

Our bodies made noises when they moved together, my wetness making smooth friction. “Fuck. You feel so damn good.” His hips wanted to move faster, but he kept his restraint.

He had the most beautiful body and an even more perfect face. He would be the man I touched myself to in a fantasy. I tried to pretend this wasn’t real. It was just a dream. I wanted this. I wasn’t being forced to do this.

He moved his hand to my clitoris, and he rubbed it the way he had earlier. He gave it circular strokes, applying the right amount of pleasure to pull me hard into the moment.

He groaned when I grew wetter for him. “Fuck.”

I pulled on my restraints, not to get away, but to arch my back. I wanted more of him. His throbbing dick felt enormous inside me, but it also felt intoxicating. It wasn’t abrasive and rough like it was with Bones, probably because I was always drier than a desert with that monster. But with Crow, we moved together perfectly.

I started to really enjoy it.

Crow pressed his face to mine and sucked my bottom lip. His hand moved to my tit and palmed it aggressively, pinching the nipple. It hurt, but in a good way. The sting made the sex feel even better. My pussy grew slicker. I felt it ooze down my crack and to the sheets beneath me.

He thrust into me harder, smacking the headboard into the wall as he slammed into me. Sweat sprinkled his chest, and he looked so sexy when he exerted himself. He looked like a god of the underworld, powerful and dark.

I pulled my legs farther apart because I wanted as much of him as I could handle. I wanted every inch of that cock. I wanted him to give it to me harder. He pulled his hand away from my tits and used his entire body to slam into me.

It was coming. I could feel it build over the horizon. It was about to hook into me and pull me under. My thighs shook as the heat bubbled, and my stomach tensed in preparation for impact. I hated myself for what I felt, but I also wanted it to happen more than anything in the world.

Crow knew I was about to explode. A victorious look was in his eyes, like he had me and was completely aware of it. “I’m going to give you so much of my come.” He thrust into me harder, his massive dick stretching my pussy wide and providing the right amount of friction for my clit.

His words shouldn’t shatter me, but they did. My spine tightened and coiled as the euphoria washed over me. The pleasure was white-hot and

blinding. I couldn't do anything but feel the powerful sensation wash through me.

I shut my mouth as tightly as possible because I refused to make a peep. I refused to tell him I was coming around his dick. The man who captured me and refused to let me go just made me come.

And I hated him.

I hated him so fucking much.

Crow separated my lips with his while he pounded into me. His smooth balls slapped against my ass with every thrust. His tongue dug into my mouth, so I couldn't keep my sounds from escaping.

A moan came out, loud and clean.

Dammit.

He smiled against my lips, enjoying his victory. "Your cunt is so tight. I can't wait to fill it."

I yanked on the lace because I wanted to be free. I wanted to grab those strong arms and hold on. I wanted to dig my nails into his skin until I drew blood. My orgasm still burned with power until it slowly started to fade. A whimper of pleasure escaped my lips because my pussy was still feeling the aftershocks.

He groaned as he pumped into me, giving me a few final thrusts before he filled me like he claimed he would. He pressed his forehead to mine when he hit his trigger. He tensed on top of me, his dick getting even harder as he released inside me with a groan. "Take all of it."

I widened my legs because I wanted to be full of him. I was still high from my orgasm and in a different state of mind. Another moan escaped my lips because I felt even more satisfied with his cum sitting inside me.

His eyes darkened as he finished, his hot seed trickling inside me. I could feel it because it was so heavy and warm. A pleased sigh escaped his lips, deep and masculine from the back of his throat.

He stayed inside me like he never wanted to leave. His cock slowly softened as the momentum passed. His mouth found mine and gave me soft kisses I didn't think he was capable of giving. "I promised you would enjoy it."

My cheeks reddened in embarrassment. I couldn't hide how much I enjoyed it. This man was keeping me captive against my will. I begged him to let me go, but he refused. And now I slept with him—and I liked it. He gave me the first orgasm I'd had in months.

It was such a betrayal.

He kissed the valley between my breasts before he slowly pulled his soft dick out of my pussy. It was smaller than it was earlier, but the size was still impressive. I couldn't believe that fit inside me. And I couldn't believe how much I enjoyed it.

He leaned down and kissed my clit, giving me a kiss full of his tongue.

I tensed because it felt even better than his fingers.

He pulled away, his lips shiny from my slickness. "One button down."

Chapter Twenty-One

Crow

She liked it.

She tried to hide the orgasm that rocked through her by shutting that pretty little mouth of hers, but it was no use. Her pussy constricted around me like an anaconda. It pleaded for my seed, trying to squeeze it out of me. She widened her legs because she wanted more of my cock. Her pathetic attempt to fool me was a waste of time.

She loved it as much as I did.

After I finally conquered her, I expected to return my focus to work. With a preoccupied mind, I wasn't getting as much done. I fell behind on paperwork, shipments, and hiring more employees for the factory. My slave was stealing the spotlight with her soft brown hair and full hips.

But now, I was even more distracted than before.

I had her once, and I was immensely satisfied. But now, I wanted her again. Her cunt was so tight and slick. My cock was in womanly heaven when I glided in and out of her. She was soaked because of me, because of the heat between us.

When I first laid eyes on her, I wasn't impressed. She was beautiful, of course. But so were a lot of women. There was nothing spectacular about her, nothing that made me want to pin her to the sheets just so I could have her.

But when I saw the fire inside her, I was drawn to her flames. She wasn't submissive, not in the least. She was a challenge, a woman who could hold her own in a fight. After that moment, I was desperate to cage her, to overpower her and make her mine.

And I loved every second of it.

After I came home from work the following afternoon, I showered then sat down to dinner. She didn't join me for breakfast that morning, but she came down now. She wore one of the dresses Lars picked out for her. It was strapless and pink, flowing out around her hips. She had the elegance of a queen and the grace of a god.

She sat across from me at the table without making eye contact. The bottle of wine was already sitting there, so she poured herself a glass and grabbed a piece of French bread from the basket.

I watched every move she made.

Lars brought the main entrees and set each plate in front of us. A pitcher of water and two glasses were placed next to the basket of bread. Sensing the

tension in the room, he walked out without saying a word. He probably heard us fucking last night. His room was on the bottom floor.

I broke the silence. "How was your day?"

Her eyes were glued to her plate. "Good. Yours?"

I knew why she wouldn't look at me. She was ashamed of everything she felt last night. She was ashamed she gave herself to me—and liked it. She lost the battle and surrendered, and that didn't leave a good taste in her mouth. "Fine. Had a lot of work to do."

She never asked me questions about my job. She either assumed I wouldn't answer or didn't care what I did outside the house.

"What are you reading?"

"A translator and some book in Italian."

I held my fork in my hand but didn't press it into my food. "You're teaching yourself Italian?"

She nodded. "I'm trying to, at least."

Even though she'd be leaving in a year?

"It's a beautiful language." She answered my question even though I never asked. "I like listening to it."

"I can teach you."

"You seem pretty busy..."

"When we talk, I can speak Italian."

"But I wouldn't know what you're saying..."

"You'll figure it out." I finally took a bite of my food. Lars used to be a chef in Vienna once upon a time and knew his way around the kitchen as well as the rest of the house. He was an irreplaceable member of the staff. If he ever wanted to leave, I'd have a hard time letting him go.

She took a few bites before her eyes drifted to mine. They were pristine blue, clearer than the shores of a paradise island. "Is Crow your real name?"

Interesting question. "Yes."

"It's unusual..."

I thought it fit my dark exterior, my rage, and my callousness perfectly. "Pearl is unusual as well."

She was about to grab her wineglass when she halted. "You know my name?"

I didn't break stride. "I know everything about you."

"But you've never mentioned it before."

“If you wanted me to address you by your name, you would have mentioned it a long time ago. Besides, I prefer Button.” I didn’t want to call her by a name everyone else used. She was my possession. She was mine in every sense of the word. So she needed a new name, something only I called her.

She couldn’t hide the shock on her face. She stupidly assumed her secrets were safe.

“Mechanical engineer. That’s very impressive.”

This time, she didn’t seem surprised. She kept her face stoic, hiding her thoughts. “I like it. Every project is new and challenging.”

“Very few women choose a career involving science and math.”

“Supposedly.”

“What made you choose that profession?”

She shrugged. “I like building things. I like working from the ground up. I like making something that will outlive me. No two projects are ever the same. It’s something new every day.”

My hand stopped moving my fork, and my eyes concentrated on her face. I felt my attraction to her grow, my respect elevate. She was so different from every other woman I met that I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. When they were in my presence, they folded like a bad hand at poker. They immediately obeyed me, intimidated or smitten by me. This woman was different. She worked by her own inner clock. She didn’t let anyone control her or manipulate her.

Which was why I wanted to control her and manipulate her. She was the wildest stallion, the last free horse of the land. It couldn’t be broken or trained. It was too stubborn, too fierce.

I loved the challenge.

“Perhaps I have something for you to work on—if you’re interested.”

“Depends on what you have in mind.”

“At the winery, we’re always looking for ways to make our fermentation process more efficient.”

“That’s how you make a living?” She’d never asked me anything personal before. She didn’t seem to care. I was just her captor, the person she wanted to flee from.

“Yes.” *In part.*

“Is that what you do with Cane?”

“No. The winery is exclusively mine.”

She was an intelligent woman, and the cogs in her mind were constantly churning. Thoughts were circling her mind now, and she deliberated on asking her following question. Finally, she went for it. “What do you do with Cane?”

“Arms dealer. We make weapons and sell them to the highest bidder.”

Her eyes narrowed, her mind working at full speed. “Bones does the same thing.”

“Yeah.” He was my biggest competitor, my biggest adversary. Our rivalry went back to a different generation, when my father and his father were at war with one another. We inherited that fight, and we would continue until one of us was dead.

“That’s your beef with him.” She said it out loud, but she seemed to be saying it more to herself than to me.

“In a nutshell.”

“And stealing me is a way of manipulating him.”

Now she was off the trail. “No.”

“No?” she asked. “What else do you want me for?”

“Revenge.” I had to avenge Vanessa, my little sister. She wasn’t just my family but my friend. When our parents passed away, I became the leading man of the family. I’d become her father.

“Revenge for what?” she asked. “What did he do to you?”

I held her gaze but felt my lips compress. I didn’t want to talk about Vanessa. Whenever she entered my mind, I immediately shook the thoughts away. It was too painful, even for me. If I ignored it long enough, maybe the pain would disappear altogether. “That’s enough questions for the evening.”

Her eyes burned with irritation. “So you can know everything about me, but I can’t know anything about you?”

“You know a lot about me.” *More than most.*

“But you won’t answer my questions.”

“Would you answer mine?” I watched her expression and saw it slacken in resolution. If I pried into her personal life, she wouldn’t tell me anything. I knew that for certain. But fortunately, I already knew everything that mattered.

Lacking a response, she looked down at her plate and finished eating. She was irritated I’d bested her. Her shoulders were tight, and her lips held a slight scowl. In the short amount of time I’d known her, I learned her habits. I

learned how to read her thoughts. I learned her likes and dislikes without asking a single question.

And she hated that.

After I enjoyed my solitude in my study, I went to her bedroom. I already knew what she would be doing before I arrived. She spent all her free time reading. Her room came with hundreds of bound books, most of them in English. She always had something to do when I wasn't entertaining her.

My natural reaction was to open the door and walk inside. She was my property, and I could do whatever I wished. But for some reason, I gave her more respect than I gave anyone else. I raised my knuckles to the door and lightly tapped.

"Come in." Her beautiful voice crept down my spine, making me tingle.

I walked inside and saw her sitting on the couch, exactly where I imagined her to be. I wore my sweat pants and a t-shirt, the clothes I always wore before retiring to bed. Only Lars and some of my staff saw me dressed this way. And now this woman.

