

BUTTONS: BOOK TWO

BUTTONS & HATE

HER HEART. HIS REVENGE.



P E N E L O P E S K Y

Buttons and Hate

Buttons Two

Penelope Sky

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious or used fictitiously. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher or author, except in the case of a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Hartwick Publishing

Buttons and Hate

Editing Services provided by Final-Edits.com

Copyright © 2017 by Penelope Sky

All Rights Reserved

Chapter One

Pearl

Now I was just confused.

My primary objective was to return home as soon as possible as a free woman. I had a job I loved, a boyfriend I loved, and my friends and his family. There were many things waiting for me.

But then Jacob betrayed me.

What was truly waiting for me back at home? A man who cared so little about our time together that he threw me away like an old piece of trash. When his gambling debts got too high, he was willing to sell a person—me—just to make ends meet. What if he wasn't in debt? What if he just needed money to buy a house or a car? Would he trade me in for that too?

I didn't know what to think anymore.

The agony that weighed on my heart cut deeper than a blade. It hurt more than a steel baseball bat against my rib cage. There was nothing worse than having no purpose.

And I had none.

I looked at the jar on the table in my bedroom and saw the pitiful amount of buttons I'd accumulated. I agreed to our sick deal because I was determined to return home. But now that I lacked motivation to leave, the buttons seemed irrelevant. The only use they had was getting things from Crow. I slept with him last night because I had a button to spare. It was my currency to get the things I needed.

That was the only value they held now.

Crow returned from work right on cue. He walked through the front door at the same time every single day. He was punctual to the point of boredom. His movements and actions were predictable. I wasn't sure how he managed to dodge his enemies when he had such a strict routine.

Instead of heading into his room to shower, he knocked on my bedroom door.

"Come in." I sat on the couch near the fireplace. A book lay beside me on the cushion. I hadn't started reading again since that horrible afternoon. All I wanted to do was sit still and stare at the wall.

He entered the room with an innate authority. His black suit was buttoned in the front, and the legs of his trousers framed his muscled thighs

perfectly. There were a lot of sexy qualities that he possessed, but I was particularly attracted to the strength in his thighs.

He wore a blue tie, the kind of blue that reminded me of tropical waters. It wasn't deep and dark like his suit. It was vibrant and beautiful. Only a stern man like him could pull it off and make it look intimidating. He made everything seem abundantly masculine. His mansion was styled with elegance and taste, and even that seemed manly.

He greeted me with a cold stare, annoyed from the second he walked through the door.

I hadn't gotten in his way or pestered him, so I didn't know what his problem was. "Yes?"

"Knock it off."

All I was doing was sitting in my room peacefully. I hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch. If his employees didn't know I was there, they wouldn't pay attention to me. "Excuse me?"

"This pity party you're throwing for yourself. Get over it already and move on." He turned back to the door, having said everything he needed to say. His shoulders were tense with irritation, like he wanted to flip the chair over while I still sat in it.

"Wow."

He turned around when he reached the door, his expression still ice-cold.

"I didn't think you could be a bigger asshole. But I guess you can." I stormed into my bathroom and locked the door so he couldn't follow me. I turned on the water and stood underneath the showerhead. The warm water felt good against my skin, soothing the anger away—at least some of it.

Lars stepped into my bedroom. "His Grace would like you to join him for dinner."

Not after the stunt he pulled earlier. "I'll enjoy my dinner in here tonight. Thank you, Lars."

He kept his hands behind his back as he stood in the open doorway.

If he didn't leave, he had something else to say. "Yes?"

"His Grace said dinner would only be served in the dining room. If you would like to eat, you need to join him."

"Then I'll starve." The choice was clear. I turned back to my book

and silently excused him.

Lars shut the door, and his footsteps trailed away. A minute passed, and I knew he was in the dining room telling Crow what I had said. It was only a matter of time before Crow stormed up here and dragged me by the hair.

His quiet footsteps approached my door a moment later. Despite how lightly he approached me, I knew there was rage in every inch of his body. Chaos would be burning in his eyes, and he would probably slap me across the face.

The doors burst open right on cue, and his eyes changed from cold peaks to burning lava. "Get. Your. Ass. Up." He stood in front of me, his powerful arms hanging by his sides. "Now."

I turned my eyes back to my book and kept reading. "No."

His hand flew to my throat, and he tightened his grip, pushing my head back against the couch. He rested a knee on the cushion and leaned over me, the threat of violence clear in his eyes. "Move now, or I'll slap you until you cry." He shook my neck forcefully. "Don't test me."

I wasn't testing him. I simply didn't care. "Do your worst, Crow." My body was unable to feel anything anyway. It was numb from the blow over Jacob, and that ice would never thaw. I was hopeless, having nothing and no one to believe in. Whether I was there as his prisoner or back at home, I was still alone with no one to trust. He could hurt me all he wanted, but I probably wouldn't feel anything anyway.

His fingers loosened on my neck, and his expression changed. Something happened deep inside him. He saw a flicker in my eyes. He saw something break in my soul. He finally saw the aftermath of my heartbreak. It took some time, but he finally understood it.

He changed his tone, dropping the violent one and adopting the gentle caress I preferred. The caring and sympathetic man didn't emerge often. But when he did, it was beautiful. "Please join me for dinner." He pulled his hand away from my neck and brushed his fingers along my cheek.

The concern in his eyes brought some life back into my bones. The fact that I could sheathe his anger sometimes and bring out the gentle side of him gave me some form of importance. "Okay."

We had dinner on the terrace that evening. The sun had set behind the

hills, but the pastel color in the sky still lingered. A gentle breeze swayed through the vineyards and rustled the leaves of the vines. The olive trees positioned by the road darkened under the impending shadow of night.

White candles burned in the center of the table, illuminating our faces as we ate our dinner. Neither one of us spoke because we usually didn't have much to say over dinner. Sometimes, I wondered why he wanted me to join him when he clearly didn't care about having company.

"How was work?" I was the first one to break the silence.

"It was fine." His answers were clipped, like always.

"What do you do there, exactly?" I knew he ran the winery, but I didn't know what that entailed. Sometimes he worked at home, and sometimes he was gone all day.

"A lot of paperwork. A lot of overseeing."

"You don't pay someone to do that for you?"

"I do. But it's important to make an appearance regularly. Keeps everyone in line. Keeps them honest."

I remembered the way Bones shot one of his workers. The man had a seizure and couldn't move, but that didn't matter to Bones. He shot him in the head anyway. Without asking, I knew Crow didn't treat his employees that way.

"I have distribution centers all over Italy, so I visit each of them randomly. When they don't know I'm coming, they behave themselves. I could pop up at any moment."

"It sounds like you don't trust them."

He swirled his wine before he took a drink. He licked his lips then returned the glass to the table. "I don't trust anyone."

He told me to do the same. And he was right. My own boyfriend sold me into a life of sexual servitude. I lived with the man, made love to him, and told him I loved him before I went to work in the morning. And then he stabbed me right in the back. "And you shouldn't." I would never make that mistake ever again. I would never let anyone into my heart. This journey showed me people were innately evil. They were never good like I once believed. I even met two women who understood I was a slave, and they didn't give a damn about it.

Crow set down his fork even though he wasn't finished eating. He usually had small servings that were gone when dinner was over. But tonight,

he abandoned his plate, lacking an appetite. His gaze locked to mine, and he searched me deep and wide. Sometimes he could read my thoughts just by looking at me. “I’m disappointed in you.”

Somehow, that was worse than when he stormed into my room and told me to get over it. It was more painful. “Yes, I’m a human being with feelings and emotions just like everyone else. I can’t be a robot like you, purely mechanical.” I couldn’t get over something that devastating overnight. It would take me some time.

“I’m disappointed that you’ve lost your fire. And I’m more disappointed that you let a piece of shit like him put it out. That’s not the woman I know. That’s not the woman I met. You’re a fighter—through and through.”

I held his gaze and felt something similar to joy radiate through my veins. He gave me a compliment—and those were seldom. I knew I let Jacob take me down. But I simply wasn’t strong enough to pull myself back up. “You’ll never understand how I feel. You’ll never understand that kind of betrayal.”

“I understand a lot more than you give me credit for.” He threatened me with his eyes, refusing to accept anything less than what he wanted.

“I loved this man. I lived with this man. The fact that he sold me into a lifetime of slavery just to pay off a gambling debt...” I shook my head because I couldn’t finish. It was beyond despicable. It was hurtful just to think about it. It was because of Jacob that I killed two men. It was because of him that I was viciously raped by a madman. My insufferable existence happened entirely because of him. I couldn’t get over that in a week. I’d probably never get over it.

“Don’t think about it.” He kept his voice firm, unbreakable. “Don’t stress over something you can’t change. Don’t live in the past when you’re in the present. What happened to you was terrible, I’ll admit that. When I read it in your file, I was in a dangerous mood for at least a week. But you aren’t going to let it define you. You aren’t going to let it push you down. You’re going to get back up on your feet and push on. You’re stronger than this.”

He still didn’t get it. “I’m not just hopeless because of what he did. I’m hopeless because there’s nothing for me to go home to. I don’t have a family searching for me. I don’t have a best friend who’s worried sick over me. Jacob was the closest thing I had to a family. And he doesn’t care

whether I live or die. Whether I'm here or in America, it doesn't make a difference." I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I don't have a home."

I washed my face and got ready for bed. My bedroom used to be a safe haven, but now I hated being in there—at least when I slept. The only time I was at peace was when Crow had his arms wrapped around me.

He was my knight, my protector—even in sleep. But I couldn't ask to sleep with him every night. I didn't have a lot of buttons left, and I didn't want to use them all within a week.

There was a light tap against my door, masculine knuckles rubbing against it.

"Come in." I'd just brushed my hair and pulled it over one shoulder. I wore the t-shirt Crow left for me. It was ten sizes too big and reached my knees, but it was comfortable. In a way, it felt like he was wrapped around me at all times.

He walked inside wearing his gray sweatpants without a shirt. His body was solid and defined, his muscles protruding against the hard lines that held his body tightly against his skeletal frame.

He watched the fire burn in the hearth before he sat beside me on the bed. His long legs widened as he sat, his knees bent slightly up because of his height.

My feet didn't touch the floor.

He rested his arms on his knees. "Do you want me to sleep with you?"

I eyed the buttons in the jar. Six sat at the bottom, all different and unique. It was a savings account, in my eyes. I had to spend it wisely. I may have a nightmare or worse that I needed them for. "No, it's okay."

He turned his head slightly my way, watching my expression. "I wish there was something I could do." His voice trailed off, showing his pain for the first time. It was never clear whether he cared for me or not. Sometimes, it seemed like he did when he protected me. But then he'd snap and treat me like a dog the very next day. He was an enigma.

"There's nothing you can do, Crow."

"I just want you to know that I do understand that kind of betrayal. I do understand that kind of pain. And I do understand what it's like not to have a home." He stared at his joined hands. The short strands of his brown hair were messy from running his fingers through the slightly curled ends.

“You aren’t alone. You never are.”

I listened to everything he said, hanging on to every word. “What happened?” He’d never told me anything personal before. All I knew was he had a brother. And I knew they had a strained relationship.

“My father passed away ten years ago. My mom has been gone for five.” He rubbed his fingers together, trying to concentrate on the task in front of him. Whatever he was going to say next caused him immense pain. His shoulders were stiff, and he purposely took short breaths. When he was most vulnerable, he was also the least emotional. “And my sister passed away a few months ago.” His voice remained steady, but he clenched his jaw like it was all he could do to remain in control of his feelings. “It’s been hard for me.”

My heart broke into a million pieces when I heard him speak. When Jacob betrayed me, I couldn’t think straight. The agony was too much. But hearing Crow confess his pain hurt more than I expected it to. I wanted to fix everything. I want to erase his suffering. “I’m so sorry.”

He bowed his head. “I know what it’s like not to have a home. I have Cane, but...it’s not the same.”

Unable to take the distance between us a moment longer, I crawled into his lap and straddled his waist. He leaned back to accommodate my movement before he rested his face in the crook of my neck. His long arms wrapped around me and kept me in place. His breathing didn’t change, and he was as emotionless as ever. But he clung to me like my presence meant something.

I pressed a kiss to his forehead and ran my fingers through his hair. My heart thudded hard against his chin, feeling the exact same pain he felt. This man captured me and held me against my will, but I was heartbroken when he was heartbroken. I cared for him more than I wanted to admit. When he suffered, I suffered twice as much. Was that why he was irritated with me when I collapsed under my grief? Because he had to feel it too?

He moved his face from my neck and looked up at me, the pain still burning in his eyes. There were no tears or even a drop of moisture, but he showed his agony in a more profound way. His eyes were the gateway to his soul—which was broken beyond repair.

I cupped his face and pressed a kiss to his lips. It was the softest one I’d ever given him. My mouth slowly moved against his, and I felt my eyes

saturate with tears. Warm and salty, they streaked down my cheeks until they landed on his skin.

He gripped me tighter as the kiss continued. We were connected in a way more profound than any other touch we'd shared. The moment was different than all the rest. He touched me like a delicate rose petal, and I poured my heart out to him as I kissed his lips. I laid my cards down and told him the truth—that I cared deeply about him.

And he told me the same thing.

Something snapped inside him and he withdrew. His lips were taken away, my tears still on his cheeks. He scooted me off his lap and onto the bed. Then he rose to his feet, shutting down like nothing happened at all. He wouldn't look at me, turning ice-cold all over again.

"Crow?" I wiped my tears with the back of my forearm, embarrassed for crying in front of him.

He stared at the ground because he couldn't handle the look in my eyes. His hands were on his hips, his shoulders returning to their rigid sternness. "Good night." He turned his back on me and walked away.

I didn't know what happened. One instant, we were combined together, sharing a vulnerable and tender moment. And in the next, he walked away. He turned off his heart and kicked me out of his mind. He pushed me away, drawing a line he never wanted me to cross.

A line he would never cross again.

Chapter Two

Crow

I stayed away from her for two days. She didn't come near me either, so our discomfort was mutual. She broke down some of my walls, so I erected new ones that were twice as high and three times as thick.

I didn't like talking about my feelings. I didn't like discussing shit that couldn't be changed. I didn't like wasting time on things that no longer mattered. But I was determined to break her spell, to bring her back to reality. I let my guard down to expose myself, to show her that some scars don't heal. You just have to live with them.

But I made myself too vulnerable in the process.

I needed to reestablish our relationship. I was the master, and she was my slave. She was working off her debt so she could leave. That was it and nothing more.

On the third day, I visited her room and found her reading by the fire. She wore a white dress that exposed her petite shoulders. The light color looked perfect against her slightly olive skin. Living at my estate had exposed her to more sunlight than she was used to. The result was beautiful and glowing skin.

I wanted to fuck her all over again.

My sex drive had returned in full force. I wanted her—badly. I wanted to fuck all my depression away. I wanted to get lost in the moment with her. When she and I were together, I didn't think about anything else but her slick pussy, the O she made with her mouth when she came, and the way she said my name as she screamed.

When she looked up at me, she knew exactly why I was there. She shut the book and met my gaze, looking just as fierce as she used to. Perhaps our last conversation had hardened her spine and made her realize she didn't have it so bad—not as bad as I did.

I kneeled in front of her and grabbed her by the hips, dragging her forward until her chest was pressed to mine. I wanted to take her rough and hard. I wanted to make her scream from both the pain and the pleasure.

I pushed my hand into my pocket and pulled out five buttons. I dropped them on the cushion beside her, telling her exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to fuck that tight little asshole and make her scream again.

She eyed the buttons and felt them with her fingertips. “I want more.”

“More?” She wasn’t getting more buttons for an action she did for a lower price in the past. “You’ll take whatever I give you.” I yanked the front of her dress down, revealing her curvy tits. I immediately pressed my face into the valley and licked the skin.

She grabbed my shoulder and pushed me off. “No. I want to do something worth more buttons.”

It took a moment for me to understand what she wanted. My mind was focused on thing—and it was between her legs. “Like what?”

“Something expensive.” Her desire for freedom had returned, and that turned me the fuck on. Her fire was back, raging with flames so hot they were blue. She was combative and hostile, her strength matching mine.

“I have something in mind worth twenty buttons. But I’m not sure you can handle it.”

“I can.” Her eyes didn’t hesitate. She kept her resolve, never caving in to the fear. She was determined to do it. She was determined to get out of there as quickly as possible.

“Then let me show you.”

We entered the playroom on the top floor. It was in the right-hand corner of the mansion without a bedroom underneath. Soundproof walls kept the screams inside. Lars knew I had strange fetishes, but he didn’t know the extent of my dark obsession.

I pulled the leather straps from the ceiling and turned to her. I watched her expression, needing to know her reaction.

She stared at the apparatus blankly.

“I’m going to hang you from the ceiling. Then I’m going to flog you.” My cock hardened just at the thought. I wanted to hear her scream. I wanted to see her skin redden and welt. Then I wanted to fuck her.

She walked closer to the leather straps and stared at them. “Okay.” She lacked any fear whatsoever. Maybe she’d done this before with Bones. Maybe she felt safe with me.

“You’re sure?”

She nodded.

I was getting my way, and my cock thickened. Twenty buttons was a high price, but it was worth the action. I yanked her dress off and dropped it

to the floor. She only wore panties underneath, so I removed those then kissed her skin everywhere. My mouth was desperate for her body. That clear skin would be marked with my strikes very soon.

My lips slathered her shoulders with kisses then I kneeled in front of her, moving my mouth to the area between her legs. I cherished her body everywhere, kneeling at her feet.

She breathed hard when she felt my mouth against her entrance. She dug her nails into my shoulders as she quietly moaned, loving the feeling of my strong tongue against her sensitive nub.

I couldn't keep this up much longer. I wanted to hurt her—so much. I wanted to push this unbreakable woman to the limits. I wanted to apply the pressure without feeling the snap.

I positioned her arms above her head and locked her wrists within the leather. My chest was pressed to her back, and I loved the view. Her feet were still on the ground, and I stared at the curves of her body. She was blessed with a steep arch in her back, a delicious ass, and an hourglass waistline. Faint scars from her previous situation still marked her skin but I intended to cover them with my own. "The safe word is lace." If she needed a way out, she had one. I just hoped she didn't use it. "Say it."

"Lace."

I curved her face toward mine and kissed her. It was an aggressive kiss, the kind that involved tongue and teeth. I smacked her ass before I walked away. My hands found the rope, and I pulled her a few inches off the ground, the perfect height to fuck her later. I locked it in place then grabbed my flogger.

I stared at her ass and felt my excitement grow. "Ready, Button?" The nickname stuck to her like glue. From the first time I used it, it felt right. Even in the playroom, it was fitting.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" I pressed.

She didn't answer, defiant.

"Yes, *master*." I'd never gotten her to say those words before. I'd never gotten her to admit she was mine. She'd given me her body, but her mind would always belong to her. The fact that I couldn't break her made me want to do it even more.

"You'll never be my master."

I whipped her hard across her back, spanning from her shoulder to the opposite hip.

She winced at the bite. Her body moved with the momentum, swinging slightly.

“What did you say?”

Tears weren’t in her eyes, not yet. “You aren’t my master.”

I struck her again.

This time, she didn’t wince. She didn’t react in the slightest.

My respect grew. My obsession increased tenfold. No woman had ever been in this room and remained silent. No woman had ever been able to put up with this kind of pain so proudly. They all broke—every single one.

I struck her again. “You will submit to me.”

Her only response was silence.

I struck her three times in a row, hitting her across the ass and the backs of her legs. The skin reddened in response, becoming inflamed.

I couldn’t keep my excitement under control. I turned into a feral beast, carnal in nature and psychotic in desperation. My cock oozed with pre-cum and I wanted to be inside her. I didn’t even want to finish whipping her. All I wanted was her.

I threw the whip on the ground and tore off my sweatpants and boxers. If I didn’t get inside her that instant, I was going to explode. My dick was eager for her. If he had a voice, he would have screamed.

I turned her around to face me then wrapped her legs around my waist. When my fingers moved to her entrance, I found the moisture I’d been expecting. Her pussy was wet for me, drenched. She seemed to love receiving pain as much as I loved giving it.

I positioned myself at her entrance with my face pressed to hers. Her arms were pulled over her head, and she was helpless to do anything but take me—and take me hard.

I pressed a hard kiss to her lips before I entered her in a swift move. She moaned into my mouth when she felt me stretch her apart. My lips remained glued to hers, but I couldn’t kiss her because she felt so good. I fell into her slickness, enjoying every thrust and every cry she gave me. “Fuck, this pussy...” I was obsessed beyond understanding. I thrived in my playroom and gave in to the lustful obsession that plagued my body. I fucked her as hard as I could, losing all thought and reason.

“Crow...” My name escaped her lips like it usually did. She always said it with a sexy moan, full of ecstasy and unbridled passion. “Twist my nipples.” It was the first time she’d given me a command.

I kept one hand on her ass and gave her what she wanted. I gave her the final push she needed to get off. I twisted her nipple harder than I normally did, and she exploded around my dick.

Her hips immediately bucked into me, wanting more of my length. She wanted to be full of me, stretched to her breaking point. “God, yes.” She breathed against my mouth, her muffled screams becoming incoherent words.

My cock felt the flood of moisture that oozed between her legs. She got so wet for me, before I entered her and during. Heat flushed through my body as I pounded into her. Her defenseless body hung from the ceiling, her left nipple was red and inflamed, and her body was covered in my scars.

The image pushed me over the edge.

I came deep inside her, moaning louder than I meant to. My head was in the clouds, and my cock released as much cum as possible. I wanted to fill her to the brim. I wanted there to be so much of my seed that it came spilling out when I pulled out. I’d never allowed myself this kind of satisfaction with a woman, to be as dark as I wanted without judgment or distaste. She knew exactly what I was and used it to her advantage. Now she was closer to gaining her freedom.

My upper lip was sweaty from the exertion, and when I kissed her, I tasted her own salt on my tongue. I always kissed her when I was finished, silently telling her how much I enjoyed being inside her.

I slowly pulled out, my cock softening now that I was satisfied.

My cum dripped out of her and splashed onto the floor—just as I fantasized about. “Fuck.” I kept her legs around my waist and felt my cock harden all over again. I wanted to add more to the pile. I wanted her to have more than she could handle.

She saw the darkness settle in my eyes again. She could read my thoughts better than anyone at this point. “Let me ride your cock.”

My cock sprung to full attention.

“Two buttons.”

At that moment, I would’ve agreed to any number. I unbound her wrists and carried her to the bed in the corner. I lay against the headboard and positioned her on my lap. “Fuck me hard, Button.”

She rested on the balls of her feet and gripped my shoulders for balance. Then she bounced up and down on my dick like a pro, taking in every inch of my enormous length. Her tits shook in my face, and she made the sexiest face as she moved.

She was amazing at everything.

She pulled one hand away and placed it behind her back. Her fingers reached my balls, and she rubbed them gently as she rode my cock. She massaged them, touching the sensitive tissue with precision.

“Fuck.” I clenched my jaw because it felt so good. She had the skills of a call girl and the innocence of a bound slave. My cock couldn’t handle the lustful goodness. She was the best sex I’d ever had—hands down. My cock was in heaven and never wanted to leave. This was the pussy he wanted to fuck for all eternity. Could I ever really let her go? I promised I would, but everything was different. She gave me the kind of satisfaction no one else could ever give. What would I do without her?

The thoughts were too much for me to handle. They brought me into darkness—and not the good kind. I focused my eyes on her tits and watched them bounce. Within a moment, I was back in the game. My cock twitched inside her and prepared to release the next round of cum. “I love this pussy.” I didn’t mean to talk dirty. It just slipped out because my cock was in full control. It made me say and do things I would normally avoid.

“My pussy loves your cock.”

And I came.

Everything was back to normal.

That terrible night was just a distant memory. She never questioned me about my sister or why I pushed her away so aggressively. She left it in the past—where it belonged.

She worked for her buttons ruthlessly. We were sitting together at dinner when she crawled under the table and blew me. When I was in my study, she’d come in unannounced and ride me. She wanted sex around the clock, collecting buttons like they were falling from the sky.

When her jar hit seventy, I grew nervous.

In just a few weeks, she’d collected nearly a third of her debt payment. If she kept up this rate, she would be gone in a few months. While I was enjoying all the rough sex immensely, I didn’t want it to end so soon.

I didn't want her to go.

I was a man of my word, and I had to honor my promise. When she reached three hundred and sixty-five buttons, I had to remove the tracker and let her walk out my front door.

There was no other choice.

But my hand shook at the thought. My brain went into a panic. Heart palpitations wrecked my chest. My estate would never be the same without my Button. My playroom would never feel so welcoming. Eating dinner alone would feel lonely again. I thrived on solitude before she walked into my life, but now, it actually scared me.

I would never find another woman like her.

I would never find one so fearless and strong. She didn't just handle pain. She was molded by it. Her dark history prepared her for this moment just as mine prepared me for the same thing.

When the time came, would I really let her walk away?

She sat across from me at the dinner table, her hair in open curls that were utterly fistable. She wore a deep purple dress that didn't have sleeves. She either looked good in everything she wore, or Lars understood her body at an innate level.

The thought made me a little jealous.

She was different tonight. She was quieter than usual, not making eye contact with me. She sipped her wine and ate quietly. The questions she usually asked about my day were absent. The silence was discomforting.

So I spoke first. "How was your day?"

She finished eating her piece of French bread. Her small mouth moved slightly when she chewed. She had impeccable table manners, something I appreciated. And when she chewed, she didn't make a sound. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

My spine coiled when she led the conversation. She was dominant at the right times, increasing my possessiveness and instinct to control her. She was an opponent that baffled me every single day. "I'm listening."

"I have seventy buttons in my jar."

That was known information. I'd been keeping track in my head. Every button I gave her was full of regret. There were times when I didn't want to give her one at all. I wanted to lie and say her performance was

terrible. But she wouldn't believe that for a second. She felt how much come I gave her every single night—multiple times. "I'm aware."

"When you want something from me, you give me buttons. And when I want something from you, I give you buttons."

Now I didn't know where this was going. She was repeating herself. "Can you get to the point?" I had nowhere to be, but I still hated wasting my time.

"I want something from you. And I'm willing to pay for it."

My body heated with intrigue. Sometimes she asked to sleep with me, and that always cost her a button. I didn't want to share my bed with her, but I desperately wanted that button. It was a small price to pay to fuck her throughout the night. Did she want something different now?

My thoughts immediately kicked into overdrive until I came to a conclusion. It got me hot all over the place. What if she wanted to hurt me the way I hurt her? What if she wanted to tie me up and whip me until I bled all over the floor? I'd never let a woman do that to me before. It never crossed my mind. But the idea of this woman doing it to me...sent me to the edge with insanity. She was strong and ruthless. She would whip me with such brutality I wouldn't have to egg her on. She would do it all on her own. "What do you want, Button?" I kept my tone steady, hiding the excitement in my voice. My cock was hard in my trousers, and I resisted the urge to adjust it.

"I want more."

More pain? More flogging? "More what?"

"I want you to take me to a show and dinner."

My mind immediately went blank when I heard what she said. I wasn't even sure if I heard her correctly. Maybe my fantasies got the best of me and interfered with what she said. I stayed quiet, hoping she would clarify.

"For two buttons."

So she did say what I thought she said. "Is this a joke?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, holding her confidence. "No."

When my fantasy was shattered, I was left with irritation. "I'm not taking you out on a date. I already told you, I'm not your boyfriend."

"I never said you were."

"Then we have an understanding."

She tapped her finger against her arm, thinking. “Five buttons.”

Five was a lot. That was the usual cost for a night with her tied to the headboard.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” She repeated my own words back to me. “But this is what I want. And the more buttons I spend, the longer you get to keep me.”

My intrigue piqued at those final words. If I took her buttons, she would have fewer in her jar. And she would be forced to stay here longer—possibly indefinitely. Maybe a date wouldn’t be so bad after all. “Ten.” I was getting as many buttons out of this as I could.

“Five. The number is non-negotiable.”

I knew ten was a steep push. Flogging her cost twenty buttons, and it would be ludicrous to charge ten just for having dinner with her. “I have a few questions.”

“I’m listening.”

“What do you get out of that?” She spent plenty of time with me. In fact, we had dinner together nearly every night. Then I fucked her into the mattress every night. Her lips were always kissed with my mouth. Why waste money on this?

“I get a lot of out of it, actually.”

I still didn’t see the benefit. Then it hit me right in the face. “You want me to take you to a city so you can run.” I was stupid for not reaching that conclusion right off the bat. “Not gonna work.”

“I’m not going to run.”

“Really? I thought we didn’t lie to each other.”

She leaned over the table, staring me down. “There’s no point in me running. I have no money and no papers to get on an international flight. The only way I can ever go home is if you help me.”

I couldn’t argue with that reasoning. “You could go to the embassy.”

“I have no idea where it is. And I don’t want to take my chances searching for it when Bones could spot me. I would much rather stay here with you than return to that psycho.”

My suspicion faded away. “I still don’t understand.”

“You’re my only friend, Crow. I like being with you even when we aren’t fucking. I just want more from you. I need affection. I need attention. I need something.”

Since she was a woman, I tried to understand her needs. She'd been cooped up in the house for months. Our conversations were minimal. We spent most of our time screwing. There wasn't much more to it.

"And the reason doesn't matter. I still don't completely understand why you enjoy hurting me so much. Why your cock is so thick inside me after you whip me. But I don't ask because it doesn't make a difference. This is what I want. Take my buttons and give it to me. Or don't."

When she laid it on thick like that, I couldn't object. She was right. Whatever her reason was, it didn't matter. I either wanted her buttons or I didn't. "I agree to your terms."

"Thank you."

The more buttons I took from her, the less she would have. And she would be mine forever.

Lars greeted me at the entrance. "Sir, do you have any preferences for dinner tonight?"

"No. I'm going out."

"Out?" I was a well-known recluse who preferred solitude. It was very rare for me to eat dinner outside the house. And Lars couldn't hide his surprise at the statement.

"Yeah. Button and I are going out."

"Oh, that sounds nice." He gave me a quick nod before he returned to the kitchen, probably to tell the cooks they had the evening off.

I walked to her bedroom on the second floor and tapped my knuckles against the door.

"Come in."

No matter how many times I knocked, I never got used to it. I wanted to barge in because I owned her. But she would give me hell if I did. I stepped inside still wearing my suit.

She stood at the window, looking across the fields.

I knew she loved the view because the window was always open. Whenever the alarm was set for the night, I had to disregard that window. I could never tell her to shut it. She would give her two cents on the matter. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

She finally turned her gaze on me, her interest nonexistent. "Sure."

I should have phrased my question better. "Would you like to have

dinner with me in Tuscany? I thought we could go wine tasting afterward.”

Her eyes immediately filled with light, her excitement undeniable. She abandoned the window and gave me her full attention. That joy in her eyes was something I’d never seen before. She never looked at me like that. The only expressions I received from her were disdain and lust—with the exception of when she cried in vigilance of my sorrow.

I tried to block it out.

“I would love to.” She placed her hands tightly together in front of her chest. “When?”

“As soon as you get ready.”

“I’ll need twenty minutes.”

I extended my palm, my fingers stretched outward.

When she eyed it, the happiness in her eyes dulled. She retrieved the five buttons from the jar and dropped them onto my extended hand. Then she crossed her arms and waited for me to leave.

I pocketed them and walked out, knowing I’d fucked up the mood.

She met me at foyer half an hour later. She came down the stairs in a skin-tight black dress. It was simple, hugging her hips and waist and showing a good amount of cleavage. A golden necklace hung from her throat, something Lars picked out for her.

I eyed her as she made her entrance and noted the soft curls of her hair. It was pulled over one shoulder and long, trailing past her chest. Her makeup was heavier than she normally wore. Her eyes were dark, sexy.

She looked fuckable.

She watched my reaction as she approached me. She tried to read my expression like she always did. She hated the fact that I understood her so well but she didn’t truly understand me.

But she didn’t need to bother. I gave her answers when she didn’t ask—sometimes. “Button, you’re perfect.” I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her to my side, loving the feel of her perfect tits against my chest. When we finished our evening, I would fuck her hard into the mattress and come all over those gorgeous tits.

“Thanks. You look handsome too.” She ran her hand up my chest, feeling my gray collared shirt. The top button was open, and her fingers touched my bare skin at the gap.

Maybe I would fuck her in the car.

“Let’s go.” The sooner we got this over with, the sooner we would be home. And I would be between her legs, moving through her slickness, just where I belonged.

I drove my special edition Audi through the hills as we headed to town. I preferred the glorious landscapes with the wide-open spaces. I loved the smell of the olive trees. Summer or winter, Tuscany was beautiful. I’d traveled to many different places, but nothing was as remarkable as this country.

Her eyes were focused out the window as I drove, treasuring the false feeling of freedom. She’d been locked up in two different houses since she’d been kidnapped. This was the most alive she must have felt for a long time.

I knew she wouldn’t run. The thought didn’t enter my mind after we discussed it. I didn’t bother bringing my gun because I wasn’t concerned. There was always a pistol in the car, but it wasn’t loaded.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more beautiful place...” Her eyes followed the hills as we moved.

“Because you haven’t.”

She turned back to me, her eyes pretty. Her lashes were long and extended, and her lipstick was ruby red.

I pictured the color smeared around the base of my cock.

Her hand moved to the gearshift where mine rested, and I immediately grew suspicious of her actions. Was she trying to take over the car? She was a fighter, so it wouldn’t surprise me. Instead, she placed her hand on mine.

I eyed it, unsure what she was doing.

She looked out the window again, her hand finding comfort on top of mine.

Normally, I would pull away. I wasn’t an affectionate man. Unless things led to sex, I wasn’t interested. But she told me what she wanted and paid for it. If she could be whipped and spanked, then I could do this.

I could give this to her.

I turned my hand and interlocked our fingers together, holding her like a lover.

She eyed our joined hands but didn’t react. A minute passed before she looked out the window again, her hand still tucked into mine. Soon, her

thumb brushed across my knuckles, feeling the hard and callused skin.

The touch soothed me. But that realization made my body tense in irritation. Affection was hard for me to give and even harder for me to receive. It burned in my blood and turned me into a hateful person.

But I could do it.

I'd done unspeakable things to her, and she played her part. If this was what she wanted, if this was her fantasy, I could do it. She needed to be my slave for as long as possible.

And holding her hand would make that happen.

She sat across from me at the dinner table and stared at the menu. Her eyes scanned back and forth before she pulled out a folded piece of paper from her clutch. She glanced through it before she turned back to the menu.

I eyed her with interest. "Button, what are you doing?"

"Deciphering the menu. The whole thing is in Italian."

I gestured for her to put it down. "I'll translate for you."

"No," she said quickly. "I want to figure it out on my own." She waved me off and kept using her notes to figure out what she wanted to order. "I really don't want to end up ordering snails."

The corner of my lip upturned in a smile. "That's French, not Italian."

"Oh...I still don't want anything like that." She ran her fingers through her hair absentmindedly, and she had no idea how sexy she looked as she did it. Diamonds flashed in her ears, sparkling by candlelight.