She shut the book she was reading and looked up at me, knowing exactly what I wanted without waiting for me to say it.

I sat on the couch beside her and pulled the button from my pocket. It was brown with beige tinsel. I held it up for her inspection and danced it between my fingertips before I dropped it into the jar on the table. The first button sat at the bottom, and now it had a friend.

Power radiated in my veins. The dominance took over, possessing all of me. I loved walking into that room and giving her a command without saying a single word. I loved making her mine by choice, not force. It was the greatest conquest I'd ever had.

She eyed the button then turned her gaze back to me. The anxiety that was there last night was absent. Her lips were slightly parted, and her breathing picked up. My hand automatically wrapped around her wrist. She thought it was an innocent touch, but I was feeling her pulse. It immediately quickened, picking up speed to a dangerous level. These were symptoms of arousal, not fear.

My cock sprang to life.

I pulled her out the door and toward the bedroom down the hall. It'd become our fuck room, our private quarters where we did nasty things. I had a special room where my darkest fantasies played out, but I knew she wasn't ready for that. I'd use a few buttons to get her prepared for what I really wanted.

Once we were alone behind a locked door, my hands cupped her cheeks, and I kissed her just the way I liked. When I sat at my desk that afternoon, this is what I thought about. I thought about her plump and delicious lips against mine. I also thought about them tight around my dick.

She kissed me back immediately, as if she'd been thinking about it all day as well. Her hands went to my waist, her fingertips digging into my sides. They strayed away and felt my powerful chest. Her breathing picked up as our passion increased.

My tongue found hers, and they danced together like they'd done it a million times. Her small mouth was delicious. I loved tasting her, smelling her, and touching her. My hands moved down her back until I felt the steep curve that led to her ass. The curves of her body were perfect. She was worth every penny she'd been bought for.

I undressed myself then removed her dress, letting her voluptuous tits pop out. They weren't enormous, but they were womanly. I loved squeezing them within my palms. I pinched her nipples and twisted them, making her wince in pain but sigh in pleasure at the same time.

Every muscle in my body tensed as sexual desire overtook me. This woman drove me wild, made me fall further into darkness. I wanted to spank her ass until it was red and bruised. I wanted to squeeze her tits a million times harder, make her pant in agony. I wanted her to cry for me, to beg me to let her go.

But that would have to wait.

I pulled my mouth away from hers even though I wanted to keep kissing her. I wanted to do it forever. But my cock wanted that mouth even more. And when I went to battle with him, I usually lost.

I sat at the edge of the bed with my cock resting against my stomach. I stared at her naked body, the heat scorching me. "Get on your knees."

The defiance moved into her eyes. She hated my commands. She hated being told what to do. For an instant, it seemed like she might defy me. She wanted to tell me to go to hell. But she held her tongue, knowing she needed to work for one more token of freedom.

She lowered herself to her knees.

My cock twitched. I won another battle. Subduing her always made me hard. "Blow me." My hand moved into her hair, and I fisted the strands. I grabbed the base of my dick and rubbed the head against her wet lips.

She obeyed this command with much less resistance. She took the head of my cock into her mouth and sucked it. Her tongue cushioned the bottom, the velvety texture feeling sensual against my throbbing cock.

I released a moan right off the bat.

She moved her hands to my balls and played with them lightly, stroking them in a sexy way and sending chills up my spine.

I didn't even have to tell her to do that.

She took my length deep into her throat until she almost gagged then pulled out again. Her fingers kept massaging me, stroking me with her saliva as it ran down my length.

My eyes feasted on the image before me. I dominated her, forcing her to her knees with my cock in her warm mouth. My hand gripped the back of her neck, and I guided her up and down my length, showing her exactly what I wanted and how I wanted it. She gave amazing head, the best I'd ever had.

I watched her closely, seeing her mouth widen just before she deep-throated me. Instead of closing her eyes, she kept them wide open. She stared at my dick as she took him in and out. The fire slowly burned deep in her eyes. It grew brighter and hotter, her pleasure mirroring mine.

She enjoyed it.

I wanted to feel her wet pussy. I wanted to wipe her slickness down my length. I wanted to know just how turned on she was. She loved my cock in her mouth and her pussy. And soon, she'd like it in her ass too.

I wanted to enjoy those wet lips a little longer, but I couldn't hold on. I wanted to squirt my seed into the back of her throat and watch her swallow it. My mouth wanted to do other things to her, but I needed to come first. "Take it and show it to me." My fingers dug into the back of her neck, and I shoved myself deep inside her throat. My chest rumbled with pleasure as heat billowed through me. Hot and on fire, flames rocked through my core and exploded in my balls. A powerful orgasm, the kind that made me moan, shot through my body and down my length. I felt my cock thicken as I released into her mouth.

She opened her mouth automatically so I could see my cock squirt on her tongue. She jerked her hand up and down my shaft, giving me a long orgasm

that stretched on for nearly a minute.

“Fuck.” My fingers dug so hard into her neck, I thought I might choke her. I finished giving her every drop before I drifted down from the high. “Show me.”

She stuck out her tongue, my white seed covering most of it. It was an impressive amount, and I wasn’t ashamed to admit I was a little proud. My hand wrapped around her neck, and I gave her a threatening squeeze. “Swallow.”

Instead of being afraid when I gripped her by the throat, her eyes lightened in response. She closed her mouth and gave a dramatic swallow, the muscles in her neck shifting to accommodate my come.

That turned me on again. “Good girl.”

That phrase yanked her from the moment, and a glare took hold.

I preferred her anger. I found it sexy. “On the bed. Now.”

She obeyed my command, holding herself up on all fours.

I came behind her, my dick semihard. It wanted to deflate from the orgasm I just had, but seeing her ass in the air like that just fired me up again. I stared at her pussy and saw the slickness gleam. Her pussy was wet and slick, just as I expected it to be.

I smiled in victory then shoved two fingers inside her. “You’re so goddamn wet.” My breath shook as I felt the warm moisture between her legs. “You love sucking my dick.” I could tell she enjoyed it despite her attempts to hide it. “Is it the taste of my cock? Is it the size? Is it the fact I love how good you suck?” I fingered her and slathered my fingers in heat.

She didn’t answer me, but her body responded. The arch in her back deepened, and her breaths became labored.

“Tell me.”

She held her silence defiantly.

I moved to my knees on the floor and pulled her hips to the edge of the bed. My face dove into her sweet pussy, and I licked her aggressively, circling her clit with my tongue before I sucked it harshly into my mouth.

A suppressed moan escaped her lips. She put all her effort into hiding her pleasure at my touch. She refused to give me the satisfaction of pleasing her. But the cause was futile because her soaked pussy did all the talking.

I circled her clit again, making her back arch farther so she could get as much of my mouth as possible.

I pulled away. “Tell me.”

She breathed hard, deep and loud.

“Answer me, Button.” I sucked her clit harshly, pushing her to the edge of an orgasm then abruptly pulling back.

She growled in frustration.

I gently blew on her opening then gave her a gentle kiss.

She snapped like I knew she would. “I love how much you enjoy it...” She spoke with self-loathing, hating herself for giving in. She sighed with defeat, her backbone crippling. “And I love the way it tastes...and I love how big it is.”

My dominance grew, and I felt like a true king. I was on top of the world, and she was beneath me. I conquered her again. I took everything from her and made her into a humble servant.

I pressed my face between her legs and gave her the reward she just sacrificed herself for. I sucked her clitoris hard then circled it, using more precision than my fingers could ever give.

She immediately moaned, no longer holding back the screams of unbridled pleasure. She arched her back farther and pressed her ass into my face, wanting more of that schooled tongue.

She combusted with an orgasm just as powerful as mine. Her yells turned into screams, and she rode the high. “Oh, god...” She gripped the sheets of the bed and turned into mush. “Oh, god...” She pressed her face into the mattress, her body giving out as heat seared her from the inside out.

When her screams died away, I knew she was finished. She panted on the bed, a crumpled mess from the head I just gave her. I knew I had her then. And she knew I had her too.

I moved behind her and positioned my dick at her entrance. After that performance, my machinery was revved up and ready for action. I shoved myself violently inside her, my cock savoring the feel of her slickness and my saliva mixed together.

And then I fucked her until she screamed again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pearl

Guilt weighed me down. I was drowning in my private suffering, hating myself for giving in to my ruthless captor. The button deal was purely business. I'd only accepted his offer because there was no other option. But now, I looked forward to the evening. I waited for him to walk through the door, a button tucked deep in his pocket.

I wasn't supposed to enjoy the sex, but I did. When his mouth was between my legs, I ignited like a firework. Jacob hardly ever went down on me, and when he did, he wasn't very good at it. It felt like a lizard was licking my lips with a thin tongue, hardly moving and doing a half-assed job. Crow ate my pussy like he was starving.

I'd never come so hard in my life.

Now that I was alone with my thoughts, the hatred emerged. When I was taken from Jacob, I tried not to think about him. I pitied him, imagining him at home and worried about me. When I thought about him, loneliness welled up inside me. He was the only family I had in the world. My parents were both abusive alcoholics, and I was taken from them when I was just ten years old. I didn't have any other relatives. I was alone in the world—literally.

I was immensely attracted to Crow. He gave me the kind of sex I didn't believe existed. He pleased me so well, and he seemed to enjoy giving me orgasms as much as receiving them. I tried to pretend I didn't love his cock inside me, but I couldn't do it anymore. Crow manipulated me right where he wanted me to be.

And I crumbled.

I betrayed Jacob. When Bones raped me, I couldn't stop it. But I could stop Crow. I simply chose not to. How much would that break Jacob's heart? I was enjoying sex with another man. Actually, I was loving it.

In one way, Crow was worse than Bones. He actually made me want to stay. He gave me a beautiful place to live with the freedom to venture outside. He respected my privacy and never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do. He made me feel safe when I shouldn't feel safe at all. And that made me not want to leave.

So he was much more dangerous.

Now I really hated him.

I hated his arrogance. I hated his intelligence. I hated his ruthlessness. This was just a sick game to him. He wanted to best me because he got off on

it. He was the dominant one in the relationship, and he relished every time I submitted.

I despised him.

He stripped me of my weaponry and armor. I was vulnerable and open to attack. He somehow convinced me that this button deal was a good idea. He tricked me into opening my legs and giving him exactly what he wanted.

I fell right into his trap.

And I hated myself.

I avoided him like the plague.

When he was in the house, I made sure I was outside of it. He had a beautiful pool in his backyard, so I spent my time lounging in my bikini and sunglasses. Every time he came outside to speak to me, I slipped into the pool where he wouldn't follow me.

When he had meals, I didn't join him. Lars brought food to my room or wherever I was hiding. He seemed to understand I was avoiding his employer, but he never questioned me about it.

Crow usually wanted sex in the evening, so I made sure I was in the pool when that time came. It was far too late to be outside, but it was a better alternative than being under him.

I sat in the hot tub and rested my head on a rolled-up towel. I could see all the stars in the sky. They shined brighter here than they did in America, probably because we were far away from the city. I stared at them and tried to identify the different stars and planets. When I put my mind to a task, all other thoughts ceased. It was the only peace I could find.

"Mind if I join you?"

As always, I hadn't heard him approach. I nearly jumped out of my skin at his question. I removed my head from the pillow and saw him standing there in sweat pants and a black t-shirt—the same thing he always wore. "I just want to be alone."

"You've been alone all day."

"And it wasn't long enough."

He didn't venture closer. His hands rested in his pockets, and he looked across the fields. They were enveloped in darkness but still present

nonetheless. The breeze moved through my hair, tickling the back of my neck as the moisture still clung to it.

I laid my head back and waited for him to walk away. He only came looking for me because he wanted sex. I refused to give it to him—not tonight. “Good night, Crow.”

Instead of leaving, he undressed himself and slipped into the hot tub beside me. “I’ve done something, haven’t I?”

I kept my eyes on the sky. “No. I just don’t like you.”

He chuckled. “It didn’t seem that way last night.”

I wanted to kick him in the nuts.

“Button.” His playfulness evaporated like the steam rising from the water. His voice held his command, telling me to obey.

I refused to.

He moved through the water until he was directly beside me, his hand moving to my thigh. His fingers slowly crept up to the apex of my thighs. My body tensed in preparation, immediately wanting him to rub my clit. But then logic returned, and I sat up straight. “What?”

He returned his hand to my thigh, keeping it at an appropriate distance. “Talk to me.”

“I won’t accept a button tonight. Go away.”

The disappointment didn’t emerge, and he pulled his hand away, understanding I couldn’t be seduced. “I’m not just your master. I’m your friend as well.”

“You aren’t my master.” Venom flew from my mouth along with drops of spit. “You don’t own me, and you never will.”

All patience and understanding ceased. It shattered inside him, leaving the ruthless man behind. “I. Own. You.” He grabbed my wrist and twisted it, holding it in an uncomfortable position. If he pushed any farther, he could break my arm.

Despite the discomfort, I didn’t react. I didn’t give him any hint that I was in pain. I just took it, refusing to break.

He jerked my arm violently, forcing me into his chest. He grabbed my chin with lightning speed, keeping me in place with two fingers. My gaze was forced on him. “You. Are. Mine.” He squeezed me tighter, making me tense. “The sooner you realize that, the easier this will be.” His hand moved to my neck, squeezing me with threat. “Now say it.”

“Never.” I would never bow to him. I may give him my body, but I would never give him my mind. My body reacted to him physically, loving the way his cock felt inside me. My mouth reacted to him, loving his lips pressed to mine. But he would never infiltrate my mind. He would never break my will. If Bones hadn’t succeeded, neither would he.

He squeezed my neck tighter. “Just because I’ve granted you mercy in the past doesn’t mean I’ll give it to you now. Don’t test me.” He constricted his fingers until I could hardly breathe.

“I’ll die before I say it.” He could drown me in this hot tub, and I still wouldn’t cooperate. “I don’t break for my captors. I didn’t break for Bones, and I sure as hell won’t break for you.” I held his gaze without flinching. I wouldn’t back down, not now and not ever.

He moved his face closer to mine, his dick hard under the water. The more I pushed him, the more he wanted me. His eyes darkened like that was the answer he wanted to hear. Every time I fought against him, his obsession only grew. He squeezed my throat so tightly he cut off my air supply. “We’ll see.”

I’d had enough.

I wasn’t putting up with my imprisonment any longer. I was only two buttons down from my debt, and I’d had to sacrifice a lot just for those two. Could I sacrifice any more?

A part of me respected Crow. He didn’t hurt me when he could have. He could have just forced my legs apart and taken me like he wanted. When Cane wanted to hurt me, he could have let it happen.

But I still hated him.

I hated the fact I actually cared for him. I hated the fact he wormed his way deep inside me. I actually enjoyed his presence, even the cryptic conversations we had. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

I wasn’t supposed to like my captor.

I had to get out.

I snuck through the house and made my way to the kitchen. The place was dark with the exception of the moonlight. It gave enough illumination to find the knives on the counter. They were stowed in the slots of a metal box, sitting right next to the sink.

I grabbed the biggest one I could find.

His bedroom was on the top floor. I'd never been inside his room, but I deduced it was next to his study. I climbed two flights of stairs without making a sound then ventured down the dark corridor. There was a paper clip in my nightstand, and I used that to pick his lock.

I worked silently, listening for the distant click of the lock when it came unhinged. My heart was beating fast, but I held my breath, too afraid to make a sound.

When the door was unlocked, I crept inside. It was dark like the rest of the house, but it was the biggest room in the mansion. It had a private living room with a flat-screen TV, a full bar, and a desk against the wall.

I shut the door behind me and tiptoed through the room. The hilt of the knife was gripped tightly in my hand. I was ready to slaughter the man who captured me. I was ready to slit his throat and let him bleed out and die. They wouldn't find his body until the morning, and I would snatch his car keys and drive to the airport with his cash in my pocket. I'd be on the next flight back home before noon.

Home.

I left the living room and found the hallway that had to lead to his bedroom. My feet moved slowly across the floor. They were bare, and all I wore was a long t-shirt that reached my knees. If I got caught, I could lie and say I was looking for something.

His bedroom door was open. I spotted the king-size bed in the center of the room. The sheets were pristine white, and his walls were gray. His furniture was rich mahogany and designed with Italian craftsmanship. Over the bed was another one of his unusual paintings, constructed with buttons.

I crept to the bed and breathed quietly. He lay perfectly still, on his back with his face pointed to the ceiling. His eyes were closed, and his jaw was covered with a thick line of hair. When he was asleep, he looked just as handsome, even more so. The lines around his eyes were nonexistent, and the slight scowl he sometimes wore was absent. In sleep, he was just a man.

I held the knife steady as I leaned over him. I'd killed a man before, and I would do it again. Nothing would stop me from escaping this prison. If men didn't want to be murdered in their sleep, then they shouldn't mess with me. It was that simple.

I moved my knee to the bed and leaned over him, placing the blade right against his throat. All I had to do was slide the blade straight across, and

Crow Barsetti would be no more.

He would finally stop haunting me.

My hand remained steady just before I made my move. I cherished his face for one more second, remembering the way his lips felt against mine in his gentle embraces. Just the fact I took a moment to savor a memory said too much damage had been done. He'd already played enough mind tricks.

His eyes opened unexpectedly, but he didn't flinch. He stared at me like he'd expected me to come to his bedroom. Calm radiated in his eyes. He could feel the cool blade against his skin, but he didn't move an inch. He watched me just the way he did from across the dinner table.

I held my breath, terrified that I'd been caught.

"Do it."

What?

"Do it." He moved one hand behind his head, becoming more relaxed. "You'll be doing me a favor. I'm too much of a coward to do it myself."

It was the first time my hand shook. My grip on the hilt was no longer strong. My fingers felt weak, and my resolve disappeared.

His eyes locked on mine. "Come on, Button." He grabbed my hand and placed the blade farther against his throat, drawing a faint line of blood.

My hand automatically pulled away, my heart aching for the blood I'd just drawn.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and adjusted me on top of him, pulling the sheets off his waist. "After everything I've done, you have every right." He grabbed my panties and pulled them far to the side, his hard cock pressed against my ass.

My determination disappeared when I looked into those green eyes. Sometimes, they seemed harmless, full of goodness and promise. Sometimes, I could fall into them if I stared for too long.

He slowly sat up, the knife still pressed to his throat. "You want to kill me so bad, then do it. This is your only chance." He pressed his face to mine, the back of the blade touching my neck.

Come on. Do it.

My hand didn't press into him. I barely held the knife at all. All I could think about was how much I had already hurt him. Drops of blood dripped down his neck and to his chest. The last thing I wanted to do was kill him. I only wanted to help him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

He pressed the head of his dick deep inside me, moving all the way until he was completely sheathed. He released a quiet moan when he felt me, feeling my slickness that seemed to appear from nowhere. He pressed his lips to my ear, taking a deep breath. "Button, your cunt was made for my cock." He moved his arms underneath my thighs and slid me up and down his length.

He stretched me in the most delectable way possible. Every thrust felt better than the one before it. I forgot why I'd come in there to begin with. Nothing else mattered besides riding his cock. When he was inside me, all I could think about was our bodies moving together. The slick friction between us ignited us both. I became wetter for him, enjoying the way he stretched me more than any other man had before. My arms hooked around his neck, and I rocked my hips back and forth, falling deep into him.

He grabbed the knife from my hand and nicked me slightly along my neck.

It happened so quickly I didn't even know it happened. It didn't hurt, but it burned when it was sliced open.

He pressed his mouth to my neck and kissed the drops away, drinking my blood like a beast.

It should've disgusted me. It should've horrified me. But it made me burn with a fiery longing.

He pulled away and exposed his neck, wanting me to do the same to him.

Without thinking twice about it, I licked his blood away. I tasted metal on my tongue. The intimate act brought us closer together. All my hatred died away, and my walls came down. I let him in for the first time.

He pulled my face to his as he rocked into me from below. He eyed my lips, seeing the remnants of his own blood. Then he kissed me, our tongues tasting each other.

My nails dug into his back, holding on tightly as I bounced on his dick. I moved harder and faster, fucking him harder than he fucked me. "Crow..." It was the first time I said his name. And it felt so good, like he was mine. "Crow."

He moaned against my mouth, his cock twitching in response. He kneaded my cheeks, squeezing them and massaging them aggressively. "Your pussy is always so wet for me, Button. Just me."

"Yes..." My body never reacted to anyone else like that. I was never that aroused. Even when I lost my virginity, I wasn't that excited. Crow brought

out the strongest emotions in me, from hatred to passion. They were all so extreme they felt like the same emotion.

“I can’t wait to fill you...so much come.”

The tender area between my legs burned. I’d never wanted a man’s come more than I wanted his. I thrust onto his length harder, feeling my own orgasm approach. “I want you to come with me.”

He sucked my bottom lip then bit it with his teeth. He thrust into me harder, stretching my legs apart with his weight. His thick cock rubbed against my clitoris with every stroke, pushing me closer to the edge.

I couldn’t hold on much longer.

“Come for me.”

I gripped his shoulders for balance as my pussy constricted tightly around him. My entire body tensed as the avalanche of pleasure radiated through my body. It started deep in my core then spread like wildfire everywhere else. I was drenched in sweat and exhausted, but I didn’t want to stop. It felt too damn good.

His cock hardened inside me as he released. I could feel the squirts fill me deep inside, his heavy come sitting exactly where it belonged. It was warm and thick. I’d never willingly let a man come inside me before. He was the first, and it was the sexiest thing I’d ever done.

Crow’s eyes lost their darkness once the heat had dissipated. His cock softened inside me, but he still stretched me with his natural thickness. He wrapped his arm around my waist and rolled me to the bed. The knife was placed on the nightstand, out of the way so neither one of us would roll on it.

Like nothing happened, he curled up beside me and closed his eyes. My leg was hooked around his waist, and his arm was still around my ribs. Now that the fun was over, he wasn’t worried I might make another attempt on his life. He didn’t have a care in the world, like nothing could touch him. He fell asleep almost instantly, his warm body keeping me comfortable.

I stared at his face before my eyes closed. The scowl left his lips once again and his eyes softened. They didn’t hold the strain of a criminal. He returned to being a man.

A man I’d never met.

I hadn't gotten a good night of sleep like that since the last time I slept in my own bed. There were no nightmares to make me jolt upright in bed. There were no dreams that made me cry silently in my sleep. All I felt was peace. Crow's arms were wrapped tightly around me all night long.

It was the first time I felt safe.

The next morning, his alarm went off, and he slipped out of bed. The second his body was gone, the bed felt a little colder. He walked into his bathroom and showered to get ready for the day.

I pulled the sheets tighter around me to fight off the cold and slipped back into sleep. It seemed like mere seconds when he was out of the shower and putting on one of his designer suits. He pulled the jacket over his massive shoulders and placed the flashy watch on his wrist. He eyed himself in the mirror, checking for wrinkles in his clothing. He looked like a model for Armani about to hit the runway. His confidence permeated the air, slicing through it like a sword.

I sat up in bed and pulled the sheets over my chest to stay warm. I loved watching him move. He had the kind of grace that still seemed innately masculine. He carried himself like royalty with the air of pretentiousness. He owned everything in every room he walked into. That kind of power was sexy—even if I refused to admit it.

He spotted me in the reflection of the mirror. He adjusted his tie, making it perfect enough to display on a mannequin. "Good morning."