She was the most gorgeous woman in the room, no competition. In fact, she was the most beautiful woman in every room I walked into. When I first laid eyes on her, I didn't find her impressive. I'd been with a long line of beautiful and exotic women. But I felt differently now. I noticed the small freckles on her cheeks when she didn't wear makeup. I noticed the way one side of her mouth would lift slightly higher than the opposite side when she smiled. I noticed how long and lean her perfect legs were. Every scar attested to her strength, making her invincible. And even when she cried with blotchy cheeks and red eyes...she looked stunning.

I'd never been more obsessed in my life.

Her spirit attracted me like a moth to a flame. Even when she fell into a depression, she was still stronger than I'd ever been. She looked fear in the eye without blinking. She stood up for herself because she understood no one

else would. She made a life for herself, starting with nothing and becoming an independent and powerful woman.

She deserved my respect.

And she had it.

“Okay, I think I know what I want.” She folded up the paper and returned it to her clutch.

I didn’t realize how far my mind had drifted. I sat there for five minutes and pointed out every quality she possessed. My internal thoughts were raging when I normally didn’t think about anything at all. “And what did you decide on?”

“The lasagna.”

My chest rumbled with a quiet chuckle. “It won’t be anything like that American shit you’re used to.”

“Now I can compare.”

“How about wine?” I handed the drink menu across the table.

She brushed it away. “I’m not ashamed to admit I know nothing about wine. You’re the expert.”

I set it on top of the menu. “What do you like? Red or white?”

Her fingers moved to her hair again, pulling a strand free of her ear. “I’m not sure. What we have at the estate is good. Like I said, you’re the expert here.” She never yielded the floor to me. And she never let me make decisions on her behalf.

I’d tamed her, in a way. “Then leave it to me.”

The waitress approached our table and flashed her mocha eyes in my direction. She probably recognized me from the vineyard. I wasn’t a celebrity by any means, but Tuscans knew their wine—and where it came from.

She exchanged a few pleasantries with me in Italian, ignoring my date for a few minutes too long.

I quickly redirected the conversation to the food. In Italian, I ordered for both of us and handed the menus over.

She gave a false smile, hiding the hurt from my rejection.

When we were alone again, I watched Button across the table. A hint of irritation was in her eyes, but she hid most of her unease.

“She was just asking me about my vineyard.”

“I thought we didn’t lie to each other.” Her voice turned ice-cold, putting me right on the spot.

How did she know?

“I can understand a little bit of Italian. And she was coming on to you, assuming I was a stupid American who couldn’t figure out what you were saying. Are all Italians that disrespectful?”

The fire in her voice made my cock come to life in my trousers. Hearing her anger and possessiveness was a turn on—even though it should’ve irritated me. “I’m going home with you tonight. So let it go.”

“Still annoying...” She grabbed a piece of bread from the basket and tore off a few pieces before she popped them into her mouth.

I didn’t go out to dinner very often. The only time I did was when I was seeing someone or I had a meeting. While I loved the food, I preferred the meals Lars prepared—because there was no social interaction required.

“Do you date?” She looked down at her hands and pulled the bread apart.

“Right now?”

“No. Before me.”

I didn’t want to be asked these kinds of questions but I assumed it was part of the agreement. If she didn’t ask anything, there wouldn’t be much to talk about. I was fine with the silence, but she wasn’t. “I have relationships... here and there.”

“So, you don’t beat them like you do with me?”

“No, I do.” That was the best part of the relationship. When they trusted me, they allowed me to do the darkest things to them. They came to adore it and wanted more.

“Have you ever been with a woman without resorting to that?”

“A few.” We would hook up a few times, but I was never satisfied. I needed violence to get off and satiate my appetite. “But they don’t last long.”

“Do you ever want to get married? Have children?”

“No.” The answer came out harsh, offended she asked the question at all. In my line of work, I couldn’t care for anyone. I couldn’t have a wife and a family. I would always be a target until the end of my days. If someone wanted to cross me, all they’d have to do was take someone I loved.

And I couldn’t lose anyone else.

Button understood she crossed a line with her question and backed off. “I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“Then don’t.”

“I was just curious. No ill intention.”

“Do you want to get married someday?”

“No,” she said just as quickly as I did.

That surprised me. Since she wanted to have a date, I assumed she still believed in romance. Maybe I was wrong. “May I ask why?”

“I don’t trust anyone. And I never will again.” She finished the slice of bread then picked up another.

I didn’t touch the basket. I wasn’t a big fan of bread.

“You shouldn’t let him ruin your future.” Not all men would have done something so sadistic. I was a criminal, a murderer, and a thief. But even I wouldn’t have done that. “You will find someone who truly cares for you.”

“Even so, my ability to trust is gone. It’ll never come back.”

“All things come back—in time.”

She shook her head. “When you’ve seen what I’ve seen, that’s not possible. I’ve seen how foul men really are. I’ve seen how their cocks control their every move. I’ve seen the real side to people—and men are all the same.”

I wanted to argue that point, but I couldn’t. I was one of the most evil men I’d ever encountered. I may not have raped her, but that didn’t make me a good person. I was still expecting a bribe to get her to open her legs. I wasn’t any better. “I’m sorry this experience has made you lose your faith.”

“It hasn’t. It’s only opened my eyes.”

The waitress returned with our meals and placed them between us. She only had eyes for me and ignored Button, probably assuming she was a colleague or client, not my sex slave.

Button stared at her hard, silently threatening her.

She poured the wine then disappeared—thankfully.

When she was gone, Button’s sour mood faded.

“You’re the jealous type?”

“I’m not jealous.” She cut into her lasagna. “I don’t like it when people write me off as insignificant.”

“She probably thinks you’re a client.”

“Well, I’m not.” She took a few bites, still tense.

She never wanted to get married and she didn’t trust anyone, but yet, she was jealous. It didn’t add up. But then again, if I saw a man go anywhere

near her, I'd stab a knife through his chest. It had nothing to do with love. It was all about possession. "Now she'll know." I slid my hand across the table and grabbed hers. I interlocked our fingers together and continued eating.

Her fingers immediately responded to mine. They shifted against my skin until they clung to me tightly. She eyed our combined hands, her anger immediately gone when the affection arrived.

We sat at a table near the window and enjoyed appetizers and the different wines we sampled. I'd already tried every kind of wine in my vicinity. I knew what I produced, and I understood what my competitors made. The experience was anticlimactic.

But Button enjoyed it.

She sampled each wine after she swirled the glass like a professional. "I like this one."

"It's one of mine."

"Really?"

I nodded.

"How many kinds of wines do you produce?"

That was a loaded question. "Off the top of my head...at least a hundred."

"Wow. Have you always been interested in wine?"

"I suppose. But I've always been interested in hard liquor as well."

"Did you start the winery on your own?"

I nodded.

She rested her wrists on the edge of the table, her toned arms sexy. Her hair had fallen to both shoulders because she stopped touching it, and it framed her face like she was about to step into a photo shoot. Her dress covered the scars on her back and ass, but I knew they were there. "How did you accomplish that?"

My mind was pulled from the small scars across her ass. "I've been in the weaponry business for a long time. I had a falling out with my father and set out to open my own business. I was tired of being bossed around. I was tired of living in his shadow. So I took my cut and opened the winery. Within a few years, it was a success."

"When did you go back to the business?"

"When my father passed away." I'd never truly grieved for him either.

The last time we spoke, we both said hurtful things. Years of silence passed until Mom called me and told me the news. “I returned to the business with Cane, and we became partners. So my time has been split between the two.”

Even though she was silent, her eyes showed her interest. Every word entered her ears and stayed in her mind. She gave me her entire focus whenever we were together. “Do you enjoy it now?”

“Not really.” The business wasn’t something I was proud of. It led to more problems than it was worth. I made a lot of enemies, the kind that never slept. Bones was my biggest adversary, a fight born before we even met each other. “But Cane wants me to be a part of it. Doesn’t want to run it on his own.”

“When did you start listening to him?”

The corner of my lip lifted in a smile. “I know he can’t handle it alone. He’s impulsive, whereas I’m methodical. He’s impatient, while I take things slow. He thinks with greed more than logic. We balance each other out.”

“Do you enjoy the winery?”

“Yes. It’s an honest living, and I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished. I started the vineyards when I was eighteen, and within a few years, it became the biggest winery in Italy.”

“Your mother must have been proud.”

“Yes.” But my father never was. He called it pussy shit.

“I’d like to see it sometime, if you’re willing to show me.”

“Sure.” I wouldn’t mind taking her over my desk in my office after a day in the fields. I wouldn’t mind showing her off to my workers, letting them see the woman I took to bed every night. Having her on my arm was a power play sometimes.

She finished her wine then moved on to the next one. “Thank you for answering my questions.”

She’d been living with me for three months, and we never had a conversation about anything real. It was straight down to business, straight down to buttons and lace. I answered her questions easily without even realizing it. She knew more about me than anyone, with the exception of Lars. “I don’t mind answering them when it doesn’t feel like an interrogation.”

“I’ve never wanted to interrogate you. I’ve only wanted to know

you.” Her eyes dropped to her glass, and she swirled the wine before she took a drink.

Anytime her gaze was averted, I watched her. I examined the way her fingers gripped the top of the glass with her painted nails. They were ruby red, matching the color of her lipstick. She had long and slender fingers, perfect for wrapping around my cock when she sucked me off. When her lids were down, I could see every single lash as it reached out and curved upright at the ends. They were full and lush, thicker than I’d ever seen them. She was beautiful every day without makeup, but when she dressed herself up, she looked too good to be true. Never in my life had I sat across from a woman more gorgeous than her. And she didn’t have a clue. How did someone from a callused background become so soft and beautiful? How did she hold on to her natural elegance, her pride? “You grew up in New York?”

She finished her wine before she returned it to the table. “Born and raised. There’s no city in the world quite like it.”

“Do you miss it?”

She shrugged. “Being in a place like this makes me resent all the traffic, the people, the noise, and the pollution. My skin looks better than it ever has, and my lungs feel like they can fully breathe for the first time. So, no, I guess I don’t miss it. I used to love that place, but now that I’ve been here...I don’t love it as much.”

At least she was enjoying herself at my estate. She lived a life of luxury. She was waited on hand and foot, and she was in the presence of the most beautiful valley in all the world. “Have you spoken to your parents since you went your separate ways?” Her file told me a lot about her, but it didn’t tell me the details only a recount could give.

“No.” Her voice was absent of bitterness. “I doubt they care. I was an accident they didn’t know what to do with. Living in foster care was difficult. Living on the streets was difficult too. But I’d rather go through that again than be anywhere near them.”

I didn’t flinch at the resentment in her voice. My father and I butted heads through the years, but that was because we were both so controlling. He knocked me around when I disagreed with him, but that made me push harder. Though, I did respect him. I was much better off than she ever was. “Were you ever adopted?”

“Once. It was this nice family in Manhattan. I liked the wife and the

husband. But then she became pregnant, and they realized they couldn't afford to keep me. So they sent me back."

My expression didn't change, but I felt my heart twist into a knot. To be welcomed into a family and then replaced when the real child came along must have been traumatic. "How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

That made it worse. "I'm sorry."

"It is what it is. When I started college, I molded into the person I was meant to be. The students didn't know about my background, so I had a clean start. That was when my life changed. Things got better, and I was happy for the first time in my life—my loans aside." She chuckled before she poured the next sample into her glass.

I admired her more than ever before. She'd been through hell but still came out positive. She could have had a pity party for herself but never did. She pushed on and never gave up.

She reminded me of myself.

"Did you have a boyfriend in college?" The idea made me sick. There were other men before me. There would be men after me. The idea shouldn't bother me. In fact, I shouldn't even blink at the thought. But I did. I asked a question without wanting the answer.

"Yes." She smiled at the memory. "Jason. He was a nice guy."

She spoke fondly of her ex. That was a rare sight. "Why did you break up?"

"He was two years older than me, so he graduated at the end of my sophomore year. He got a job in California, and the long-distance situation just wasn't working. We went our separate ways—as friends." He was the only memory she spoke highly of. Everything else was full of darkness.

"Do you still keep in contact with him?"

"We texted each other on and off sometimes. But nothing too intimate. I never asked if he was seeing anyone, and he never asked me. It was one thing we silently agreed on."

Now he started to sound like the one who got away. I grew more uncomfortable by the second, feeling an inexplicable rage deep in my gut. The fact that she loved a man and was still fond of him burned my skin all the way to the bone. Her past life shouldn't matter to me. Her future shouldn't matter to me either. But it disturbed me in a profound way. "Did you sleep

with him?”

She rolled her eyes, a smile on her lips. “I was in college. Hell yeah, I slept with him.”

That answer just made me more tense. I wanted to change the subject because I was growing more uncomfortable by the second. I kept my face stoic, but my hand gripped the glass so tightly it was about to shatter. “Which wine is your favorite?”

She surveyed the bottles on the table and chewed her inner lips as she tried to come to a conclusion. “The second one.”

One of mine.

“What’s yours?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Why not?”

“Conflict of interest.”

“This isn’t an interview with the paper. You’re talking to me.”

I leaned forward and examined the bottles. “The second one.”

“Good. It would be awkward if you preferred someone else’s wine over yours.”

“I suppose.” I set my empty glass down. “Are you ready to go?” We’d dined and wined. I fulfilled my end of the bargain. I wanted her underneath me on the bed. I wanted to fuck away her memory of that pathetic boyfriend of hers. How could he let her slip away? Sounded like a goddamn idiot to me.

“Yeah. I like riding in your car. It’s nice.”

If she wanted to get into my pants, all she had to do was compliment my ride. “Thanks. It looks a lot nicer when you’re in the passenger seat.”

She gave me a sexy grin. “How about the backseat?”

We entered her bedroom, and I immediately came up behind her and unzipped her skintight dress. I pulled the zipper all the way down to her ass, showing the top of her black thong and those luscious cheeks. A deep growl came from my throat at the sight. My cock was already oozing with pre-cum. It was desperate to be inside that slick pussy.

I pulled the thin fabric all the way to her ankles and kneeled. I pushed her torso down, making her bend over at the foot of the bed. My fingers grabbed her thong and pushed it over while my tongue licked her tiny slit. She was wet like I anticipated, and I enjoyed making her wetter.

She moaned for me, pressing her ass farther into my mouth because she wanted more. She wanted my thick tongue to rub her sensitive clit. We'd been together enough times to understand exactly what the other wanted. I knew her likes and dislikes at an innate level.

I stood then removed my trousers and boxers. I wanted to fuck her hard from behind, watch her ass shake with every thrust I made. My fingers quickly unbuttoned my shirt so I was buck naked behind her.

She turned around and moved farther up the bed, on her back and against the headboard.

I didn't understand her movements, but I didn't question it. I crawled on top of her and kissed the valley between her breasts. I loved her tits just as much as her ass. Her rack was perfect.

Her hand moved between her parted thighs, and she rubbed her clitoris while she fisted my hair with the other hand. She moaned quietly for me, arching her back so she could fit my nipple in her mouth.

Fuck, she was sexy.

I twisted one of her nipples and sucked the other, listening to her wince and moan at the same time. Her fingers rubbed her nub harder, and she moaned loudly for me, not caring if anyone in the mansion listened to the sexy cries she made just for me.

Staring at her all night made me desperate for her. I loved the dark and smoky look around her eyes. I loved the ruby color of her lips. She looked so beautiful by the candlelight. My dick wanted to be inside her more than anything else in the world.

My cock lay against her stomach, smearing my liquid against her belly button. He expelled plenty of lubrication, but I never needed it. Her pussy was always soaked for me.

I pulled away and grabbed her hips. I shifted her weight and turned her over onto her stomach. I was going to pound her hard against the mattress, listening to her muffled cries against the pillows.

She turned back over. "What are you doing?"

I stared at her in the darkness, unsure if I missed something. "Fucking you."

"I want it like this." She wrapped her legs around my waist and pulled me on top of her.

"I don't care how you want it." We did things my way, and she would

have to deal with it. I made her come whether she was suspended from the ceiling or bent over a dresser. I didn't do missionary because it was too intimate for my taste. We only did it one time because I was easing her into our relationship. Last time we were face-to-face, she cried for my pain. I didn't want to feel the closeness, the syncing of our beating hearts.

"It's my night." She squeezed her thighs against my waist. "You do what I tell you. Now, obey."

My spine immediately shivered at the command. No woman ever dared to give me an instruction. She did it so effortlessly and with so much conviction it made my cock thicker. I was the dominant one, the man who needed control. But I was aroused by this woman with a backbone made of steel. She was my perfect match, my counterpart. I almost did as she asked. "You have it backward, Button. I'm going to fuck you on your stomach so turn over."

"No. I paid for tonight. You do what I want without question, just as I do for you." Fire burned deep in her eyes, about to burn me from the heat.

My eyes narrowed in confusion. "You paid for dinner and a show. Sex was never included."

"It's implied."

"No."

"Yes." She dug her nails into my arms, silently warning me. "I want it like this. I want it slow. I want you to kiss me like I'm the only woman in the world who matters to you. Now do it."

She wanted vanilla sex. Fuck no, I wasn't giving it to her. "I'm not making love to you."

"You bet your ass you are."

The back talk fired me up. I wanted to crush my mouth against that pretty mouth of hers. I wanted to force her into submission, but I also wanted her to fight back. "That was not included in the deal. Now shut up so we can fuck." My cock throbbed and ached for release.

"Fine. Two buttons."

"No." There was no amount of buttons she could pay me. I didn't do vanilla. Never had and never would.

"Five."

"You don't have enough buttons to make me do it."

She dragged her nails to my chest and dug into the skin until I almost

bled. Her voice lowered, sexy and powerful. Her eyes were locked to mine. “I’ve done things with you I never thought I could do. I’ve enjoyed things I never thought I would enjoy. I give you what you need. Now give me what I need.”

I held her gaze and felt my resolve slip away.

She pressed a soft kiss to my lips, coaxing me to cooperate. “Now.” She breathed into my mouth, her confidence making me slip away. Her words made me rethink everything. She hung from the ceiling from leather straps and let me whip her until she bled. She’d done everything I asked because she knew I needed it. She took a chance and kept an open mind. That was more than most women would do.

“Three.”

Her hands moved to my shoulders, and she slowly dragged them down my back. She kissed the corner of my mouth and tightened her legs around my waist. “Three.”

The deal had been sealed, and I upheld my end of the contract. I pressed my mouth to hers and kissed her slowly, concentrating on what I was doing and nothing else. I closed off my heart and kept it at a steady beat. I enjoyed every kiss and every caress physically, never emotionally.

She responded to my affection immediately. Her nails dragged down my back but she didn’t cut the skin. Her touches turned gentle, inviting. She breathed into my mouth every time I kissed her, getting into it.

I positioned myself on top of her and my cock found her entrance like it had a mind of its own. With her legs still wrapped around my waist, I pressed my tip to her soaked opening.

My back coiled in longing when I felt the moisture. It felt so good against my cock. It was warm and slick, helping my large thickness slide right in. She was wetter than she’d ever been before. And that was something I didn’t think was possible.

I slowly sank into her, stretching her apart with every inch. Her pussy was heaven, and I could stay buried inside forever. My cock wanted to make a home here and never leave.

She hooked her ankles together and rested them in the center of my back, right against my spine. She was folded underneath me, her tits pressed to me. Her hands trailed to my hips, and she gripped them possessively. “Crow...” Her lips were parted, and her face was red. She enjoyed it so much

before we even began. “Oh god, Crow.” She grabbed my ass and pulled me the rest of the way inside her. “Your cock feels so good.”

I paused before I thrust inside her. Her words dragged across my skin and made me bleed everywhere. They turned me on more than I already was. I barely did anything, and she was a crumpled mess beneath me. My breathing escalated, and my dick was even more sensitive. I could feel every movement of her channel. I could feel the flood as more moisture greeted me from deep inside her womb.

I slowly pulled my cock out before I thrust into her, stretching her as my cock entered her tight pussy. My hips immediately wanted to move harder, fuck faster, but I kept my body under control. I made my thrusts slow and gentle.

And I already wanted to come.

It was harder to control myself than it usually was. All I had to do was command my body and it obeyed. But right then, normalcy went out the window. I couldn't think straight when this beautiful woman enjoyed me so thoroughly. I was the one making her moan and beg for more. I was the king who conquered this queen. I was the man she traded bits of freedom for.

My cock throbbed.

“Crow.” It was the third time she said my name, and that broke her last record.

My hips slowly thrust into her, and my ass contracted every time I moved. I pushed into her slowly, barely rocking the bed. My lips moved with hers and tasted the wine on her tongue. “You look so beautiful tonight.” The words left my lips all on their own. I didn't have to force it. I gave her what she wanted without having to try. When I fell into the movement and concentrated on the connection of our bodies, everything else fell into place.

She melted underneath me, her lips trembling. She said my name again, this time with more passion than ever before. “Crow...” Her nails dug into my ass before her arms hooked around my neck. Her fingers slid into my hair, feeling the soft strands.

Our bodies were caked with sweat and we moaned together. I kissed her when I could, but sometimes, it felt too good. I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing and kiss her at the exact same time. My forehead pressed to hers, and I looked into her eyes as I moved. I watched the fire dance in her irises. They were still blue, but searing hot. She got lost with me, conscious

thought ending and emotions beginning.

She gripped my biceps, what she usually did just before she exploded. “I’m going to come for you...”

I could feel the slickness between her legs increase. There was so much of it. It dripped down to my balls and sank into her sheets, making them damp. My heart seared with unexpected pain, and I felt my breath leave my lungs. “Tell me you’re mine.” She’d given her rejection countless times, but I knew her answer would be different. I could feel it in my bones as well as my soul.

She tightened around me as the force hit her right in the chest. She convulsed and writhed, her pussy constricting my cock until it bruised. “Crow...” Her sharp nails dug into my skin. “I’m yours... Only yours.”

Those were words I’d wanted to hear for months. Now that they entered my brain, my body became weak, and I gave in to the all-consuming pleasure. My cock lit on fire as my cum traveled from my balls to my shaft. I released inside her with a powerful explosion, giving her as much as I possibly could. “Button.” I hooked my arm around her waist and held her tightly against me, finishing out the high that gave me the greatest satisfaction I’d ever known. I felt like I came three times in a row, one after another. My muscles winced in soreness like I fucked her as hard as I could. Everything ached but felt so good at the same time.

I rolled off her and lay on my back. My legs automatically kicked the sheets away because the place felt like a boiler room. My breathing slowly returned to normal, and my body temperature declined.

My eyes felt heavy, and I was ready for bed. Before I became too tired, I sat up and moved to the edge of the bed.

She grabbed my arm and steadied me. With just a simple look, she told me exactly what she wanted.

Without reluctance, I agreed. I moved back into the bed beside her and pulled her flush against my body. Her leg hooked around my waist and my semi-hard dick was pressed against her pussy. Face-to-face, I stared at her soft lips. They were relaxed with sleep. The red color was absent, probably smeared against my mouth and tongue. My hand cupped her face then drifted to her neck where I could feel her soft pulse.

She opened her eyes and looked at me, the exhaustion deep in her irises. Her fire had been drenched, and now she was at peace. Her hand

moved to my chest, and she rested her fingers against my beating heart.

My body took control, and I pressed my lips against hers, giving her a kiss that was different than all the others. It was soft but aggressive. It was gentle but controlling. I pulled away and felt cold the second I wasn't against her. "Mine."

She rubbed her hand against my chest. "Yours."

Chapter Three

Pearl

I loved the pain. I loved the bite of leather, the snap of a whip, and the rough way his cock took me. His eyes darkened to coals, and he fell into the underworld. The tender man I knew disappeared and was replaced by a far more sadistic version of himself.

I like that too.

But I really loved vanilla.

I loved the way he kissed me gently, his lips taking their time and making every caress have a purpose. He felt my lips like he was trying to memorize them, to recall the sensation from memory when I wasn't around.

His powerful thighs thrust into me slowly, every inch of his cock thicker and longer when he slowed everything down. My pussy was the slickest it'd ever been, and I fell into a different world as we moved together.

It was worth every button.

I didn't feel guilty for asking him to do something he wasn't comfortable with. He'd done some incredible things to me—and I had the scars to prove it. But once he gave it a chance, he enjoyed it. I could tell by the amount of cum he deposited deep inside me. I couldn't hold it all in.

It was the first time I let him have me—all of me. He earned it once he did something just for me. He let me have control of the situation, unleashing the power just for the night. It was difficult for him not to be in control every instant. But he somehow found the strength—for me.

I wanted to do that more often. But I already spent nine buttons on the evening, my total taking a big hit. I could only do that six more times before I ran empty. Losing my freedom wasn't what bothered me. It was losing my ability to pay for things I wanted.

I needed more buttons.

I came down to breakfast where he was reading the morning paper. He was already dressed in one of his fine suits with a brightly-colored tie. His hair was combed back but still a little curly at the ends. He was a beautiful view to see first thing in the morning.

I pulled his paper away and dropped my ass into his lap.

Instead of being irritated that his morning ritual had been interrupted,

his cock hardened underneath me. He looked at me with cold eyes, his dark exterior and placid expression back to normal. There were seldom times when he let me in. And once he did, he was always more shut off afterward. "You want my cock before I leave?" He was right back to business.

I straddled his hips and grinded slightly against his erection. "I always want your cock."

His hands moved to my thighs, and he gave them a hard squeeze. He pulled my dress up to my waist so my ass stuck out. His fingers immediately went to my cheeks, pulling them apart and fingering my thong. "What a coincidence. My dick wants to fuck you in the ass." He moved his forefinger to my back entrance and slipped it inside.

My body used to tense and expel his fingers, but now I was used to it. I remained relaxed, allowing myself to stretch in response to his probing. "Then, why doesn't he?" I undid his belt and zipper, letting his cock come out. It was thick and long, already gleaming with his juice.

He shoved another finger inside me, his face reddening in desire. "I think I will." He pulled me closer against his chest and pushed my thong over. He grabbed my hand and held it to my face, silently commanding me.

I spit on it then reached behind me to rub his length from the tip to the balls. I moved up and down, my sticky saliva lubricating him.

His eyes darkened further, and he fingered my ass continuously, moving deeper and harder. "I love your ass as much as your pussy. Didn't think that was possible." He slowly pulled his fingers out then grabbed the base of his cock. He pointed it at my entrance, stretching me wide with just the tip. He released a shaky breath, anticipating the sensation of his entire length inside me.

I grabbed his base and stopped him from going farther.

His eyes looked into mine, burning with impatience.

"Ten buttons."

"Five."

"Ten." I wouldn't budge because I knew I would win. He was hard and throbbing, eager to be inside me as soon as possible. His thoughts were completely on sex. He was desperate enough to agree to anything.

He upturned the corner of his mouth and growled.

"I'll fuck you so hard I won't be able to sit for the rest of the day."

His fingers dug into my thighs, and his cock twitched within my grip.

“Fine. You better make it worthwhile.”

I smiled in victory then pointed his tip at my opening. Despite the pain, I loved it when he fucked my ass. But I really wanted those buttons for something else. Giving him something he couldn't resist was the best way to accomplish that.

I slid to the base of his cock and winced when he stretched me wide. No matter how many times we did this, my ass could never get used to how thick he was. It caused me pain, the kind that made my eyes water.

His eyes were glued to mine, memorizing every expression of my face. His hands moved underneath my ass, pulling my cheeks apart slightly so his cock had plenty of room. “Fuck me.”

I gripped his shoulders and raised myself up on the balls of my feet. I bounced on his dick, feeling it penetrate my ass over and over. His cock was wet from my saliva, but it wasn't as smooth as it was with lubrication. The friction burned as I took him in over and over, but I kept going.

Crow directed me with his hands and increased the pace. His descended into the underworld, needing my pain to have an explosive orgasm. He pulled me onto his length harder.

“God...” I shoved his length deep inside me, tears bubbling in my eyes.

“Harder.”

I did as he commanded, wanting those buttons in my jar. My ass stretched wide apart to accommodate him, and the pain became ruthless. His dick was too big, my channel too narrow. My eyes watered with tears, and a few of them slipped away.

He watched my tears fall, his chest rising and falling with increased arousal. “I love it when you cry for me...”

I dug my nails into his suit and dropped my ass onto his length over and over. I gasped in pain every time I shoved him harshly inside me. I felt like I was going to rip right down the center.

He moved his fingers between my legs and rubbed my clit harshly. He performed circular motions against the sensitive nub, lighting me on fire. Two fingers slipped into my pussy as his thumb kept rubbing the area. “I can't wait to come in that ass.”

My body became slick with sweat, and my pussy ached with release. The pain was still unbearable, but it turned me on at the same time. Knowing

how big his dick was and how much I could handle made my core tighten in desire.

“You’re wet.” His fingers moved inside my slit, and he applied the moisture to my clit. “You love that cock in your ass, don’t you?”

“Yes...” My hair bounced up and down with my movement. My tits shook within the dress. My ass relaxed as I became more turned on. His dick fit easier, but it still stretched me painfully. The tears kept falling to my chin before they dripped onto his suit.

“Your ass is so tight.”

I closed my eyes as I got swept away in the sensation. My mind turned off as my body lit on fire. I burned from the inside out and ignited into a cosmic fireball. I screamed louder than I meant to, announcing our activity to everyone else in the house. He rubbed my clit harder as I fell into a million pieces. Having his fingers in my pussy and his dick in my ass gave me the right pressure at the right time. I convulsed with an explosion, taking his dick harder as I rode out the high.

“Fuck.” He gripped my thighs and guided me up and down, shoving his dick inside me harder and faster. His teeth nipped at my collarbone before he bit into my shoulder.

The bite made the orgasm last a little longer.

He shoved himself as far as he could go and released inside me, filling me with as much seed as possible. He leaned back into the chair and moaned quietly, trying to suppress how good his cock felt. His eyes drooped with satisfaction as he finished. “Button.”

I leaned into his chest and rested my face against his. His cock slowly slid out of me, and my ass ached from the forceful intrusion. I needed a shower after the harsh way I fucked him. I did enjoy it, despite the pain. But I would enjoy my buttons even more.

He wiped my tears away with his thumbs. “I’m going to be thinking about that all day when I’m at work.”

“Maybe you can do it to me again when you get home.”

Despite his satisfaction, his eyes darkened in interest. “If you’re up for it, I didn’t fuck you hard enough.”

“You did. But I’m willing to take on more pain if you’re willing to pay more.”

His hands rested on my cheeks. “You’re killing me, Button.”

“You’re killing me too.”

Chapter Four

Crow

I didn't want to be there.

All I could think about was the woman waiting for me. She wanted me to fuck her in the ass again, cause her more pain than I already did. She cried for me, my enormous dick tearing her apart every time she slid down my length. The sight of her tears brought forth the demon inside me—the beast.

And she still wanted more.

She enjoyed me but also had her own intentions. She was in the business of collecting buttons, as many as she could gather. She intentionally made me sex-crazed so I would agree to her ridiculous terms. I gave her ten buttons for that fuck when I would normally give her five.

And I respected her for that.

Now I sat in my office with my mind in the gutter. I wasn't sure why I bothered going to work at all. It was difficult to get anything done when my slave waited for me to return.

Fuck, I was hard just thinking about it.

A knock sounded on my door. "Guess who?" She cracked the door open and poked her head inside. "Why the long face?" She sauntered inside, wearing skinny jeans and a white blouse.

I snapped out of my thoughts and came back to reality. "Jasmine, what are you doing here?" I rose out of my chair and came around the desk. I buttoned the front of my jacket as I moved.

"I just came back from Napa. Thought I would stop by." She leaned into me and kissed each of my cheeks.

I did the same to her. "How was it?" I leaned against the desk and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Beautiful. There's no comparison to Tuscany, but it's still something worth looking at." Jasmine was a researcher for my company. She'd taken an extended leave of absence to gather information from around the world. Wine was California's biggest commodity, and she spent a great deal of time there.

"And what did you learn?"

"A lot, actually." She pulled the folder out of her purse and set it on my desk. "It's a lot to read, so I can just tell you everything over some dinner

and wine.” She came closer to me and rested her arms on my biceps.

Jasmine and I were fucking before she left. She enjoyed my playroom and the way I spanked her. She did what I asked without hesitation so she’d been around for a few months. When she left, I ended the arrangement and moved on. Just because she was here didn’t mean I wanted to pick up where we left off. When I walked away from someone, I never went back. It was just how I was. “I’m tied up at the moment. I’ll give this a read when I get a chance.” I evaded her proximity and returned to my place behind the desk, keeping the large assembly of wood between us. “Thank you for your journey. I hope you enjoyed yourself.”

“I did. But I did miss home.” She approached the edge of the desk and leaned slightly forward, exposing her cleavage line.

“Thank you for stopping by. I should get back to work.” I politely dismissed her, wanting to remove myself from the awkward situation. She was dropping subtle hints left and right. But my hints of indifference weren’t so subtle.

“Busy man. I know how that goes...” She trailed back to the door and gave me a friendly wave before she walked away.

All I gave her was a nod.

Button snuck up on me.

She pleased me sexually and satisfied my insatiable appetite. She did the dirtiest things to me, begging me to spank her when I fucked her from behind. I took her everywhere—in my bed, the shower, and even in the pool.

Her jar filled up quickly. Without realizing how much sex we were having, she added an additional sixty buttons to the jar.

That was too many for me to feel comfortable. She was nearly halfway finished with her sentence. If she kept going at that rate, she would be out of there in no time.

And that was bad news for me.

I had to slow down the awesome sex she was giving me, or I had to work for buttons from her. Since the first option simply wasn’t possible, I had to go for the second one. I had to deplete that jar before it became any fuller. It required unorthodox acts on my part, but I was willing to compromise to keep her around.

I walked into her bedroom one evening and saw her reading by the

fire. An Italian dictionary was on the ground, and she was making notes. She wore an evening dress, pink satin with black bows. It was something Lars picked out for her.

She looked up when she realized she wasn't alone. "Hey."

My eyes immediately went to her ass, which peeked out slightly. I swallowed the lump in my throat before I came closer. I kneeled on the rug beside her, the flames just a few feet away.

She sat up and closed her book. Her face was free of makeup because she was ready for bed, but she still looked stunning. Her hair was in loose curls from styling that morning. Now they were coming undone, making her hair wavy.

She watched me with an unreadable expression, trying to determine exactly what I wanted without asking. She wasn't impulsive like most people I knew. She carefully considered her options before she made a move. She was manipulative and observant.

I eyed the jar on the table and took out ten buttons. I held them in my palm so she could see the number before I dropped them into my pocket. "I'm at your command."

Her eyes darkened at my words, fire erupting inside her when I gave her the control—even if it was momentary. She considered her options before she found an answer. "Are we near the beach?"

The question caught me by surprise. It was the last thing I expected her to say. "Thirty minutes away. Why?"

"I want to go there for the day. I want to have lunch and dinner, and then I want to come back here and have really good sex." She told me exactly what she wanted without beating around the bush. She wanted my presence for an entire day for a romantic getaway.

"If that's what you want." I needed to make a dent in her collection of buttons.

"I want you to be sweet, romantic."

I didn't know how to do that. "I can try."

"No. You will."

When she ordered me with so much conviction, I wished she would command me to do something more sinister, like taking twenty lashes across my back. I want her to hurt me more than I ever hurt her. The idea was enough to make me hard. "I have a house on the coast. Would you like to

stay there?”

“You do?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes. Right on the Mediterranean.”

“I would love that.”