"Morning." The knife still sat on his nightstand. The steel glinted under the light of the lamp. The memory of last night came back to me. I came here to kill him, but instead, I fucked him like I needed him.

He came around the bed then leaned down to kiss me. He didn't seem to care if I had morning breath. He kissed me just the way he would during our evenings together.

I melted at his touch, turning to butter on a hot roll. My hands gripped his arms because I didn't want him to leave. I wanted to strip off those expensive clothes and pull him on top of me.

He pulled his lips away but kept them close to mine. "Return that knife to Lars. He'll be looking for it." Threat was in his eyes. He wasn't happy with my behavior the previous night. "I'll punish you when I get home."

"Punish me?"

"Yes." He grabbed the back of my hair and kept his hold on me. It was unbreakable, made of iron. "An assassination attempt on your master's life

won't go unnoticed. I suggest you rest before I get back."

I wasn't worried about his threat. He could try to hurt me, but I would fight back. Just because I didn't have any weapons didn't mean I couldn't throw a mean right hook. Growing up in the ghetto gave me a steel spine. It was difficult to intimidate me.

Very difficult.

He came home at his regular time and retreated into his room to shower and change. He didn't stop by the bedroom to greet me. Without his saying a word to me, I knew he expected me to come to dinner dressed in something nice.

If I didn't obey, it would lead to a fight, and I'd rather save my energy for whatever he had planned for me. When it came to Crow, I had to pick my battles. I may be a worthy opponent, but so was he.

I sat across from him at the dinner table, wearing whatever I found in my closet. Most of my wardrobe consisted of dresses. Crow preferred the classy look, a woman dressed in elegance that showed off her shoulders and legs.

He sipped his wine then started to eat. He didn't make conversation with me. He didn't mention what happened last night. Sometimes, he was in a talkative mood, and sometimes, he wasn't. His moods were unpredictable. Being his captive for over a month wasn't enough time for me to figure him out.

"So, when are you going to punish me?" I probably shouldn't mock him, but I couldn't help it. I liked to thwart him, to remind him I couldn't be easily overcome.

"As soon as we're finished with dinner." He continued eating with upstanding manners. His elegant movements contradicted the darkness in his eyes. He was a gentleman, but he was the devil at the same time.

"And what exactly are you planning on doing to me?"

"It can wait until after dinner." He always had to have the power in the conversation. He made subtle moves to put me down and raise himself up.

I kept pushing. "No, it can't."

"I don't want you to lose your appetite."

"I never have an appetite when I have to look at you." I gave him a cold stare, hating him and adoring him at the same time. I loved it when he kissed

me and fucked me so passionately. No man had ever taken me like that, like he had to have me then and there. It was the kind of attraction I'd only heard about. But I also despised him for keeping me as a prisoner. He treated me like a pawn in a game, a toy he liked to play with.

My words didn't put him on edge. It didn't seem like he cared. "All I have to do is shove two fingers inside you. I'll see your appetite then." He held my gaze with a winter chill in his eyes.

My thighs squeezed together automatically, knowing he was right. My body was dangerously dehydrated because he made me wet every time he was in my presence.

We sat in uncomfortable silence and finished our meal. I waited for him to tell me his plan for the evening, but he never did. He finished a glass of wine like he did every night with dinner. He threw the remaining liquid away, never keeping a bottle that had already been uncorked.

"I'm finished." I set my napkin on the table and stood.

"Sit." His command erupted from deep within his throat. He never raised his voice, but he sounded powerful all the same.

I didn't want to obey. I wanted to stand there out of defiance. But I wanted to know what plans he had for me. A bottle of wine was sitting on the table, and I could whack him upside the head with it. I lowered myself back into the chair.

"Your actions last night really got to me." He sat upright in his chair like he was a king and I was a citizen about to be executed. "I've never been so hard in my life."

That last part confused me.

"But you have to be punished for your actions. So I'm going to tie you up, spank you with my belt, and then fuck you. That's a fair punishment for your behavior, Button."

I'd been slapped with a belt before. It didn't seem painful, but it was. The bite of leather always marked the skin, making it welt and redden. The pain lingered for days afterward, and the scars took weeks to disappear. "You expect me to do that for a button?"

"You *will* do that for a button." He held my gaze, telling me defiance wouldn't help in this situation. He was going to get what he wanted no matter how much I fought.

"No." I wasn't going to let him throw me around like a rag doll. Been there, done that.

“Yes. Your actions aren’t excusable.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have tried to kill you if you didn’t try to choke me last night.”

“And maybe I wouldn’t have had to do that if you just admitted you’re mine.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’ll die before that happens.”

“Then I’ll kill you and bring you back to life.” The threat wasn’t idle. He stared at me like he meant every word.

Sometimes, I forgot he really was a psychopath. Not a psycho like Bones but mentally unstable nonetheless. “I’m not letting you beat me. Get over it.”

“I’m not going to beat you.”

“That’s what you just said.”

“I said I’m going to spank you. It’ll hurt a little bit, but it’ll feel so good you won’t even notice.”

“I’ve been slapped with a belt before. It doesn’t feel good—at all. Maybe you should let me slap you around and see how you like it.”

He didn’t respond to the sarcasm. “You’ll enjoy it.”

“Will not.”

“You’ll enjoy it with me. I can promise you that.”

“Nope.”

He leaned over the table, his elbows resting on the surface. “Button.”

I met his gaze without flinching. “Crow.”

He hated being defied, but he loved it at the same time. It was obvious in the intensity of his eyes. His arms shook in frustration. He held up two fingers. “Two buttons.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“Instead of one, I’ll give you two.”

I didn’t realize the cost of my actions was negotiable. “Nothing less than five.”

He stared at me with a calculating look.

I wasn’t going to go through that without serious compensation. Five buttons for one session was reasonable. That saved me five days of enslavement. That put me five days closer to freedom.

“Five is too many.”

“If you were the one being whipped, you would feel differently.”

“It won’t hurt, Button.”

“Easy for you to say. Five.” I wasn’t going to budge. I was worth more than two buttons.

He clenched his jaw as he considered the offer. His cock was hard in his jeans from thinking about the violence he was about to cause. He didn’t want to waste time bartering back and forth. He wanted to get down to the good stuff. “Four.”

“Five.”

He gripped the edge of the table before he gave in. “Five.”

He pushed me on the bed and tied my ankles together with the yellow lace he pulled out of his pocket. I was buck naked and on my stomach. He grabbed my wrists and tied them together behind my back, making it impossible for me to move.

He crawled on top of me and swept the hair off the back of my neck. He kissed the nape gently, following my spine all the way down to my ass. His lips found my entrance and he kissed it softly, making my spine curl in pleasure.

I forgot that I was tied up like a hog, and I just enjoyed it. He was a god with his mouth, and he knew how to bring me to life. He slipped his tongue into my slit then rubbed my clit vigorously.

My hatred for him ebbed away, replaced with the fire of longing in my belly. In the throes of passion, there was nothing but the two of us. There was no hesitation or second-guessing. We were together, and in that moment, we would always be together.

He crawled up my back, his chest pressed against me. He kissed each shoulder before he turned my face toward his and kissed me on the mouth. I could taste myself, but that drove my arousal higher.

He kept his mouth to mine but stopped kissing me. “Safe word is lace.”

The safe word scared me because this time it was necessary. But it also made me burn hotter that I had the option. All I had to do was say that word, and he would stop at once. It gave me power, the kind I never had with Bones.

“Say it.”

“Lace.”

He moved to his feet and grabbed the black belt from the table. He stood in his black boxers, his muscled thighs thick and strong. His stomach was chiseled and hard, his eight-pack defined, even in the darkness. His chest expanded with every excited breath. The darkness had descended in his eyes. "You tried to kill me in my own bed." He raised the belt.

I closed my eyes and prepared for the slap. I'd been hit with a belt before, and while it wasn't agonizing, it did hurt. But the anticipation of the pain was worse than the pain itself.

He slammed the belt on my left cheek, immediately slapping once it hit my skin.

I released an involuntary cry.

He took a deep breath like my reaction pleased him. "You deserve to be punished for what you did." He slammed the belt down again, hitting my right cheek.

I clenched my jaw and tried not to make a peep. I'd already let out one yell, and I was embarrassed.

He slapped the belt again.

My body clenched at the impact. My skin was on fire, and I felt the redness form. Instead of drying up, my pussy grew wetter. To my horror, I actually enjoyed it. I actually liked the bite of the leather against my skin. It hurt, but it felt good at the same time.

He slapped me again. "Try to kill me again and see what happens." He struck me three times in a row, hitting the exact same place with ferocity.

Tears burned in my eyes, but I didn't let them fall. But I couldn't stop the yells from escaping my lips. "Stop. Please, stop." My entire ass hurt, and I knew I wouldn't be able to sit on it for weeks.

"You want me to stop?" He slapped my ass again. "I will when you learn your lesson."

Tears flooded my eyes until they breached the surface. They streamed down my face, my sinuses flooded with mucus. My body reacted in pain, but my pussy clenched tighter with longing. The pain just made it more pleasurable.

I was sick.

He threw the belt on the floor then ripped the lace from my ankles with one swipe. He turned me over onto my back, my hands resting underneath me. The fire in his eyes had turned into a raging inferno. It burned everything in his path. He wanted me. He separated my legs and leaned over me,

shoving his rock-hard dick inside me. He stared at the tears as they streamed down my face, his cock thicker and harder than it'd ever been. The sight of my tears turned him on even more. My pain was his fantasy.

He shoved himself inside without preamble, and he slid through the slickness between my legs. He groaned as he fucked me, his balls slapping against my ass as he rocked into me fiercely.

I tasted the salt on my lips, and the tears stopped falling. I stared at his powerful chest as he bucked inside me. It glistened with sweat and strength. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but my hands were restrained.

He grabbed my legs and hooked them over his shoulders, compressing me deep into the mattress. He slammed hard inside me, using the springs of the mattress to push me back up and over his cock. He fucked me harder than he ever had before. "You're wetter than you've ever been."

I should be disgusted by what I just agreed to. I should be disgusted by his obsession with hurting me. But I got pulled into the darkness with him. I was a beast just like him. My captivity with Bones was a living nightmare, but being Crow's prisoner was the most erotic experience of my life.

"Your pussy is mine." He pressed his forehead to mine and thrust into me. "Tell me."

My pussy took his cock over and over, growing wetter when an orgasm approached in the distance. I felt it start deep inside me and slowly creep everywhere else. An avalanche had started deep in the mountains, and the snow was slowly falling my way.

He pressed his pelvic bone against me as he thrust, rubbing my clit violently. "Tell me."

I wasn't his, and I never would be. But he took control over my body. He owned my reaction. He owned the way he made me come around his dick. "My pussy is yours."

My submission made him moan deep from the back of his throat. "All mine." He wanted to come, but he held off, giving it to me harder so I could reach the threshold at the exact same moment he did.

It crept up on me at a slow pace, but once it was near, it zoomed by quicker than the eye could see. It shattered me into infinite pieces. I fell, breaking piece by piece until there was nothing left. There was just a burning sensation between my legs. Unbridled pleasure stretched through me, sending me all the way to the stars and back. "Oh, god..." It was the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had. It actually hurt because it felt so good. It stretched on

forever, multiple climaxes combining into one raging explosion. “Crow...” I locked my gaze with his and fell deeper into him, more attached than I ever wanted to be.

“Button.” He inserted himself completely inside me as he released, moaning with pleasure as he filled my pussy with his warm seed. “Fuck.” He grabbed the back of my neck and held me in place as he kept his dick shoved inside me, wanting to make sure I got every drop.

I writhed underneath him, clinging to the euphoria as it slipped away. I never wanted this feeling to end. It was phenomenal, better than the most exquisite food in the world. It was even better than freedom.

And that’s when the guilt kicked in. I was enjoying this far too much. I had a boyfriend at home worried about me, and I was getting good sex in a foreign country. It didn’t just make me a slut. It made me a terrible person.

Crow caught the change in my eyes. He saw the light leave forever. “Where did you go?”

I didn’t want to talk about it with him. I’d just told him my pussy was his. Jacob hadn’t come into my mind once. I just blurted that out without any thought of consequences. “Nowhere.”

After he showered, he entered my bedroom. I just finished applying ointment to my ass to stop the burn. My cheeks were red and covered in welts. While they hurt, I still enjoyed them. It reminded me of the fierce way he took me. And that usually made the area between my legs ache for him.

He walked to the jar sitting on the shelf where two buttons sat at the bottom. He pulled out five buttons from his pocket and dropped them inside, bringing my new total to a whopping eight.

He sat beside me on the bed, his eyes soft again. The darkness and heat had disappeared once we were finished. “You liked it. And then you disappeared. What happened?”

He was two different people depending on what time of day it was. Right now, he was the gentle and protective man I saw from time to time. He had no interest in hurting me, and he would protect me against anything. He cared about my feelings and thoughts. I loved that side of him. But I also loved the feral side too. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He brushed my hair from my face and glided his fingers through the strands. He soothed me quietly, lulling me to a safe place. He leaned in and kissed my cheek then my shoulder, treating me like a goddess he worshiped. "Did I do something?"

"No." Well, yes. I was in this situation because he wouldn't let me go. He kept screwing me and making me enjoy it.

"I'm here if you change your mind."

"I know..." My heart softened at the offer.

He cupped my face and gave me a kiss. "Good night."

"Good night..." I didn't want him to leave. When I slept with him last night, it was the best night of sleep I've ever gotten. No one could touch me when I was in his arms. Bones couldn't get to me. No one could.

He left my bedroom and shut the door behind him.

My eyes moved to the jar on the counter, seeing the eight distinct buttons sitting inside. They were all different colors, coming from different places. Each one was unique, special. It was the rarest form of currency I'd ever heard of.

I went to bed and felt lonely. The room was too big, and I was too small. My past haunted me, and I couldn't escape. I kept thinking about Bones and the way he hurt me. But then I thought about Crow doing the same thing and how much I enjoyed it. It didn't make any sense. Nothing was adding up.

I finally fell asleep but didn't have any dreams. Instead, I had nightmares. I dreamed of Jacob trying to get back on his feet after I disappeared. I imagined that sadness in his eyes everywhere he went. He was lost without me, living in the apartment he used to share with me. He went to the police and tried everything he could to find me, but the trail went cold. He lost me forever.

Then the dream changed to Bones. His grotesque face looked into mine before he slapped me as hard as he could. A bat came from nowhere, and he chased me around the house, prepared to crack my skull in.

Crow came out of nowhere and pushed him back, breaking the bat across his thigh before he slammed both pieces in his gut. Bones fell over, dropping dead on the spot.

Crow came back to me, wrapping his protective arms around me. "Button, no one will hurt you. My word is law." His voice was hazy, blurry from the dream.

I wrapped my arms around him and finally felt safe.

Bones rose from the dead and pulled the wood out of his stomach. Then he lunged for Crow, stabbing the wood all the way through his back and through my chest. We were stabbed together, fixed in place.

Bones laughed as the light left Crow's eyes.

Stop.

Wake up.

Come on, Pearl.

Get up.

I finally snapped out of the dream and sat up. My body was covered in sweat, and I couldn't keep my breath steady. I gripped the sheets beside me and felt the moisture that dampened the material. I needed something to confirm that I was truly awake—that I was safe.

My heart was palpitating a million miles a minute, and I felt sick to my stomach. Visions from the dream played out right in front of me, slowly dissipating like smoke on the wind. Even when the images left my mind, fear still wrecked my heart.

I got out of bed and let my feet carry me. I left my bedroom and walked up the stairs until I was on the third landing. His bedroom was down the hall, and I walked as quickly as I could without running.

I reached for the knob and turned it, but it was locked in place. It wouldn't budge. I pounded my fists against the door and hoped he would hear me from his bedroom. When my hands grew tired, I rested my forehead against the door and tried to remain calm. It was just a nightmare. Bones couldn't get me now.

The door opened, and Crow stared at me with an expressionless face. His eyebrows were furrowed, and his hair was slightly messy from rolling around in his bed. He only wore his black boxers. "Button, what's wrong?"

I moved into his chest and rested my cheek against his slowly beating heart. "Nightmare."

He enveloped me in his arms and rubbed my back gently. His chin rested on my head, and he quietly consoled me, his affection doing most of the work.

When I was in his arms, I immediately felt better. I was soothed just as I was when I slept with him. I loved my room, but I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to sleep beside my dream catcher. I moved from his embrace and headed to his bedroom.

He grabbed my hand and steadied me. "What are you doing?"

“Going to sleep.” I pulled away.

“You can’t sleep in here.”

I turned his way, assuming I’d heard him wrong. “Excuse me?”

“You can’t sleep in here,” he repeated. “This is my room—not yours.”

“I slept in here last night.”

“That was a special circumstance.”

What was his deal? “You slap me around and fuck me, but you won’t sleep with me?” I couldn’t keep the anger from escaping my throat. “I had a nightmare, and I don’t want to be alone, but you’re turning me away anyway?” It hurt that I was opening myself up to him and showing my vulnerability, but he didn’t give a damn.

“I’ll go to your room and lie with you until you fall asleep.”

That just made it worse. “So you’ll only do it completely out of pity?”

His eyes darkened in irritation. “I don’t know what you expect from me. I’m your master, and you’re my slave. I’m not your boyfriend. I’m not even your lover. I don’t owe you a damn thing.”

That was a slap in the face. “Fuck you, Crow.”

He stood there in silence, still as a statue.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance.” I stormed off and slammed his door behind me. I was so pissed I couldn’t see straight. My heart had come to care for him, even rely on him, and for him to cruelly reject me made me feel stupid. It made me feel more than just stupid. It made me feel like a goddamn fool.

Too blind in my rage to see where I was going, I practically ran down the hallway until I reached the stairs. I tripped on a step and rolled painfully to the bottom. My body hit the tile, and I lay there, feeling pain all over my body, particularly my ankle.

I didn’t get up because I had no motivation. I had no reason. I’d just hit rock bottom, and I knew it. I looked across the room and saw the entryway in the distance. My whole life I’d always gotten back on my feet the second I collapsed. Defeat was something I never accepted. But now, I welcomed it.

Quick footsteps sounded behind me and stopped when they reached me. Strong hands scooped me from underneath and lifted me into the air.

I didn’t need to look to know who it was.

Crow carried me into my bedroom and placed me on the bed. He quickly looked me over, examining me to make sure I wasn’t hurt. He felt my ankle with his fingertips to make sure it wasn’t sprained.

How could he throw me out so coldly but then attend to me like he cared? “I’m fine. Go away.” I kicked his hand away and crawled up the bed until my head reached the pillow. My sweat had evaporated from the sheets, and it didn’t feel as damp.

His body sank into the mattress beside me, and he placed his arm around my waist. His chest was pressed into my back, and his breaths fell on the back of my neck. “I’ll be here until you fall asleep.”

“I’m fine. You can leave.”

He stayed put, keeping his arm tightly around me.

The second we fell silent, my eyes drooped. Exhaustion crept over me, and I felt my body slip away. Slowly, I drifted until conscious thoughts ceased. I fell into a dreamless sleep.

Thanks to him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Crow

I sat in my study with my bottle of scotch beside me. I was going over this month's margins for the winery and was pleased to see that the new distribution center was a success. The generated revenue was worth the expense.

Lars's voice came over the intercom. "Your Grace, Cane just approached the gate."

My blood went cold when I realized what he said. "Thank you."

"Shall I let him in?"

"Stall for two minutes."

"Of course, sir."

I abandoned my office and went downstairs to her room. She was probably reading on her couch. She hadn't spoken to me since last night. She didn't hide her loathing of me. In fact, she despised me at the moment. But that would change next time I got between her legs.

I didn't knock like I normally did. I burst through the doors.

She was sitting on the couch, exactly where I expected her to be. "Uh, have you heard of knocking?"

"Come with me. Now." I snapped my fingers and pointed to the door.

Her eyes widened in offense. She opened her mouth to give me back talk.

"Cane is here." That was all I needed to say.

She set the book down and came to my side, panic in her eyes.

"I know he'll come in here looking for you. Follow me." I headed back up the stairs to the third floor with her close behind me. I went to the hallway on the right, away from the one where my bedroom was located. I pulled a key out of my pocket and unlocked the large green door.

She stood beside me, eyeing the door with uncertainty. "What room is this?"

"It's one he won't go into." I stepped inside and shut the door behind us.

She gasped when she saw the leather straps hanging from the ceiling, the king-size bed in the corner, and the shelves of sex toys and whips. "Oh my god..."

I hadn't invited her to my playroom because I knew she wasn't ready for it. But I didn't have a choice now. "Just stay in here until I come back for you. Make yourself comfortable."

“I’m supposed to make myself comfortable in here?” she asked incredulously.

“Unless you want to go down there with me?” I threatened.

She shot me a glare before she walked to the bed. She sat down and pulled her knees to her chest.

“I’ll be back in about an hour.”

“Okay.”

I left the room and locked the door behind me. The steel door would keep Cane out. I didn’t want his hands on my slave. I didn’t want him touching my possession.

I walked to the other side of the mansion until I met Cane in the entryway. He wore one of his finest suits, looking like an upstanding citizen. His jaw was cleanly shaved, and his hair was styled.

“Hey, bro. Long time, no see.”

“Hello, Cane.” I hid my annoyance as best as possible. When he knew he got under my skin, he just irritated me even more. “Miguel told me they received the first shipment. Loved the product.”

“They should.” He stood with his hands in his pockets. “It’s the finest machinery the world has ever seen. Nothing Bones can compare with.”

“Bones can’t compare with anything.” Talking about business was the one thing Cane and I could do civilly. We had the same best interest in mind, and we worked well together. Once it became personal, we butted heads. Ever since Vanessa passed away, things between us had been worse. She was the glue that kept us together. She was the disciplinarian that kept us in line, probably because she resembled our mother so well.

When I thought about her too much, the pain welled inside me. I felt the grief seep out of my skin. The agony was too much to bear, so I pushed it to the darkest recesses of my mind.

“So...where’s your little plaything?”

“Tied up somewhere.”

He grinned just like an excited boy. “So, you finally grew a backbone and knocked her around a bit?”

The most I’d ever done was spank her—and that got me rock hard. Her skin grew red from the bite of the leather, and I thought I was going to come in my boxers just from thinking about it. “You could say so.”

“How is she?” he asked. “Is she a crier? A screamer?”

The question was way too personal. What Button and I had was intimate. She was mine, and I didn't want to share her with anyone. I didn't even want to share stories of her. "Did you come here for a reason?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're lame."

I waited for him to answer my question, not caring about the half-assed insult.

"I want a go. That was the deal."

I wasn't letting him go anywhere near my slave. She was mine. "She's off-limits. End of discussion."

"What the fuck?" he snapped. "I deserve my revenge too. I want to hurt Bones just like he hurt me. I need to fuck her in the ass to accomplish that."

"We'll get our revenge. Don't worry about it."

"Well, we're running out of time. We need to hand over her body soon."

What did he say? "What do you mean?"

"Bones sent a message."

His long silence told me his first plan was for immediate retaliation. He wanted to hit us and hit us hard. But he couldn't track us down. We were dispersed across the country and in France. It was easier to search for a needle in a haystack. "What does he want?"

"He said he'd pay twenty million for her."