“When would you like to go?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I have work.”

“Now you don’t.” Her eyes darkened just the way mine did when I was in full control. She had the same possessiveness. She had the same brutality, just in a different form. She may be petite but she was tough. Hard as steel and rough around the edges.

“Then we leave in the morning.”

Lars packed our things into the trunk before we got inside the car. I wore a t-shirt and jeans, something I hardly wore outside the house. It was nice to wear something other than a stiff suit.

Button wore a white dress, looking like my greatest fucking fantasy. It had a halter-top around her neck and fit her waistline perfectly. Her long legs stretched out in front of her in her heeled wedges. Lars picked out the perfect clothes for her.

We drove through the hillside and headed to the west. My hand eyed hers in her lap, and I did as she asked. I grabbed it and held it on her thigh, being romantic like she wanted.

She gave my hand a gentle squeeze and the corners of her lips rose in a smile.

She and I didn’t speak on the drive because there wasn’t much to say. The last time we had a date, we both asked more questions than we did before. I realized she loved a man long before me and they parted on good terms. She learned a great deal about me, the type of stuff I kept confidential.

We arrived at the house within thirty minutes. It wasn’t nearly as large as my estate in the valley, but it was enough for ten people or less. I didn’t visit very often because I was busy with work and life. The only time I came to the property was when I wanted to be alone—even away from Lars.

We pulled through the gate, and I parked the car in the roundabout driveway. A fountain stood in the center, erupting water from the tip and making it sprinkle like drops of rain.

Button stared at the scene, her fingertips pressed to the window. “This place is amazing.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t mention it before.”

There were a lot of things I didn’t mention. I got out of the car and grabbed our bags from the trunk.

She came to my side and grabbed her own things, shouldering them and preparing to walk into the house.

I stared at her in surprise. “Knock it off.” I grabbed the bags and placed them over my shoulders. How was I supposed to be sweet and romantic if she was doing things she shouldn’t?

She didn’t argue and stepped back.

I arrived at the door and entered the security code before we walked inside. The place was sterile because the maids still cleaned the dust every week. It was prepared for visitors at a moment’s notice.

She walked inside first and stared at the place in awe. Her eyes trailed to the pristine white furniture in the living room and the subtle beach decorations that contrasted against my vineyard estate. It looked nothing like the place she was used to but still contained the air of symmetry. “It’s beautiful.”

I found it ironic that she stood in a skin-tight white dress. She matched the house perfectly, looking like she came with the purchase. She could easily live there, complementing the house and giving it the one aspect it was missing.

I carried our bags into the master bedroom then returned to the living room where the entryway to the deck stood. I unlocked everything and opened the doors wide apart. Just past the sand was the turquoise blue ocean. The waves came to shore, carrying the melodic sounds of water rushing up to the beach. Distant sounds of seagulls cried overhead. Far out into the water were majestic yachts and fishing boats.

Button stared across the water as the breeze flew through her hair. It trailed behind her, and one strand flew across her face, sticking to the skin above her lip. She pulled it away absentmindedly, her eyes still on the horizon.

I hadn’t seen this view in a long time, but I chose to look at her instead. I was reliving my first moment through her eyes. I experienced a

million new things when I watched her reaction to everything. It made me appreciate what I had despite everything I lost.

And it made me appreciate her.

Something about the joy on her face went straight into my chest. I loved hurting her, but I also loved making her happy. I loved giving her expensive clothes and jewels. I loved taking her to places she would never experience on her own. When she gave me something, I wanted to give back in return. Normally, I just took and took until there was nothing left.

Once she had her fill of the view, she turned to me. "Swim with me."

I was under her command for the next twenty-four hours, so I complied. "Whatever you want."

She swam around in the water and looked at the fish circling our feet. Absorbed in the beauty of her world, she examined everything like a rare jewel. When she finished, she swam up to me and wrapped her legs around my waist. Her arms hooked around my neck, and she waded in the water with me. "The water feels so nice." Her wet hair clung to her skin and her eyes ran with makeup, but she even made that look good.

"It does." Nothing beat the warm waters of the Mediterranean. People traveled from all over the world just to see it.

She pressed her face to mine and kissed me, our bodies bobbing in the waves. Her mouth tasted like salt but I relished the tang. No matter how she tasted, I wanted her on my tongue.

She reached her hand under the water and pulled down my swim trunks so my cock could emerge. "Make love to me."

Those words rubbed me the wrong way. I did it once before and enjoyed it, but it was still a hurdle I couldn't easily overcome. Like ice-cold water, I had to slowly walk into it. If it weren't necessary to keep her around, I wouldn't do it at all. I wouldn't do it for anybody. "Not here."

She bit my bottom lip aggressively, refusing to accept no as my answer.

"I don't want anyone to see you." I didn't care if they saw me. But I didn't want them to beat off to me fucking her in the water. She was mine to enjoy, not to share.

She pulled my shorts up and gave my lips a soft kiss. "Then let's get in the shower."

She was featherlight and limber. My large hands gripped her ass, and I slowly lowered her onto my cock. The showerhead that hung from the ceiling covered us both with warm water. My cock felt her slickness with each thrust I made, spreading her lips to accommodate my size and girth.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and moaned every time her pussy lowered onto my length. She used her arms to move with me, excitement escaping her voice in the form of loud moans. They bounced off the tiles in the shower and echoed in the bathroom, amplifying every cry she made.

I lifted her up and down and enjoyed listening to her. Knowing how much she loved it egged me on. It was my pleasure to hurt her, but it was also my honor to make her feel good.

I enjoyed both.

“I’m gonna come...” She dug her nails into the back of my neck and breathed hard through the pleasure. “God, your dick feels so good.”

Her pussy felt like liquid heaven.

She whimpered against my mouth, loving the feeling of her pussy constricting with euphoria. I listened to her moan and felt my cock throb. She suddenly tightened around me, releasing a loud yell that filled the entire house. She rested her forehead against mine as she enjoyed it from beginning to end. “Oh...”

I continued to rock into her, staring at those thick lashes I’d recently become obsessed with. She had the plumpest lips I’d ever seen. I loved pulling them into my mouth and feeling their softness. When she enjoyed me and made it known, I wanted to keep going. I wanted to work for those buttons.

Instead of hitting my threshold, I kept pumping into her. Her pussy was indescribable around my cock. My chest heaved with excitement. I wanted to come inside her, but I also wanted to keep going. “I’m going to make you come again.”

She was still high from her climax. Her eyes drooped with heaviness, and the area between her legs was slick. “Twice?”

I nodded as I pounded into her.

“Wow. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Anything is possible with me.”

Lars dropped off dinner then we spent the evening lying in the hammock on the deck. The sky grew progressively darker, and the sand of the beach was no longer visible. But the ocean was still loud in our ears. It crashed against the shore, rising with the appearance of the moon.

She lay against my chest with her leg tucked between mine. Her hair was scattered around her shoulders, and her blue eyes were heavy with sleep. We spent nearly an hour in the shower.

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

I ran my fingers through her hair, feeling the soft strands glide past my fingertips. “Thank you for being a gorgeous woman.”

She looked up at me, her lips forming a small smile. “You think I’m gorgeous?”

That was an understatement. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” Maybe I didn’t think it right away, but I definitely thought it now. I was obsessed with all of her features, even the little freckle on her nose.

“Really?” Her smile fell away, and a whisper of hesitance filled the night. She wanted to believe me but didn’t know if she could. It might’ve been some cruel joke I was playing. Or maybe I was only saying it because she paid me to.

“We don’t lie to each other, remember?” I cupped her face and brushed my lips against hers.

She visibly melted under my touch, just as she always did when I laid a hand on her. Her hand wrapped around my wrist. “Are you saying that because you’re trying to be romantic?”

“I am romantic,” I whispered. “And no. I mean that.”

Her eyes softened when she finally accepted the compliment, no longer feeling self-conscious about my sincerity. “You’re the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Well, duh.” I grinned so she knew I was kidding.

She gave me a playful smack. “Did dark and brooding Crow really just make a joke?”

“Yes. Don’t get used to it.”

“Well, I really do think you’re the sexiest man in the world.” She ran her hand up my bare chest. “And I’m not just saying that because you made me come three times today.”

When she stroked my ego like that, my obsession deepened. I loved giving her compliments as much as receiving them.

“When I saw you in that bar, you gave me hope. I pictured you with some beautiful woman. You were the kind of man I wished I could be with instead of that cruel man, Bones. I even thought if I spotted you on the subway on my way to work, I’d ask you out right on the spot.”

That intrigued me—down to my soul. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “No lies, remember.”

“It seemed like you hated me when we first met.”

“Well, you were being a dick.”

“Was not,” I said with a chuckle. “I was trying to save you.”

“So you could snatch me later.”

“Which was saving you. Come on, you have to admit being my slave is much better than being his.”

Her eyes narrowed, her playfulness gone. “I’m not your slave.”

“Just the other night you told me you were mine.”

“I am yours,” she repeated. “But in a much different way. I’m yours because I’ve given myself to you. I’ve come to care for you. If something were to happen to you, I would be devastated. Don’t get that confused with being a slave. They’re very different. And if you ask me, what I’ve given to you is far more valuable.”

My fingers paused in her hair, wrapped around the strands. She just confessed something vital. I meant something to her. She didn’t despise me and want to fuck me over. There was something else there. That night she cried for me was because she cared.

But that wasn’t a good thing.

“You shouldn’t care about me. I’m not a good man, and I never will be.”

“You’re wrong about that.”

I pulled my hand away. “You don’t know me well enough. You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

“You’re capable of a lot of things—to people who deserve it. You’ve been nothing but good to me.”

“Then why haven’t I let you go?” I challenged her with the question, knowing she would have no way of justifying it. “I keep you here against your will with indentured servitude. I’m making you fuck me until your debt

is repaid.”

“You don’t make me do anything. I make my own decisions.”

“But I’m the one giving you a decision to make. Let’s not pretend I’m someone I’m not. Don’t develop anything for me. I’m not worth your heart.”

“You’re my friend.” Her voice carried her emotion. “Aren’t we friends?”

“I don’t have any friends.”

“You have me.” She ran her hand across my chest. “And I have you. Yes, I care about you. And I know you care about me.”

“I couldn’t care less what happens to you.”

She grabbed my chin and directed my look on her gaze. “Say that again.” The threat in her eyes was unmistakable. Despite her small size, she was a formidable opponent. She was too smart for her own good and far too fearless. “Without lying.” Her fingers hugged my chin aggressively, and she stared me down.

I clenched my jaw as I prepared to speak, wanting to tell her what I wanted to feel—not how I actually felt. But when she stared down at me with that brutality, I couldn’t defy her. I couldn’t break a promise I made to her—that I wouldn’t lie.

She pressed her face close to mine then gave me a kiss softer than a rose petal. “You would die before you let anything happen to me.” Conviction rang in her voice like the bell in the town square. Her unshakeable belief in me was both warming and heartbreaking. “And I would die before I let anything happen to you.”

She crawled on top of me on the bed, her tits in my face and her ass in the air. “I want to do something to you.”

My hands slid over her hips, touching the smooth skin. “Enlighten me.”

“I want to tie you to the bed.” She looked into my eyes and waited for permission without ever asking for it.

My cock twitched at the thought. One of my fantasies was coming true. And she did it all on her own. “Go for it, Button.”

She opened my nightstand and rifled through its contents. She pushed past the condoms and the books until she found a pair of metallic handcuffs. “I knew you’d have a pair in here...” She moved my hands to the headboard

and restrained me through the beams. Her eyes didn't blaze in jealousy like they should.

I would've thrown a rampage. "I've never had a woman here before."

"It's really none of my business whether you have or haven't." She secured the cuffs before she dragged her fingernails down my chest.

"I really haven't." The only reason why those things were in my drawer was just in case I had someone over here. But up until this point, there had been no visitors. "I haven't used these with anyone else."

She saw the truth in my eyes, and she smiled. "You use these with yourself?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I would." She sprinkled kisses down my chest until she found my cock resting hard against my stomach.

I imagined all the hurtful things she would do to me. Maybe she would pour hot wax down my chest and burn the skin. Maybe she would grab my belt and whip me across the chest. Maybe she would cut me.

She kissed my cock from the tip down to the balls. Her tongue dragged across the large vein throbbing down the side. Then she sucked my balls into her mouth and ran her small tongue over the sensitive area.

She gave amazing head.

She lapped at my balls and my cock for five minutes, making my body tense in longing. I loved feeling the back of her throat, the way she would gag slightly when my thickness was too much for her. She lathered saliva up and down my base, getting me ready to enter her tight pussy.

She crawled back up my chest, her ass still high in the air like a pouncing tiger. She kissed my chest again and felt the muscles under her fingertips.

I never thought I would love giving someone else the control. "What are you going to do to me?"

She sat up and positioned her lithe body on top of my lap. My cock lay underneath her, hard and throbbing. Her wet sex rubbed against mine, ready to feel me stretch her. "Whatever I want."

"Are you going to hurt me?" I kept my voice steady even though I was desperate for some pain. A belt hung up in my closet. All she had to do was grab it and whip me senseless.

She cocked her head to the side, my meaning clearly lost on her. "Do

you want me to hurt you?” She dragged her nails down my stomach. It was a tease—a sexy one.

“Yeah.” I wanted her to slap me across the face so hard I saw stars. I’d never wanted a woman to dominate me, to control me, but I wanted her to be the first. Control and domination were things I needed to survive. But they didn’t seem so important with this woman.

She rocked her hips slightly, dragging her heat up and down my length.

“Grab my belt and whip me until I bleed.” I pulled on the handcuffs because I was desperate to touch her. I wanted to grab her hips and thrust myself inside her in one clean move.

She stopped moving altogether, her eyes narrowing on my face. “Maybe you like hurting me, but I never want to hurt you, Crow.” She leaned forward until her face was suspended above mine. She leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss over my heart.

“You’ve never done it. You’ll feel differently if you give it a chance.”

She held my gaze with a stern expression. When her lips were pressed tightly together and her eyes were narrowed, she looked like a terrifying disciplinarian. But that made me more attracted to her. “I never will.” She pressed a kiss to my lips, and her hair fell over one shoulder, blanketing my chest with softness that smelled like vanilla.

My heart ached for the confession, but it didn’t change my desire. I still wanted her to hurt me brutally, far worse than I ever hurt her. She was the only woman with the backbone to do it. But I dropped the subject because she wouldn’t cooperate. “You’ve teased me enough.” I thrust my hips upward, my cock wanting to slide into her entrance.

She wrapped her fingers around my length and slowly jerked me up and down. “I’ve only gotten started.”

She was quiet on the drive home. Her eyes were glued to the window and the passing hillsides. Homes that were older than most museums sprinkled the land around us. Walls made of cobblestone with ornate windows hinted at ancient history. Abandoned castles could be spotted higher up the hill, closed to the public and a reminder of how old these lands really were. “I don’t want to go back.”

I eyed her from my spot behind the wheel. “You prefer the beach over

my estate?” Both were beautiful places, but I preferred the lands in the midst of the vineyards. It felt more secluded.

“No. I just prefer the other you.”

The other me?

She answered my unspoken question. “I like it when you let your walls down. I like it when you reveal who you truly are. When we’re at the estate, you’re back to business, brooding and silent. You close off from me like always. And it takes forever to pull you back out.”

She observed me with greater detail than I could ever imagine. “You close off from me too.”

“In retaliation.”

My hand moved to hers on her lap. “I am who I am. No one will ever change that. I give you what you want when I can. But you can’t expect me to give it to you all the time.”

“Only when I have buttons...”

I turned my gaze back to the road, the silence filling up the air and making it inhospitable.

“Can I ask you something?”

I looked straight ahead but kept her movements in my peripheral vision.

When I didn’t respond, she asked her question. “Do you only do things I enjoy because of the buttons?”

What other reason would I have? “Yes.”

“So, you wouldn’t be so sweet to me otherwise?”

“No.” I didn’t care about shattering her dreams. From the beginning, I made it clear she was just my slave. I did horrific things to her because it got me off. That was it.

“Because I like the things you do to me...even without the buttons.” She slowly turned my way, her expression hard and unreadable.

My hand remained on hers. “What are you saying?” I didn’t know what this conversation meant. I didn’t know what conclusion she was trying to reach.

“I just think you enjoy the things I ask you to do...even if you won’t admit it.”

I immediately dropped her hand and moved it to the center console between us. She could analyze every move I made and every word I spoke,

but she wouldn't find the answer she was looking for. "I'm not a romantic guy. I don't make love. I do those things just for the buttons. I do them so you'll stay in my possession for as long as possible. Because I love hurting you—very much."

When that wasn't the answer she wanted to hear, she turned her gaze back to the window. "I think you're in denial."

"I'm not."

"Well, that's my opinion. I'm sorry you disagree with it."

"And I'm sorry you choose to believe a fairy tale over reality. I thought you were smarter than that. I thought you were stronger than that." My voice carried my disappointment. I was initially attracted to her because of her simplified view of the world. She didn't convince herself things were better than they really were to make herself feel better. She accepted the world as it was—cold and cruel. "You told me men are all the same. You told me you would never trust a man ever again. You told me you never wanted to have a husband and kids."

"I still stand by those statements. I never said I trusted you. I never said I wanted to marry you and have your children." Her voice remained steady like she was telling the truth. "But I still care about you. And I think you care about me. That's all I'm trying to say." Her voice fell away when she was finished.

I rested my arm on the armrest beneath the window and wished the time would pass. I wanted to be home so I could walk away from her—enjoy my solitude. This woman got under my skin in ways I didn't like. She observed me when I wasn't paying attention, and she made me think things that never should cross my mind. I didn't like it. "What brought on this conversation?" We were fine yesterday before everything shifted.

"You want me to hurt you."

"Your point?"

"All day, you were the man I paid for. And then when I tied you up, he disappeared. And..." She shook her head. "Never mind."

"Tell me." I didn't raise my voice, but my authority rang in the air like a loud gong.

"A part of me does want to hurt you."

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, my knuckles turning white.

"Not because I want to. But because I want to give you what you

want. How could I possibly rationalize that kind of action? I've never had the urge to cause someone pain. But with you...I consider things I wouldn't normally consider."

My spine shivered at the thought. "That doesn't make you a bad person."

"But it makes me an insane person."

"So what? We're all a little insane."

She turned her gaze back to the window, dismissing the conversation.

"Button."

She refused to look at me.

"There's nothing—"

"I'm not going to hurt you, and you can't change my mind." She fought against herself because she thought she was doing the right thing. Despite what she endured, she still fought for a respectable and truthful existence. She'd descended into the darkness but only as a visitor. Once she became a part of it, a resident, she would feel differently.

And I would be ready when that time came.

Button and I didn't speak for the following two days. She took her meals in her room and rarely ventured outside of it. She didn't lounge at the pool or take walks through the vineyards like she normally would. Her presence was confined to the corner of the house, the smoke from her chimney the only sign of life.

I didn't pressure her because I needed my own space. Her previous words sank into me like quicksand. She claimed I cared about her, and the more I considered it, the more I couldn't deny it. I'd done things with her that I would never do with anyone else. If I were in this same predicament with another woman, I wouldn't cave. I'd let her keep her buttons then leave when she paid off her debt.

But I was so desperate to keep Button that I did whatever was necessary to make her stay.

I did enjoy the things she asked me to do. I wouldn't admit it to her because that would make everything complicated. When we lay together in the hammock, I felt at peace. When I took her slowly on the bed, I didn't have to pretend she was chained up and crying in pain.

But it didn't mean anything.

I was just comfortable with her.

That was all.

Like everything else, I pushed the thoughts from my mind and moved forward. I had more important things to concern myself with besides my beautiful slave.

When I came home from work on the third day, I was greeted by a visitor. Jasmine stood in front of the entryway wearing a gray dress with wedges. She wore a sun hat to keep the rays off her skin, and her hair was curled in open waves.

What did she want?

I left the car in the roundabout and approached her. Without greeting her, I stared coldly. She was my employee, and anything work related should be discussed at the winery—not at my private home. Our sexual relationship was over, so she had no business being there.

“Hello to you too.” She laughed off my coldness.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

“What?” she said with a fake chuckle. “You aren’t going to invite me inside?”

My manners kicked in, but then they shut down an instant later. Button was shut away in her room, but I didn’t want her to see Jasmine. She had a hissy fit when the waitress made a pass at me. What would she think if she saw a beautiful woman inside the house? “Let’s take a walk.”

“A stroll through the vineyards would be nice.” She walked beside me, her teeth white and her smile dazzling. “I came by the other day, but Lars said you were out.”

Probably when I was at the coast. “Took a short vacation.” It was strange that Lars didn’t mention it to me. But he probably didn’t want to sour my mood when I was already angry.

“Hope you had a good time.”

I inserted my hands into the pockets of my trousers. We crossed the lush yard and ventured into one of the rows that grew some of the finest grapes in all of Italy. “So, what brings you here?”

“I just returned to Italy, and I feel a little lost. Being gone for months will do that to you.”

I wasn’t her therapist, so I didn’t see why she was telling me this. “You’ll get back into the swing of things.” Italy was much slower than

America. People took their time getting things done. From my limited stay in the States, I knew everything was fast-paced with a deadline.

“I missed you while I was away.” Her voice shook, self-conscious about what she said before she even finished saying it.

As soon as she left, I stopped thinking about her. In fact, I didn’t think about her once. Our relationship was strictly physical. She would come to my playroom, and I would whip her until she cried. Then I fucked her like a madman. She was like all the others. She was in my company longer than most women, at least three months. But when she decided to leave, I didn’t stop her. Our time had come to an end. I let her go without a fight, understanding all relationships came to an end one way or another.

She crossed her arms over her chest at my silence.

I refused to say it back even to make her feel better. I wasn’t a liar. If I missed her, I would have fucked her when she stepped into my office. But my body remained dormant because I was already satisfied with the woman who occupied my bed most nights.

She stopped walking, peering up at me from underneath her hat. “Is there someone else?”

There was never anyone else. It was always just me. I was alone in the world, completely and utterly. “Yes.” Monogamy wasn’t my specialty. Sometimes I had exclusive relationships with women who fulfilled my fantasies, but most of the time, I went with the motions. Sometimes, I paid call girls to take the most inhumane treatment before I fucked them. My heart was never invested, and everything had a timer.

Disappointment filled her eyes. “Is this serious?”

“No.” She was just a slave. I would release her when she accumulated every single button. I didn’t owe her anything. I could fuck whomever I wanted. She was wrong to assume I had any special feelings toward her.

Jasmine moved in closer to me, her hand resting on my arm.

I let the touch linger because I didn’t want to be a monster. I didn’t want to reject her twice—coldly.

“I miss you, master. I want to be punished.”

I loved that word. But when I heard it, I only thought of Button. She’d never said it to me, and I had a feeling she never would. But just the thought of it happening made me hard. I wanted to conquer her so completely, the most powerful nemesis I’d ever encountered. My thoughts continued to

whirl, and Jasmine's face disappeared.

That's when her lips pressed against mine. Delicate like a flower but full of undeniable longing. She breathed into me the instant we touched, her excitement piqued. Her arm wrapped around my neck as she deepened the kiss.

It was hard to believe I'd ever kissed this woman before. My body didn't light in a blaze, and my heart didn't skip a beat. My mind didn't travel to dirty thoughts in my playroom. Like nothing happened at all, I didn't feel a goddamn thing.

She didn't resemble Button in any way whatsoever.

I pulled my mouth away, distinctly uninterested. "Jasmine, we're done." I didn't let her down easy because I needed her to understand she would never walk into my playroom again.

"But...no one makes me feel the way you do. No one can hurt me the way you do." She gave in to her true emotions and laid her cards down. Despair washed over her face, painful and ugly.

"I'm sorry." There was nothing more for me to say.

"If this woman isn't serious, then why can't we be together?"

Her desperation was unattractive. Button was too proud to ever admit weakness. I loved that about her. "Because I don't want you." I was a cruel man, and I didn't feel bad for reminding Jasmine of that fact. I had no loyalty to Button, but I couldn't deny my craving. My cock was desperate for the slave living in my estate—and only her.

Chapter Five

Pearl

I stared at him through my open window. Days had passed, and I avoided him with utmost care. Our last conversation in the car didn't end well. I didn't like his responses. And I didn't like the words that left my mouth either.

But I missed him.

Now, I stared at him through my bedroom window, watching his powerful shoulders fill out his suit with masculinity. He walked with his hands in his pockets, owning the vineyards and everything beyond.

A woman walked beside him. She wore a pretty dress with a hat. Her face wasn't easily distinguished, but I could tell she was beautiful. Perhaps she worked with him. Or maybe she was someone who tended to his fields during the harvest. I wasn't sure.

She stopped in her tracks, and her hand moved to his arm.

A bolt of jealousy washed through me, but I quickly let it die. It was stupid to feel any attachment toward him, especially at such an innocent touch. I'd hugged Lars before. It would be absurd if Crow became jealous.

And jealous wasn't in my vocabulary. I was screwing a man so cold he couldn't feel the fire when he stood right beside it. The instant his fingertips began to thaw, he shut me out. He convinced himself the sensation never occurred to begin with.

He may not be the best man in the world, but he wasn't the worst. He convinced himself he was evil, but I had yet to see a hideous act. He whipped me and spanked me, but that was consensual. He never did anything against my will.

So where did his self-loathing come from?

I continued to watch him tower over the woman, his dark hair perfectly styled with his five o'clock shadow coming in. I missed his lips all over me. I hadn't been satisfied in days, and I was annoyed when he didn't come for me. My mind might not be attached to him but my body certainly was.

I wanted him between my legs.

I wanted his leather to mark my skin with every snap. I wanted his palm to smack my ass when he fucked me from behind. I wanted his fingers

to twist my nipples so hard I cried.

I missed him more than I cared to admit. But I was far too proud to make the first move. I was far too stubborn to be the first one to blink. All I had to do was use my fingers to satisfy myself until he caved. Knowing his sexual appetite, he would surrender very soon.

My eyes watched her move in and press a kiss against his mouth. It was soft and full of desperation. Her hand remained on his arm, touching him like it wasn't her first time.

Rage shot through me.

Unbridled anger like I'd never known exploded inside me.

I saw red.

My blood boiled, and murder was on my mind.

Jealousy swirled inside me and burned every nerve. I'd just convinced myself I didn't feel anything for this man. He was just my captor, someone I'd grown fond of. But out of nowhere, my body ignited in a terrible blaze. I was jealous—more jealous than I'd been in my entire life.

I told him I was his. He made love to me on my bed, and I gave him what he wanted. The connection between us burned me alive and made me feel like I belonged somewhere. This place felt like home. It was vulnerable and terrifying. But I went to the place where he took me and let it happen. I allowed him to conquer me.

And he was off with other women.

I was pissed—to say the least.

Hours later, I was still pissed off. The passage of time hadn't dulled my hatred. I wanted to slap him across the face and make his skin turn deep red. I wanted to kick him right in the nuts and watch him cower underneath me.

My rage even terrified me.

A few hours after dinner, a knock sounded on my door.

I eyed the doorknob, feeling my anger rise like heat in a cold room. If it were him, I wouldn't be able to hold my tongue. Profanities would fly out of my mouth quicker than air.

He knocked again when I didn't answer.

If he were smart, he would just walk away.

He cracked the door open and saw me sitting on the couch. He was in

his sweatpants and t-shirt, the clothes he always wore before bed. Judging from the darkness in his eyes, he wanted me. He gave in to his desire and finally made the first move. Scotch was on his breath even though I couldn't smell it. He had to drink in order to find the courage to face me.

Coward.

He slowly approached the couch then kneeled at my feet. He separated my knees then inserted his torso between them. His hands moved to my thighs, gently squeezing them before he looked me in the eye. "I miss you." He pressed his forehead to mine and eyed my lips.

"Really?" I couldn't keep the derision out of my voice.

He met my gaze when he noticed the ferocity.

"You fuck some skank and then miss me?" I asked incredulously. "You're such an ass." I shoved him hard in the chest so he fell back onto the carpet.

He fell with the momentum because he hadn't expected the attack. He quickly sat up, not reacting or even seeming like he was in pain.

"Get out of my room. Now." I stormed to the door and threw it open. "Unless you want a hard kick in the nuts. And I know how much you like those." I didn't feel an ounce of fear with this man. I could go head-to-head with him and win.

He finally rose to his feet, his powerful arms tensing by his sides. "I didn't fuck some skank."

"Don't lie to me." That was more insulting than what he did with that slut. "Do whatever you want, but don't pull that shit on me."

"What the fuck is going on?" He slammed the door so our voices wouldn't carry to the rest of the house. He grabbed me by the neck and threw me against the wall, pinning me down so I couldn't move an inch.

"Why don't you tell me?" I tried to knee him, but he blocked it.

He slapped me hard across the face, catching me off guard. "Spit it out."

I recovered from the hit, hating myself for being aroused. "I saw you with your girlfriend outside."

His eyes shifted to the window before he turned back to me. Realization followed the blank look a moment later.

"Yeah. You've been caught. Maybe next time you should shack up at a hotel."

“Shut up.” He threw me against the wall again.

“No.” I kicked him in the shin.

He pressed his entire body against me so I couldn’t move.

“I told you I was yours.” The hatred left my voice just for a second, replaced by sorrow. I felt stupid for ever thinking I was the only woman in his life. I felt stupid for caring.

His eyes narrowed. “You are mine. But I never said I was yours.” He squeezed my throat so I could hardly breathe. “Let’s get that straight right now. I do what I want when I want. I don’t owe you a goddamn thing. You’re my slave. *Slave.*”

My heart shattered into pieces when I heard that word. My captivity began in the form of slavery, but it slowly changed into something else entirely. I could have hoarded all my buttons and worked toward freedom as quickly as possible. But I sacrificed some of my tokens to be with him in a different way. This whole time, I thought he didn’t mean anything to me, but now the truth was looking me right in the face.

He gave me a final squeeze before he released me, watching me slide down to the floor while my chest shook with dry coughs. His look was ice-cold, freezing just like the Arctic Circle.

I was the first one to look away, the defeat overruling my body. He didn’t just win the battle, but he won the war. There was no fight left inside me. My mind may have stayed on the prize, but my heart had a different agenda.

I had to get out of there as soon as possible.

I didn’t want to stay in that house—with him.

There was nothing waiting for me back at home, but it was still better than being there. I could start over in a new place. Maybe, with enough time, I could start to believe in humanity again.

There was nothing for me there.

My only ticket to freedom was my hoard of buttons. I had to collect every single one until the jar was full. Then he would release me. Maybe his promise was false, but I had to keep going in the hope he truly was a man of his word.

After three days of silence between us, I swallowed the vomit sitting in the back of my throat and gave in. I went downstairs and joined him for

dinner—but without the intention of eating.

He looked up from his phone when he heard me enter the dining room. His eyes filled with surprise at my presence but only for a nanosecond. He quickly changed the look, seeming as indifferent as before.

I ignored my chair and dropped to my knees in front of his. I positioned myself between his muscled thighs and undid the button and zipper of his jeans. His cock popped out, quickly hardening at my arrival. I pulled my hair to one side and shoved him into the back of my throat.

A breath escaped between his teeth, and he dug his fingers into my hair as he enjoyed it. He gently thrust into me from below, pushing farther into my mouth. He grabbed the back of my neck to get a better hold and guided me to the pace he desired.

I hated myself for getting wet.

I hated myself for enjoying it.

I hated him. But I still wanted him.

I entered his playroom wearing black lingerie, the kind with black stockings and a tight teddy. I didn't bother with the panties because I knew they would be ripped to shreds anyway. I hit the button on the intercom, the one that connected to his study. "Join me." I released the button and walked to the center of the room. I'd only been inside a handful of times, but I knew where most of his kinky apparatuses were.

I grabbed the leather choker and hooked it around my neck, knowing I was about to do something more extreme than anything I'd tried before. But if I got a huge payday out of it, I didn't care. It was one more step closer to freedom.

He entered a moment later, his eyes intense with longing. He eyed the leather wrapped around my neck and couldn't hide his surprise—and his desire. His hands immediately removed his clothes, his eyes on me the entire time. Then he grabbed the rope to suspend me.

"Fifty."

His hand was still on the rope but he didn't pull.

"Fifty. Take it or leave it." It was the biggest payment I would ever receive. But now, I was aiming high, needing to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. The connection between us was never real. Every time he said something cold, I assumed he was in denial. But now I understood he

truly was an empty vessel. I was just one of many. When I left, he would forget about me.

He pondered the offer before he finally nodded. “Fifty.”

I closed off my mind just as I did when I was a prisoner of Bones. I completed tasks without considering the details. I rode his cock when he asked, and I endured things more painful than I could possibly imagine. He always made me come—but that was the only sensation I allowed myself to feel.

Over the weeks, I’d accumulated an impressive amount of buttons. I snatched them from his hand and tossed them inside the vase, watching them pile higher and higher. When the depression kicked in, I dumped them out and counted each one.

275.

I had 275 buttons. That meant I only needed ninety more. He’d already choked me while he fucked me, whipped me until I sobbed, and fucked me in the ass too many times to count. There was nothing new we hadn’t tried. If I just allowed him to choke me two more times, I would be free.

So close.

Chapter Six

Crow

I refused to admit it.

I wasn't hers.

I would never be hers.

She had to deal with it and finally come to terms with it.

But I knew that wasn't true the moment I turned Jasmine down. I had every right to do what I wanted, but I simply didn't want to. My eyes never ventured elsewhere, and I didn't even consider jerking off. My mind and body exclusively belonged to one woman.

But I would never tell her that.

She could continue to think I screwed some other woman. That would put space between us. We returned to master and slave, just as I wanted. Our conversations were at a bare minimum, and all we concentrated on was the feeling of our bodies moving together.

But I started to feel empty.

She didn't join me for dinner or breakfast. When I went to her room, she hardly looked at me. Not once did she ask me to do anything for her. I waited for a request for dinner or a trip to the beach, but it never came. Even after weeks had come and gone, she kept up her walls.

She didn't let me in.

I knew her buttons were adding up, but I hadn't kept track. We fucked around the clock like animals, and she did things that made my cock scream in joy. She joined me in the darkness and turned into a beast. She was just as feral, carnal, and out of control as me. I'd been too busy enjoying it to care how much it cost me.

I opened my drawer and counted the remaining buttons. There were only ninety left.

Ninety.

My heart fell into my stomach with a loud thud, making me sick. A distant pain coursed through my heart and my chest. I was anxious, unable to sit still for longer than a moment.

She performed intense sexual acts that cost me a fortune. At that rate, she would only be there for another week before I had to release her. It would be easy for me to forget my promise and force her to stay for the rest of her

life.

But I couldn't break my promise to her.

I had to get those buttons back—no matter the cost.

When I arrived at the headquarters, I received a cold look from Cane. We hadn't spoken since the tense argument we had. He wanted to trade Button for twenty million dollars but I refused.

He was still pissed about it.

"Look who it is..." He loaded his gun and shoved it into the holster like he might need it.

I ignored his hostility and got right down to business. "Miguel dropped off the new prototype. I'm impressed."

He lowered into the chair with a glass of scotch in his hand. "Good for you."

I sat beside him and carried on. "The drop will happen tomorrow. Looks like Great Britain won the bid. I'm not surprised since Bones sold his new weapon to the Middle East."

Cane sipped his drink without looking at me. "Bones doubled the offer."

"What offer?" I suspected I knew what he was talking about, but I chose not to believe it. Button wasn't for sale, and there was no amount of money that could compare to her worth.

"Don't play stupid. He's willing to pay forty million dollars." My brother finally turned to me, the threat in his eyes unmistakable. "We'd be stupid not to hand her over now." He gripped his glass with enough force to shatter it. He anticipated my answer before I gave it.

"She's. Not. For. Sale." I wasn't giving her to anyone. She belonged to me and no one else. Someone could offer me an entire country as payment, and I still wouldn't take it.

He slammed his glass down so hard it shattered across the table.

I didn't flinch.

"This is bullshit. I risked my ass to capture this cunt, and now I'm getting nothing out of it. I'm not getting revenge, and I'm not getting paid either. If you think you can get away with this, you're wrong."

My brother may be larger than me, but he didn't intimidate me. "I'll give you the forty million."

“What?” His hand was bleeding, but he didn’t wrap it.

“I’ll give you the money. And we’ll never speak of this again.” The only way Cane would back off was if he got something in return. He was stubborn and bitter. He would hold a grudge until the end of time.

“Are you insane?” He gave me a look I’d never seen before. He stared at me like he didn’t know me, like we hadn’t been brothers our entire lives. “Are you in love with this woman or something?”

I kept my voice steady. “No.”

“Then what the fuck? Do you hear yourself talk?”

“I’m not handing her over and that’s final. Do we have a deal or not?”

He shook his head and looked away, drops of blood falling on the table. “Are you making her black and blue?”

I wanted to lie and claim she was hanging from the ceiling right at the very moment. “I don’t have to answer to you. I’m compensating you for your time. Take the money, and shut the fuck up.”

“What about Vanessa?”

“Killing this woman isn’t going to bring her back. Let’s leave it in the past.”

“Easy for you to say,” he snapped. “You didn’t even go to her funeral.”

My hands formed fists. “Cane, don’t even go there.”

“No, I’m going to.” He rose to his feet. “Maybe you didn’t give a shit about Vanessa, but I did. I’m not letting Bones get away with this. You’re a piece of shit for caring more about your cock than avenging our sister. I loved Vanessa, and it’s clear you never did.”

I was on my feet in an instant. “Don’t tell me how I feel.”

“I don’t need to. It’s fucking obvious.”

I flipped the table over, channeling my rage in the only way I could. “I can’t sleep because her face is in my nightmares. I can’t breathe because the guilt suffocates me. I can’t feel anything but agony because of what happened to her. So don’t say I didn’t give a shit about her. If anything, I care more about her. I can’t function because it still feels like she just passed away. Every day, I have to start over and feel the loss. Don’t sit there and act like you loved her more than me. We both know I was closer to her than you ever were.”

“I thought the same thing—until this.” He didn’t care about anything I

said. His mind was made up. With repulsion still on his face, he stepped away. “Dad would be so disappointed in you.”

He cut me right where it hurt. “He was always disappointed in me.”

Cane grabbed the bottle of scotch, and his blood ran down the glass. It dripped onto the floor, making a small puddle. Without looking at me, he headed to the door. “That makes two of us.”

I ate dinner in my study that night.

My thoughts circled with my predicament. My brother, the only family I had left in the world, despised me. And the one woman I couldn’t live without hated me even more.

I’d officially hit rock bottom.

The easiest solution to my problem with Cane was handing Button over—and killing her. Cane would forgive me, and this would all be a distant memory. We would be close again, back to normal.

But I couldn’t give her up.

Not only could I not let that man hurt her again, but I couldn’t share her with anyone. I wasn’t even sure how I was going to release her when the time came. There was no right answer. If I could go back in time, I never would have spared her. I would have steered clear and let Cane have his way with her. My life would be exactly as it was before.

But also meaningless.

The door opened, and Button stepped inside. She was covered in a thick brown blanket, everything below her neck obscured from view. She approached my desk with the fire burning behind her. Heavy makeup was on her face, her eyes smoky just the way I liked. Her hair was big and curled, and she looked ready for a rough fuck.

Despite my pain, I got hard.

She stared at me with an expression mixed with both fire and ice. She wanted me, but she also hated me.

The feeling was mutual.

She dropped the blanket and let it fall to her feet. She stood completely naked before me, the light from the flames making her skin glow. Her tiny hourglass waist led to voluptuous tits. There were no scars on her front. Every inch of her was perfect.

I wanted her—but I couldn’t have her.

I was dangerously low on buttons. I couldn't afford to hand over any more. My brother just turned his back on me, and I wasn't prepared to lose the one person who gave me satisfaction.

I rose to my feet and came around the desk. My hands immediately gripped her tits and massaged them fiercely. She moaned quietly for me, loving my touch but also hating it.

My hands gripped her small waist, and I placed my forehead against hers. I wanted to kiss her but refrained. Once I placed a kiss on her mouth, I would be lost. I would lose myself and give up more buttons than I could afford. "I'll make love to you." The fire roared in the hearth, and the soft rug on the floor would cushion my knees. I could give her exactly what she needed all night long. Then, tomorrow, I would take her somewhere nice. I wouldn't even go to work just so I could spend the entire day with her. Whatever she wanted to do, I would give it to her. She was dangerously close to slipping from my grasp.

Her face kept the same expression it had a moment ago. Those words meant nothing to her. They washed over her without any impact. "Bend me over your desk and fuck me—and make sure you spank me." She leaned over the wood and displayed her ass to me. The steep curve in her back was tight with intricate muscles. Her cheeks were firm and round, ready to be separated with my thick cock.

I wanted to fuck her—hard.

But I didn't want to give up my buttons. I leaned over her, pressing my chest to her back. "Let's take a trip to Rome tomorrow. I want to show you around and take you to dinner."

She grinded her ass against my cock, enticing me to slide inside her wet slit. "How about you tie me up and gag me then fuck me until I pass out?" She grabbed the bridge of my sweatpants and pulled them down until my cock emerged.

My mouth clamped on her shoulder, and I gave her a mild bite. I wanted to thrust into her until she screamed for me. I wanted it hard and rough, spanking her ass until it was red.

But I kept my focus. I grabbed her hips and turned her around until she was on her back. I positioned her legs over my shoulders and rubbed my dick against her entrance. "I want vanilla."

She pushed her hands against my thighs. "No." Her sensuality

disappeared as her stern warning took over. “Fuck me or don’t. That’s it.”

Anger crept through my veins, making me squeeze her tighter than I meant to. “I’m giving you what you want. Now shut up and let me.”

She pushed her feet against my chest and shoved me away. “I don’t want vanilla. I don’t want to go to Rome. I want you to fuck me hard and then let me go.” She jumped off the desk and snatched the blanket from the ground. The hatred in her eyes was undeniable. She wanted to get away from me as quickly as possible. The connection she used to feel for me had disappeared. Once she thought I screwed someone else, her affection for me died.

She covered her naked body with the blanket before she marched out of my study. “I want to get the hell away from this place. I want to get away from you. I want to get away from everything.”

Chapter Seven

Pearl

Crow didn't speak to me again. He never came for sex or conversation. After the fight in his study, he stayed away from me.

I refused to accept his offer. He was just trying to take back the buttons he'd given me, but I wasn't going to let that happen. There was no bribe he could offer that I would consider. Even if he offered to take me on a weeklong vacation for a single button, I still wouldn't do it.

I was determined to leave.

Crow had wormed his way into my heart without my knowledge. A little bit of me died the day I spotted him with another woman. I was stupid to think I was the only woman riding his cock. I assumed I was enough for him, but he clearly wasn't satisfied.

It hurt.

If I could get away, I could return home and start over. I could forget about Crow and the amazing things he did to my body. I could settle in a small town on the West Coast and try to forget everything that happened.

My eyes were on the prize, and I wasn't going to falter—even for a moment.

Crow was gone during the day, so that was my time to leave my room if I wished. He had a beautiful pool on the property and a hiking trail around the vineyards. I took advantage of the beautiful scenery when he was absent. I needed to soak it up while I had the chance. Soon, I would be gone.

I walked out of my room with a book tucked under my arm. My bikini was on, and my summer dress hung loose around my body. The sunscreen had already been applied, and I smelled like lotion and coconut mixed together.

I was just about to reach the grand staircase when I heard a crash.

"Sorry about this, Lars." A man's voice traveled to my ears, familiar but foreign. A loud thump echoed against the tile, and the sound of crashing dishes came next. Patricia screamed before something muffled the noise.

I froze.

Panic hit me hard in the chest.

There was an intruder in the house, someone violent and aggressive.

I wanted to bolt down the stairs and through the front doors, but the

man was down there, probably watching the exit.

Shit.

Feet sounded on the tile until a man with dark brown hair emerged. He had hypnotic green eyes, identical to his brother's. Greed shined in them when he spotted me. Violence was written all over his face. Without an explanation, I knew exactly why he was there.

To kill me.

"Black and blue, my ass." He stopped at the foot of the stairs, tensing before he made his move.

My heart slammed into my chest and survival mode kicked in. I had to think and think fast. Crow wouldn't be home for hours, so I couldn't rely on his protection. The only person I could rely on was myself.

"Don't run. You'll just make it worse." He slowly ascended the stairs, his eyes on me the entire time.

"Come near me and see what happens."

He chuckled. "I forgot how feisty you are. Maybe that's why he won't give you up." He kept moving up the stairs, inching closer to me.

I had no other choice but to run. If I moved quickly enough, I could find a weapon. The third floor held Crow's bedroom, his study, and the playroom. I would definitely find something to my advantage in there.

I chucked my book at him and ran.

"Get your ass back here."

I sprinted up the stairs as quickly as my body would carry me. When I reached the top, there were only two ways to go—left or right. Within an instant, I made my decision and sprinted down the right hallway and straight into the playroom. By a stroke of luck, it was unlocked.

I burst inside and grabbed the first weapon I could find. A whip was on the ground, and I snatched it. I could strike him across the face or choke him with it. I'd killed a man before—and I would do it again.

Cane caught up to me and shut the door behind him, blocking the exit with his back. He eyed the whip in my hand, a dangerous smile on his lips. "What are you going to do with that, sweetheart?"

"Crow is going to kill you."

"He's too much of a pussy. He won't even give you up."

"Because he's not a monster." I held the whip ready, prepared to strike him when he was close enough.

“No. He’s just a lying piece of shit. He cares more about getting his dick wet than protecting his own family. Since he can’t do what’s necessary, I will.”

His words fell on deaf ears because I didn’t understand them. All that mattered was surviving. I had to get through this. I had to fight him off until Crow came home. His staff was incapacitated, and he would figure out exactly what happened instantly.

“If you surrender, I’ll go easy on you.”

“If you touch me, I’ll kill you.”

He chuckled. “You’re on fire, sweetheart.” He faked a sprint to his right then changed his footing at the last minute, coming at me from the left.

I struck him with my whip, snapping him right across the wrist, but that didn’t accomplish anything. It didn’t even slow him down.

He charged right into me and pinned me to the floor.

The fight was still in me, and I punched him hard in the face, connecting my knuckles against his nose. Blood streamed out and oozed down his face. I punched him again, prepared to kill him.

“Fucking cunt.” He pinned my arms above my head then punched me as hard as he could—right in the face.

I felt my cheekbone crack.

“Black and blue.” He hit me again. “I’m going to make Bones suffer for what he’s done to me. When I’m through with you, no one will recognize your face. Bones won’t even want you anymore.” He slammed his fists harder into my face, beating me until blood oozed everywhere.

I didn’t scream.

I didn’t beg.

I didn’t plead.

I would never give him that satisfaction.

He grabbed me by the neck and slammed my head into the floor. “Today is the last day you’ll ever see.”

Chapter Eight

Crow

I drove into the roundabout with such speed that I skidded across the pavement and almost collided with one of the pillars of the entryway. Leaving the car still running, I jumped out with my gun in my hand.

Lars hit the distress button from the kitchen and triggered the alarm on my phone. I jumped in my car and drove as fast as I could, almost crashing on the way. Without getting any details, I knew exactly what happened.

Cane.

I sprinted into the house and saw Lars tied up on the tile floor right outside the kitchen. He was still breathing, but his eyes were closed. “*Cane!*” My chest swelled with hatred. The adrenaline kicked in as I prepared for the fight of my life. If I had to choose Button over my last family member, I would.

Because he’d crossed a line.

I sprinted upstairs and checked the bedrooms, searching for them. Cane may have taken her back to the headquarters. Or he may have handed her over to Bones already.

I had to check just in case.

I ran to the third floor and checked every room. The only room that remained was the playroom.

Somehow, I knew he was in there.

I ran to the door and broke it down with my shoulder despite the fact that it was dead bolted shut. Right then, I was ten times stronger than usual. My muscles were twitching and firing at rapid speed. My body prepared me for the ultimate battle, the fight that would claim my life or his.

What I saw made me stop in my tracks.

Button lay on the floor covered in so much blood I couldn’t distinguish her features. She was a limp corpse, smelling like death. I couldn’t tell if she was still bleeding. Her blood gleamed under the light.

Cane stood there with his head held high. He was caked in her blood. His eyes lacked remorse. Rage was the only feeling he could convey. “Black and blue, Crow. You should have done this a long time ago.”

Without thinking twice about it, I pointed the gun right at his head.

“Like you would shoot—”

I pulled the trigger, and he crumpled to the ground.

My eyes turned to her mangled mass on the floor. I found her neck and listened for a pulse, needing there to be some form of life left in her. If she slipped away, I would never forgive myself. I’d already broken my promise to her. Now I would never get the chance to apologize for it.

But it was there—weak and dangerous.

“Button, hold on. I’m here.” I lifted her from the floor and carried her out of the room, leaving my brother to bleed out and die. My rage was quickly replaced with terror. If I didn’t get her to the hospital quick enough, she would pass on. I couldn’t lose another person. I just lost Vanessa, and now I was going to lose someone else I couldn’t live without.

Button.

I got her checked in to the hospital, and they whisked her off for emergency surgery. If they didn’t perform it immediately, she was guaranteed to die. But she was likely going to die anyway.

I paced in the hallway and watched the clock as time stood still. My legs carried me back and forth, and my chest ached with every breath I took. If she didn’t make it, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with myself.

I’d probably take my own life.

Hours dragged on indefinitely. I stayed in the exact same spot in the waiting room just in case anyone came looking for me. I didn’t eat or drink. I was exposing myself to my enemies by lingering without my guards, but that didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered but Button.

Ten hours later, she was out of surgery.

“How is she?”

“Critical,” the doctor said.

I processed the word without reacting, without feeling. It was just like Vanessa all over again. The pain was too unbearable. If I allowed my body to feel the pain, it would shut down forever. “Will she be okay?”

He looked at the ground and avoided my eyes. “It’s too early to tell. She lost a lot of blood. Had a lot of internal injuries. We fixed everything, but that doesn’t mean she’ll pull through. It’s a lot of trauma for one person to

take. It's all up to her at this point."

She was a fighter. She would push through. "Take me to her."

"She can't have any visitors—"

"Now."

He didn't dare defy me after the terrifying expression I gave him. If anyone fucked with me, they were an idiot. I was delirious with pain and could snap at any moment. "Right this way."

He guided me to her room, a private room in the corner of the hospital. It had a large bed, a private living room, and a big window overlooking the city. He nodded before he shut the door behind me.

I approached her bed and stood over her. The blood had been cleaned up, but she looked half her usual size. Her skin was no longer plump, and it was unusually pale. Bruises and cuts still marked her face. It was so bad I couldn't distinguish her features at all.

I sat in a chair at her bedside and felt the grief creep up my throat. She was in this condition because of me. I shouldn't have been so arrogant to assume she was safe in my home. She'd already been through so much, and now she went through something worse.

I failed her.

My hand found hers, and I interlocked our fingers. It reminded me of the times I held her hand during the drive. Her fingers felt smaller now, lifeless. The affection wasn't the same. It was like touching a corpse. "Button, I know you can hear me. You're going to pull through this. You're strong. You've been through worse. Just keep fighting." I squeezed her hand gently, hoping she knew I was there. "Don't give up on me."

Two days passed, and she didn't wake up.

I showered in her room and ate whatever the nurse brought for me. I didn't leave her side because I was too afraid. If I weren't there to protect her, she would be vulnerable and alone. Even if Bones's men came with guns, I still wouldn't move. I would cover her body with mine until I was pierced with bullet holes.

I would protect her at all costs.

I hadn't slept because it was too difficult to close my eyes. I was afraid she might need something. What if she woke up, but I wasn't awake to comfort her? And I knew the nightmares would descend the second I closed

my eyes. "Button, keep fighting." I held her hand like always, wanting her to feel the warmth of my skin against her icy fingers. "You're going to pull through this. I know you are."

It'd been four days since she was admitted to the hospital, and there still wasn't a sign of life. Her bruises hadn't faded, and she still looked like hell swallowed her up then spit her back out.

What if she never woke up?

My phone rang in my pocket.

I answered it without looking at the name. "What?"

"It's Lars, sir."

"What?" I repeated. I didn't have the ability to put on a face. I didn't have the ability to be polite. Everything died within me.

"I just wanted to let you know that Cane just checked out of the hospital."

He was alive? "Oh."

"I thought you might like to know."

If he came here, I'd shoot him again—and this time, I wouldn't miss. "Thank you, Lars. How are things at the house?"

"Good. Everyone is okay. We just hope Miss Pearl comes home soon."

Pearl. It was a beautiful name, one that I never used. "She will. She'll pull through." My thumb moved over her knuckles.

"Is there anything I can get you, sir?"

"No."

"Okay. I'll be on standby, sir."

I hung up and shoved the phone into my pocket.

Cane would be stupid to fuck with me right now. I shot him in the arm, so he knew I meant business. If he crossed me again, I'd make sure that bullet went into his head. Family or not, he shouldn't have messed with me.

Button suddenly took a deep breath, and her eyes opened. She stared straight ahead, the light from the window making her wince. She took another deep breath, and her pulse quickened under my fingertips.

Shocked that she was awake, I forgot to speak for a moment. "He's gone. You're safe."

She turned to me and narrowed her eyes on my face. She stared at me

for several heartbeats, processing her memories and reality at the same time. Her hand moved to her chest, and she felt her skin, as if needing to make sure it wasn't a dream.

She made it through.

“Crow?”

“Button, I’m here.” I held her hand in both of mine, thankful she was still on this earth. She was beaten beyond recognition, but I recognized her beautiful blue eyes. They looked into mine countless times.

My body reacted in a way I couldn’t anticipate. Tears sprang into my eyes, hot moisture that came from nowhere. They filled my eyes at the sight of her. My sister didn’t make it but Button did. I couldn’t handle another corpse in my arms. I couldn’t handle burying another innocent woman. I couldn’t lose someone else... Someone that I cared so much for. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

She didn’t hide her surprise at the tears in my eyes. Her hand reached up and touched my cheek. Her thumb slowly moved to the corner of my eye, the unfallen tear sticking to the pad of her thumb.

I wasn’t ashamed of my emotion. It was the first time I showed it. It reminded me that I was human, that I wasn’t made of solid stone. I had a heart that still worked. Just when I thought nothing was left, she filled me with something new—she filled me with hope.

“I hate myself.” I kissed her hand then rested it against my cheek, needing to feel the distant pulse to remain calm. “I hate myself for letting this happen to you.” I kissed her hand again and closed my eyes, steeling my resolve and controlling my composure.

“It wasn’t your fault...” Her voice cracked from not speaking for days.

“Yes, it is.” There was no point in sugarcoating it. “I broke my promise to you.”

“Crow...” She was too weak to speak. Normally, her mouth went off a million miles a minute. But now, it was slow and quiet. Her lips were chapped from sleeping for so long. “It’s okay.”

“It’ll never be okay.” I’ll never get over this. I’ll never forgive myself for letting this happen. I’ll never forgive my brother for doing this. He beat her so viciously, worse than Bones ever did to her.

“Is Cane dead?”

“No.” I was embarrassed to say otherwise. “I shot him, but he just left the hospital.”

“Oh...” She couldn’t hide her disappointment.

“He won’t come near you again. Don’t worry about him.” It was hard to look her in the eye when her face was demolished with bruises. It physically pained me to see it. Not because she looked different—but because she was still in immense pain.

“Can I leave?”

I wasn’t going to make her stay with me. The buttons didn’t matter anymore. She’d been through enough. If she wanted to walk away, I wouldn’t stop her. “You’re free to go whenever you wish.” I thought she was safe with me, but I quickly learned how incompetent I was.

“So we can go home now?” she whispered. “I hate hospitals...”

We? “You want to go to the estate?” I kept the hope out of my voice. If she asked me to drop her off at the airport right this instant, I would.

She nodded. “I want to be in my bed—with my window.”

If that was what she wanted, she would have it.

“I have a room with a private balcony. Would you want to move in there instead?” I should have offered that to her a long time ago.

“A balcony?” she whispered.

“Yeah. You can leave the doors open whenever you want. You could even lie out there in the shade.” If she wanted my room, I would even give that to her.

After a moment of consideration, she nodded. “I’d like that.”

“I’m going to speak with the doctor, and we’ll be on our way.” I kept my hand in hers because it was too difficult to pull away. I didn’t want to leave her grasp, not even for a second. I almost lost her, and it was the most painful feeling in the world.

She sensed my hesitance. “I’ll be okay.” She pulled her hand away, taking care of the difficult part for me.

I stood up and leaned over her. My mouth immediately moved to her forehead, and I placed a long kiss against the skin. I held the affection for nearly a minute, my heart aching in violent pain. I’d never done such a thing, but it somehow felt right with her.

Like I should have been doing it from the beginning.

Chapter Nine

Pearl

Everything hurt.

Even days after my surgeries, I felt weak. My body didn't work the same way it used to. The strength I once felt in my muscles was absent. If I had to defend myself, I was embarrassed to say I had no chance of succeeding.

I was that broken.

Cane was ruthless. When he got going, he couldn't be stopped. He wailed on me like I'd done something to him personally. Something in his mind snapped, and he beat me to within an inch of my life.

When I did nothing to provoke him.

What was his obsession with me? Crow wasn't going to return me to Bones, so why did his brother keep fighting it? What did beating me senseless accomplish? Was his intention to kill me? I honestly thought I was dead. When I opened my eyes in the hospital room, I couldn't believe where I was.

A part of me hoped I was dead.

I'd grown attached to a man who enjoyed hurting me, my own boyfriend sold me into slavery to pay off his debts, I'd been raped by a madman, and there was no one waiting for me at home.

What was the point?

Crow took me back to his mansion and set me up in the room with the balcony. He carried me in his arms and placed me on the couch he positioned out under the shade. A table laden with books was placed beside it. Instead of having one of his maids attend to me, he stuck by my side. "Is there anything else I can get you?" He placed the armchair beside me and sat down. He wore jeans and a t-shirt, but he held himself with such rigidity it seemed like he was in a meeting. He was on edge every second we were together.

"I'm okay." I grabbed a book and felt my arm strain as I tried to lift it. Something as simple as a bound book was a struggle for me. It was pathetic. I'd lost all my strength in the fight to survive, and now I feared I would never get it back.

Crow assisted me. "It'll come back to you." He understood better than anyone how much I prided myself on my ability to look after myself. Now, I

was so weak I had to rely on someone else to take care of me—something I hated.

I opened the book and turned to the page where I left off. I read through a paragraph when I felt his intense gaze on me. It was practically burning a hole through the side of my face. “I’m fine.” I turned my gaze back to him, showing him that my resolution hadn’t faltered when my body broke. That strength was still within my walls.

He lowered his gaze, shame and despair written all over his features. He didn’t put up a stoic expression to hide his thoughts like he usually did. He allowed them to pour out like a flood.

I hadn’t looked in a mirror yet because I didn’t want to see the damage Cane inflicted. But judging by the swelling of my cheek and lips, I was still black and blue. My eyes throbbed and one was partially closed from the assault. I could see my demolished body and knew my face must complement it.

Crow turned his gaze to the balcony and looked across the vineyards. He didn’t stare right at me anymore but I remained in his peripheral vision. Still and quiet as a statue, he lingered.

“You don’t have to sit with me. I’m fine.”

He didn’t react to my words.

I may be weak, but I didn’t need his pity. “Crow, you can go.”

“Maybe I need to sit with you.” He spoke quietly, like he didn’t want me to hear.

“No, you don’t.”

“You don’t understand. Maybe you don’t need me, but I need you. So please, just let me sit here.” His jaw was stern and he gripped the armrest like he would topple over at any second.

I respected his request and turned to my book. I didn’t make a sound and neither did he. We just sat together in heavy silence, him seething and me reading. I remembered the tears he formed for me, the tears from my pain. They mirrored my own when he told me about his heartbreak over losing his little sister. We’d both cried for one another. We were connected in more ways than we realized. But that didn’t scare me anymore.

And it didn’t scare him either.

I was too weak to walk.

It was embarrassing.

Crow had to carry me into the bathroom every time I needed to use it, and I was unable to fetch things I needed because my body wouldn't cooperate. I was like a helpless corpse, relying on someone else to provide what I needed.

It was humiliating.

The sun had disappeared beyond the horizon, and the sound of crickets filled the nighttime air. The fields came alive with the melody of the breeze and the bugs that buzzed through the night. I wanted to sit there all day and appreciate the moment, but I could barely keep my eyes open.

Crow sat at the edge of the couch and peered into my face. "Ready for bed?"

"Yeah..."

He lifted me into his arms and carried me back into the bedroom. The room was similar to my own, but had its own unique qualities. It was slightly bigger and had a shower and a tub.

Instead of placing me on the bed, he carried me into his bedroom and set me on his bed.

"What are you doing?"

He laid me back then lifted up my legs, removing my sweatpants. "Getting you ready for bed."

"In your bedroom?"

He returned my feet then tucked me in like a child. He'd never been so gentle with me, even when I asked him to make love to me. His clothes were stripped away, and he got into bed beside me. "Yes." He turned off the light but didn't snuggle beside me. He knew my body was in immense pain even with the painkillers in my system. Too much pressure on my legs or arms would cause me severe discomfort. "When you're beside me, you're safe."

I stared at the contours of his face in the dark. "I'm sure I'll be fine down the hall."

"I want you here. Unless you don't want to be." Now, he always gave me a choice. Before, it was his way or no way at all. Now I felt like an equal, not a possession.

"I do. But not if it's going to make you uncomfortable."

"I'd be more uncomfortable with you down the hall." He reached for

my hand under the sheet and wrapped his long fingers gently around mine. “I don’t want you to be anywhere else but here.”

Crow didn’t return to work. He stayed at the house and stuck to me like superglue. He didn’t like any members of his staff to come near me. He was the one who brought my meals, bathed me, and kept me company.

“I understand if you need to return to work.” I sat at the table on the balcony, trying to eat everything on my plate. The medication I was on killed my appetite. I didn’t have an urge to eat anything. If I had it my way, I wouldn’t eat at all. “You don’t need to stick around for me.”

He didn’t acknowledge my statement. He ate his salad and sandwich quietly.

When he didn’t respond, I didn’t push the matter. He was silently brooding behind his exterior. He was gentle when he looked after me, but he also seemed angry at the same time. “It’s a beautiful day.”

“I suppose.” He ate half his food before he pushed the plate away. His appetite hadn’t been the same either. He was darker than usual, seething in a silent rage. If he didn’t remind me he wanted to be there, I would’ve assumed he hated me.

“I wish I could take a walk through the vineyards.” I appreciated my health so much more when I didn’t have it. Now that I couldn’t walk, I wanted to run. Now that I couldn’t use my arms, I wanted to climb. One day, I would regain my strength. But the recovery would be a long process.

“I can carry you.”

“No, it’s okay.” I chuckled because Crow came to my rescue when I needed anything. If I asked him to play me a song on the harmonica, he would somehow pull it off.

“Anything you want, I’ll make it happen.” He said it with such conviction that I believed him.

“There’s nothing I want at the moment.” I was curious to know what became of Cane. He left the hospital, but how injured was he? Should I expect him to return for another attack? I didn’t ask because it would get under Crow’s skin.

“Do you want to leave?” He didn’t meet my gaze when he asked the question, unable to say it with meaning. “Because you’re free to go whenever you wish. I’ll make all the arrangements to return you safely.”

Freedom.

He was giving it to me on a silver platter. All I had to do was say the word, and I'd be returned to America. I could listen to the traffic of the city and watch the weirdos pass me on the sidewalk. I would be able to inhale the pollution and savor the smell in my nose. I would watch skyscrapers block out the sun after five in the evening. I would see home again.

But how would I survive in my state? I couldn't even walk. I had no home to return to, not a cent to my name, and no job. I couldn't go back right now. And even if I could, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Something held me back.

"I want to stay."

He turned his gaze on me, unable to hide the relief in his eyes. "You're sure?"

I nodded.

"The offer isn't temporary. You can always change your mind."

"I know..." The buttons no longer mattered. He didn't own me anymore. I was free to come and go as I pleased—like a person. Our relationship was different. It was the first time I was treated as a guest.

"You have a doctor's appointment tomorrow. Routine checkup."

"Good. I need as many pills as possible."

A tiny smile formed on his lips, hardly noticeable. "I'll get you everything you need."

"Thanks." I picked at my salad but didn't take a bite. Everything Lars made was delicious, but my stomach couldn't hold down food like it used to.

"Keep eating." His voice hinted with authority, but he didn't exert it the way he used to, suffocating me.

"I'm not hungry."

"How do you expect to get your strength back if you don't eat?"

"I may never get my strength back..." I was more scarred than ever before. I'd lost nearly half my blood. I hadn't looked at my face, but I knew it was demolished. I probably didn't look like myself at all.

"Button, you will." The nickname came by surprise, but he didn't hesitate at the word. He looked at me the way he used to, full of respect and admiration. "I'll help you get there."

While the belief warmed my heart, it wasn't enough. Hopelessness flooded inside me. After nearly dying from my injuries, I would never be the

same. It would take months to recover. And even then, I wouldn't be able to run as fast or push as hard.

He spotted the unease on my face, knowing exactly what I was thinking. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Throw a pity party for yourself. I won't allow it."

I averted my gaze.

"I won't allow it."

A fire roared in the hearth directly across from his large bed. The nightmares hadn't descended because his presence drove them away. He was the protector of my dreams—and the protector of my body.

He maneuvered me against his chest, careful not to hurt me in the process. He pulled my leg between his knees and rested his head against mine. The fire was the only source of light in the room, and it cast a glow on his bare chest.

His hard chest was the most comfortable place. I preferred it over the soft mattress or a field of flowers. It was warm and inviting. I tried not to think of all the other women who'd slept in his bed. The woman who'd kissed him came to my mind. I never stopped being angry with him for that. He broke my heart when I didn't realize he could.

I stopped myself from thinking about it before the pain pulled me under.

Crow watched every move I made. He could distinguish my thoughts through my eyes, knowing something changed in the atmosphere. He sensed the tension in my petite arms, the way I slightly pulled away from him. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing." I cleared my mind and stopped picturing him with other women. When I thought about it too hard, I felt like I might drown in despair. He didn't mean anything to me when I arrived there, but when I thought he was sticking his cock in someone else, I realized he meant the world to me.

"Don't lie to me." He moved on top of me, holding himself up on his arms. He pinned me to the mattress so I couldn't squirm away.

Which was pointless since I couldn't move.

"Do you hate me for letting this happen to you?" he whispered. "Because you should."

“That’s not what I was thinking.”

“Then what?”

The one thing I learned in life was to never let people know how much they hurt you. Keeping up a strong stance was essential to prevent people from hurting you further. “That woman you were with. Are you still seeing her?”

“What woman?” A dumbfounded expression entered his eyes. He didn’t have a clue whom I referred to.

“The woman you were sleeping with.” Unless there were more. That would just make me feel worse. “It still comes into my mind from time to time.”

His eyes slowly relaxed, the hostile burn dying away. “She never meant anything to me, Button.”

“But she meant enough to hurt me.” I didn’t bother lying anymore. My feelings were as obvious as the blue sky I looked at every day.

His eyes fell, the first sign of remorse he’d ever shown me. “I never slept with her.”

It was one thing to cheat but another to lie. “Don’t backpedal.”

“I’m not,” he said. “She and I were together before you and I met. But we went our separate ways when she left the country. She just returned and wanted to start up things again. I said no.”

“That’s not what you told me.”

“Actually, all I said was I wasn’t yours, and I could do whatever I wanted.” He kept his body on top of mine, not touching me for fear of hurting me with his weight. “I didn’t want you to know that I was committed to you. I didn’t want you to know you had a hold over me. So I let you believe it.”

Crow wouldn’t lie to me, so I believed every word he said. “I wish you’d told me the truth...” I’d battled my heartbreak for a long time.

“I do too. I almost did before...” He didn’t finish the sentence because it was too painful. “When you refused to give me any of your buttons, I knew how much I screwed up. I tried to make it right but took too long.”

“So...have you been with anyone else since me?” I kept the hope out of my voice, but it took all my strength to accomplish the task. My exterior was vulnerable, and I was allowing him inside.

“Never.” He cupped my face, his fingers digging into my hair. “And I

don't want to be with anyone else.”

His coldness had pushed me away for so long, but now I understood that what we had was meaningful. I was no longer a slave, and he was no longer my master. What we had meant something—to both of us.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.”

My fingers wrapped around his wrist. “Don’t do it again.”

He held my gaze, our stares locked together. “I won’t.”

Chapter Ten

Crow

I entered through the backdoor with my gun on my hip and my knife in my back pocket. My men flanked me, covering me from every angle as we entered the closed café.

The lights were off with the exception of the single bulb glowing from the kitchen. The windows at the front of the shop were pitch black so unfriendly eyes couldn't spot this unusual meeting.

His men scattered around the opposite side of the café, holding rifles and pistols. They were all dressed in black with bulletproof vests. Our terms were to come alone but neither one of us cooperated.

Bones sat at a table in the center of the room, wearing his ordinary suit with a black tie. His blond hair was combed back, and his constant sneer was on his lips. His eyes were neutral within his poker face, giving nothing and taking nothing. "Crow." He nodded to the seat across from him.

When I stared at that man, hatred exploded within my body. He did terrible things to Button, put her in immense pain when she didn't deserve it. He treated her like a dog rather than a human being. He had the misconception that a woman like her could be bought.

I lowered myself into the chair and kept my hands on the table, a courtesy all criminals extended. When I was that close to his face, I felt sick to my stomach. He oozed with longing and brutality. Even after all this time, he was still desperate for the woman I took from him.

Now she was my woman.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" He folded his hands together, attempting to look refined but coming off as cheap. He was like a knock-off imitating a designer.

The last time we spoke, he shot Vanessa in the back of the head. Every muscle in my body was tense with the memory. I would never forget the way her blood showered through the air and clung to my skin. I'll never forget the fear in her eyes the instant she slipped away. Sleeping was a luxury I no longer enjoyed. It was the gateway to suffering. "You know exactly why I'm here." When I called for the meeting, I didn't explain my reason.

Because we both knew what that reason was.

"I hope she's in the back of a van and ready to be transferred."

She was dead asleep in my bed, the fire still roaring in the hearth and her small body covered with one of my t-shirts. She was heavily guarded and protected under my watchful eye. She didn't even know I was gone. I glanced over my shoulder and snapped my fingers.