I kept a stoic expression, but my heart pounded. It pissed me off that he was willing to pay so much for her return. She was mine. He couldn't buy her back. She wasn't for sale.

"Can you believe it?" Cane asked. "Twenty fucking million dollars. That's insane. Does she have a magic pussy or something?"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up." I threatened him with my look. No one spoke of her like that—except me.

He raised an eyebrow. "Damn. Now you're obsessed with her too. What is it with this woman? I admit she's hot, but she's not a supermodel."

"We aren't accepting the offer." *End of story.*

"Are you kidding?" he asked. "Hell yeah, we're accepting the money. Do you have any idea how much that is? I know we're both wealthy, but damn, that's more than most countries have in their treasury."

"No." She was worth more than any man could ever pay.

"This is what I'm thinking..." He rubbed his palms together. "We accept the money and transfer it into our account. Then we return the woman but insert a vial of poison into her arm. Just when she's in his grasp and gone,

we'll hit the trigger and kill her right then and there." He grinned from ear-to-ear, proud of the plan. "Talk about a sweet revenge."

I wasn't handing her over. And I certainly wasn't going to kill her. I'd made a deal with her, and I was a man of my word. When she paid off her debt to me, I'd let her go. But I couldn't tell Cane that, not without setting him off. "I'll think about it."

"What's there to think about?"

"If we reject his deal and keep her, that'll just piss him off even more. That's a sweeter revenge, if you ask me."

"I don't agree with that."

"If we refuse to hand her over for any price, that'll tick him off even more. There's nothing a man hates more than being powerless. Bones will have no way of getting her back, knowing we're raping her and mutilating her on a daily basis. I think that's a pretty sweet revenge."

"I guess," he said. "But I still think we can do better."

"Let's take some time to think about it." I wasn't sure how I was going to pull this off. If I let her go, Cane would see it as an act of war. He loved Vanessa as much as I did. If I took away his revenge, he would never forgive me. Our business would be split right down the middle, and our familial bond would be as well. He wouldn't be able to handle that kind of rejection, not from his only living family member.

"In the meantime, I'm gonna put her on her knees and have her suck me off. That's harmless."

Her lips would only be wrapped around my dick—both pairs of lips. "I told you she's mine."

"We've shared before. How is this any different?"

"It's different because it is." I didn't have a firm answer to give. I didn't have any justification for my behavior. All I knew was he wasn't going anywhere near her. No man was. "Now drop it."

"Why the hell do you get to keep her? You've been hogging her for a month. I thought by now you'd be bored of her."

"Well, I'm not." Not anywhere near bored. "So drop it. You know where to find entertainment."

"Paying someone to do something is one thing. But raping someone's slave...that's not something a man can just walk away from."

His infatuation with my property was disconcerting. We'd never fought over women before. There were plenty to go around for good-looking men

like us. This obsession was a direct challenge against me. And I didn't like it. "You're going to have to. Now, leave. I have things to do."

"You mean you have some fucking to do." When he turned, he nudged his shoulder painfully against mine. There was a threatening look to go with it. "I'll get her one way or another, Crow. You know me." He headed to the door, and my footman immediately opened it for him.

He walked out and approached his sports car waiting at the curb. He threw on his sunglasses and got inside the car, starting the powerful engine with the push of a single button. He turned to me and gave me the coldest stare I'd ever seen, even with his eyes hidden.

My footman shut the door just before he drove off, breaking our eye contact. I knew a threat when I was issued one, and I didn't like it one bit. No one threatened me unless they were suicidal.

No one.

I unlocked the door and entered the playroom.

She was lying on the bed with her knees bent. She stared at the ceiling, inspecting the leather straps hanging from hooks. "That was quick."

"We didn't have much to say." My bad mood had festered during the walk to the playroom. My jaw was clenched, and a distant migraine thudded behind my eyes. I approached the bed and stood with my hands in my pockets.

"He ticked you off." She wasn't happy with me after the way I treated her last night. She came to my room in the expectation of finding comfort.

I shut that down pretty quickly. "He wants to fuck you." I looked at the whips and chains sitting on the sterile tabletop. I'd used my tools on a handful of girls, but it was never that much fun. They always asked me to stop once we'd begun. Others were paid to play the role. That wasn't exciting either.

She sat up, her attention piqued. "Are you going to let him?"

"No one will ever fuck you but me."

She sighed in relief. She didn't bother hiding the reaction. She loved my cock inside her, and she didn't want anyone else. When we screwed, she fell into the darkness with me like it was meant for her. She acclimated to the intensity immediately, having a backbone of steel and a fearless heart. She

was just as much of a beast as I was—even if she didn't realize it. "That's good to know. Then why are you so...grouchy?"

"Because he won't drop it."

"He'll lose interest eventually. I'm nothing special." She crossed her legs in front of her and held on to her ankles.

It was the first time I chuckled that day. She surprised me with the strange things she said.

"Something funny?" she asked coldly.

"You."

"And what's so funny about me?" She turned defensive, uneasy that I had knowledge she lacked.

"You're very special. You're the most special woman I've ever met—and I've met a lot." I never knew a woman who could fight so fiercely. I never knew a woman who wouldn't break under pressure. I never knew a woman so strong. It turned me on just thinking about it.

She pressed her lips tightly together as she considered what she might say next. A question was coming. Her brain was hard at work. "Come here." She patted the comforter she sat on.

I didn't like being told what to do, but I wouldn't deny an invitation. My obsession was sitting in my playroom, and she didn't have a clue how much danger she was in. I wanted to hook her wrists to the leather straps and suspend her over the floor.

I kicked off my shoes before I sat beside her, just inches away from her mouth. The second I was close to her, my blood screamed for release. I wanted to slap her hard across the face and then kiss her even harder.

"Can I ask you something?"

My hand moved to her thigh, feeling the muscle underneath her beautiful skin. "Depends."

"On what?"

"If you're going to ask me several questions I don't want to answer, I want something in return."

"You always want something in return."

"Yeah." I wasn't ashamed of that fact. I was a businessman. I didn't do anything for charity. "Don't we all?"

"What do you want?"

"What I always want." I squeezed her thigh gently.

"Do I get a button?"

“Yes. But you have to give me a button if you want answers.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I have to pay to get something out of you?”

“Exactly.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re unbelievable.”

“That’s our world, Button. That’s our currency. You want something from me, you have to pay for it. When I want something from you, I have to pay too. It’s the fairest relationship in the world, actually.”

She watched my hand as it massaged her.

“So, what’s it going to be?”

She held her silence as she deliberated. A strand of hair fell from behind her ear, and she tucked it away. “I want to ask my questions.”

“And I want to fuck you. Looks like we have an agreement.”

“So, I can ask whatever I want?”

“Can I fuck you however I want?” I challenged.

Fear entered her eyes when she understood my meaning. “No.”

“Then be selective.”

She fell silent as she tried to figure out what she wanted to say. Finally, she spoke. “Why do you like to hurt me?”

It was a fair question. “I don’t know. Why do you enjoy it when I hurt you?”

“I’m the one asking questions here. So, answer.”

“It’s about dominance. It’s about strength. Only those who are truly strong can find the good in the bad. When you enjoy the pleasure in the midst of pain, you’re fortified by it. You’re empowered by it. It turns me on to see a woman cry but still enjoy it. If she can handle it, then she’s a warrior.” I turned my gaze on her, my lips desperate for hers. “That’s why I’m so obsessed with you. You aren’t like the others. You breathe fire. You’re strong. Nothing can break you, not even me.”

Instead of being offended by the response, she seemed a little touched. It wasn’t the answer she was expecting. “Do you hurt every woman you’re with?”

“No. I have regular sex. I just don’t enjoy it as much.”

“Have you ever raped someone before?”

Now she was on question number three. “I’ll keep answering your questions, but it’s going to cost you.”

“How much?”

“Another button.”

She pressed her lips together as she considered her next move. She only had seven buttons left in her jar. How much would she spend? “Answer my question.”

“You already asked me this weeks ago.”

“And I want to know if your answer is still the same.”

She needed reassurance I wasn’t a liar. When she’d asked me that question, she didn’t know me as well as she did now. “No, I never have.”

“Were you ever going to rape me?”

I made two attempts, and I failed both times. “It wasn’t from a lack of trying. When I walked into your bedroom that first time, I had every intention of doing it. But I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

That was a complicated question. “I don’t like to make women cry. I don’t like to cause them pain. The fear you showed and the tears you shed...those were from fear. I’m not into that. I want a woman to want me—and to want me to hurt them.”

“Then why did you come up with this button arrangement?”

“Because I could tell you wanted me. You needed an excuse to be with me. You’re too proud to give in to your captor, even if you’re attracted to him. I had to give you a reason. And freedom was the only way to do that. I was willing to lose you as long as I got to have you first.”

“So you really will let me go?”

She’d asked enough questions. “You moved to the next tier. It will cost you three buttons to continue.”

She sighed in irritation. “This isn’t fair. You don’t need to ask me anything because you know everything about me. But I don’t know anything about you.”

“Who said life was fair?” I countered.

She glared at me. “I shouldn’t have to pay for your answers.”

I shrugged. “That’s how it goes.”

She glared at me again.

“How about this? I’ll keep answering your questions until we reach the number of buttons you’re willing to pay. And tonight, you’ll work them off.” We were in the perfect room to accomplish the task. “We’ll be even.”

“But you’ll make me do something crazy.”

“I’ll never make you do anything you don’t want to do.” She knew me better by now. She was never forced to do anything against her will. Not now

and not ever. Well...except being my prisoner.

“Fine. Will you really let me go?”

“When you pay your debt?”

“Yes.”

“I’m a man of my word—through and through.”

Relief filled her eyes. “I’ve been debating whether I should trust you or not.”

“You know I’m an honorable guy, an honorable criminal.”

“I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“Now you do. Anything else?”

“If you’re a good guy, why do you sell weapons to criminals?”

I never said such a thing. “What makes you think I sell to criminals?”

“You’re an arms dealer. Who else would you sell them to?”

“Our company creates weapons to sell to governments for their defense. When Bones releases a new prototype, we design something to counteract it. Countries are always prepared for whatever’s headed their way.”

She stared at me with a dumbfounded expression, realizing she’d assumed the worst. She usually covered up her weakness like an expert, but this time, she couldn’t hide her misstep. “Seriously?”

“When have I ever lied to you?”

“I just thought... I’m confused.”

“Clearly.”

“Why do you do that? Why do you sell weapons to governments instead of the highest bidder?”

“Sometimes the good guys are the highest bidders.” That was my answer, but only part of it. “I don’t know about you, but I like feeling safe in my country. I have friends all over the world, and I want them to be safe too. Bones is the type of enemy that will try to rule the world. If he succeeded, that would benefit nobody. Besides, it pisses him off. And I like pissing him off.”

She still looked confused, unable to process the truth. “So...you aren’t really a criminal.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” I’d done my fair share of terrible things. I was far more evil than I was good. “Don’t forget you’re being held against your will. I make you work for your freedom—by fucking. I’m definitely a criminal.”

She felt the sheets underneath her fingertips, deep in thought. “I wonder —”

“You’re at five buttons. I’ll keep going if you’re willing to pay the price.” Her eyes narrowed. “Your answers weren’t worth that much.”

“I disagree.” She knew a lot more about me.

“But I have more questions...”

“Go ahead. But you’ll have to pay for them.” I loved manipulating her into sex. I loved getting her to pay me with her pretty mouth and slick pussy.

“Is that really all you care about? Sex?”

I didn’t answer the question because I didn’t understand it.

“Do you ever have relationships?”

“That sounds like another question.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know you can get sex from me just by asking. Do you really need to get buttons out of it?”

“Yes.” I held her gaze without an ounce of sympathy. “The more buttons I get, the more sex I get before I’m forced to let you go. It’s not any different from cash in a bank account. I spend wisely.”