One of my men placed a black duffel bag on the floor beside us. It landed with a heavy thud.

Bones glanced at it. "If she's in there, you'll be dead before you walk out that door." Threat filled the air, and it was the first time I saw him express a real emotion. All he emitted was hostility and death. But now he showed something more.

"It's forty million."

His eyes traveled to the bag before he returned his look to me. "And what is it for?"

"Consider it a severance package." I wasn't giving her up for any amount of money in the world. She didn't come with a price tag. She didn't belong to anyone—not even me. "Accept the money and walk away."

His blue eyes narrowed on my face, irritated with my boldness. "I'll never walk away."

"Take the money. You've recuperated your losses and received an excellent return on your investment. You can buy as many whores as you want, all more beautiful than the one you lost."

He didn't flinch in his movement. His chest didn't even expand with a breath. Despite his calm exterior, he was murderous. If he could, he would've leaned across the table and grabbed me by the throat. "I don't accept your offer."

I couldn't walk out of the restaurant without a deal. If I didn't end his obsession with Button, he would continue searching for her. Cane may strike again, and next time, she may not survive. I had to end this violent situation once and for all. "I'll double the money."

His eyes didn't widen, but they lightened in surprise. "The higher you go, the more I want her."

"But you'll never have her. I only brought compensation as a peace offering. If you don't want it, fine. But I'm not handing her over. Not now and not ever."

He slowly leaned over the table, resting his elbows on the surface. "You have a lot of nerve, Crow. More than I gave you credit for. You stole

my slave, and now, you're using her like she's your own."

"She is my own."

"And this is revenge for Vanessa." He shook his head. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"I have a lot more in me." If I could put a bullet in his brain right now, I would. I wouldn't hesitate to kill the man who'd wronged my family. If I could claim the life of the man who took my sister, I would.

"But you're starting a war worse than the first one." He lowered his voice so only the two of us could hear. "There will be more casualties than the last. I'll stop at nothing until that cunt is in my bed. Are you willing to defy me just for some pussy?"

My muscles tensed at his wording. "I don't need another excuse to kill you. I already have plenty."

When he didn't get the reaction he wanted, he leaned back. "Keep your money. I'll take everything you have when we meet again—including my slave." He rose from the chair and buttoned the front of his suit as he moved. His guard covered his exit just in case I tried to take a shot. I wanted to pull out my gun, but I knew I wouldn't be able to pull the trigger without a bullet flying into my neck.

I watched him leave, knowing the battle had just escalated into a war.

I slipped back into bed without her noticing. She would never know I left in the middle of the night and tried to secure her freedom. The only way she could walk the world as a free woman was if I killed Bones.

Just another reason for me to take him out.

He wasn't an easy opponent to eliminate, and I knew it would be difficult, to say the least. But it was him or her. And when it was broken down that way, I knew what I had to do.

And that meant I needed Cane.

I hated to admit the truth after what he did to Button. But there was no way around it. I needed him in order to pull this off. I needed the manpower, the weapons, and the force.

But could I look him in the eye without pulling the trigger? Could I stop myself from shooting him right in the face?

My eyes were glued to the dying fire in the fireplace. I was too worked up to sleep. Instead, I watched the sun illuminate the curtains as it

rose over the hills. The room slowly filled with more light as the new day arrived.

She slowly stretched her petite body until her eyes fluttered open. Her gaze fell on me, and a small smile filled her lips. Her face no longer looked the same. Both of her eyes were still blue and bruised. Her lip was covered in cuts inflicted by Cane's knuckles. Her left cheekbone had been cracked from the force of his punch. The discoloration hid her freckles and her once beautiful skin. Somehow, her beauty radiated past the scars and shined through. "Morning."

I stared at her, entranced. "Morning."

She cuddled farther into my side, her arm wrapped around my muscular torso. She placed her cheek against my chest and released a comfortable sigh. Her hair stretched across my skin, lightly caressing the surface.

"Sleep well?"

"Uh-huh." She ran her fingers across my lower stomach, her touch grazing my happy trail.

When I told her the truth about Jasmine, the weight left my shoulders. My stubbornness got me into that mess in the first place. I wanted to keep her at a distance and hide my infatuation with her, but the second I almost lost her, the game changed. I couldn't handle her coldness and disappointment. I had to come clean and admit she did mean something to me.

"How about you?"

"Great." I noticed her affection had increased since the night before. When she was hurt by my infidelity, I actually enjoyed it. I liked knowing she'd become just as possessive of me as I was of her. I didn't understand what our relationship was or if it was a relationship at all, but there was something there. It was the first time I actually cared about a woman. They used to only be sexual objects meant to fulfill my fantasies. But I needed Button to fulfill a lot more than that.

"Those painkillers are a godsend. I wouldn't be able to sleep without them."

"I can imagine." I'd had my fair share of pain. But I didn't always have access to medicine. I made sure she had a different experience.

She slowly sat up, her back exposed to me. Old scars marked the skin from the places I'd whipped her. Now, the marks didn't turn me on. In fact,

they made me hate myself even more. How were Cane and I different? We both caused her pain intentionally. If anything, mine was worse because I got off on it. Unable to handle the evidence of my inhumane treatment of her, I looked into the fire.

“Are you going to work today?”

“No.” I sat up and pressed my chest against her back. When I covered the scars with my own body, I could no longer see them. My lips pressed against her shoulder, and I gave her a soft kiss. “I’m staying right here.”

“I hope you don’t feel obligated. I really will be okay.”

“I definitely don’t feel obligated.” If I was there, no one else could touch her. No one could come near her. My presence was the greatest protection she could ever have. If someone wanted to get to her, they had to go through me.

Good luck with that.

“Do you think breakfast is ready?”

My hand moved to her small stomach. I lightly touched her, giving her affection without hurting her. “Finally have an appetite?”

She nodded. “I’m starving, actually.”

“I’ll give Lars a call.”

“Let’s go downstairs. I’m tired of being cooped up all the time.”

“Whatever you want.” I got dressed then helped her into her clothes. She was still weak, and standing on one foot to put on her pants was impossible. She usually had to lie on the bed while I pulled her sweats up her thighs. Whenever we were in that position, my cock came to life. Despite her pain and suffering, I still wanted to fuck her.

There was something seriously wrong with me.

I scooped her into my arms and prepared to carry her to the ground floor.

“No. Put me down.” Her arms were hooked around my neck, and she stared at the ground.

“Why?”

“I can manage on my own.”

I didn’t want to discourage her, but I really didn’t think she could make it. “You should rest for a few weeks before you give it a try.”

“You just told me not to have a pity party for myself.”

“And I stand by that. But don’t push yourself to do something you

can't."

That flame of stubbornness burned in her eyes, and she wiggled in my arms. "Put me down."

I shouldn't have phrased my words that way. Of course, they would entice her to prove me wrong. I slowly set her on the ground and gripped both of her arms, just in case her legs gave out.

She stood on both feet but didn't move. She stared at her feet and held her arms out for balance. Her breathing immediately increased, and she labored through the pain.

"Let me carry you."

"I got it." She spoke through a clenched jaw, ignoring the pain shooting up her legs.

Then I got angry. "This is stupid—"

"Just shut up and give me a chance." She took a shaky step forward, her arms still raised. Her foot wobbled when it touched the hardwood floor. She took another step and shook from side to side like she was balancing on a balance beam.

We'll never get to breakfast at this rate.

She made it through the door and into the hallway before her legs shook even more. Her atrophied muscles couldn't handle her light weight, and she slowly tipped and began to fall.

I caught her and swooped her into my arms. "It's a good start. You'll get better."

"I can make it. Just be patient."

"If you fall over every few feet, then you aren't going to make it." I carried her down two flights of stairs and knew she would have tumbled to the bottom if I let her go on her own. "But give it some time. You're still healing." I carried her into the dining room and set her down. "What do you want?" I sat across from her and waited for Lars to walk in. He always knew exactly what room I was in without looking. He had a special butler sixth sense.

"Do you think Lars can make French toast?"

I tried not to scoff. "He can make anything."

Right on cue, Lars entered. "Miss Pearl, I'm glad to see you're doing better."

"Thanks, Lars." She gave him a genuine smile, the kind she'd never

given me. "I'm glad you're well too."

He nodded. "What can I get you this morning?"

"If it's not too much trouble, can I have French toast?"

Lars had been smitten with her from the beginning. Her obvious respect for the help and polite way of asking for things made her the star of the mansion. "Of course. And you, sir?" He turned to me, his hands behind his back.

"I'll take the usual." Egg whites and coffee.

"Very good, sir." He nodded before he walked out.

Button turned to me, a disappointed look on her face. "Don't you get tired of eating that every single day?"

"Do you get tired of eating me every single day?" I held her gaze with ferocity.

"Not the same thing."

"I think so." I rested my elbows on the table and leaned forward. "What did you want to do today?"

"Not much I can do. I'm a cripple."

"Not true. We can do anything you want."

"You aren't tired of spending time with me?" she asked in surprise. "You usually prefer solitude ninety percent of the time."

All of that changed when she almost died. "Now I prefer you ninety percent of the time."

Instead of running like most people would, Cane opened the door like a man. He faced me with a hard look and clenched jaw, pissed I shot him and desperate to do the same back to me. He stared at me without speaking, the warning clear in his eyes.

Looking at him just ticked me off. I wanted to put a bullet in each one of his limbs and watch him bleed out just as he did to Button. He deserved a fate worse than what she had to go through.

When I didn't utter a word, he spoke. "You here to kill me?"

"Maybe."

He leaned against the door, gauze wrapped around his upper arm where the bullet hit him. "Then get it over with." He stepped away from the entryway, leaving the door open so I could follow him inside.

He had a house near the headquarters in Florence. He preferred the

big city with people and cobblestone walkways between buildings. The great outdoors and wide-open spaces simply weren't his style.

I followed behind him and walked into his open living room. The back wall was made entirely of windows and overlooked the backyard with flowers and grass. It was a small place, but for Florence, it was enormous.

Cane grabbed his glass of scotch from the counter and downed it like I wasn't there.

Even though he was my brother, I still wanted to kill him. I wanted to murder him right on the spot. Button had become an intricate part of my life. When she hurt, I hurt. Living with her for six months made me oddly attached to her.

"Can we get this shit over with?"

I took off my jacket and tossed it on the back of the chair. "She almost died."

"Good. That was the point."

My knuckles turned white because my fists were so tight. "And what did that accomplish?"

"Pissed off Bones. I sent the pictures to him."

He took pictures of her? "You're a sick motherfucker."

"No. I just want revenge for Vanessa. You remember her, right? Our sister?"

"Don't go there right now." My gun was hooked into the back of my jeans, and I wasn't afraid to use it.

"You keep acting like I'm the bad guy, but you're the one who screwed everything up. We made a plan, and I stuck to the course. It's not my problem that you fell in love with this stupid whore."

"I didn't fall in love with her."

"Well, something happened. You chose her over me. I won't forget that easily."

"What are you talking about?"

"First, you denied me my revenge. I told you on several occasions how much that meant to me. And then you fucking shot me. What the fuck, Crow?"

"You broke in to my goddamn house and tortured her. What did you think I was going to do?"

"Pick your brother instead of some whore."

“Don’t call her that.” She was anything but a whore. She was mine and mine alone.

He rolled his eyes. “Here we go again. What’s with this woman? Bones offers to pay forty million bucks for her, and you shoot your own brother to protect her? Is her pussy heaven or what?”

“Don’t talk about her pussy.” My neck tensed in offense, and I barely stopped myself from grabbing my gun.

He gave me an incredulous look. “I don’t even know you anymore, man.”

“She’s off-limits to everyone. She doesn’t belong to Bones, and she won’t be used to get revenge for Vanessa. We’ll figure something else out. So back the fuck off.” If he pulled another stunt, I really would kill him.

He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head slightly. “Do you understand how insane you are?”

“Do you understand how much of a dick you are?”

“I risked my neck to get that bitch out of there, in case you forgot.”

“And I offered to compensate you for that, if you don’t remember.”

“But I don’t want money,” he snapped. “All I want is revenge. And I got some of that when I beat the shit out of her. If you want me to apologize, you’re wasting your time. I don’t feel remorse and I never will. If I could do it all over again, I would.”

Now he crossed a line. “Cane, I’ll shoot you again—in the goddamn head.”

“You may as well. I’m not your brother anymore and you aren’t mine either. So what does it matter?”

In the back of my mind, I understood Cane’s thoughts. We took Button for one reason but everything changed when I saw that fiery ferocity. I took her under my wing with the intention of using her for my own satisfaction, but she brought out the softer version of me—a version I didn’t know existed. Protecting her was an act of betrayal to Cane. I understood it. “We’ll always be brothers. We’re all we have left of family. But don’t cross me again. I should kill you for what you did to her.”

He stared at me with the same cold expression I’d received my entire life. “I’m not stopping until I avenge Vanessa. I’ll kill whoever is in my way—even your plaything.”

“You really think Vanessa would want this?” I demanded. “Pearl is

just an innocent woman who was taken while on vacation. She was sold like livestock to that psychopath Bones. She's just as innocent as Vanessa. Why does she have to pay the price for another man's actions?"

"I don't care if she's innocent. I don't care if she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is where she ended up, and she just has to deal with it. Someone fucked with my family, and I have to strike with full force. She's essential to that."

"She's no longer part of this game. You and I will get our vengeance in some other way. When we put our minds together, great things happen."

"I don't want to get vengeance in some other way."

"Wouldn't you want to kill him?" I asked. "With your bare hands?"

"No. I want him to suffer the way I've suffered." Cane was stubborn and set in his ways. When he made a decision, he stuck to it unless it crumbled underneath him. "I want to hurt someone he loves the way he hurt Vanessa."

"Well, we've accomplished that. His slave has been our prisoner for six months."

"Your prisoner," he hissed. "And we didn't get under his skin until I sent him those pictures. That will haunt his dreams the way he's haunted ours."

"Or we just started the war of the century." When I met Bones the night before, the intensity of his anger rang in the atmosphere. Very few words were said, but the hostility was evident. "I met with him last night."

Cane dropped his anger. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at me like I was criminally insane. "Why?"

"I tried to pay him off."

"You're kidding, right?" he asked. "You paid him to keep his slave?" He clutched his head like he was about to explode. "So, we steal her, and then you offer to pay him? You sound like his bitch."

"I just wanted him to back off."

"Did he take the cash?"

"No." Unfortunately. "The war rages on."

"So she means even more to him than we realized." A slight smile upturned his lips. "Good thing I beat her. He's probably going insane right now."

I wouldn't be able to keep my anger back for much longer. After what

he did to her, I didn't look at him as my brother. I saw him as my enemy. "We need to work together to take him down, Cane. Once and for all."

"Take down one of the biggest criminal masterminds in Europe?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes."

He walked to the table and poured himself another glass of scotch. He downed the entire thing before he turned back to me. Drops of the gold liquid clung to his bottom lip before he wiped them away with his sleeve. "If that were possible, we would have done it a long time ago."

"It is possible."

"The original plan is better. It's working. He's writhing right now."

Button wouldn't suffer again. She was off-limits—to everyone. "No."

He slammed his empty glass down, almost shattering it. "If you were in love with this woman, I would be more understanding. Is that the case?"

Love wasn't in my vocabulary. I hadn't said the words to anyone for fifteen years. It was a miracle I formed any kind of attachment to Button at all. But love was out of the question. "No."

"Then I don't understand."

I didn't understand it either. "Bones thinks we're mutilating her as we speak, thanks to your pictures. So we don't need to do much more anyway. When he makes a move to steal her back, we'll take him out."

"Or we could hand her over and watch her die in his arms."

She wasn't dying in anyone's arms. "Cane, I said no."

"And I said yes."

I was going to shoot him right between the eyes. "Get on board or you're out."

"Out of what?"

"Out of my life." He could take the weapon business. It didn't mean much to me. If he was going to work against me, then I couldn't trust him. And if I couldn't trust him, then we would get nowhere. "Work with me or walk away."

He leaned against the back of the couch, his arms still across his chest.

"I loved Vanessa too. I want to destroy Bones for what he's done to our family. My devotion is the same as it's always been. But I don't want to sacrifice Pearl for it. That's a compromise you should be willing to make."

His look was as cold as ever.

“Cane.”

He refused to look at me, keeping his thoughts hidden.

“Do we have an understanding or not?”

His resentment increased by the second. His cold nature filled the room, making it feel like winter rather than summer. He was childish by nature and immature by stature, hating the fact that he always lived in my shadow. Our father picked on me more than Cane, but that was because I was the first son. Cane never appreciated that. “I guess.”

“That’s not a sufficient answer.”

“What the hell do you want me to say?” he snapped. “Do you want me to bow? Do you want me to get on my knees and kiss your feet?”

“I just want you to have my back—like I have yours.”

He gave me a sneer. “You stopped having my back the second that cunt came into the picture.”

“No. You stopped having mine.”

“Fine. Whatever.” He uncrossed his arms and stopped leaning against the couch. “But I want Bones buried six feet under. I want him to have a death so painful he’ll suffer in the next life. Got it?”

That was something we could finally agree on. “Got it.”

“Alright. Now let’s take him down.”

I pulled my gun out of my jeans and set it on the counter.

Cane watched my movements. “What are you doing?”

I cracked my knuckles and stretched my arms. “Our deal still stands. But I have to get retribution for what you did to me. You broke in to my house and beat her to within an inch of her life. I’ll never forgive you for that. I’ll never forget how much you hurt her.”

Cane’s surprise vanished. He even seemed a little bored. “I suspected this was coming...”

“An eye for an eye.” This wouldn’t make Button feel better but she deserved justice. She was just an innocent woman caught in a firestorm of testosterone. But she would be represented just like everyone else. “I’m going to take pictures of my handiwork and show them to her.” Just as he did with Bones.

“She asked you to do this?” he asked incredulously.

“No.” I pulled my arm back and slugged him hard across the face,

making blood fly from his nose and mouth. "I'm doing this just for me."

When I entered the bedroom, I was disappointed to see that she was sitting up in bed with her knees pulled to her chest. The fire had dimmed to hot coals and the room was hardly lit by the flames. But there was enough light to see the expression on her face. She was worried, having no idea where I went or when I would return.

I walked inside and set my gun on the table near the door. The safety was on, and it wasn't even loaded.

She turned her eyes on me and the relief spread across her face. "You're back...thank goodness."

"I would never leave you unprotected. There are guards outside."

"I don't care about that. I was worried about you."

I kept my hands from her sight so she wouldn't see the dried blood caked into the skin. "You never have to worry about me."

She grabbed my arm and pulled me to the bed the second I was close enough. She wasn't strong enough to force me to do anything, but once she touched me, I complied. "Where were you?"

I didn't like being questioned. It went against my authority. "I'm not a fan of interrogations."

"Answer me. You snuck out in the middle of the night for a reason."

"No. Sometimes business must be done during the night."

"Or you didn't want me to know what you were doing."

"Maybe." I held my tongue and stared at the fire.

"Crow." She commanded me with just her voice. She was broken and weak, but she still retained the authority of a general. "Tell me." Her hair was a mess from tossing and turning, and her t-shirt was several sizes too big. If her lips were red and swollen, it would look like she'd just been fucked hard.

I had to focus. "I went to see Cane."

"Oh..." Hatred filled her eyes but she didn't speak of it. It was a fine line she didn't cross. She wanted to insult him, but she held her tongue because he was my brother. She had too much respect for me.

And I didn't deserve it. "I straightened things out with him. He won't bother you again."

Her eyes glowed from the flames in the fire.

"And then I gave him what he deserved." I pulled my phone from my

pocket and opened the pictures app.

She didn't look at them. "What happened to your hands?"

I held the phone out to her. "You'll see."

She stared at the phone and navigated through the different pictures, seeing Cane just as messed up as she was. Blood was everywhere, and he was beaten until he passed out. "You didn't have to do that..."

"Yes, I did." I didn't have any regrets. "He trespassed on my property and violated my guest. I don't care if he's family. I couldn't let him get away with that. I couldn't let him hurt you and do nothing about it. He's lucky I didn't kill him."

"I wouldn't have wanted you to kill him."

I couldn't hold back my surprise. I turned to her, unable to believe what I just heard. "You shouldn't feel pity for him."

"He's your brother. I wouldn't want you to lose your last family member."

How could she say that after he tried to rape her twice, and then he beat her senseless? "He doesn't deserve your compassion."

"No. But you do."

I turned away because I couldn't hold her look anymore.

"I just wish I understood why. Why is he so intent on hurting me? He ripped me apart like I'd wronged him in some way. That kind of brutality doesn't come from nowhere. It comes with a reason."

I didn't want to tell her the truth about Vanessa. Not because I had something to hide or wanted to keep it a secret. It was just painful to talk about. I'd avoided my emotions since the night it happened. I refused to grieve or even think about it because it was enough to kill me.

"Crow...tell me."

When she lowered her words to a beautiful whisper, I couldn't refuse her. "Cane does have a reason for wanting to cause you insufferable pain. And if I didn't care about you, I'd say he was justified. My brother and I aren't good men. We have very closed minds and will eliminate anyone who gets in our way—even if they are innocent. Unfortunately, you're the innocent bystander in this case."

She remained silent and waited for more of the story.

"I told you about my sister..." I didn't want to say her name. I could say it to Cane, but it was difficult to speak it to her. "That she passed away

recently.”

She nodded. “Of course, I remember.”

“Bones kidnapped her three months before you got off that ship. He kept her as his slave and raped, mutilated, and destroyed her. He did it to make Cane and me suffer. We did everything we could to find her. Bones kept moving, staying at different safe houses so we could never track him down. But he would always send us images...things he did to her.” I swallowed the lump in my throat because the pain was about to drag me under. Knowing she was suffering while I lived in my mansion was the worst feeling in the world. I slept in a safe place while she fought to live another day. “Cane and I finally made contact. We offered a great deal of money in exchange. To our surprise, he agreed.”

Button hung on to every word I said. She didn’t even breathe.

“We made the swap in an alleyway. My sister left his arms and walked toward me. She could barely move because she was beaten so badly. The last time I saw her before that day, she was strong and full of life. She could hold her own in a fight, and she had the kind of spirit that couldn’t be crushed. But when I saw her that night, I knew she was dead inside. She wasn’t the same person at all. Bones broke her—crushed her spirit.”

Tears formed in Button’s eyes and slowly fell down her cheeks.

“Just when she was about to fall into my arms, Bones shot her in the head. Her eyes made contact with mine, and she gave me a silent goodbye. She was dead before she hit the pavement. And that was it.”

Button couldn’t hold back the sob that came from deep in her chest. She covered her mouth to muffle the sound, but it escaped anyway. Tears cascaded down her cheeks like a waterfall.

“Cane and I have always been at war with Bones. He killed my father then my mother. And then he took Vanessa. His purpose is to eradicate us altogether. He won’t stop until the Barsettis are no more. And that’s why Cane is obsessed with you. You’re his only way of causing the same kind of pain Bones has caused us. Because up until this point, you’re the only thing that Bones has ever cared about.”

She kept her hand over her mouth as she silently cried. The sound was excruciating on my ears, painful. She cried for someone she never knew. She cried for the pain heavy in my chest. She felt the exact agony I carried every single day. “Crow...” She moved to my chest and wrapped her arms around

my neck. "I'm so sorry." Her face was buried in my chest, soaking the fabric of my shirt with her tears.

I wrapped my arms around her. "I know."

"He's a monster. He came from hell."

I knew that too.

"You deserve justice for what he did. He deserves to die."

"Cane and I will get him—eventually." If I didn't take him out soon, he would track Button down and try to steal her. I wasn't just fighting for my sister anymore. I was fighting for this woman who had gotten under my skin. "When I saw you fight off my men and do anything necessary to survive...I felt a connection. You reminded me of my sister. But I also resented you because I wished she was as strong as you are. You were both captured for the same amount of time, but you didn't break. You didn't crack. But she did."

"That doesn't mean she was weak."

"I know...but she still wasn't strong enough."

Button cupped my face and rested her forehead against mine. The tears still fell and dripped off her chin.

It was the exact same position as before, the one that made me shut her out for weeks. The intimacy and vulnerability were too difficult. My body couldn't handle the hole in my chest. It made everything hurt. I was letting her in when I shouldn't. Every time I cared for someone, they wound up dead. If I fell much further, I would never recover.

I had to pull back.

"I hope you understand now."

She nodded. "I do."

"It doesn't justify what Cane did. But I hope it makes sense now."

"It does."

"We've butted heads over you since you arrived. He wants to return you to Bones with a transmitter that will kill you the moment you're in his possession. But I refused to let that happen."

She took a deep breath as if just the thought was too much for her.

"We'll kill him. And then you'll be safe for good."

"Does he still want me? I've been gone for six months."

I didn't want to scare her, but I didn't want her to be unprepared. "He does. I met him a few nights ago and tried to buy him off. But he wouldn't

take the money.”

“What?” She pulled away and looked into my face, stunned.

“You were asleep.” I answered her unspoken question.

“You offered him money?”

“He offered Cane and me forty million to return you. When I said no, Cane became upset. So I thought if I offered the same amount to him, he would forget about you and move on. But it didn’t change anything.”

“Forty million dollars?” Her mouth dropped, and her tears stuck to her cheeks.

I nodded.

“You were willing to pay that much just to save me?”

I didn’t realize how crazy it sounded until she put it into words. “I’d do anything to protect you.”

Her eyes softened in a way they never had before. She cupped my face and pressed her forehead against mine. She cried quietly against me, forcing me to feel the profound moment with her. Our hearts were in sync and our minds worked as one.

And I was terrified.

Chapter Eleven

Pearl

I was gently stirred from my dreamless sleep. A large hand gripped me by the shoulder and softly rocked me, pulling me from the warm bed and the soft sheets. A masculine voice came into my ear, dragging me further into the light. "Button, wake up."

My eyes opened, and I saw Crow's five o'clock shadow. His green eyes were amused by my sleepiness, and the smile on his lips was irresistible because it was so rare. "Hmm?"

"I've been trying to wake you up for five minutes now."

"Muh."

He chuckled. "Didn't catch that."

"Why are you waking me up at all?" If it were anyone else, I'd throw a tantrum.

"I have to work today. And I'm taking you with me."

"Why?"

"I don't want you anywhere without me." His fingers dug into my hair until they rested behind my ear. "So get up."

"Ugh."

He pressed his lips to mine and gave me a soft kiss. "Don't ugh me. Now get your ass up."

I smiled because I couldn't contain the words behind my lips. They slipped out from defiance. "Ugh."

He lifted me from the bed and cradled me against his chest. "Fine. I'll just take you like this."

"Whoa, hold on."

"Nope." He walked to the door.

"Okay, okay. Let me shower and try not to look like a train wreck."

"That's better." He set me at the edge of the bed. "I'll get the water running."

I definitely needed a shower if I had any hope of waking up.

"Stop carrying me everywhere." I fought in his arms and tried to get my feet on the ground.

"It's fine."

“No, it’s embarrassing.”

“Who cares what they think. I’m the boss. They’ll get over it.” He carried me into the gorgeous vineyard where a cultured Italian house sat near a few buildings for the barrels, equipment, and delivery trucks. It was a small compound, but the winery itself was immense.

We entered the building and he carried me through the lobby. People eyed us as we passed, but no one commented. “They’re all staring at me.”

“Because you’re a beautiful woman.”

I was anything but beautiful right now. “I look like I jumped on a grenade.”

“No, you don’t.”

I’d seen my face. It was still discolored and ruined. My lips were plump and swollen, and my eyes still looked black and blue. “Whatever...”

He carried me into a large office. A window overlooked the expansive vineyards, showing the hills and valleys. It looked similar to the house he slept in every single night. His furniture was pristine and sterile, as if someone came in and cleaned it every single night after he left. Bookshelves lined the walls with hardback novels.

“Wow. This place is fancy.”

He sat me on the couch in the corner and grabbed a stack of books for me. “Thank you.”

“I wasn’t giving you a compliment. Just saying.”

That ghostly smile was back on his lips again. “It sounded like one.”

“Nope.”

He kneeled down in front of me, that familiar intensity in his gaze. “You’ll be okay right here.”

“Well, I wish I were in your lap...”

His eyes darkened just the way they did when I first came into his possession. Instead of making a move like he normally would, he kept his hands to himself, probably because I was injured. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m okay.”

“Don’t be distracting.” He gave me a quick kiss on the lips, one that was rushed. He probably didn’t want to get caught up in our chemistry and let the flames turn into a forest fire.

“When am I ever distracting?”

He pressed his forehead to mine. “Always.” He rose to his feet and

walked to the desk, his powerful shoulders tense with strength. He lowered into the chair, holding himself upright like a king. He looked good in anything, but he looked particularly divine in a colored suit—divine.

When he felt my gaze burn into his face, he looked up. “What did I just say?”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Distracting.” He gently nodded toward the books on the table. “Now get to it.”

I rolled my eyes and stuck out my tongue.

That just made him stare harder. “Don’t test me today.”

With a heavy sigh, I picked up a book and started reading. Minutes passed, and I felt his stare still stuck on me. It was like a branding iron pressed right against the skin. I turned back to him. “Now what?”

He finally looked away. “Nothing.”

After lunch, a knock sounded on his door.

“Come in.” He looked up from his iPad, his eyes concentrating on whatever he was reading.

The door flew open and a brunette walked inside. She didn’t notice me because the couch was placed right against the wall and slightly behind the door. When I looked at her long brown hair and fair skin, I immediately recognized her.

It was the woman from the vineyards.

Who. Kissed. Crow.

Crow looked at her but didn’t react. He seemed indifferent. “Yes?”

“I just talked to the shipping department. They said they’re a little short-handed down there and have to postpone the next delivery.” She placed her hands on the edge of his desk, her tight dress showing every curve she possessed.

If I could walk, I’d knock that bitch out.

“How many people do we need?” He turned back to his iPad.

“At least three.”

“Alright. Take care of it.”

Even though the conversation was over, she continued to linger.

“Yes?”

“Have you had lunch?”

Hell no.

“Yes,” he answered. “I suggest you take your lunch break soon. They’re there for a reason.”

“Well, maybe you and I could get an early dinner tonight. We haven’t talked in a while.”

Now she was just asking for it. “Hey, lady.”

She stiffened when she heard my voice from behind her.

The corner of Crow’s mouth rose in a smile, amused by the impending situation.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw me sitting there, immediately noticing all the scars and bruises. “I beg your pardon. I didn’t see you there...”

“Just because you can’t see me doesn’t mean I’m not here.” Crow told her I existed. He made it clear he was seeing someone. But she tried to snatch him anyway. “Crow has dinner plans tonight. And he has dinner plans every single night for the foreseeable future. So take a hike.” I snapped my fingers and pointed to the door.

Shocked by what I’d just said, she stood there awkwardly. It took her a moment to decide what to do. It seemed like she was embarrassed but also irritated. “I should go...” She walked out.

“Cunt.” I said the word right before the door shut.

Crow rested his fists against his lips, trying to cover up a smile that just formed. “That was entertaining.”

“That dumb ho knows you’re seeing someone. She needs to keep it in her pants.”

“I think she will from now on.”

“She better. I’ll get a big stick and whack her with it.”

“How scary...” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

“When I can walk again, I’ll definitely be a formidable foe.”

“At least she has a big head start.”

I narrowed my eyes to slits.

He matched my look with his signature intense gaze. He seemed amused more than anything else. “You’re cute, you know that?”

“Cute?” I asked the word in shock. “That word is in your vocabulary?” This brooding and mysterious man who had enemies that would give you nightmares knew that word?

“No. But you’re in my vocabulary.” He turned back to his iPad, dismissing the conversation.

Everything was different after he told me the truth about that woman. The fact that he remained faithful to me, established a monogamous relationship with me, told me there was something between us. Maybe he kept me as his prisoner at one point in time, but he’d let me go since. I was there by my own choice, having nowhere else to go. He told me his biggest secret, his biggest regret. Everything was different, and nothing was the same.

After we had dinner, we retired to his bedroom—our bedroom. All of my things were inside. My clothes hung in the closet, the drawers were full of my undergarments, and some of the masculine decorations had been swapped with the things that were left behind in my old room.

I didn’t have to pay him to sleep with me anymore. He stayed beside me throughout the night, and sometimes I felt his hand reach for mine under the sheets at three in the morning. Once he felt my beating pulse, he pulled away.

“Why don’t you have a TV in here?”

“Why?” he asked. “Do you want one?” He stripped down to his boxers and got in the sheets beside me.

“Everyone has a TV in their bedroom.”

“I guess I prefer the fireplace. But I can arrange it, if you wish.”

“No. I was just curious.” I snuggled beside him, feeling safe. Security was a rare thing to experience. I’d spent the last nine months of my life being the plaything of someone else. My freedom was stripped from me, and I had to obey someone else’s command. But now I had my power back. And when I slept beside Crow in bed, I felt protected from all the terrible things in the world. As long as he was there, I would be okay. I never needed someone to look after me before, but now, I clung to him with gratitude.

He turned off the bedside lamp and spooned me from behind. His hard cock was pressed against my ass, but he didn’t make a move to be inside me. He remained absolutely still, slowly drifting away.

We hadn’t had sex in weeks. I wasn’t a sex-addict, but I was frustrated with the abstinence. We used to get it on every single day, and now there was no action at all.

If he didn't make the move, I would.

I turned over and rolled him onto his back. His eyes opened with the movement, and he stared up at me, his expression stoic. I straddled his hips then leaned down and pressed a kiss to his lips. My body ached with the effort because I wasn't strong enough, but my need drove me forward.

He kissed me back but restrained his lips from taking me as harshly as he wanted. His tongue remained behind his teeth and he only massaged my lips with his.

I slowly grinded against his cock through my underwear. My clit came to life the second I felt the friction. The moisture immediately pooled to the surface because my body was excited to have him.

He breathed hard into my mouth as he felt me slide across him. His chest expanded with each breath and he dug his hands into my hips. But instead of pulling his boxers off and slipping inside me, he gently rolled me to the mattress.

I widened my legs to accommodate his size. I wanted to scream in joy because I needed him so desperately. It was the first time we would have sex without the exchange of buttons.

He kissed my neck then moved back to the position he was in before.

I stared at the ceiling, unsure what just happened.

"We can't." He ran his fingers through his hair, the same frustration in his eyes.

"Why not?"

"Button, you're too injured."

"I'll be fine."

"I'm not going to hurt you. Just be patient."

"It's been two weeks." I groaned in frustration. "I can't be patient any longer."

"I'm sorry." He pulled the covers over both of us. "It's not easy for me either."

"Just get on top of me."

"No."

"Is it all the bruises?" Did that turn him off? If anything, I thought that would turn him on more.

"Not at all."

"Then—"

“No.” He sighed into the darkness, his anger filling the room. “When you’re back on your feet, we’ll talk.”

I tried to ignore the cold rejection that washed over me. I was self-conscious and hurt, but my arousal still didn’t disappear. I still wanted the man beside me. I still wanted his huge cock inside me. “Please.” I sat up and leaned over him, running my hand up his chest. “Just be gentle, and we’ll be fine.”

“Drop it.”

“Your slave is asking you to please her. You’re going to let her down?”

He gave me a cold look. “You aren’t my slave.”

My arousal disappeared for an instant, surprised by the heartfelt words he just said. “Then what am I?”

That was a loaded question, and he didn’t have a response. He stared at me in the darkness, searching for an answer. “I don’t know.”

It was still better than slave. “We’ll take it slow. I’ll tell you the instant I’m in pain.”

“I’m worried about everything inside your body. I’m worried it might not be able to handle anything strenuous.”

“It’ll be fine.” I continued to rub his chest, trying to coax him into cooperating. My hand moved farther south until it reached his hard cock in his boxers. I stroked him gently, just the way he liked. “Please...I want you so much.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Crow.” A man loved hearing his own name above everything else.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand away. “You’ll tell me the instant you’re uncomfortable.”

Finally. “Yes.”

He moved on top of me but didn’t touch my legs. Normally, he bent my body in impressive angles, deepening the channel for his cock. But tonight, he allowed my knees to hang open just enough for his hips to fit through. His arms were placed on either side of me without touching me. His hard cock slowly pressed against my entrance.

The second I felt him, I moaned.

He slowly pushed himself inside me, stretching me until his entire length was sheathed. He moaned from deep in the back of his throat, his body

screaming with joy from being connected to me once more.

I dug my nails into his forearms and stared at his face above mine. “God...feels so good.” I arched my back unintentionally and felt the orgasm start the instant he was inside me. He barely moved but I missed that sensational stretching. There was nothing like it.

He carefully rocked into me, going as slow as possible. The bed barely rocked, and he treated me like a virgin. “You doing okay?”

“Fucking amazing.” I threw my head back. My hair was scattered around me on the bed and my nails dug farther into his warm skin. The area between my legs was drenched—just for him. My nipples hardened, and I wanted him to twist them. My hands moved to his powerful shoulders and all the way down his back until I reached that perfect ass. I pulled him deeper into me, loving that unbelievable stretching.

His thrusts increased as I yanked him harder into me. His breathing was quiet, and he kept his eyes glued to my face. “You look beautiful when you’re getting fucked.”

My hands moved up his chest. “You too.” I already felt the approaching orgasm. It started deep in my core, growing in intensity and strength and burning me from the inside. It migrated down my belly until it reached the area between my legs. Like a scorching wildfire, it burned everything in its path. My body temperature increased by ten degrees, and my breathing went haywire. My nails dug farther into his chest, practically drawing blood. “Crow...I’m gonna come for you.”

He rocked into me harder, the possession taking hold of his face. His cock slid in and out, lubricated with my excessive moisture. His dick thickened inside me, stretching my pussy to the limit.

I snapped like a twig and my body rose to a new level of existence. Unbridled pleasure rocked through me, all-consuming and powerful. My toes curled and my breathing stopped. All I could do was yell and scream, enjoying the greatest climax my body had ever experienced. I went so long without this kind of satisfaction, and the second it returned, my body clung to it like a life vest. “God...yes.” Even when the orgasm passed, the pleasure still lingered long after. My body was tender from enjoyment, and his cock still felt amazing.

“I want to make you come again.” His chest glistened with sweat, and his muscles were tight from rocking into me. His eyes darkened to a

dangerous shade of green, and he looked like a territorial monster who would snarl at anyone who came too close to me.

I wanted to come as many times as possible. But he'd gone through a dry spell that lasted just as long. It was time for him to find the same satisfaction. "I'd love that...but I want to feel you come inside me."

A quiet growl escaped the back of his throat and his hips hesitated for just an instant. His cock thickened noticeably, his trigger ignited for a powerful orgasm that would cripple his spine.

"Give it to me." I grabbed his hips and pulled him farther inside me.

His body tensed, and he released another growl. "Fuck."

I loved seeing the pleasure on his face. I loved knowing he was enjoying this as much as I was. Seeing his satisfaction only increased my own. He never looked more handsome than when he was buried deep inside me, about to release his heavy seed. "I want all of it." I pulled him deeper inside me. "Every. Last. Drop."

That hit his trigger, and he buried himself entirely inside me, his ass clenching and his back tightening. He released, his hot cum filling my channel and hitting my cervix. He pushed himself farther inside, wanting to go as deep as possible. "Button..." His eyes locked to mine as he deposited his seed. He controlled me with just the look, telling me I was exclusively his to enjoy. I wasn't a slave, but I was his possession nonetheless.

"Feels so good..." I widened my legs to accommodate him, wanting everything he could possibly give me.

He finished with a sigh of pleasure and his body relaxed. His muscles lost their tightness, and he finally took a deep breath. His head was still in the clouds as he slowly came back to reality. "You love my cum, don't you?" He pressed his face to mine, his breathing still elevated.

"Yes." I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him against me. "I love feeling it sit inside me all day while you're at work. So I never stop thinking about you."

His eyes darkened in intensity. "Button...you know exactly what I want to hear." He moved his mouth to mine and gave me a kiss that was no longer soft. It was aggressive and demanding, expecting me to give him everything all over again. It was just a sliver of how rough he could be, but it was enough to make me tense in arousal once again.

He moved his lips away then slowly pulled his cock out. His fingers

went to my entrance and gently massaged the area, touching the opening in the expectation of feeling his seed. When none of it came out, he was satisfied. "Mine."

"Yours."

He kissed my neck then smothered my tits with his embrace. "How are you feeling?" He gently slid his hand up my thigh, inspecting my body for new trauma.

"Satisfied and sleepy."

He pressed a kiss to my entrance then lay beside me. "I didn't hurt you?"

"No." He used to love hurting me, but now he hated the idea of me being in pain. The situations were completely different and I understood that. But the contrast was so stark I couldn't help but take notice.

He settled into bed beside me, his semi-hard cock lying against his stomach. His arm moved behind his head, and his eyes drooped with exhaustion.

I snuggled into his side and rested my head on his chest. My leg wrapped around his under the sheet, and I immediately felt my body drift away. I was constantly in pain from my injuries, but that agony was numbed when Crow was beside me. He didn't just protect me in sleep. He didn't just protect me when I was awake. He protected me against things no one else could see. He chased away sadness, pain, and hopelessness.

He chased away everything.

"Put this on." Crow threw a black strapless dress on the bed. "Now."

I put my hands on my hips. "Excuse me?" He was back to bossing me around, and I didn't like it one bit.

"Did you not understand me?" He grabbed my shoes from the closet and tossed them on the ground. He was tense and ruthless, back to his old, angry self.

"I understood you perfectly. Just don't appreciate being bossed around."

"Well, start appreciating it." He gave me a threatening look, telling me not to test him today.

"What's up your ass?"

He stopped in mid-step and gave me an expression I couldn't identify.

“What’s up my ass?”

“Yeah.”

He marched to me with the intention of murder. When he reached me, his hand flew right for my neck, about to grab me the way he always did. But just before he touched me, he halted. He eyed his hand and what he was about to do. Then he pulled it away and took a step back. “Just get ready.” He left the room without shutting the door behind him.

I listened for his footsteps until they were gone before I eyed the dress on the bed. I didn’t think about the fabric or the way it would fit. My mind wondered about the argument that just transpired. Did he stop himself from grabbing me because I was injured? Or did he stop for a different reason altogether?

I got dressed and walked to the foyer, expecting him to be waiting for me. He stood there in his black suit with a light blue tie, looking just as beautiful clothed as he did naked. But he wasn’t alone.

Cane stood beside him, dressed in the same manner. His face was black and blue just like mine was. Scars on top of scars plastered his face. He hardly looked like himself.

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs because fear caught me off-balance. The last time I saw him, he struck me until I blacked out. I stayed in the hospital for a week and almost died. Even now, it took nearly ten minutes for me to walk down the stairs because I was so weak.

Hatred flared deep inside me.

Crow turned my way when he realized I’d joined their conversation. “Let’s go to the dining room.” He walked toward me with one hand in his pocket, and then his arm wrapped around my waist.

My eyes were glued to Cane.

What game was Crow playing? Why did he invite his brother to the house? And why did he want me there?

Crow guided me inside the dining room and pulled out a chair for me. He guided me into the seat before he pushed it in, tending to me like a gentleman even though, just fifteen minutes ago, he was an ass.

Now that I saw Cane, I understood why he was in such a bad mood.

Crow sat beside me, and Cane took the seat across from him. The scotch was poured and they both drank it like water. Cane’s movements were slow because he was still sore from his injuries.

Serves him right.

I waited to learn the reason for my presence. Instead of speaking up like I normally would, I stayed quiet just in case I learned something from observing.

“How are we going to do this?” Crow was the person to speak first. He eyed the ice cubes in his glass before he gave them a gentle stir.

“The last thing I heard was Bones moved. He’s no longer in Italy.”

My ears perked up.

“Where did he go?” Crow asked.

“Don’t have a clue.” Cane turned his eyes on me, and the expression he gave me was full of hatred. He despised me as much as he did before. If Crow wasn’t there, he’d probably beat me all over again.

Why was I there?

“The one thing we can rely on is Pearl.” It was the first time Crow ever said my name. He always called me Button. I was so used to the endearment that I nearly didn’t respond to my true name. “We can use her to lull him out. When he tries to snatch her, we can strike.”

“Use her as bait?” Cane asked.

“Essentially.”

Cane drank his scotch and then poured another glass. “Interesting. Could work.”

“It’s the only thing that could work. We could leak false information about our whereabouts, and he’ll take advantage of our vulnerability. Only he’ll be the one who’s vulnerable.”

“Risky. Bones has ears everywhere.”

“And so do we,” Crow said darkly.

I was tired of holding my silence so the men could talk. “Couldn’t I act like I ran away?”

They both turned to me, their stoic expressions identical.

“Cane just beat me and put me in the hospital.” I gave him the coldest stare I could muster. “It would make sense why I tried to escape. We could leak information that I’m heading for the embassy. He’ll definitely try to intercept me. You can count on it.”

Crow watched me with intelligent eyes. He examined my face, looking at me in a new way. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“It leaves a lot to chance,” Cane argued. “We have no idea where

he'll wait for her."

"Probably right outside the embassy," Crow argued. "That's what I would do."

"I'll approach the building so he'll come out." I knew Bones on an intimate level. He wouldn't send one of his cronies to take me. He'd want to grab me himself, wanting me to think he was my savior before he turned into the devil once more. "He'll want to get me himself."

"You're sure about that?" Cane asked.

"Yes." I grabbed Crow's glass and took a drink. "I know him better than you do."

"No." Cane couldn't hide his distaste for me. He hated looking at me. "Are you sure you want to put yourself at risk like that? There's always a possibility of something going wrong."

"Crow would never let him take me." I slid the empty glass back across the table and felt Crow stare at me hard. His hand slowly moved to my thigh under the table, telling me more with a simple gesture than words could ever relay. "And I want to take this fucker down. If we don't kill him, he'll just continue hurting women. I'm not going to let that happen. I need revenge just as much as the two of you."

Cane's hard expression didn't change. He was just as stern as ever.

"She can handle it." Crow spoke on my behalf, vouching for my strength and ferocity. "We'll need to wait until she's back to full health. Once that happens, I think we should go for it."

"Don't you think it'll be a little difficult to pull that off in the middle of the city?" Cane switched his eyes to his brother. "We'll need at least fifty men for backup and the embassy is right in the center of town. This idea is foolish, and you're only considering it because your dick is making all the decisions."

Crow didn't slap him across the table like I thought he might. He stared him down in silence, his expression doing the insulting. "Pearl is an exceptionally intelligent woman who can handle herself. Don't doubt her."

"So much can go wrong with this plan," Cane argued. "Bones may not even come out for her. We're relying on her opinion for something paramount. We might lose our only leverage and our enemy at the same time."

"He will." There was no doubt about it.

“He would expose himself to gunfire just to capture you?” Cane asked incredulously. “I’m sure the guy was obsessed with you, but no man would risk his life for pussy.”

“He won’t know there’s gunfire,” I argued. “Everyone stays out of sight until he’s in my grasp. I’ll stab him myself.” All I had to do was hide something in my pocket and shove it right into his heart. “And then you guys can take down his men.”

“Again,” Cane repeated. “We’re in the middle of the city. We pull off our criminal activities in the dead of night. Not smack during the day.”

“Then let’s do it at night,” Crow argued.

“The embassy isn’t open past five,” Cane said. “So why would she go there in the evening?”

“Maybe I don’t know they’re closed,” I argued.

“No.” Cane rolled his eyes. “Anyone would know they’re closed.”

“Then let’s do it in the afternoon,” Crow argued. “We’ve done crazier shit.”

Cane rubbed his temple and winced when he moved his arm too quickly. “I need to think about it.”

“I can do this without you.” Crow poured another glass of scotch and slid it toward me. “I’m just including you for Vanessa. If you don’t want anything to do with it, then fine. I don’t give a damn.”

Cane lowered his hand to the table, irritation coming into his eyes. “Don’t start acting like a hero.”

“I’m not,” Crow said coldly. “I’m just the one actually trying to avenge Vanessa instead of making excuses.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Cane slammed his hand down on the table but didn’t wince. “I would have been done with this already if you just let me do whatever the hell I wanted with this cunt.”

Crow’s shoulders tensed in threat. He was about to pounce across the table and shove his glass down his brother’s throat. “Talk about her like that again and see what happens.” He held his brother’s gaze.

Cane didn’t blink when he met his brother’s eyes. A silent war raged between them. When he kept his silence, it was a declaration of surrender. He held his tongue and didn’t utter another insult.

“Good call.”

“Thank you for including me this afternoon.” I sat across from Crow at the table on the terrace. We ate dinner in the garden with the pool behind us and a distant view of the setting sun.

He ate his food slowly, just as he always did. Most of the men in my life inhaled their food the second it was placed before them. But Crow took his time, selective in his choices. “You’re a part of the team now.”

I was grateful Crow didn’t put me on the sidelines because he wanted to protect me. He knew I had a backbone of steel, and I could hold my own in a fight. That kind of respect was hard to find.

“And I wanted Cane to see your bruises.” He didn’t flinch while eating. “A reminder that I haven’t forgotten what he’s done to you. And that I’ll never forget he laid a hand on you.” The threat in his voice was subtle but powerful. The veins in his neck bulged with hatred. He loved his brother but seemed to hate him equally.

“I think you succeeded.” Cane stared at me for most of the meeting. There was no remorse in his eyes and there never would be. He felt justified because of the person he lost. A part of me understood it completely.

Crow sipped his wine then returned it to the table. “Did he make you uncomfortable?”

“No.” Even after putting me in the hospital, I wasn’t afraid of him. If anything, I wanted a rematch. I wanted a steel bat in my hands so I could even the score. “It takes a lot more than a few glares across a table to frighten me.”

A small smile crept onto his lips. He took another drink of his wine before he set the glass down. “When the time comes, you’re certain you’ll be prepared?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t afraid to go through with the plan. I didn’t want to be anywhere near Bones. He still haunted my dreams. But I was eager to finish what he started. I wanted to end his life, get justice for all the women who weren’t as lucky as me.

He nodded in approval. “I think it’ll work. And the world will be a better place.”

It would be an entirely new place. “I don’t think I can stop there.”

He pulled his gaze away from his plate. He watched me closely, and without saying a word, he asked me to elaborate. The months we spent together allowed us to understand one another at a basic level. We could

communicate silently. Words had no use for us.

“When I was sold at the auction, someone pocketed three million dollars off my captivity. Three million.” I still couldn’t wrap my mind around that. That was so much money for someone who did nothing to earn it. “I want it back. I’ve been through hell and deserve to be compensated. I was the one who was a slave, so I should be paid for my work.”

He examined me in silence, his entire focus directed on me.

“I want to find out who that man is. And I’m going to hunt him down.”

“I could be of assistance.”

I knew he would offer. “Thanks. I could use the help.”

“And what do you plan on doing to him?”

“Collecting my debt.”

“And murdering him?”

I didn’t know about that. When I was in the situation, I would make the right decision. “We’ll see.”

“I hate to dampen your vendetta, but trafficking occurs all over the world. It’s one of the biggest sectors of the black market. Billions of dollars are made every single year.”

“Things are about to change.”

Affection burned in his eyes. “And you think you can change it?”

“Anyone can do anything if they put their mind to it.”

“I think you’ll need a lot of money and manpower to get anywhere.”

He didn’t try to dissuade me, but he was obligated to be honest.

“True...” I didn’t have a penny to my name at the moment.

“But you can always use my resources.”

“In exchange for what?”

A ghostly smile spread on his lips. He held my gaze with a sinister intention, answering the question without saying a single word. “You.”

“You already have me.”

“Yeah. But I could keep you as long as I wanted. I could be your silent backer who gets excellent compensation. Your fidelity. Your loyalty. And everything else.”

He didn’t need to do anything to keep me around. I had the freedom to leave whenever I wanted. The only reason why I was still there was because I wanted to be. We no longer needed a currency like buttons. “That’s

a fair deal.”

“Then we have an agreement.” He poured more wine into both of our glasses.

Our relationship started off under tense terms but it was different now. We were similar to any other relationship. He wanted me to be in his life and his bed indefinitely, and I felt the same way. I didn’t think I could trust anyone ever again, but my heart was already softening for him. When it came to Crow, I felt safe. And I felt cherished. He wanted me and I wanted him—for the rest of time.

Maybe I was meant to come there. Maybe I was meant to leave New York and Jacob because I was destined for something more. Perhaps I had to push through all the darkness to finally reach the light. What if I was meant for someone just as dark and broken?

What if I was meant for the man sitting right across from me?

Crow finished his dinner and entertained himself with my appearance. He stared at the features of my face, entranced by the bruises as well as the unmarked skin. Despite my appearance, he wanted to keep staring, believing there was something worth seeing. “What are you thinking?”

I could never admit the thoughts that just entered my mind. If they scared me, they were bound to scare him. At one point, I hated this man, but now I felt something more. The realization was disturbing. “I’m thinking about you.”

“Be specific.”

“I’m thinking about going to bed with you between my legs.”

His eyes shined with approval. “When we’re finished with dinner, I’ll make that thought a reality.”

“Well, I’m finished. How about you?”

He chuckled in amusement. “Impatient, aren’t we?”

“You’re the best sex I’ve ever had. How can I not be?”

Instead of being aroused by the statement, he was irritated. “I’m the only sex you’ve ever had. There has never been anyone before me. There will be no one after me.” His clenched jaw dared me to disagree with him, to remind him of the other men I’d taken to bed.

His possessiveness turned me on rather than warning me. “I really enjoy it, and I want more of it. I want all you can give. I used to despise you until you were inside me. Your cock changed everything I believed in.”

His jaw unclenched, and the veins in his neck stopped bulging.

I leaned over the table, my elbows resting on the surface. “Fuck me. Now.”

He took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring in response. His aroused look was the same as his angry one. He gripped the edge of the table to steady himself, those words sending him into a frenzy.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Stop. Tempting. Me.”

I loved to play this game with him. I loved pushing him to the edge and making him buckle. When he was weak, he was just as sexy as he was when he was strong. The fact that I could manipulate him with just words made me feel powerful.

It made me feel like a queen.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’ll be fine.” When we moved together, I ignored the pain completely. His cock felt so good between my legs that I didn’t care about anything else. I pushed my dinner plate aside and leaned forward, my cleavage on display for him to see.

He immediately eyed it, his pupils turning into storm clouds. He was about to explode in a thundershower, lightning following soon after.

“When I tell you to do something, you do it.”

His eyes narrowed, equally angry and aroused. He was the only man I knew who enjoyed being dominated. He responded to my bossy attitude and loved being defied—usually because he got to punish me.

“Now.” I loved pushing him as far as he would go. I could stretch him until his breaking point and ignite the man full of rage and arousal. He fucked me like he hated me.

“You’re playing with fire, Button.”

“I am the fire.”

That finally got him to his feet. He stormed around the table and grabbed me by the arm, the one place where I didn’t have an injury. He pulled me to my feet and threw me into his arms.

He carried me inside and into the bedroom where we had total privacy. The fire was already going because Lars prepared it every night before bed. The bed was made with new sheets that were about to be destroyed.

He stripped his clothes away with lightning speed, his look furious. “Get on the bed. Ass in the air.”

I was winning—and I loved it.

I crawled on all fours, ready for him to come behind me.

He shoved my dress up and pulled my thong down to my knees. He situated himself behind me, the head of his cock rubbing against my slit. He leaned over me and kissed the back of my neck, sucking the skin harshly just the way he used to. His mouth migrated to my ear. “I am yours to command.”

The moment he yielded to me, my pussy became drenched. When he commanded me, I was wet, but having the authority just turned me on more. I loved being in control. I loved having power over my own destiny. My abilities had been stripped from me for so long, and when a man so domineering and powerful relented his reign, even for a moment, it sent chills down my spine. “Fuck me.”

He breathed into my ear, his arousal evident in his heavy breaths. “Yes, Button.”

I arched my back and released a moan even though his cock wasn’t inside me yet. Power was exhilarating, addicting. I understood why Crow craved it so deeply. I understood why he got off so hard when he ordered me to spread my legs and bend over.

He inserted his cock until the base and his hips connected with my ass. Every inch of him fit snugly inside me, practically hitting my cervix with his length. He was long and thick, the best cock I’d ever taken.

He thrust into me from behind, using a quick pace right from the beginning. He moved through my slickness, feeling the smooth heat ooze for him. He grabbed my hips but kept his hold gentle, still thoughtful of the bruises and scars across my body.

“Harder.”

He shoved himself inside me with greater vigor. Our bodies made noises from the friction, and I could hear just how wet I was. He pulled his cock out until just his head was inside before he slammed back into me.

“Grab my neck.”

His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, keeping a firm grip as he thrust into me.

“Harder.”

Despite his quick speed, he moved faster. He fucked me as hard as he

could, shaking the bed and slamming the headboard into the wall. He breathed hard through his movements, the sweat collecting on his chest.

“Spank me.”

He didn’t obey the command. He continued to thrust inside me, one hand on my hip and the other on my neck.

“I told you to spank me.”

He hesitated, afraid of hurting me. He pulled his hand off my hip and gave me a gentle slap across the ass.

It was pitiful. “Harder.”

He didn’t cooperate.

“What did I tell you?”

He rubbed my ass gently before he gave me a hard slap.

His palm reddened my skin but the pain felt so good. It made me feel alive. The pain was different than that I’d already endured. It was arousing and satisfying. “Again.”

He smacked me again.

My pussy clenched around him, knowing an orgasm was just over the horizon. I could feel it in my bones. It already felt amazing and it hadn’t even started yet.

“Again.”

He smacked me harder than ever before.

And that’s when I hit my trigger. I spiraled down, screaming incoherent words and coming around his cock. My face pressed into the sheets and the mattress muffled my sounds. The pleasure was overbearing, and I was slipping away, reaching the heavens and the stars.

When the orgasm passed, I enjoyed the aftershocks. The tenderness felt just as good as the initial explosion. I relished the feel of his cock sliding in and out of me. I slowly pushed myself up so my face was no longer buried in the sheets.

“May I come?” His submission to me was the sexiest thing in the world.

“No. You can come when I say so.”

He groaned from behind me, loving the change in roles as much as I did.

“Keep going.”

Chapter Twelve

Crow

I took Button everywhere I went. In the back of my mind, I always thought of the man who wanted to steal her away. If he took her again, I'd never get her back. He would take her somewhere I couldn't follow, Russia or Japan. The only way to ensure her safety was by keeping her tucked into my side every moment of every day.

I took her to work with me every day and tried to concentrate while she read on the couch. She didn't make a peep so I could focus on all the tasks I needed to complete. But no matter how much she blended into the background, she distracted me.

I thought about her long legs wrapped around my waist. I imagined her underneath my desk and sucking my cock. I imagined a lot of dirty things that got me hard. Sometimes, my temper would snap, and I would order her to blow me right then and there. Sometimes, I turned her on her stomach and fucked her without giving any warning.

My productivity wasn't nearly what it used to be.

I liked having the control, the dominance. I called the shots and rolled the dice. It was my way or no way. But sometimes, her temper flared up and she looked at me with those bossy eyes. I let her take over because I liked being dominated once in a while. And she was exceptionally good at it.

Jasmine avoided me. If she needed something from me, she sent an insincere email. She suspected Button was in my office, hovering over me like a guard dog. And she was right.

As the weeks passed, Button got progressively better. Her bruises started to fade, and the rosy tint to her cheeks I once adored returned. She didn't ache from old pains. She walked on her own and took the stairs at a normal pace. She wasn't back to where she was before, but she wasn't worse either. There were a few scars along her abdomen, hardly noticeable unless you knew they were there. The surgeon had to cut her open to save her life.

And thankfully, she pulled through.

In a very short amount of time, Button became my whole world. I'd known her for nine months, and the time passed in the blink of an eye. She came to me as a prisoner, but I quickly realized I'd become the prisoner.

I belonged to her.

She was the only woman who had any power over me. If she wanted something, I would take care of it. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her. If she asked for a piece of the sun, I would figure out a way to give it to her.

Sometimes, it scared me.

The connection was intimidating because of the power it contained. If she walked away from me, I would be crippled. If she decided she wanted to return to America, all I could do would be to watch her leave. My life without her would never be the same. Without even realizing, I'd become attached.

Sickly attached.

She slept in my bed every night and rode my cock every morning. She called my name when I made her come. She kissed me every night before bed and every morning before work.

And she made me drop to my knees.

What the fuck happened to me?

"Are you alright?" Button held the closed book in her hand as she watched me with concern.

"Fine." My previous thoughts drifted away like smoke from a fire. "Why?"

"You've been staring at me for nearly ten minutes."

"I always stare at you."

"This was different." She set the book on the table and turned her body toward mine.

I sat behind the desk at the vineyard, thinking about things I shouldn't. When I was at the property, I was supposed to work, not consider my feelings for my lover. Was she my lover? "Have a lot on my mind."

"Maybe you should call it a day."

"Maybe." I turned off the iPad and stowed everything inside my desk.

"Anything I can do?" She came behind me and rubbed my shoulders, relaxing the tense muscles underneath the fabric.

"You can lie at the foot of the bed when we get home."

"Ooh...sounds good to me."

I left the desk and grabbed my jacket from the coat rack. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." A sexy grin was on her face, her mind elsewhere. "I'm just not sure if I can wait until we get home..."

“Can I ask you something?” She spoke from the passenger seat.

She always asked me questions on the drive, probably because she knew I couldn’t get away. “Yes.”

“You like it when I call the shots?”

I knew she was referring to our reversal of roles. It happened rarely, but when it did, it was hot. She wouldn’t let me come until she was completely satisfied. And even then, she made me work for it. The brutal way she pushed me around like I was a doormat turned me on. “Sometimes.”

“Have you...ever done that with anyone else?”

Never. “No.”

“I’m the first woman to take control?”

“One and only.”

She looked out the window and processed what I said.

“You like it. I can tell.”

“I do.” She admitted it without a fuss.

“Having that kind of power is exhilarating. It can get addicting.”

“You don’t say?” A slight smile was on her lips. “I’m surprised you let me do it to you. You seem like a man who...hates letting anyone else take over.”

“You’re right. I do hate it.” I followed the road until we approached the estate. I could see it at the bottom of the valley, waiting for us to arrive.

“But with you, I enjoy it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re strong. I’ve never met a strong woman before.”

“You could easily overpower me.”

“You don’t have to be large to be strong. Strength comes from a place deep inside us. It’s the ability to deflect pain, to persevere when failure hits you in the face like cold rain. It’s refusal to break under someone else’s reign. It’s a lot of things. Size is irrelevant.”

She turned back to me, a thoughtful expression on her face. “You’re strong too.”

Not as strong as I wanted to be. My past haunted me every day. My regret choked me and refused to let go. I would be forever terrorized by the things that couldn’t be changed. Button had experienced her fair share of heartbreak but she continued to carry on. I just passed through life, my heart and soul locked up tight so no one could ever get in. “You ask a lot of

questions.”

“I’m a curious person.”

“Nosy, more like it.” The corner of my mouth rose so she knew I was joking.

She gave me a gentle pinch in the side. “Shut up.”

I tickled her back. “You shut up.” I pulled into the roundabout and allowed my valet to take the car. My arm immediately went around Button, and we walked inside the estate I shared with her. It was a big place for one person. Somehow, it seemed even bigger for two people.

“So...can I lead when we get to the bedroom?” She moved into my side as we took the stairs to the top floor.

“No.”

“No?”

“Dominance isn’t something you can ask for. You have to take it.” Listening to her ask for control was a turnoff. I liked it when it came from nowhere, when she demanded to have me right then and there. That’s when I let my walls down, and I allowed her to control me. I trusted her to please me, to make me feel good in ways I never thought were possible. I’d tried enough new things with her to trust the new things we would experience together.

She lay on top of me, her small body resting against mine. Her fingers ran through my hair and her face hung over mine. Her hair fell to one side and tickled my shoulder.

The sex was done and now we stared at each other. I liked it when she lay on top of me. Her tits always felt comfortable when they were pressed against my chest. When they hardened, I knew she was ready for another round.

Her eyes were glued to mine, and she stared at me with a thoughtful expression. Her fingers slowly twirled my chest hair, and she got lost in her actions. Sometimes, a small smile would stretch across her face, remembering something with fondness.

I was just as entertained staring at her. The bruises were mostly absent from her face, so now her blue eyes sparkled in contrast to her fair skin. Her lips were no longer swollen from abuse but from my kiss. My hand explored the steep curve of her back, feeling the soft skin as my fingertips dragged

across it. I'd never watched a woman so intently after being satisfied. Normally, I walked away and moved on with my day. But now, I was content lying just like this. "Hmm?"

"Hmm, what?"

"You've got a staring problem."

"Me?" she asked. "I'm only staring because you were staring at me first."

"Whatever you say, Button." I listened to the fire crackle and pop behind me. The flames danced in the fireplace, slowly fading to embers. The sound was essential for me to sleep. Without it, the silence was too deafening for me to handle.

"So, when do you work out?"

I was puzzled by the question. "Excuse me?"

"You're so lean and strong. How do you stay in shape?"

"I run in the morning. You know that."

"But you haven't done that in months."

It was true. I let my exercise regimen slip away once she became my primary obsession. "I guess all the sex keeps me in my prime."

"Then why don't I have a perfect body?"

A smile formed on my lips even though I tried to stop it. "Who says you don't?"

"Me. I've got love handles, thunder thighs, and flabby arms."

A laugh escaped my lips because it was ridiculous. "Flabby arms?"

"Yeah." She lifted her arm and shook it. "See how it moves?"

"That's skin."

"It's still saggy."

"And what are thunder thighs?"

"When I walk, they shake. You know, like thunder."

It was just as ludicrous as the last complaint. "Button, you're insane. None of those things are true."

"Yeah, they are. I look in the mirror every day."

"And I fuck you every day." Her self-image was preposterous. She was the sexiest woman I'd ever had in my bed. "My opinion triumphs."

"No, it doesn't. All you notice are my tits and ass."

"Those aren't the only things that make a woman sexy. It's everything combined together. It's the hair, the lips, the eyes...not just the obvious

parts.”

“Then what do you find most sexy about me?” She rested her arms on my shoulders to hold herself up.

“Hmm...that’s a hard one.”

“I already know what you’re going to say.”

“Really?”

“My pussy. You love that thing.”

I chuckled. “I do. But no, that’s not what I was going to say.”

“Then what?”

I tried to think of the things that turned me on the most. Sometimes, it was the movement of her soft hair. Sometimes, it was the shape her mouth made when she screamed my name. Sometimes, it was the tight muscles in her back when she was on all fours underneath me. There were too many things to choose. But when I narrowed it down to one concept, one idea, I found my answer. “You.”

“Me?” she asked. “That’s not an answer.”

“I mean, who you are. What you say. How you behave. You.”

Her eyes narrowed, still puzzled. “I don’t understand your meaning.”

“Your fire. Your passion. Your ferocity. Your strength. All those things make up who you are. So, I guess my answer is you.”

Her confusion faded away when she understood what I was trying to say. Her eyes softened in an affectionate way, touched by my words. She’d given me this look before, and it pushed me away. It made me so uncomfortable I avoided her for a week. But now, I enjoyed it. It brought me a sense of joy I’d never known in my lifetime. “I love—”

Lars knocked on the door. “Sir, I’m so sorry to disturb you, but can I have a moment of your time?” He never came to my room unless it was important. After dinner, he left me in solitude for the rest of the evening.

I moved Button over and got off the bed. I pulled on my sweatpants and t-shirt before I stepped out into the hallway. Instead of being irritated with my butler, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. “What is it?”

“Come with me.” He nodded toward the hallway, and we walked until we were out of earshot.

That wasn’t a good sign.

He stopped at the end of the corridor, his hands still tucked behind his back. “The police are here.”

My blood went ice-cold.

“And they’re looking for Miss Pearl.”

Now my heart stopped altogether. “What did you tell them?”

“I said I didn’t know anything and I would retrieve the owner of the estate.”

I kept my body calm and my face stoic. Panicking wouldn’t solve anything. “Did they say anything else?”

“No. Just that they have a few questions for you.”

I paced in front of him, rubbing the back of my neck. I wasn’t sure how to handle the situation. Did they trace her back to my estate? Did someone tip them off? Was it Bones?

“Sir, they’re waiting.”

“I know.” Was someone still looking for her? She didn’t have family, and Jacob certainly didn’t give a damn. Then who was it? “I’ll be right there.” I walked back to the bedroom and saw her lying on the bed where I left her.

When she saw the look on my face, she knew something was wrong. “What is it?”

“The police are here. They’re looking for you.” I told her she could leave when she wanted, but now her chauffeur was right at the door. All she had to do was walk out, and she’d be returned home. She could tell them I held her against her will and let them throw me in prison for a long time.

“There are? How did they know I was here?”

“I’m not sure. But I’ll figure it out.”

She rose to her feet and crossed her arms over her chest, standing there naked. “What do we do?”

“It’s up to you. If you want to walk down there and leave, I won’t stop you.” If she wanted to exact her revenge, she could. Nothing was in her way now.

“Walk down there?” she asked quietly. “I don’t want them to know I’m here.”

My eyes widened in surprise. I tried to keep my expression under control but I couldn’t. Her escape route was right outside my front door, but she didn’t want to leave. She wanted to stay right there—with me. “You’re sure?”

Hesitance came into her eyes. “Who’s looking for me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I just...I’ve been gone for nine months. Anyone who was concerned about me would have given up by now.”

I had the same thought. “Maybe they stopped looking eight months ago but some lead turned up and they decided to check it out.” I wouldn’t know until I spoke with them.

“Yeah...maybe.”

“You want me to tell them you aren’t here?” I needed clear confirmation before I went through with it. She was no longer my prisoner. She was my equal. Her ticket back to America was right outside. If she wanted to take it, she had every right to.

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

She was looking out for me? “Don’t worry about me. I can handle the police. If you want to leave, do it.”

Her eyes fell in disappointment. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Of course not. If I had it my way, you’d be stuck in this house for the rest of your life. But you aren’t my slave anymore. If you want to leave...I don’t want to get in the way.”

“I don’t. And I don’t want you to be taken by the police.”

“Alright. Then I’m going to go down there.”

She nodded.

“Last chance.”

“I’m sure.”

I gave her one final look before I turned to the door. I took my time, just in case she changed her mind. But a protest never happened. She let me go without another word.