When she didn’t ask any more questions, I knew she’d reached her max. She didn’t want to do a sexual act that cost more than five buttons because she knew exactly how much it was worth—since she did it once before. “Alright. I’m done.”

“Good. Now for the good stuff.” I left the bed and grabbed the instrument I’d been thinking of. While she asked her questions, I thought about how I wanted to take her. Seeing her sitting on the bed in my very own playroom got me hard and bothered. My mind immediately went to dirty places—really dirty places.

I came back to the bed and set the rod on top. My mouth moved to hers so I could get the foreplay started. Getting women wet was the part I despised the most. I was hard up and wanted to be inside her. But with Button, I didn’t mind. I loved kissing and touching her. I loved the quiet noises she made when her lips parted. She writhed in my arms because she wanted me, and I could feel her thighs press tightly together in longing.

“Uh, what’s that?”

I eyed her lips, irritated that she stopped me. “A butt plug.” I crushed my mouth against hers again and guided her to her back. I ripped my jacket off and tossed it on the ground. The fact my brother wanted to fuck her made me want her even more. She was mine, and I didn’t share anything that was mine.

“Whoa, what?” She pressed her hand to my chest and pushed me back. “A butt plug?”

“Yeah.” A purple jewel sparkled at the end so when it was in her ass, I could see it sparkle under the light. It would look sexy between her cheeks. “Now stop talking.” I grabbed the back of her neck and forced her lips on mine.

She pushed me off again. “That thing is not going in my ass. Forget it.”

She was apprehensive before I slapped her with my belt, but she enjoyed it. She would enjoy this too. “Trust me.”

“No.”

“You’ll enjoy it.” I was at a crossroad. I was irritated when she argued with me, but I absolutely loved it at the same time. I had a partner who rivaled my strength. I had a partner who was just as headstrong, argumentative, and stubborn. “You enjoy being whipped, and you’ll enjoy this.”

“There’s one thing I don’t do and that’s anal. It’s off the table.”

My cock hardened at her disagreement. Now her ass was even more desirable to me. The fact I couldn’t have it, or at least she thought I couldn’t, made me want it more. “Button.” My hand snaked into her hair, and I held myself on top of her. “When have I ever done anything that didn’t feel good?” I was rough with her, but I never did more than she could handle. And this was very tame.

She softened under my touch, loving the gentle side of me because it was so rare. “Bones did that a lot with me, and it was the most painful experience of my life. More painful than being hit with a bat. More painful than being cut with a knife. Crow, I don’t want to do it.”

It was the first time I felt something similar to sympathy. Imagining her being hunted down and beaten sent rage through my spine. The fact she suffered alone without any comfort pulled at my heart. It was a sensation I didn’t think I could feel. But somehow, I did. “Let’s get something straight. I’m not him. I’m nothing like him. If you compare me to him again, I’ll slap you so hard you’ll be knocked out for days. You understand me?” My moment of weakness made me ice-cold. I didn’t want to be caring or compassionate. I didn’t want to care about anyone or anything. Every time I did, they disappeared.

She saw the flames in my eyes and immediately nodded.

“This is happening. I know you can do it.” She was made of thicker stuff than the rest of us. Nothing could knock her down. She was like Superwoman, but sexier.

“Crow—”

“Button.” I held her gaze and commanded her to cooperate.

“Seven buttons.”

My eyes narrowed at the offer. “Five. That was the agreement.”

“I’m not doing this for anything less than seven.”

“No.”

“Then we have no deal.” She defied me with the fire in her eyes. She wasn’t scared of me, and she had no problem standing up to me. She knew she could get what she wanted if she pushed hard enough.

I sucked her bottom lip into my mouth and gave her a gentle bite. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll agree to seven. But if you like it, we go back to five. That sounds fair.”

She eyed me in surprise. “How do you know I won’t lie?”

I kissed the corner of her mouth. “Because we don’t lie to each other.”

I took her from behind and slowly thrust my dick into her tight little cunt. It was slick and warm, just like all the other times I felt her. She had the best pussy in the world. It constricted around my dick every time I shoved inside her. I could feel it tremble with pleasure.

She was so wet her slickness dripped down to my balls. My big cock wouldn’t be able to fit so well if she wasn’t this drenched for me. She was carnally desperate for me, just the way I was for her.

I stared at her tiny asshole and felt my cock thicken. I couldn’t wait to fuck that little hole. I would stretch her wide, making her scream in both pain and ecstasy.

When I felt her tighten around me, slowly approaching a climax, I slowed down my pace. I didn’t want her to come yet. I wanted to be deep inside her ass before that happened.

She looked over her shoulder and gave me a moan mixed with a growl.

That needy look on her face, that plea to make her come, almost made me shatter. I leaned over her back and pressed a kiss to her mouth, devouring her the way my dick wanted to.

I knew she was ready, so I pulled away and squirted the warm lubricant into her ass. She immediately flinched when she felt the liquid, dreading what was coming next.

I inserted two fingers inside her ass and moved slowly, still rocking my cock into her. I wanted this to feel just as good for her as it did for me. My other hand moved to her clit, and I rubbed it aggressively, trying to bring her back.

Once she got used to it, she backed her ass into me again, wanting every possible inch of my cock. She moaned quietly, enjoying all the nerve endings firing off in her body.

I was barely holding on. I had a beautiful woman backing her ass into me with desperation. Her pussy was drenched around my cock, and my fingers loved the tightness of her asshole. I couldn't wait to enter her, to feel that tight channel.

I slowly pulled my fingers out and grabbed the butt plug. I inserted the curved tip inside her ass then slowly pushed it all the way in. It nearly glided because she was so aroused.

My hand kept working her clit, and I stared at the jewel looking back at me. I'd never struggled to hold my come to the end, but she was making me weak. I'd had a lot of crazy sex in my life, but fucking Button was the best. She had the perfect body, the perfect soul, and the perfect—everything.

I fucked her for a few more minutes, pausing when she was about to come, and then I kept going. I could give her multiples, but I wanted to save it for the grand finale. I wanted her to understand how enjoyable being fucked in the ass could be.

When her ass was stretched and ready for me, I pulled the butt plug out then quickly inserted my dick before it could contract again. I slipped my head inside then slowly pushed.

She tensed underneath me, uncomfortable with my thickness and length.

"Relax."

"You try to relax when a football is being shoved up your ass."

Her back talk just made me hotter. I shoved myself the rest of the way inside her until I was balls deep.

She released a cry at the intrusion. She didn't pull away, but she stiffened underneath me. "It hurts..."

"You can use the safe word at any time. Tonight it's ice." I always reminded her of that just in case she forgot. I wanted her to be there because

she wanted it, not because she had to. “But you better not.” I grabbed the back of her neck and positioned her against the mattress. I put one foot on the bed and bent my knee to get a better angle.

And then I fucked her ass.

She moaned in pain as she felt my dick slide in and out. It was a lot to take in, and her discomfort was understandable.

“Fuck, this feels good.” Her ass was even tighter than her pussy. It constricted around my dick so hard it nearly bruised it. I shoved myself inside her and felt my chest ache with pleasure. Her quiet cries turned me on even more. I loved knowing she was in pain from my big cock.

I rubbed her clit as I rocked inside her, wanting her to start appreciating the sensation in her ass. She immediately relaxed for me, her asshole noticeably looser. “Button, rub your clit for me.” I pulled my hand away and watched her take my place.

She rubbed her nub with her fingertips. I could see them underneath her ass.

I increased my thrusts and fucked her harder. I knew the moment she started to enjoy it because her cries turned to moans. They became louder as time progressed. She stopped touching her clit altogether and just enjoyed it.

“Oh my god...”

I knew what was coming next. I could feel it as her body tightened.

“I’m gonna come... I can’t believe it.”

I fucked her harder. “Come for me, Button.”

She screamed louder than she ever had before. She exploded like a firework booth and shrieked as the pleasure hit her. She writhed underneath me, her hips bucking in response. Her moans lasted an eternity, enjoying a long orgasm that couldn’t have been reached without a little pain.

Once she was in the clear, I finally let myself go. I went to town on her ass, fucking her like an animal. My ass contracted with every thrust I made, and my balls slapped her skin as I moved. Her moans turned to cries again because I was fucking her so hard.

Then I released.

“Fuck.” I gripped her hips as I depleted inside her, filling her with my mounds of white come. My entire length was in her ass, and I gave her every drop, wanting her to keep it as long as possible. I loved knowing she walked around the estate with my come still inside her, in her ass, her pussy, and her throat. “Button, your ass is fucking amazing.”

She pulled her cheeks apart just as I slid out of her ass. She winced the second my length was gone because her ass had to adjust. She released her cheeks and sighed on the bed, both exhausted and satisfied.

I collapsed beside her, my eyes heavy from the orgasm that nearly snapped me in half. Button gave me so much pleasure I wasn't sure how to accept it. It was better with her than any other woman I'd been with.

"Five."

I turned to her when I heard her speak. Unsure what she said, I kept staring.

"Five buttons."

I grinned then faced the ceiling again, knowing she was going to say that before she said anything at all.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Pearl

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I was a prisoner in a beautiful mansion in the middle of a vineyard, and I was having amazing sex—which I thoroughly enjoyed. When Crow was inside me, I didn't think about anyone but him. I didn't think about the boyfriend I left behind, the man who still ached from my absence. Our relationship just started to get good again when I was taken.

I was a terrible person.

Evil.

The longer I was there, the less I thought about Jacob, and that realization made me hate myself even more. I was slowly forgetting about him, accepting my new life completely. Italy was now my home.

What kind of person was I?

Guilt dragged me down, and I couldn't breathe. I was drowning in my own selfishness. While Jacob was at home suffering over me, I was trading buttons with a possessive man who would only sell me my freedom—in the form of sexual favors.

And I liked it.

I couldn't continue living like this anymore. When I stopped thinking about Jacob, I felt better. But when I realized I stopped, I would feel even worse. Something needed to be done.

Crow came to my room that night. I hadn't come down to dinner or breakfast, and he didn't chase me. He gave me space when he understood I needed it. But when the silence stretched too long, he made his move.

He sat next to me on the couch, wearing his sweat pants and t-shirt. The muscles of his body were highlighted in the fabric. Everything about him screamed sexy. He was the most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on. "What is it, Button?"

I wasn't sure if I should tell him, but I didn't have any other choice. Crow was the only friend I made since I was abducted. Despite his darkness, he was trustworthy. I could tell him things I wouldn't tell anyone else. "I feel guilty, and I can't shake the feeling."

"What do you feel guilty about?" He rested one arm over the back of the couch, his warm skin touching the back of my neck.

"Us."

He looked down into my face, waiting for an explanation.

“You kidnapped me, but I still love having sex with you. You’re holding me here against my will, but I trust you. You’ve slapped me and whipped me, but I feel safe with you.”

“That’s nothing to feel guilty about. We’re attracted to each other.”

He didn’t understand. “I have a boyfriend...” Crow knew about him. He saw it in my file. “And I feel bad for enjoying you when he’s at home worried sick about me. He doesn’t know what happened to me. He probably can’t sleep or even think...”

Crow tensed beside me, clearly irritated by the subject. “You’re mine now, Button. Forget about him.”

“But I can’t. We lived together. We were together for a year. We had some hard times, but I know that didn’t change our feelings. I know he’s trying to get through each day, hoping I’m not dead in a ditch somewhere.”

Crow looked away, his cheeks red and his nostrils flaring. Rage built inside him and reached a breaking point. Then violence shook him, making him a man I didn’t recognize.

“Don’t be jealous.”

He clenched his jaw and stopped himself from speaking.

“Please let me call him. Just let me tell him I’m okay, and I’ll be back in a year.” That would alleviate some of my guilt. Jacob would know I was alive and taken care of. I wasn’t drugged in a brothel somewhere in the Middle East. I lived in luxury with a man who protected me.

“You aren’t calling him.” He pulled his arm away and scooted to the edge of the couch. He rested his arms on his knees, his head tilted toward the floor. “Don’t feel guilty for anything. Don’t even think about him. Pretend he doesn’t exist.” Anger burned in his voice. “He’s a piece of shit. Don’t you dare think about him.”

I knew Crow was possessive of me, but I never suspected him as the jealous type. I was his slave, his plaything. But I was never his girlfriend. I was never his lover. He made that abundantly clear. “Please let me call him. Just two minutes.”

He rose to his feet, his arms shaking. “No.”

“I’m not going to tell him where I am, okay?”

He turned around, giving me a look that actually scared me. “No. Now drop it.”

“Crow—”

“You’re forbidden from thinking of him. End of story.”

“Forbidden?” I asked. “Crow, there’s nothing to be jealous of.”

“I’m not jealous,” he snapped. “I hate that fucker with every fiber of my being. Just listen to me. Don’t think about him. Forget you ever knew him.”

The conversation wasn’t adding up. Crow claimed he wasn’t jealous, but he was violently angry, angrier than I’d ever seen him. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He avoided my look, staring into the dead fireplace.

“Crow?”

His jaw remained clenched, refusing to speak.

I rose to my feet as my suspicion grew. I’d been around Crow long enough to understand him. His moods were different from this. His anger didn’t come out of nowhere. He had a reason for every action he took. There was an explanation behind this. “Tell. Me. Now.” He only responded to strength. The harder I pushed, the more he gave. He didn’t submit out of weakness but respect.

He turned his gaze on me, his green eyes deliberating.

“I can handle it.”

He held another moment of silence before he spoke. “I wasn’t going to tell you. I didn’t see the point.”

“Tell me what?”

“But I’m not going to let you feel guilty for enjoying me, a real man. I’m not going to let you think he’s at home searching for you. I’m not going to let you think that asshole loves you.”

Now I was scared. Actually scared.

He broke eye contact for a second, glancing at the floor before he turned back to me. “He’s the one who sold you.” His words thudded against the air like atomic bombs. Each one exploded with the power to decimate mountains.

I heard what he said. I understood it perfectly. But my brain rejected it because it didn’t add up. “What?”

“He took you to the dock because that’s where they agreed to meet. He was supposed to hand you over and leave.”

“But...he was knocked out.”

“A part of the plan. He didn’t want you to know he was responsible.” The ferocity still burned in his eyes. His anger increased with every passing second, reaching each corner of the room.

“He wouldn’t do that.” I refused to believe that. Our relationship was rocky for months, but he would never resort to that for some quick cash. “No.”

“He had some serious gambling debts. If he didn’t pay them back, he was going to be killed. He got a hundred thousand dollars for you since you were American and beautiful.”

My stomach clenched like I’d been stabbed. I remembered the greasy man who came to the apartment looking for Jacob. He said Jacob owed him money. I brushed it off at the time, assuming it was just a mistake or Jacob lost a hundred bucks in a round of poker. But now it made sense. Everything started adding up, justifying the story Crow told me.

I crossed my arms over my chest and felt the humiliation stick to me like humidity. This entire time, I battled my guilt for my relationship with Crow. I agreed to our arrangement just so I could go home and return to my life. But now I understood there was no life waiting for me at home. Jacob never got another job. He used the money he’d been paid to take me to the Bahamas with the intention of leaving me there.

Oh, god.

I covered my mouth as tears burned deep in my heart. They didn’t start in the back of my eyes like they usually did. They seeped from my broken soul.

Crow watched me. His anger faded and sadness replaced it. “I didn’t want to tell you.”

I didn’t want his pity. It was written all over his face. To him, I was a stupid girl who believed stupid things. My own boyfriend betrayed me for some cash. When he was at his lowest point, I stood beside him. But when he hit hard times, he immediately turned on me. He sold me to a group of traffickers, knowing exactly what would happen to me.

And he did it anyway.

Heartbreak couldn’t describe what I felt.

Betrayal couldn’t describe it either.

There was nothing in any human language that could describe the agony ripping me apart from the inside out. To any onlooker, I just looked quiet. But inside, I was crumbling apart. All my strength to survive and return home had vanished. Jacob was the only family I had. Now there was no reason to go home. There was nothing waiting for me.

I turned to the door because I needed to get out of there. I couldn’t handle Crow’s pity a second longer. I hated the reflection of my pain in his eyes. All

I wanted to do was leave—and never come back.

“Button.” His gentle voice steadied me, but only for a second.

I left the bedroom without looking back. My feet carried me to the entrance and out the front doors. My body couldn’t handle the pain deep in my gut. I didn’t know how to digest this kind of agony. It was worse than everything I experienced with Bones. I’d gladly take imprisonment over this.

I couldn’t see well in the dark, so I stumbled through the night. I knew I reached the vineyards when I felt the leaves brush against me. I followed the dirt path down the rows, walking in a straight line. When I was away from the house and finally alone, I felt the tears slip from my eyes.

I fell to my knees in the middle of the fields and sobbed where no one could hear me. I gave in to my broken heart and let everything pour out. I thought I hit rock bottom when I became a slave. But I knew I really hit rock bottom when there was nothing waiting for me back at home. My parents were too busy with drugs and alcohol to care about the police taking me away. My own boyfriend who I lived with sold me for a paycheck. I had nobody.

I was nobody.

The sprinklers turned on and splashed my face with frigid water. My eyes immediately opened as my hair and clothes became drenched. I sat up and felt the drops slide down the bridge of my nose.

The sun just peeked over the hills, basking the valley with an orange sun. The night had passed, but the darkness stayed behind. I cried myself to sleep and felt my eyes go dry while the agony still settled in my heart.

I’d never broken down before, not quite like that. When I woke up, I hoped last night was just a nightmare. But seeing the fields surrounding me told me it was nothing but the harsh truth.

I rose to my feet and walked along the row, still wet from the sprinklers. My clothes were soaked and sticking to my body. My hair clung to the back of my neck. My feet were bare, so the soil got stuck between my toes.

I walked back to the house, knowing Crow would have left for work by now. I wouldn’t have to deal with him or his pathetic looks of pity. Lars would probably eye me with disdain as I tracked mud all over the house.

But I couldn’t care less right now.

I walked to my bedroom on the second floor and flinched when I saw Crow sitting there. He wasn't dressed in a suit, and his hair wasn't combed. He wore the same thing he'd worn the night before. He clearly hadn't moved all night.

On the bed was a breakfast tray of scrambled eggs, tomatoes, and slices of bacon. In a small vase sat a red rose, just like the day I arrived there.

He rose to his feet and looked me over, still sympathetic. He didn't ask me any questions, which was a relief. Concern was in his eyes, like he'd been worried about me all night long.

I didn't know what to say, so I blurted the first thing that came to mind. "I'm going to shower." I looked like a wet cat that got stuck in some mud. I smelled like a farm animal.

He nodded.

I walked into the shower and stood under the warm water. Mud filled the drain at the bottom and disappeared through the tiny holes. My hair was caked with it, and my feet were worse.

The door opened, and Crow came in behind me, buck naked and glorious. The water drifted down his hard muscles and powerful thighs. His hair was slicked back from the water, and his facial hair had thickened through the night.

But I didn't feel anything.

He lathered his hands with soap then rubbed his palms into my skin. He cleaned me with his bare hands, massaging my neck and shoulders to get rid of the grime that had sunk into my pores. He even cleaned my hands, rubbing the dirt from the cracks in my fingernails. He washed me gently, taking his time. His cock never hardened as he touched me. But then again, why would he? I was a dumb and dirty girl standing in the shower.

He washed my hair next, rubbing the grime from the strands. His strong fingers massaged my scalp, giving me the only comfort he could possibly give. He tilted my chin up then cupped my face. There was sorrow in his eyes, the first sign of compassion I'd truly seen on his face. Then he leaned down and gave me a soft kiss on the lips. "I will hurt him for hurting you. I promise."

He was the only person who cared about what happened to me. When men tried to take me, he protected me. When someone even looked at me, he snapped. He gave me a home where I felt safe. He respected me, even

treasured me. Despite his darkness, he was the kindest man I'd ever known. "I know."

Crow worked from home all week. He understood I needed my space, but he stayed in the house just in case I changed my mind. He came into my bedroom every few hours to check on me.

I spent most of my time in solitude. I walked through the fields during the day, accompanied by the wind and the grapes. The sun pounded against my shoulders, but the warmth made me feel alive.

I swam in the pool and floated on the surface, letting my buoyancy do all the work. I stared at the sky and tried to fall asleep. I wanted to slip under the water and drown. Death used to terrify me, but now it didn't. Slipping away into the darkness sounded better than living in a nightmare.

I was sold by a monster to another monster. And then I was snatched by a beast. The world was darker and more formidable than I ever thought possible. Everyone was innately selfish, guided by greed and power. I was just a pawn in the game like all the others. But I happened to be a lucky one. I could have been drugged and placed in a brothel in Mexico. I wouldn't have known anything about my surroundings until the medication wore off. But then I would be drugged again—and again.

It was a sad thought—to consider myself lucky.

I spent my nights alone in my room. Most of the time, I didn't sleep. I just stared at the wall and wondered what Jacob was doing in that moment. Had he already moved on with someone else? Did he ever feel guilt for what he'd done to me? Or was he just relieved his debt had been paid?

Did I ever mean anything to him?

Did he force himself to cry when he told everyone what happened? Did he fool everyone into believing he was truly sad for losing me? Had they stopped talking about me? I'd been gone for six months.

That was a long time.

My nights were always full of nightmares. Sometimes they contained Bones. Sometimes they included Jacob. Most of the time, they included both. Jacob was surrounded by mounds of cash while Bones stabbed me with a knife and fucked me at the same time.

I always woke up in a cold sweat.

That night was just like all the others. I sat up in bed, and my eyes immediately went to the vase on the windowsill. Seven buttons sat inside, distantly glowing under the moonlight.

I stared at them and debated what I should do. Crow told me they were the currency we shared. He paid for things he wanted, and I paid for things I wanted.

Right now, I wanted something.

He denied it to me before, but perhaps a button would change his mind. I grabbed one button from the jar and walked to his bedroom. The door was locked like usual, so I knocked.

He answered it a moment later, shirtless and tired. His hair was messy, and his eyes conveyed his exhaustion. He didn't look at me with irritation like he normally would. Now, he was just concerned.

I held up the button then placed it in his palm. "Can I sleep with you?" A single button in exchange for a night of sleep seemed fair. But I would give him two buttons if he really wanted to negotiate. I didn't care about the price. I just wanted to be in that bed with him, to let him chase away my nightmares.

He eyed the button in his palm and rubbed his thumb along the grooves. He turned it over and felt the other side, feeling the tiny holes located in the center. He pushed it between his forefinger and thumb before he grabbed my hand and placed it within my palm. He curled my fingers around it and closed my fist. "You can keep the button—this time."

I pulled my hand to my chest, treasuring the payment I didn't have to make. Keeping the button didn't matter to me. Freedom didn't matter to me anymore either. But the gesture, the kindness, meant the world to me.

Crow kissed the corner of my mouth before he guided me into his bedroom. He lay beside me in bed and wrapped his powerful arms around me, sleeping with me just the way I liked.

I placed the button on the nightstand directly next to his lamp where I could grab it the following morning. It glinted under the light from his alarm clock, shiny and pristine.

Crow hugged me to his chest and pressed a kiss to the side of my neck. "Sleep well, Button."

I hooked his arm across my chest, using it as an anchor. "I will."

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The story continues in *Buttons and Hate*.

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