She wanted to stay.

The police asked routine questions in their missing person investigation. They had a picture of Pearl. She was young in the photo, probably in college at the time. They didn’t seem to suspect I had her in the house. All they wanted to know was if I’d seen her in Tuscany. A lot of my employees lived in wine country so they asked if I would make a statement at my distribution centers the following day.

And that was it.

But I did ask the question I wanted to know. “Her parents must be worried sick. Are they the ones encouraging this investigation?” I couldn’t outright ask the question without looking suspicious.

“No. Not a family member.” They didn’t elaborate before they left. That was all they gave me before they walked back to their police cars and got off my property.

Their lack of information just made me paranoid. Who called them to my home? Was it someone I knew? Possibly Cane? Was it someone else? I hated not getting my way, and being left with questions instead of answers infuriated me.

“I don’t think they’re suspicious,” Lars said. “Perhaps their intuition isn’t as good as the police claim.”

I wasn’t in the mood to talk. “Good night, Lars.”

“Good night, sir.” He gave me a slight bow before he went to the kitchen.

I walked to the top floor and entered the bedroom. Button sat at the edge of the bed, wearing my t-shirt and boxers. Her arms were folded close to her chest and she stared at the fire with fear in her eyes.

I shut the door and announced my presence.

Her eyes were on me instantly. “What happened?”

“They just asked routine questions.” I removed my clothes then sat beside her.

“That’s it?” she asked incredulously.

“They asked if I’d seen you around Tuscany, and they asked me to share your absence with my employees. I employ a lot of people in Tuscany, and the cops thought it would be a good way to spread the word.”

“They’re still looking for me nine months later?”

“I’m just as surprised.”

She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins. “Who called for the search?”

I didn’t have an answer for that. “I don’t know. When I asked, they didn’t give me an answer.”

“I have no idea who it could be.”

My suspicion immediately went to Cane, but what did he get out of that? If the police extracted her and shipped her off to America, we would

lose our only leverage. Unless he had an alternative plan? I wasn't sure.

She turned to me, tucking her hair behind her ear. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure...but I suspect Cane has something to do with it."

"What would he get out of it?"

"I don't know. But I can't think of any other possibility. He's the only person who knows you're here."

She tucked her hair behind her ear again. "If it was him, I'm going to punch him right in the dick."

"You should punch him in the dick anyway."

"What are we going to do?"

"The police didn't seem too suspicious. But we'll have to lay low for a while. Stay in the house until it blows over."

"If someone I loved was looking for me, I'd have to hand myself over. I couldn't let them keep worrying about me. But I know no one is looking for me. It was either Cane or some other stranger." The sadness in her voice echoed off the walls and masked the crackling flames in the fire. The loneliness and despair were enough to affect everything around her.

Including me. "You always have me, Button. If something were to happen to you, I would never stop looking for you until I found you." Maybe she didn't have anyone else, but she had me. I didn't have anyone either. But now I had her.

"I know, Crow."

I wrapped my arm around her waist and held her close to me. "You're never alone. I'm never alone. Because we have each other." I pressed my lips to her forehead and let them linger, feeling her take a deep breath under my touch. The affection comforted her, but it also made me warm. I didn't feel like such a monster when I was with her. I didn't feel like a thief and a criminal. It was the first time I felt like a man.

Just a man.

I snuck into Cane's house just as he snuck into mine. I climbed through a window and entered the living room. He was screwing a whore on the couch, her ass in the air while she gripped the back of the couch. "Sorry. Am I interrupting?"

Cane stopped what he was doing and gave me a glare. "Uh, do you

mind?”

“Nope. You broke in to my house, and I’m gonna do the same to you.” I fell onto the opposite couch and rested my feet on the table. “You’re just lucky I’m not gonna knock her around.”

“Like I would give a damn.” He pulled out of her and dressed himself. Then he opened his wallet and tossed some cash at her. “Get out.”

She pulled on her dress and took the money without asking a single question. She left through the front door, grateful for getting paid even though she didn’t finish the job.

“What the fuck?” Cane tensed with his arms by his sides, giving me a look that was beyond hateful.

“You broke in to my house and hurt my slave. I no longer have any respect for you. I will walk into your house like I own the damn place whenever I feel like it.”

“Would you let it go already?”

“Never.” The only retribution I would have is to do the same thing to him—whenever he found someone he actually cared about.

He abandoned the fight and poured himself a scotch. “What is it? What do you want?”

“I didn’t appreciate the little stunt you pulled.” It was easier to get him to talk if I acted like I already knew what happened. When he was cornered, he usually caved.

“What stunt?”

“Don’t play stupid, Cane. I know you contacted the police about Pearl.”

“The police?” He was about to take a drink but stopped himself. “Why the hell would I call the police?”

“You tell me. Why would they have shown up at my house last night looking for her?”

He set the glass down. “Whoa, hold on. The police came looking for her last night?”

“That’s what I just said, idiot.”

He pressed his hand into his chest, feigning innocence. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“Cut the shit, man.”

“What makes you think it was me?”

“No one else knows Pearl even exists.”

“Uh, Bones?” he snapped. “You know, our mortal enemy.”

“He doesn’t know where I live. And even if he did, he wouldn’t get the police involved. He would ambush the property and kill everyone.”

“You’re right. But it still wasn’t me. What would I get out of that?”

“Payback for me beating your ass.”

He rolled his eyes. “I let you fuck me up. That was to even the score. As far as I’m concerned, you and I are square. So, no, I wouldn’t have done that. We need Pearl to get what we want. What would getting rid of her accomplish?”

Pissing me off.

Cane watched me with heated eyes. He was a firecracker about to explode. “You still don’t believe me?”

It was hard to trust anything he said. After he went behind my back and hurt Button, I could never look at him the same way. He used to be my brother, my accomplice. But now, I couldn’t tell whether he was a friend or foe. That trust was gone.

“Wow. You don’t believe me.” He sat back in the chair, his shoulders tense. “Look, if I did something, I would own up to it. When have I ever lied to you? Yeah, I broke in to your house and beat your girlfriend. I never hid my hatred for that woman. I never lied about what I wanted to do to her. So stop calling me a liar when I didn’t do anything to deserve the title.” He put his feet on the table, resting them near his glass.

“I don’t know what to believe, Cane. If it wasn’t you, I have no idea who it could be.”

“Maybe one of her family members. Maybe one of her friends. Did you think of that?”

“She doesn’t have any.”

“Well, it wasn’t me. I swear it.”

Cane had never lied to me in the past. When he had beef with me, he always said it to my face. He never snuck around behind my back and hid his distaste. He was honest—even when I didn’t want to hear it.

“Pull your head out of your ass and start thinking clearly.”

“I’ll pull mine out when you pull yours out.” Cane was emotional and angry. Words and actions bothered him more than they bothered me.

“You believe me now?”

“I believe you more than I did before.”

He sighed and snatched his drink off the table. “Whatever, man. Instead of interrogating me, we should put our heads together and find a solution.”

“A solution to what?”

“Who’s looking for her.”

“How would we figure that out?” I already asked and didn’t get an answer.

“We know people on the force. We could ask around.”

“Might draw more attention to ourselves.” To me, specifically.

“A bribe would keep them quiet.”

“I suppose.”

“I’ll see what I can dig up.”

His enthusiasm increased my suspicion.

Cane caught on to my thoughts even though I didn’t voice my paranoia. “The sooner I clear my name, the sooner we get to move on.”

I poured myself a glass of scotch and eyed the black TV. The room still smelled like sex, but I ignored it. My bedroom had started to smell that way since Button and I were always at it.

“So, have you married her yet?”

I ignored the jab.

“Seriously, what is it with her? Maybe if I fucked her, I’d understand. Both you and Bones seemed to have fallen under her spell.”

I didn’t like picturing her with anyone, but especially not with him. “Don’t say that shit ever again.”

“What?”

“You know what.” I downed the liquid and felt the fire in my belly.

“Crow, I’m being serious right now.”

“You’re always being serious.” The guy couldn’t take a joke if his life depended on it.

“What is this thing you have with her? When I was over there last month, I saw you together. She’s not there against her will. She wants to be there. She’s just as obsessed with you as you are with her.”

“Because I make my women come.”

Cane didn’t absorb the jab. “Don’t ignore the question. Talk to me.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because if you’re in love with her, then I really am a dick. I shouldn’t have hurt her. I never would have broken into your house and beat her bloody if there was something more between you. Come on, I would never do that to a woman you love.”

“I don’t love her.” Love wasn’t possible for me. Every time I felt something for someone, they ended up dead. Cane was the only person I had left, and I suspected he would disappear like all the others. It was only a matter of time. That was the last blow I could handle. There was no room in my heart to accept anyone else.

“Are you sure about that? Because I can tell you haven’t been fucking anyone else in six months.”

“What I do with my cock is none of your business.”

“Jasmine told me you turned her down.”

Why the hell was he talking to her? “How did that come up?”

“I went by the winery to talk to you, but she said you took Pearl on a tour. And then she told me the whole story.”

That woman needed to get over it. “When she left, I forgot about her. Any man would.”

“But no man would turn down an easy lay—with a woman who likes the whip.”

“Pearl satisfies me. That’s all.”

He shook his head, his lips pressed tightly together. “I don’t believe that. There’s something more. There has to be. I’ve never seen you with the same woman for more than a few months. And you’ve never invited one to live with you every second of the day.”

I was sick of being analyzed like a patient. “What does it matter? Just drop it, Cane.”

“It does matter.”

“Shut. Up.”

“If you’re in love with her, I’ll look her in the eye and apologize—and mean it. I just wish you’d told me sooner.”

“Cane.” I held up my hand, needing him to shut his mouth right this second. “I don’t do that pussy shit, alright? I’m not capable of love or romance. I’m alone, and I will die alone. You and I are exactly the same in that regard. There’s no room for a wife or kids.”

“Well, she obviously doesn’t agree with you.”

I lowered my hand, my gaze blackening.

“I can tell just by looking at her.”

“You can tell what?”

“Crow, she’s in love with you. She’s picturing you as her husband. She’s picturing giving birth to your babies. It’s obvious.”

“You’re wrong about that.” She even told me she never wanted to get married or have children. She didn’t trust anyone and never would. Cane was more wrong than he realized.

“I’ve survived this long because I know how to read people. You tell me one thing, but everything else you do contradicts it.”

“I’ve had enough of this conversation.” The smell of sex was giving me a headache, and it was getting late. I left the couch and abandoned my glass on the counter. “Think what you want. I really don’t give a damn.”

“I can prove I’m right.”

I stopped in my tracks and turned around. His lingering words wormed into my brain and ignited my curiosity.

He interlocked his fingers behind his head with a victorious smile on his face. “When the police came, did she leave with them?”

I narrowed my eyes.

“Her ticket to freedom was right outside her door. But she didn’t go. She stayed, Crow. Why would a woman who’s been away from home for nine months stay? Why would a woman stay with a man who held her against her will? There’s only one answer—and we both know it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Pearl

“Stay.” I pushed him on the bed and straddled his hips. He wore his crisp suit and tie, but I didn’t care about wrinkling it. My knees rested on either side of his hips, and I felt his hard cock form in his trousers.

His hands moved to my thighs while his gaze darkened. He just shaved that morning, and his face was absent of any hair. The fine lines of his jaw were more prominent, and he looked even more handsome. “Button, I have work.”

“Then take me with you.” I pressed my hands into his chest, feeling the hard muscle underneath his collared shirt.

“You know I can’t. You need to stay out of sight.” He propped himself up on his elbows, his cock still defined in his slacks.

“Then work from home.” He would be gone for eight hours. Eight hours was too long for us to be apart. I wanted his cock inside me around the clock. I wanted to have lunch with him in the dining room. My life would stop the moment he walked out that door.

“I can’t do that either.”

I pouted my lips and grinded against his cock slowly.

He moaned quietly, his eyes becoming hooded. “All that’s going to happen is, I’m going to fuck you—and then leave.”

“It’s better than not being fucked at all.” I unzipped his trousers so his long cock could pop out.

He released another moan before he pulled my thong aside and inserted himself within me in one swift move. My pussy was wet for him like always, and when he understood just how aroused I was, it gave him even more pleasure. He loved making me wet. And he loved getting wet himself. “Fuck.”

I gripped his shoulders as an anchor and arched my back, slowly riding his cock over and over. I intended to make this last as long as possible. If he was late enough, perhaps he wouldn’t go to work at all. “I love your cock...so big.”

He dug his fingers into my thighs, clenching his jaw tightly. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, really?” I said with a sexy voice.

“You’re trying to keep me here.”

“So?” I rode his cock harder, pushing his head through my tight entrance over and over.

He thrust his hips up, moving with me. “And it’s working.”

My plan only partially worked. He left for work an hour later than he normally did. And that meant he would probably be home an hour later than usual.

Maybe I sabotaged myself.

I read in bed while I waited for him to come home. I tried not to think about him because the longing consumed me. The mansion was bigger and emptier without his darkness filling every corner.

Lars knocked on the door. He wasn’t bringing my lunch tray because I finished eating over an hour ago.

I got out of bed and answered the door. “Hey, Lars. Did you need something?”

“Mr. Barsetti is here to see you.”

“Crow?” Both of my eyebrows rose. If he wanted to see me, he would just walk into the bedroom.

“Cane, actually.” He grabbed my tray from the floor beside the door. “He’s waiting in the entryway.” There wasn’t fear in his eyes after the way Cane hurt both of us. He was calm as ever.

And that was strange. “What does he want?”

“A conversation,” he said. “He didn’t give me the specifics.”

I wasn’t one to run and hide, but I wasn’t one to be stupid either. “I’ll be right there.” I shut the door and opened Crow’s nightstand drawer. Inside was a loaded pistol. I grabbed it and turned off the safety before I walked out.

I was prepared this time.

If he made any move, I’d shoot him in the head. Crow wouldn’t hold a grudge. If he were there, he’d do it himself.

I walked down the flights of stairs until I reached the entryway to the mansion. Cane stood there in a suit and tie, looking like an upstanding citizen despite his less-than-honorable work ethic.

He eyed the gun in my hand, and a smile stretched his lips. “I guess I’m not surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be.” I closed the distance between us, holding the gun

at my side with my finger over the trigger. I didn't aim it just yet. But I was prepared for the slightest move.

"I come in peace." He raised both hands in the form of surrender.

"Like I believe what a snake tells me as he slithers through the garden."

Cane chuckled. "I'm not the snake—not this time." He put his hands in his pockets and came closer to me. "I was hoping we could talk. Five minutes of your time is all I need."

"You'll get none of my time. I'll deal with you when Crow is around. But if he's not here, I don't want to see you."

"You have a gun." He nodded to the pistol. "That's all the security you need."

"You're a criminal. You probably have a gun and a knife hidden somewhere on your body."

He shrugged. "Okay...maybe I do. But I'm not going to use them."

"How reassuring..."

"Come on, Pearl. If I were going to hurt you, I would have done it already."

That was the only part of his argument I couldn't disagree with. If he wanted to tear me apart, he would have broken in and shot everyone. Perhaps his intentions were pure.

"Can we sit?" He nodded toward the waiting area. There were two couches on either side of a glass table. It was a lobby for the mansion, where Crow's guests waited comfortably to be seen.

"Sure." I sat on the couch across from him, resting my gun on my thigh. My finger was still on the trigger, and the barrel was pointed right at his knee.

He eyed it, uneasy. "Are you familiar with guns?"

"I know how to shoot them."

"How about you point it somewhere else—for now?"

I leaned back against the couch and shifted the gun so it was pointed to the wall. Italian frescoes marked the beige wall, showing different views of the estate against the green background of the vineyards and hills beyond. "Spill it."

"Busy?" A ghost of a smile stretched his lips.

"Very."

“I don’t think waiting around for a man to come home is equivalent to being busy.”

I let the comment slide because he wasn’t worth my anger. “Any day now, Cane.”

“Alright.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “I came here to apologize.”

“For?” For not killing me when he had the chance?

“I’m sorry for what I did to you. I’m sorry I broke in to the house and touched you. I’m sorry I hurt you.” He held my gaze and spoke with sincerity. “If I could go back in time, I wouldn’t have done such a horrible thing. I just wanted you to know I’m sorry.”

My jaw dropped as I stared at him in shock. “You’re apologizing...to me?” He didn’t hide his disdain the last time he was there. He practically snarled at me from across the table.

“Yes.”

“Where is this coming from?” Did Crow make him do this? I never talked about Cane when we were together. I didn’t even care to get an apology from him.

“Crow and I talked last night and...I realized I made a mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s an unspoken code between us. All women are free for interception. We’ve even shared a few before. And that applies to brutality. There’s no one we’re particularly loyal to, so they’re all fair game. Unless one of us is in love.”

I held my breath, unsure if I heard him right.

“I didn’t realize how he felt about you because he never told me. And when I figured it out...I realized how much I fucked up. I just want you to know I never would have crossed that line if I’d known the line was there to begin with. My brother and I butt heads a lot, but that’s a sacred thing we don’t touch. If I loved a woman, he would treat her like a goddamn queen.”

I still couldn’t breathe. I heard what he said, but I couldn’t accept it. It was so unexpected. “He told you he loved me?”

“Well, not exactly. But he made it pretty clear.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. Crow has never been in love before. Neither have I. So, it took me some time to figure it out.”

I finally took a breath, my chest aching after remaining still for so long. My heart kicked into overdrive, and my palms grew sweaty. Everything in the room seemed brighter, more vibrant and beautiful.

“And I know you love him too. I tried to tell him that, but he wouldn’t believe me.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Not sure. Maybe he just didn’t want to talk about it. I don’t know. He’s still pissed at me for what I did, so he’s not as open as he used to be. He’s always been a private guy, but now, he’s over the top. Annoying.”

I stared at the gun in my hand and felt my finger leave the trigger. Cane wasn’t there to hurt me, so there was no point in holding the weapon. I set it on the cushion beside me.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say that. I know what I did was unforgivable, but maybe we can move forward and find a new beginning somewhere down the road. I promise I won’t hurt you again.”

Maybe it was foolish, but I believed him. “I think we can find some common ground.” If it were anyone else, I’d say no. But Cane was Crow’s last family member in the world. I’d rather make it work than place a wedge between them.

“Great.” He slapped his thighs before he stood up. “I can tell you’re good for him. You’re not emotional like most women.”

“Excuse me?” I stood up and put my hands on my hips. “Emotional?”

“Yeah. No woman would be able to let this go like you did. Women hold on to things and never forget. But you’re focused on moving forward. That’s how generals think. That’s how dictators think.”

“Well, I’m definitely not a dictator.”

“Give it time.” He winked before he walked to the front door. “Happy humping.” He turned toward the kitchen near the staircase. “See ya, Lars.” He waved before he walked out.

I grabbed the gun from the couch and prepared to return it to the bedroom.

Lars appeared, wearing his tuxedo like always. “Mr. Barsetti left?”

“Yep.” I held the gun at my side and engaged the safety.

“The two of you were able to work things out?”

I realized how crazy it sounded when someone else said it. “I guess

so.”

“I know Cane’s behavior was unacceptable, but he truly is an honorable man.”

Somehow, I knew he was right. “I can tell.”

“They’ve both lost so many people. I used to be the family butler when his parents were still alive. Good people. And Vanessa...she was something special.” His eyes trailed to the floor, and he released a sigh of heartbreak.

Hearing her name made me ache for someone I didn’t know. “I can tell it’s hard for him.”

“Those two were inseparable. I’d say Mr. Barsetti was closer to Vanessa than anyone else. When she passed away, he never grieved. But I know that’s only because he’s so utterly heartbroken.”

“He’s pretty closed off.”

“I know.” He turned his gaze back to me. “He’s been much happier now. Haven’t seen him smile since he was a child.” He gave me a knowing look before he turned back to the kitchen. “And I think I know why.”

“Your master is home.” He walked into the bedroom like a king and removed his tie. His eyes weren’t exhausted from a long day at the office. In fact, they looked rejuvenated.

“And your slave has been waiting.” I’d never allowed him to call me that before, and I certainly never called myself that. But now, the connotation didn’t seem offensive. I wanted to be owned by him—completely and utterly. I’d already given myself to him in the most profound way. Freedom knocked on my door, but I didn’t answer.

He stopped when he was in the center of the room, his hands moving to his jacket. He heard what I said and savored the echo. His jacket fell to the floor before he unbuttoned his shirt. “Miss me?”

“So much.”

He let his shirt drop to the floor before he reached the bed. He stood with his knees against the frame, his chiseled chest strong and powerful. Even in the dark, the lines intersecting the muscles were prominent. He was all strength and no weakness.

I rose to my knees and ran my hands up his chest, feeling the smooth skin under the grooves of muscle. My nails scratched him lightly because I

knew he enjoyed the pain. “Did you miss me?”

“We both did.” His hands went to my ass and kneaded it, feeling my cheeks and pulling them apart. He pressed his cock into my stomach, his erection defined in his boxers.

“I don’t want you to work tomorrow.” I wanted to wake up beside him and stay there all day. I wanted to make love and never stop. I wanted to feel him inside me constantly, claiming me for the rest of time.

He lost his resolve as he squeezed my ass in his bare hands. “No work tomorrow.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my face close to his. “Now show me how much you missed me.”

He immediately responded to the command, his eyes darkened and his body tensed. He gripped my ass harder then played with my thong. His mouth moved along my jaw without kissing me until he reached my neck. He gave me a small kiss on my warm skin, teasing me relentlessly. His fingers curved around my ass until they found my entrance. Slowly, they pressed into my slit and felt my moisture greet him. He moaned quietly against my ear. “You got started without me.”

“Maybe a little foreplay...”

His face moved back to mine. “Think of me?”

“Always.”

His eyes darkened in approval before he grabbed me and threw me on the bed. My back hit the mattress and my knees fell apart. He stripped off his trousers and boxers before he crawled on top of me, his hard cock oozing with pre-cum. He positioned himself over me and immediately shoved his long length inside my opening, stretching me wide apart and making me cry out. “You’re not allowed to think of anyone but me—ever.”

That was a command I could obey. “Yes, master.”

We sat together in his study and read before the fire. He sat alone in his armchair with a decanter of brandy beside him. A hardback book was in his hands, and he read with his fingers resting against his bottom lip. The thoughtful expression made him look even sexier.

I tried to focus on my book but my eyes kept returning to him. I’d rather read him than the story in my hands. The flames crackled in the hearth and supplied us with soothing music. He always had a fire going in whatever

room he occupied—even in the midst of summer.

My eyes turned to the paintings on the wall, the ones I'd seen before. They were unusual because they were made of buttons and paint. On the one occasion I was going to ask about them, something else came up. "Crow?"

"Hmm?" He didn't take his eyes off the page. His ankle rested on the opposite knee, and he wore his gray sweats with a black t-shirt, his strong chest filling out the fabric.

"Can I ask you something?"

He pulled his gaze away from the story and stared at me.

I turned to the paintings on the wall. "Who made those?" I suspected it was someone he knew. They didn't match the rest of the artwork in the house, and they didn't match Crow's taste either.

He shut the book and rested it on his thigh. His eyes were glued to the first painting, the one with the vineyards fading into the background. With a stoic expression, he stared. His eyes didn't darken or lighten in response. Whatever he was thinking was too private to share. "Vanessa."

I watched his face, seeing the sadness enter his eyes at her memory. He looked resigned, defeated. "They're beautiful." Now I wished I hadn't asked him that dreaded question. It brought him more pain than he was willing to show.

"She was an artist. Ever since she was little, she liked to paint. When she lived with me, she spent her time on the balcony painting the scenery before her. And without asking, she put up these pieces around the house. They weren't to my taste, but I never told her to take them down. After a few weeks, I found myself staring at them endlessly. Whenever I was in a bad mood, they made me feel better. I'd come to accept them—even loved them. After she passed away...they were all I had left of her. So I could never move them."

My hand reached for his, and I interlocked our fingers together. "I'm sorry."

He eyed our joined hands.

"Can I see a picture of her?"

He kept his eyes glued to our tangle of fingers before he left the chair and opened a drawer in his desk. He took out three picture frames and returned to me.

I took all three and examined them. The first one was a picture of

Crow, Cane, and Vanessa. Crow and Cane looked like they were in high school, while Vanessa appeared much younger. I looked at the next picture and saw Vanessa in a graduation gown with Crow beside her. His arm was wrapped around her and a smile was on his lips. The last one was the entire family—including Lars. His father shared Crow’s likeness so much that they looked like brothers. His mother was beautiful with dark brown hair and a slender frame. She shared several similarities with her daughter. “Beautiful family.”

Crow took the pictures back and set them on the table between us. He turned his gaze to the fire and grew somber, suddenly brooding and angry. “She moved in with me when my parents died. She stayed here for years before Bones got her. Once she was gone, the house never felt the same. It still doesn’t feel the same.”

I couldn’t begin to understand that kind of loss. I didn’t have a sibling, and I never had a family to begin with. The kind of pain I carried was fundamentally different. I never had anything to lose, while he had everything and lost it. “I’m sorry.” I wish I had something better to say. When it came to heartbreaking moments like this, there was nothing to be done. “But we’ll make him pay for what he’s done. We’ll get Vanessa the justice she deserves.”

“Maybe,” he whispered. “But at the end of the day, she’ll still be gone. My parents will still be gone.”

My fingers drifted across his knuckles. “You have me. You’ll always have me.”

He eyed my hand before he linked our fingers together.

“Lars told me you’ve never really grieved...” I didn’t understand what that meant, not fully.

He stared into the fire. “I didn’t go to her funeral.”

“Why not?”

He shook his head slightly. “It’s...never mind. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Please tell me.” I wanted to hear this. For his sake as well as my own.

He pulled his hand away. “Drop it.” He refilled his glass and downed the brandy with a single gulp. He withdrew from me, completely this time. He shut me out and refused to let me in. His eyes never turned my way and

he darkened into the background, slowly fading from reality. He became nothing. He wanted to be nothing. He was nothing.

Chapter Fourteen

Crow

I fell into darkness for a week straight. I kept to myself and shut out the world, suffering in silence and waiting for it to pass. Button was by my side every day, but she didn't speak to me. In fact, we didn't talk once.

I went through the motions of my life until the despair finally left my body. When I thought too hard about Vanessa, I was pulled under by a sweeping current. It was enough to drown me—over and over.

By the time I pulled myself out, a week had passed. I couldn't recall what I did in those seven days. I couldn't recall what I ate or what I accomplished at work. Cane didn't drop in like he usually did. He probably detected something with his sibling radar.

I finally snapped out of it one night after dinner. "I'm sorry." I looked at Button across the table, truly looking at her for the first time in days. "I just..." I couldn't explain it, so I didn't bother trying.

"It's okay." Her voice rang with sympathy, and she gave me a sad look as she finished the last pieces of her dinner. "I know the feeling. You dim down your participation in life and let it pass you by."

That was a good way to describe it.

"How's work been?" She didn't make the mistake of asking prying questions. She let the tense week pass without further thought. She didn't interrogate me or tell me to seek out emotional help.

Because she understood me. "Fine. We have a shipment going out on Wednesday. The ship only leaves once every three weeks, so we have to load as many crates as possible."

"Where is the shipment going?"

"The United States."

"I've never heard of your wine before."

"Were you a big wine lover in America?"

"No."

"Perhaps that's why." Anyone who knew about wine would recognize my product. When Button first came here, she didn't seem to know about anything besides engineering and kicking ass.

"Do you ship anywhere else?"

"Russia, England, Africa...anywhere you can think of, really."

“That’s a large business. Must be exhausting running it by yourself.”

“It’s fine,” I answered. “It gives me something to do besides sell weapons to world leaders.”

“Has Cane ever considered leaving the business and joining you?”

“No.” His heart was sided with the family business. He would never abandon the company my father built on his own. “Wine isn’t his interest.”

“Just explosions and women,” she said with a chuckle.

I noticed she spoke of Cane more highly than she did before. Actually, she never spoke badly of him at all. I didn’t know where the change stemmed from, but I didn’t care enough to ask. “Are you finished?”

“Yes. It was delicious, like always.”

“Let’s take a walk.”

She left her chair and immediately took my hand. Our palms stuck together like glue, perfectly cradling one another like they were meant for each other. I guided her outside where the sun was setting over the horizon, and we walked along the trail around the vineyards.

“Did this estate belong to your parents before you moved in?”

“No.” I bought it on my own once the winery was successful. “But I hired Lars after he had no one to serve.”

“Does he live here?”

“Yeah.”

“Then he works around the clock.”

“He likes it here. He has weekends off and vacation time, but he never uses it. His wife passed away ten years ago, and his only daughter passed away as well. I think working here gives him a purpose, takes his mind off things.”

“Oh...that’s so sad.”

“Indeed.” Lars understood loss the same way I did. That was a connection we shared. Neither one of us spoke of it, but it hung in the room constantly. Loss was something that couldn’t be escaped. It followed you around like magnet to steel.

Button dropped my hand and hooked her arm through mine instead. She walked close to me, her cheek touching the top of my arm. Her hair brushed against my skin as the breeze caressed it. “Lars is a sweet man. He’s always been so nice to me since I arrived.”

“He likes you.”

“He does?” she asked with a smile.

“I can tell.”

“What about the rest of the staff?”

“I think they like you too.”

“Good,” she said. “Because they are all so sweet. I can tell they love being here. You’re a low-maintenance employer.”

“I don’t know about that...” My own brother broke in to the house and knocked everyone out before he tortured my guest. I wouldn’t consider that to be low-maintenance.

She stopped in the middle of a row and examined one of the vines. A horde of grapes dangled from the deep green stem, purple and plump with juice. She eyed it before she turned to me. “Can I eat one?”

“Yeah. But I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Why?”

“It hasn’t been washed.”

“Whatever.” She plucked one before she tossed it into her mouth. “I have a dirty mouth anyway.” Her eyes glowed with playfulness.

I chuckled and pulled her into my side, feeling the life return to my body. Button was the biggest distraction I’ve ever had. She stopped me from thinking about things I couldn’t change. She kept me focused on pleasure and joy. My despair and misery faded into the background because she took up center stage.

“So, when are you going to take me out again?”

“Not for a long time.”

“Oh, come on.” She pinched my side. “I’ve been cooped up in the house for weeks. Let’s go somewhere.”

“The coast isn’t clear. Those cops are probably still looking for you.”

“Then I’ll wear a disguise.”

“What kind of disguise?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll get some glasses and dye my hair.”

“You’d look cute in glasses.” I could picture heavy frames sitting on the bridge of her nose while she bent over my desk and I took her from behind. “But don’t change your hair. I like it the way it is.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded and pulled her tighter into my side.

“You like long dark hair?”

“Definitely.” I stopped walking and fisted her strands, loving the hold I had on her. It was easy to overpower her with just a single grip. I had her right where I wanted her, and she couldn’t get away. I pulled her head back so her lips were tilted toward mine. “I like you.”

“I think you more than like me.” She ran her hands up my chest, her nails digging into my skin with desperation. She eyed my lips seductively, wanting my mouth tight against hers. With subtle moves, she turned into the sexiest woman I’d ever laid eyes on. Even without the whips and chains, she turned me on like crazy.

There were no words I could use to describe exactly how I felt. All I knew was I wanted her beside me—now and forever. I want her to share my bed every night, and I wanted her to ride my cock every morning. Without her, I would return to the ghost I used to be. “I think so too.”

Her ankles hooked together around my waist, and her nails clawed down my back. Her nipples were hard in arousal, and her chest was flushed with a red tint. Sweat collected on her neck and her forehead, the heat between us burning us both. “Crow...”

I loved hearing her say my name. When we first slept together, she refused to make a sound. She didn’t want me to understand how much she enjoyed my cock. And then, when she did admit it, she still wouldn’t say my name. But now she said it every chance she got. “Button.”

“God, yes.” She writhed on the bed underneath me, her back arching and her hips tilting to get more of my cock inside her. She took my entire length like a pro without wincing. She loved my thickness and the way I throbbed inside her.

Her pussy was always so wet. I’d never been inside her without that slickness greeting me. My cock moved in and out with perfect friction, feeling her tight pussy clench around me while the moisture pooled around my cock. She was a heathen in bed, the hottest sex I’d ever had.

The longest time I’d been with one woman was three months. After that, I got bored and walked away. There was nothing better than having a new partner. It was exciting and new, and you learned all the fetishes they liked. But I’d been with Button for nine months, and I was just getting started. I didn’t want her to walk away from me. I didn’t want a new partner.

I only wanted her.

“Right there...” She clawed my back with a moan, nearly cutting me open with her sharp nails.

I pounded her into the mattress, burying her underneath me. I gave it to her hard like she wanted, hitting her in the right spot over and over. Her pussy tightened around me, and more moisture greeted me. The slickness increased, and my cock craved everything she possessed.

“God, yes.” Her head rolled back, and her mouth made a delectable O. She screamed through the blinding orgasm, holding on to me tighter than before. She widened her legs to accommodate more of me, and her screams turned to incoherent moans. “Yes...”

My cock ached for release after watching her sexy performance. Every time she came, I wanted to do the same. I wanted to follow her into the bliss that combined us together. I wanted to fill her pussy with as much of my seed as possible.

“Come inside me.” She grabbed my ass and pulled me farther into her. “Fill me.”

She was just as obsessed with taking my cum as I was about giving it to her. She said the dirtiest things to turn me on. No woman ever got me hot and bothered like this. She pleased my cock with the utmost satisfaction. But then she made it want more at the same time. “Fuck, Button. You’re so goddamn hot.”

She pulled me farther into her, grabbing my thighs so she could move her pussy down my shaft. She panted hard with the movement then moaned when she felt my cock thicken in anticipation. She knew it was coming because she’d fucked me so many times.

The euphoria exploded inside my body, starting at the base of my spine then shooting down my shaft. My balls ached with satisfaction before I blew my load deep inside her. I shoved my cock as far as it would go and released, giving her every drop of cum. The muscles of my back tightened and my ass ached from contracting so hard. I filled her pussy to the brim, nearly overflowing from the amount.

I let the sensation slowly pass, feeling my body drift high into the clouds. The moment I was finished, I wanted to collapse beside her and sleep endlessly. My eyes focused again and I stared at her beautiful face. Her lips were red and puckered from my kiss and her eyes were hooded with

satisfaction. I pressed a kiss to her lips, still wanting her even though I'd been thoroughly pleased.

She kissed me back with intensity, like she wanted more despite the blazing orgasm she just experienced. She cupped my face and kissed me passionately, moving her tongue with mine. My spine tensed with desire when I felt her soft lips move against mine. I was never finished with her even when I thought I was. She pulled me tighter against her like she never wanted to let me go. She needed me more than ever, wanting more than I could give. Her lips moved against mine as she spoke. "I love you, Crow." The emotion in her voice was enough to make her lips tremble with sincerity. Her nails dug into me harder and her legs tightened around my hips.

I heard what she said but couldn't process it. My lips froze in place because I couldn't even move. The words entered my ears and solidified in my brain. Of all the things I expected her to say, that wasn't one of them. I was still inside her, soft but getting harder, and my cum was deposited deep inside her.

My heart rate skipped sporadically and my nerves were on fire. Agony ripped through me and all I wanted to do was run. Her words landed on my skin like a branding iron. The declaration didn't bring me closer to her. In fact, it just pushed me away.

The connection between us was ripped apart. My entire body shattered. All I wanted to do was move away from her as quickly as possible. I pulled my cock out of her and moved to the edge of the bed.

She sat up and stared at me, the sheet pulled to her chest. Hurt radiated on her face like the hot, burning sun. Her eyes couldn't hide her sense of betrayal. She tightened the sheet further around herself, pulling her knees to her chest at the same time.

She told me she would never love anyone again. She said a husband and kids were off the table. Everything we had was perfect. Just earlier that day, I couldn't believe that I actually felt a moment of joy.

But then it disappeared.

I walked into the bathroom and got under the warm water of the shower. Her words echoed in my mind over and over. Anxiety and fear took over like a conquering enemy. All I could picture was her dead on the floor, a bullet through her head. The blood seeped out everywhere and formed a pool that couldn't be cleaned. I could picture her body sitting in the graveyard

where the rest of my family was buried. Just like the others, she disappeared into the soil.

The thought was too much to handle.

I couldn't go through that again.

I'd had enough.

Right then and there, I turned everything off. I stopped every sensation from entering my brain. My body shut down, and I cleared my thoughts. Button pulled me from the path and took me to a place I promised I would never go. I let her in way too far, and now I was paying the price.

I couldn't let her love me.

And I couldn't love her.

It wasn't an option.

And it never would be an option.

When I left the bathroom, she was gone. The sheets were still crumpled from where we laid. The room reeked of sex, the good kind that made you hot and bothered. The clothes she'd been wearing were absent and so were her shoes.

She left.

But where did she go?

Did she call for a cab and prepare to leave me forever? Was she on her way to the airport at that very moment? Did my cold rejection chase her away for good? The idea of her leaving sent me into a panic. I didn't feel what she felt, but I didn't necessarily want her to leave either.

I walked into her bedroom and found her sitting on the couch. A book rested on her thighs but she wasn't reading it. Instead, she looked out the window, a void expression on her face. Her hair was styled and her makeup pristine. It didn't seem like an awkward moment just happened at all.

I cleared my throat to announce my presence, my hands in the pockets of my jeans. The situation was tense, and I wasn't sure how to handle it. I'd never experienced anything like this. A woman had never told me she loved me. Not once.

She didn't turn my way even though she knew I was there. "Yes?" Her voice fell flat, like she didn't care about anyone or anything.

Normally, I would just walk away and let time heal the awkwardness. But I was afraid if I didn't talk to her, she might leave for good. How did I

keep her around without telling her I loved her? Would there ever be a reason to make her stay? I sat on the couch beside her so she would be forced to look at me. “I think we should talk.”

“What’s there to talk about?” She held the book in her hands and slowly shut it. It closed with a loud thud.

She was going to make this difficult. I should have assumed. “I know I hurt you, and I want to make it right—if I can.”

“There’s nothing to make right, Crow. You did nothing wrong.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

“I told you how I felt, and you didn’t say it back. It’s fine.” Her voice caught slightly, the heartbreak emerging. She did her best to hide it but some emotion came pouring through.

“I thought you told me you would never trust anyone again. You said you didn’t want a husband and kids. And I told you I would never love anyone. What changed?”

She opened her mouth to talk, and her eyes scanned back and forth. She took a loud breath then shut her mouth again, abandoning whatever she was going to say. “I would really love it if we could just pretend it never happened. Let’s just move on and leave it in the past.”

There’s nothing I wanted more. “But can we really do that?”

“We’ll have to.”

“You don’t want to leave?” If she stayed and never mentioned this fiasco again, that would be perfect. But it seemed too good to be true.

“Not yet. I want to finish *Bones* first.”

So she did want to leave. My heart sank into my chest, and excruciating pain burned me everywhere. I couldn’t breathe because it hurt so much. The idea of her walking away from me was unthinkable. But could we really go on after what happened? She crossed a line that could never be uncrossed. Perhaps it was best if she left. She was already too close to me. And when people got close, they ended up with a bullet in their skull.

“But I do want to say something...” She finally met my gaze, her strength coming back.

“I’m listening.”

“Cane came to the house a few weeks ago and apologized for what he did to me. He said he never would have done that if he’d known you were in love with me. He told me that’s how you felt. And when he said that...it

made me realize I felt the same way about you. If I'd known you felt otherwise, I wouldn't have said anything."

Cane came to the house?

Without telling me?

And he told her that?

I'd kill him later.

"I had no idea." I didn't know what else to say. All of this went on right under my nose, and I didn't have a clue.

"I just wanted to explain where it came from. I wouldn't have had the courage to tell you if he hadn't said those words to me. And I know you didn't say it back because you don't feel the same way...but I find it hard to believe you don't feel anything. We've been together for a long time now and we're inseparable. I don't think it's ludicrous for me to believe you loved me."

She was justifying her behavior when she didn't have to. "You don't need to explain."

"But I do," she whispered. "When I said I didn't trust anyone and would never settle down, I meant it. But I also realized you and I are the opposite sides of the same coin. You share my darkness. You share my strength. You share my weakness. We really aren't all that different. I thought I could have a future with you. I could have something with you."

I bowed my head, feeling the shame. "I can't have a future with anyone, Button. I'm not safe. Anyone I get close to dies. I do my best to protect the people I care about but...sometimes it's out of my hands. I like short-term relationships because they're fulfilling. But I don't want anything longer than that. People get attached, and feelings get hurt. It's just better this way."

"Then what were you going to do if I were still your slave?" she whispered. "Have sex with me until you got bored with me? Then what?"

"No. I would never get bored of you." That was something I couldn't deny. "But you would never be anything more than that. You would just be another member of the staff. I would never care for you enough to allow you to be used as leverage. No one could use you against me because I don't love you." That last part burned my ears. It was an insensitive thing to say, but I had to push her away. She needed to understand our time together was as beautiful as it seemed, but it only went so far. I couldn't give her all the

things she deserved. And I never would.

She didn't react at my harshness, but a storm was raging deep inside her. Her eyes couldn't hide that fact. She looked down at her book and gripped the edges. "I'm sorry I misinterpreted things."

"Please don't apologize." I felt the same pull she experienced. But I pulled myself out of it before it was too late. We could never be anything more than what we were. When the time came, I would let her go. And I would move on.

"I hope we can enjoy our time together until I leave. But if you want me to go now, I can."

"No." The word slipped from my mouth quickly. The idea of her walking away from me forever was too much—at least, right now. I needed her in my life. I needed to feel her under me when our bodies were connected. I needed to see her smile first thing in the morning. I just...needed her. "Stay."

"Okay. I'll stay until the job is done."

And then she would leave. Would I be able to let her walk away? I didn't love her, but I did feel something noteworthy deep in my heart. It went all the way down to my soul. It was more than lust, and it was more than affection. But I couldn't love her. It wasn't possible. And it never would be. "Okay."

Chapter Fifteen

Pearl

I got into bed but couldn't sleep. My mind was glued to the jar sitting on the table. It was over halfway full of random buttons. Black with purple lace and white with gray tinsel—each button was distinctly different. The vase was a collage of different pieces. I wondered if they once belonged to Vanessa.

A light knock sounded on the door before Crow entered. He was in his sweatpants and t-shirt, ready for bed. He stood at the doorway and eyed me on the bed, his look stoic and unreadable.

I knew exactly what he wanted. But I wouldn't give it to him.

"Come sleep with me."

He didn't get it both ways. He didn't get to sleep with me every night but not feel anything for me. He already pulled me into the darkness once with his kiss, touch, and pretty words. Now I had to put distance between us—ice-cold distance. The moment he didn't return my affection, a part of me died. I was certain he felt the same way, that his lips would tremble with adoration when he repeated the words. When I only received silence and an awkward look, I was heartbroken. "I like it in here." The bed felt foreign the moment I got into it. The mattress was unfamiliar and smelled like flowers. I preferred the masculine scent in the air, the mix of his aftershave and cologne.

"Button." He tried to exert his authority with a single word, but it wasn't going to work.

I couldn't sleep in there anymore. It wouldn't feel magical like it once did. My body went limp and rigid at the same time. My heart shut down completely. I didn't want to listen to him breathe in the dark. I didn't want to see his face first thing in the morning. If we were just two people screwing, then that's how we should act. "I'm staying in here. Good night, Crow."

He remained by the door, his hand resting on the doorknob. "I want to keep an eye on you."

"You don't need to." He'd even said it himself. If I died, he'd be able to get over it—because he didn't love me and liked it that way. The past nine months felt like a dream. It had to be a dream because I was the only one who remembered it. I thought I'd found the place where I belonged. I thought I

was different—special. But he coldly reminded me I was just one of the many.

And I always would be.

He lingered in the entryway even though he didn't have anything else to say.

"I'm tired." That was my polite way of dismissing him. I wasn't even sure if I could sleep with him again before I left. All I would think about was the way I poured my heart out and he shut it down. "I'll see you in the morning." I adjusted myself on the bed and got comfortable under the sheets. I purposely turned away from him so I wouldn't have to look at him.

His feet didn't echo with his footsteps. He stood his ground and stared at me. I expected him to crawl into bed beside me but he never did. Then I heard his feet hit the hardwood floor as he walked out. The click of the door sounded a moment later.

I wanted to cry, but I refused to. Bones hurt me beyond repair, and I got over that. Jacob betrayed me, and I got over that. Cane beat me until I was black and blue, and I got over that. But I would never get over this.

I got Cane's phone number from Lars, and when Crow was at work, I gave him a call.

"Barsetti," he answered.

"I have a bone to pick with you, idiot."

He paused over the line. "Who the hell is this?"

"It's Pearl. You know, the woman you said your brother was in love with?"

"Uh...what's up?"

"You lied to me. You made me believe he actually loved me. And then when I told him how I felt, he shut me down."

"He did?" he asked in shock. "What happened? You told him you loved him, and he just stood there?"

"We were having sex."

"Yikes. That makes it worse."

"Anyway, he told me he didn't love me and never would. So, thanks."

"He's full of shit. I know when my brother is full of it, and right now, he's delusional."

"Doesn't matter. I just wanted to chew you out for throwing me under

the bus.”

“Whoa, hold on,” he said. “I never told you to tell him you love him.”

“But you certainly gave me a nudge.”

He sighed into the phone. “What do you want me to say? You want me to talk to him?”

“God, no. I just wanted to give you a piece of my mind.”

“Well, I don’t care. I’m not good with these strange girl talks. I’m not even sure why we’re still talking about it. Who cares if he didn’t say it back? Move on.”

If only it were that easy. “I want to take down Bones now. I want to get it over with so I can leave.”

“Right now?” he asked incredulously. “Aren’t you still injured?”

“No.” My scars had finally healed weeks ago. “I’m ready to take this asshole down. Are you with me or what?”

“Of course I am—”

“Then talk to him.” I hung up before Cane could get another word in.

Chapter Sixteen

Crow

I stared out my window at the distant vineyards like I had so many times. I knew this land better than most people. It was in my blood, my heritage. Sometimes, when I enjoyed the scenery, it cleared my thoughts from the subjects that dragged me down.

The door to my office opened, and Cane walked inside. I could tell it was him by the way he barged in without checking in with my assistant. The door clicked shut behind him. "Hard at work, huh?"

I turned in the chair and faced him, my temple already thudding with a headache. "I could say the same to you."

He helped himself to the chair in front of my desk. He slouched in the cushion and breathed a deep sigh like he was exhausted. "Wad up?"

My eyes automatically narrowed. "You tell me. You're the one paying me a visit."

"Well, I've been getting restless. When are we going to make a move on Bones?"

I hadn't thought about it. Button was on my mind. Last night, I didn't get any sleep without her. I used to hate sleeping with another person, but now I couldn't stand being alone. "I don't know. Pearl is still healing."

"She's fine. She looks good as new."

"But she's not mentally prepared."

"Well, she called me and asked when we're taking out Bones. So, I think she's ready."

She called him? Why didn't she speak to me instead of him? "Really?"

"Yep."

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing much." He took a look around my office, admiring my pictures and bookshelves. "Just that she said she loved you, and you didn't say it back..."

I couldn't believe she told my brother that. They used to be mortal enemies, and now they were gossiping girlfriends.

"Dude, what's up?"

"What do you mean, what's up?"

“What the hell are you doing?” He tilted his head to the side and looked at me like I was a weirdo. “Why did you leave her hanging like that?”

“I’m not having this conversation with you.” I didn’t share private information with my brother.

“Well, I’m having this conversation with you.”

“Cane, stay out of it.”

“I can’t. According to the Barsetti code, I can’t. You think I like talking about this stupid bullshit? No, it’s not my cup of tea. Or should I say, it’s not my glass of wine.”

“Barsetti code?”

“Yeah. You’re making a serious mistake that you’ll regret. I can’t let you do that without giving you some counsel first. You would do it for me.”

“I don’t need counsel on the matter.” He was sticking his nose where it didn’t belong, and I wasn’t thrilled about it. Cane and I weren’t the kind of brothers that talked about emotional bullshit. We hardly talked about Vanessa when she died.

“I think you do. She’s pretty upset about it.”

That wasn’t surprising. It was the most awkward moment of my life. She stared at me and waited for me to repeat the words back to her. When they never came, her face contorted into one of heartbreak. “As she should be.”

“No, you don’t get it. She wants to leave as soon as possible.”

I gathered that much.

“I’m not trying to be a pussy, but I know you love her. Just tell her.”

“I don’t love her.”

“Come on, yes, you do. It’s so obvious—even to me.”

My heart was frozen solid, and my body was incapacitated. It couldn’t handle another blow—another loss. “I don’t.”

“So when she leaves, you’re just going to let her go?” he asked incredulously.

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“Crow, she’s not just some slut you’re keeping around. Whatever you have with her goes beyond that. I don’t understand why you’re in denial about this. People fall in love and get married every day. Why is this so difficult for you to understand?”

“I’m not people.”

“Last time I checked you were.”

Definitely not. I was a beast of the dark.

“Look, she’s going to leave as soon as this is finished. Are you really prepared to give her up?”

I couldn’t imagine my life without that woman living in my house. Just getting any sleep without her was nearly impossible. The vineyards would never look quite the same. Eating dinner without her would never feel the same. After work, I would go home to an empty house until I found another woman to whip and beat. The idea made me feel lonely. “If she wants to go, she can go.”

“And you’re okay with losing the love of your life?”

“I never said she was.”

“But it’s so goddamn obvious, man. What’s the holdup?”

I knew he wasn’t going to drop this anytime soon. “You and I aren’t the type of men who can have a wife and a family.”

“Why not?”

“Because of Mom, Dad, and Vanessa. One by one, we’ve been taken out. You think a woman you love would ever be safe? Our enemies would constantly look for a way to hurt us. A wife would be a perfect target.”

“Not if we keep them safe.”

“How did that go last time?” I snapped. “Vanessa is buried in the ground along with Mom and Dad. How many more bodies will we add?”

“Let me get this straight.” He held up both hands, growing enthused. “The only reason why you’re pushing her away is to protect her? So you do love her? You just can’t risk telling her that?”

“Yes, I’m pushing her away to protect her. But, no, I don’t love her.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Crow.”

“I don’t. I don’t do love. I told her that from the beginning. It’s not my fault she didn’t believe me.”

“I’ve seen you with her,” he snapped. “Maybe you can lie to yourself, but you can’t lie to me.”

“Cane, just drop it. I’m embarrassed we’ve had this conversation at all.”

“I’m not. You’re my brother, and I want you to be happy. I think you need her in order to be happy.”

I stared at my bookshelf, avoiding the determined look on his face.

“I’ll never be happy.” It was a fate I accepted a long time ago. With Button, small jolts of joy erupted through my body at random times. She made me laugh and made me smile. But those feelings were only temporary. The depression would swallow me up again shortly afterward.

“Maybe you should stop being so dramatic and just give it a shot.”

“Maybe you should shut your mouth.”

“Look, I’m just trying to help. If you don’t want to lose her, you need to change gears. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I’ve already let her go.” I would never return her feelings or give her the life she wanted. I would never keep her. My heart no longer worked, and I was void of any emotion except violence. She deserved a man far better than me.

He sighed in defeat. “Alright. I had to give it a shot.”

At least the conversation was over.

“So, when are we taking him out?”

“Not sure. When do you think you’ll be ready?”

“When it comes to taking down that asshole, I’m always ready.”

“Alright,” I said. “We’ll make the plans.”

Chapter Seventeen

Pearl

I started training again.

I ran every day after Crow went to work. The path around the vineyards was over a mile, so I ran around that a few times before I used Crow's weight room in the basement. I wasn't trying to drop a few pounds or gain muscle. I was just trying to get back into shape.

I needed to be strong when I went toe-to-toe with Bones. He probably wouldn't have the opportunity to harm me since Crow and Cane were on the lookout. But it was better to be safe than sorry.

Crow came home at his usual time, and he was quiet and brooding. Ever since that awkward night, neither one of us had been the same. We talked it out, but in the end, it didn't change anything.

It was tense as hell.

He rapped his knuckles against my door before he stepped inside. "Lars tells me you've been a working machine lately."

"Yeah. Just been exercising." A book was open in my hands. Reading was the only thing strong enough to distract me from my agony. I tried to forget the way Crow cruelly rejected me, but I couldn't. Despite the way he hurt me, my heart still beat for him. I still felt the exact same way as I did before.

And that only made me feel pathetic.

"Any reason?" he asked.

"Just preparing for our mission. Wanted to get back into shape."

He walked farther into the room, his suit fitting him perfectly. His sculpted shoulders looked powerful, and his thin hips led to muscled thighs. He was still a wet dream. "You think you're ready for that?"

"I know I am." There were two things I wanted desperately. The first was to get away from Crow. And the second was to get my vengeance on Bones. Even if I died in the process, it would be worth it. I had to do something. Running back to America to leave other women to their fate wasn't an option for me.

He sat on the couch beside me but kept his hands to himself. He hadn't made a move toward me since that terrible night. He asked me to sleep with him a few times, but I always refused. "Cane is ready too."

“Then let’s do it.”

He turned his mystic green eyes on me, their power radiating like orbs. “You’re certain you can handle this?”

I didn’t blink as I held his gaze. “Absolutely.” I’d been through trauma after trauma. There were very few things that scared me anymore. My spine was a rod of steel, and my heart was calloused and cold. The last blow that killed me was Crow’s rejection. Now, there was nothing left that could cause any damage.

“Okay. I’ll talk it over with Cane, and we’ll figure out a plan.”

“Alright.” The sooner, the better. I wasn’t sure what I would do when I got back to America. There was no job waiting for me. There wasn’t even an apartment waiting for me. I’d have to be smart and figure it out. But choosing to stay out of fear was unacceptable. I’d find my way—that was certain.

Instead of leaving, Crow stayed right beside me. He leaned forward and rested his arms on his thighs. His fingers interlocked together, and he stared at the floor beneath his shiny shoes.

I waited for him to walk out and leave me in peace. Being in his presence any longer than necessary was torture. I was happy just a week ago, and now, I was miserable. He took something away from me, something I never thought I would have again. Somehow, I resented him for it.

“I miss you.” He stared at his hands and rubbed his thumbs together.

I heard what he said but didn’t react. The words were meaningless to me. At one point, I thought he loved me, that he couldn’t live without me. All those nights we spent together were beautiful. He took care of me when I could barely walk. But I’d misinterpreted all of that.

He slowly turned his head my way, expecting me to echo the words back at him.

Now he knew what rejection felt like.

His eyes filled with disappointment, the kind he couldn’t hide. He tightened his fingers together, the veins in his forearms protruding through the skin. He turned back to his hands when he couldn’t bear my coldness any longer. “I thought we agreed we would enjoy our time together before you left.”

Change of plans. “I don’t feel the same way anymore, Crow.”

He clenched his jaw slightly. “Meaning?”

“I don’t want to sleep with you. I don’t want to fuck you. All I want is to hurt Bones for hurting us. And then I want to leave and start over. Coming to this place has shown me what the real world is like. It’s taught me how to observe people, how to stiffen my spine, and how to survive. Now that I have those skills, I’m ready to return to my old world.”

He sat up straight and pulled his hands apart. “I don’t see why we can’t enjoy each other.”

I didn’t want his hands on me. I didn’t want him inside me. It would just make me think of the day he broke my heart. After everything I’d been through, I didn’t think it was possible to love someone, to trust someone. He pulled me into a false sense of security, making me think we were dark together but whole. “Because we can’t.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you but—”

“It’s okay, Crow. You don’t need to apologize for the way you feel. But now, I want other things. I can’t let you touch me because I won’t enjoy it. All I’ll think about was the last time we were together. We’re just friends. Accomplices. And that’s all we’ll ever be.”

He took a quiet breath, his frustration obvious. “For what it’s worth, I do miss you. I can’t sleep without you. I can’t focus at work without you. Everything has been turned upside down, and I can’t even think straight. I miss us. I miss what we had. It hasn’t been easy for me.”

It was hard to feel any pity. He wanted me around for entertainment. He wanted me around because we had amazing sex together. But that was it and nothing more.

That’s all I meant to him.

“You’ll get through it. The longing will pass, and you’ll forget about me—like all the others.” There wasn’t a hint of venom in my voice. I told him the truth—the whole truth.

He turned his head my way, the despair in his eyes.

I was numb and couldn’t feel a thing. There was no sympathy in my heart or anything else. All I felt was desperation for escape. I wanted to get as far away as possible so I could get over him.

I wanted to forget about him.

I wanted to forget all of this.

I slept comfortably in my bed when the sound of shattering glass woke me up.

I bolted upright in bed the second the shards scattered across the hardwood floor. My nightmares had returned, but I somehow knew this was real. The sound was unmistakable. It was far too loud to be fake.

The beam from a flashlight hit me in the face and blinded me. My first instinct was to scream, and that's exactly what I did. I screamed at the top of my lungs and hoped Crow would hear me.

"Shut her up!" A man grabbed me and threw me on the ground. The alarm to the house went off, so loud it was going to make me deaf. They tied a handkerchief around my mouth to quiet my screams. One man punched me in the face and then the stomach, momentarily paralyzing me.

Crow, come on.

One man grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me to a stand. He kept my hands pinned behind my back as he shoved me toward the broken window.

I twisted my body to evade his grasp but his hold was too strong. My stomach screamed in pain, and my mouth started to bleed.

He shoved me through the window, and I let out a muffled scream as I flew through the air, expecting to hit the grass at the bottom. My body landed on a stack of mattresses, and I bounced in place, recovering from the realization that I wasn't broken on the ground.

The men followed behind me and grabbed me again. One positioned me on a motorbike, sitting behind me so I couldn't escape his grasp. He turned on the engine then sped out of the yard, moving through a row of vines to return to the main road.

The wind blew through my hair, and I tried to turn in the seat to see if Crow was following me. Just when I turned, the man punched me in the back so I would face forward. I slumped toward the handlebars as the pain shot through my body.

They continued driving through the pastures without turning on their headlights. It was pitch black, and I couldn't see where we were going. When I saw the guy next to me, I realized he wore night vision goggles. They could see the road in front of them, but Crow couldn't detect their headlights.

This wasn't looking good.

Fifteen minutes later, they reached a road. They pulled onto the turf

and slowed down as they reached a midnight black town car parked off to the side. They killed the engines to the bikes, and I was yanked off.

Now that my feet were on the ground, I tried to escape. I kicked the guy closest to me in the balls before I broke the other guy's nose. There was nowhere for me to run, so I had to incapacitate my captors if I had any chance of getting away.

"Hands above your head where I can see them." A woman's voice sounded from behind me. It was distinctly feminine but rang with authority. She cocked the gun, and the sound echoed in the nighttime air.

I turned around and saw the gun pointed right at my face. The barrel was aimed directly at my nose. With a single touch of the trigger, my face would be gone.

The woman was my height with dark brown hair. She had blue eyes that looked kind despite her no-bullshit appearance. She stood in a pencil skirt and jacket, not fitting the criminal bill. "Enough of that. Let's go." She nodded to the car.

I expected Bones to be inside the vehicle, not a woman. None of this was adding up. The men didn't look like the kind of backup Bones would employ, and he certainly wouldn't have a woman working for him. "Who the hell are you?"

"None of your damn business. Get in the goddamn car." She stepped closer to me and pressed the gun to my temple.

She needed me alive. I knew that much. Bones probably put out a bounty for my head, and she was the first one to track my whereabouts. "I'm not worth anything to you if I'm dead."

A smile that looked more like a sneer formed on her lips. "You're absolutely right." She moved the gun to the center of my palm and held her forefinger over the trigger. "I'm sure you could survive a few shots."

I didn't give in to the fear. Showing weakness, even for a moment, would undoubtedly lead to my demise. "I hope you do shoot me. I'd rather bleed out and die than go back to that psychopath."

This time, she smiled. "I understand his infatuation. You're a toy that just won't break." She grabbed my arm and spun me around with lightning speed. She pressed the gun to my right shoulder blade. "Hands behind your back."

I didn't move.

She kicked in the back of my knee.

I bit my lip and fell to my knees in the middle of the road. My body automatically reacted to the hit, and I couldn't stop myself from falling. My bones ached when they hit the concrete.

She tied a length of rope around my wrists then yanked me to my feet. "Get your ass in the car." She opened the back door and continued to hold the gun to my shoulder.

"Do you understand what you're doing? You're returning me to a madman who will beat me and rape me. As a woman, you're okay with that?" I had to believe that the world didn't function solely around money. There had to be some good people—even just one.

Her expression was as cold as ever. "Are you done whining?"

"Not whining. Just hoping for some good in this world."

"Bones has a ten million dollar award for your return. I don't give a damn if he's going to rip off each limb one by one and feed it to a pack of dogs. I don't give a damn if you're a man or a woman. All I care about is that cash. Now shut up." She slammed the gun into the back of my head.

My body winced at the collision, and I felt the air leave my lungs. The metal was heavy and brutal against my scalp. My legs felt weak, and I fell into the seat near the window.

She shot me a glare before she slammed the door shut.

I leaned my back against the seat and felt a migraine start to emerge. My hands were pressed against my back so I had to arch my spine in the seat to be slightly comfortable.

The woman got into the backseat beside me, her hand still on her gun. "Go." She ordered the driver with a quick flick of her wrist.

The car pulled onto the road as the men mounted their motorcycles. When their engines roared to life, they took off in the opposite direction.

I looked out the window and tried to figure out where we were and where we were going. The woman and the driver were the only other people in the car. Two against one weren't good odds, but it was better than four against one.

The woman eyed me in my seat, watching me suffer before she turned her gaze out the window. "We're taking you to his headquarters. We'll drop you off and be on our way."

"How far away is that?"

“Thirty minutes,” she answered. “I suggest you get some rest.”

The idea of returning to the man who got off to torturing me sent chills down my spine. Now that I had a taste of freedom, I never wanted to go back. I hoped Crow would track me down and come to my rescue but I knew that was impossible. The men drove straight through the hills and now I was in a different vehicle in the middle of nowhere.

He would never find me.

We entered a major city twenty minutes later. Few cars were on the street because of the late hour and most of the stores were closed. But the streetlights were on and a few bums sat on the sidewalks.

We were almost there.

I eyed the gun sitting on her thigh and cast a glance at the driver. He didn't seem like a military man, just a chauffeur. I could probably take him down if I had to. The woman was my only concern.

Without moving my head, I eyed her body in the hope of finding another gun on her belt. If there was one, I could snatch it and put a bullet right in her head. But I didn't see one.

But I did notice a wallet. It was slowly falling out of her pocket when we hit bumps in the road. It was black and made of leather, looking like it belonged to a man. She probably had cash and an ID inside. If I could take her out and get away, I'd have money to travel.

But how did I get it?

The rope around my wrists had softened from the sweat against my back. It leaked through my t-shirt and absorbed into the rope, making it more brittle. I never put on my safety belt when I entered the car, and the buckle lay beside my right arm. It wasn't sharp but it did have an edge.

That gave me an idea.

I kept my gaze out the window and shifted my weight closer to the door. I managed to grab the strap and pull it to me, getting the buckle closer to my fingertips. When I felt the metal in my hands, I rubbed it against the rope, serrating it with as much pressure as possible. It slipped a few times and didn't make a dent. But when I took my time and slowly grinded the metal against the deteriorating rope, it started to loosen.

It was actually working.

I slowly cut through the strap until it came loose. Once the rope was

weak enough, I felt it snap in two.

My hands were free.

I released the buckle and sat still, feeling my heart slam into my chest. I was excited and terrified. All I had to do was wait for the right moment, and I would make my move. With lightning speed, I would snatch the gun and get the hell out of there.

The car slowed to a stop when we reached a red light. A pedestrian walked across the intersection with a bottle of booze in a paper bag. He took his time, already drunk.

Now was the time.

I took a deep breath before I moved as quickly as possible. I jumped on the woman and tore the gun away from her grasp before she could even react.

“You fucking bitch!”

I slammed the gun hard into her scalp and made her collapse against the window. Blood oozed from her skull and dripped into her hair.

My hand grabbed her wallet before I pointed the gun at the driver. “Move and you die.”

He held both hands up.

I jabbed the butt of the gun into the back of his neck, making him go limp instantly.

I jumped out of the car and ran as fast as I could. I ran down a dark alleyway without looking behind me. All I did was run. There was no looking back and no second-guessing. The woman probably already informed Bones I was on the way, so if I didn’t show up on time, he would send men to look for me in the city.

I stopped when I was five blocks away because I couldn’t run anymore. I was out of breath and exhausted. My wrists ached from the harsh rope that had bound them together for the past thirty minutes.

A sound of a roaring engine played on my ears. It thudded within the air, causing vibrations against my skin. When I looked up, I saw a commercial airliner aimed for the sky. It slowly ascended into the air, the lights of the wings shining from the blackness.

An airport.

There was an airport nearby.

My first instinct was to call Crow and tell him where I was. But then I

realized I didn't have a number. He never gave me a phone or told me how to contact him. None of the stores were open so I couldn't ask about the Barsetti winery. I was on my own. Soon, Bones' men would come for me.

I had to move now.

I kept walking and pulled out the wallet I stole. Inside was a passport, an Italian ID, a credit card and some cash. When I looked at her picture, I noticed our similarities. I could pass for her if the inspector didn't pay too much attention.

I tossed the gun into the nearby garbage can and waved down a cab. When I was in the backseat, I told him to take me to the airport as quickly as possible. He didn't understand my English, so I had to say it again in Italian. Good thing Crow helped me learn a few things.

When I made it to the airport, I walked to the counter and purchased the first ticket to America. Luckily for me, it was leaving in half an hour. I didn't have any luggage so I would be able to make it if I hauled ass.

I went through security and had to hand over my passport when I reached the end of the line. The security officer took my ticket and ID and examined it closely. His eyes checked the name and the ticket number before he looked into my eyes.

I held my stance and didn't react, praying this man didn't notice how different I looked from that woman. He eyed it again before he handed it back to me. "Have a safe flight."

I took it with a shaky hand and tried not to fall apart. The last hurdle to get out of there had been passed. No one could get to me now. Not even Bones. I walked to the terminal and reached the gate. Everyone was already on board and they'd just issued the last call.

I handed over my ticket just as they were about to close the doors.

"Just in time." She ripped off the stub of my ticket before she opened the door for me. "Enjoy your flight."

I looked down the corridor and almost cried. The path was right before me, and all I had to do was walk. No one would detain me. No one would hold me down and stop this from happening.

I was finally going home.

Chapter Eighteen

Crow

When they first took her, I panicked.

I had no idea where they went or how they tracked her down. They extracted her like professionals and disappeared into the night. I could only assume Bones was behind the attack but that wasn't possible. If it were him, he would have blown up the house and murdered me in my sleep.

Someone else was responsible for this.

When I finally took a breath, I was calm enough to fall into my soldier mentality. There was a solution to this, and I would find it. I would find Button if it was the last thing I did.

No one would take her away from me.

And that's when I remembered the GPS I installed in her ankle.

I hadn't looked at it once since she arrived there. She didn't try to run, and she didn't try to remove it on her own. It was still implanted under the skin. When she was admitted to the hospital, the doctors asked about it but I told them to leave it in.

Now I could trace her location.

She was in Rome. Her coordinate moved at a steady pace, which told me she was in a car. Bones lived in the area so she was dangerously close to being swept away forever.

I had to move fast.

I hauled ass in my sports car and made it to Rome in record time. On the way, I called Cane and told him what happened.

"They just broke in?" he shouted over the line.

"Took her and ran."

"Fuck."

"I'm almost to Rome. Gather the men and meet me."

"I'm on it. Where is she exactly?"

"Not sure. Last time I looked, she was about to enter the city."

"Keep me posted." He hung up and the line went dead.

I broke every speeding law and cut off a lot of people to get there as quickly as possible. All I had were two pistols and my rifle, but that would be enough. I could take out a hundred men if I had to.

I had to get her back.

When I reached Rome, I checked her coordinates again. She was probably heading south where Bones had a few headquarters. Once they got her there, they would transfer her into a helicopter and fly her out of there before I could intervene. It would only be a few minutes before they found the tracking device and removed it.

The dot was nowhere on the map.

I searched through the grid of Rome but didn't see her dot anywhere. Her location was non-existent even though the transmitter still sent a signal.

Where the fuck was she?

I pulled over and kept searching, not understanding what was malfunctioning. She wasn't in Rome. In fact, she wasn't in Italy at all. When I zoomed out of the map, I finally found the dot. It was over the Atlantic Ocean, slowly moving across the water.

What the hell?

It took me a moment to figure it out. There was no other explanation for her flying west out of Italy. There was no other explanation for her being on a plane.

She escaped.

As I watched her fly away, a smile formed on my lips. "Go, Button." A moment of pride flooded through my body. She refused to be captured again, and when I wasn't there to save her, she saved herself. She used that smart brain of hers and found a solution to her problem.

I'd never meet another woman like her.

I watched the dot fly farther away as the devastation sank into my body. She left Italy without a backward glance. She didn't try to contact me and tell me she was safe. The second her freedom was available, she left.

She left me behind.

My instinct was to go after her but that wouldn't accomplish anything. She didn't want me anymore. I refused to give her what she wanted, so we couldn't reach common ground.

Maybe this was for the best.

But when I pictured returning to my mansion in Tuscany, I was filled with depression. Her smell wouldn't sink into my sheets ever again. The buttons would remain in the jar on her table, untouched and forgotten. I wouldn't see her face first thing in the morning. All the little things that made

my life enjoyable were now gone.
She took them with her.

Thanks so much for reading *Buttons and Hate*. I loved writing this story so much, and Crow and Pearl are very close to my heart. If you loved it too, it would mean the WORLD if you could leave a short review. It's the best kind of support you can give an author.

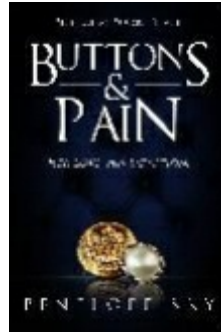
Hugs,

Pene

Want more?

The story concludes in *Buttons and Pain*

Book Three



[ORDER NOW](#)

Keep in touch with Penelope

Subscribe to my newsletter for updates on new releases and giveaways.

Sign up today.

www.PenelopeSky.com

LIKE Penelope's Facebook page for updates on new releases and giveaways.

Penelope's Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/PenelopeSkyAuthor>