

BUTTONS: BOOK FIVE

# BUTTONS & BLAME

*A LOAN I WANT TO KEEP.*



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

P E N E L O P E   S K Y

# **BUTTONS AND BLAME**

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PENELOPE SKY

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## CANE

ADELINA WAS QUIET DURING THE JOURNEY HOME. SHE DIDN'T MAKE A FUSS about leaving or seem to consider running. She kept her head down through the airport, was silent on the flight back, and returned to Italy without a single complaint.

How did she maintain such restraint?

If I had been able to see Vanessa one last time, I wouldn't have let her go. I would have tied her up so she couldn't leave. Whoever burst through the door to retrieve her would have to go through me—and a million bullets.

When we returned to my house in the countryside, we immediately went to sleep in my enormous bed. The maids had just cleaned the place, so the sheets were fresh and soft against my skin. We lay side by side, but no sex was had.

I knew she didn't want it.

She was exhausted, so she went straight to sleep.

I was tired too, but all I could do was think. I stared up at the ceiling and pictured the way her parents hugged her goodbye. They were both in tears, even her father. They hugged her so tightly that Adelina had to pull their

hands off.

It was too painful to watch.

Hours passed before I finally drifted off to sleep, my brain shutting down because it didn't want to think anymore. My body found hers, and my arms wrapped around her petite rib cage, holding her like a stuffed animal.

Morning arrived within the blink of an eye.

My eyes opened to Adelina wrapped around my body. Her face rested in the crook of my shoulder, some of her brown hair across my chest. Her arm circled my waist, her petite hand rising and falling with my stomach as I breathed. One slender leg was tucked between my knees. She was clinging to me like I was her savior, not the evil fiend I truly was. She didn't see the world in black and white. Her traumatic experiences taught her that life was much more complicated than that. Maybe I was evil, but I wasn't the kind of evil she needed to be scared of.

I watched her with lidded eyes, waking up to the sound of her gentle breathing. Sometimes she adjusted her position, moved her arm to a different place along my abs. Her lips were parted slightly, and her warm breath fell directly across my skin.

I watched her as the sun rose higher in the sky and flooded the bedroom with morning light. She was usually awake at the crack of dawn, and her sleepiness told me she was knocked out from our long flight.

Since I had work to do, I couldn't wait around forever. I got out of bed, took a quick shower, and then headed to the base. Crow and I had a brief conversation on the phone just before we prepared to leave for our flight, so not much was said.

But he was definitely pissed.

I got to the base, took care of a few things, and then found Crow sitting in the assembly building. The completed guns were stacked on shelves while the others were on tables in the center of the room. The skeletons were done, but the specific parts of the gun work needed to be completed. Crow stood in one of the aisles, his hands resting in his pockets. He was staring straight ahead at a plain wall. He was absolutely still like one of the statues in Rome. His chest didn't rise or fall with a single breath. His expression didn't seem different because he wore the same look of consternation at all times.

But I knew he wasn't the same man anymore.

I walked down the aisle and stopped when I was ten feet away. He was in a black suit, obviously intent on heading to the winery when he was finished at the warehouse. I gave him the opportunity to speak first, to see just how sour his mood was.

But he didn't speak. He didn't even look at me.

This was going to be a bad day.

"Pretty fascinating wall, huh?" I tried to lighten the mood by being a smartass. It usually coaxed Crow into some kind of reaction. I looked at one of the guns sitting on the table and felt it in my hands. I ran my thumb along the smooth barrel before I returned it to the table.

Crow turned his head slightly to look at me, but his reaction was exactly the same. He didn't spit out some harsh insult or tell me to jump off a cliff.

Now I was really worried. "What did Pearl do?"

He turned his gaze back to the wall.

I tried to be patient and wait for Crow to speak when he finally found the words. My brother was the strong and silent type, but he usually had more to say than this. He must have had too many thoughts in his head to keep them

straight. Or his jaw was clenched so tightly that he couldn't unhinge it to talk.

Finally, he said something. "She betrayed me."

Pearl was the loyal type. She'd risked her life to save mine. My brother was always honest, but I didn't believe him for a second. "How so?" In terms of fidelity, she wouldn't cross Crow either. She was committed to him now just as much as she was the day she married him. I didn't see why she loved him or agreed to put up with him for the rest of her life, but I didn't doubt her love.

Crow took a deep breath before he answered, like saying the words took all his energy. "She went to Tristan."

"Tristan?" I asked. "Psychopath Tristan?"

He nodded. "She went by herself to help Adelina."

The words screwed into my brain and an image of Pearl with Tristan appeared in my mind, but I still couldn't believe it. No woman was safe in his domain. He used women like he used bullets, disposing of them the second he used them. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine." He closed his eyes, struggling with another jolt of pain. "Thank fucking god. If she weren't my wife, Tristan would have..." He never finished the sentence, and I knew he never would.

I rubbed my temple, irritated that my sister-in-law was such a stupid idiot. "Jesus Christ. What did she say to him?"

"I don't fucking know. I didn't ask."

"You didn't ask?"

"I was too busy slapping the shit out of her." He suddenly grabbed the table and flipped it over, sending all the equipment flying onto the concrete floor.

His hands gripped his skull like he was melting from a migraine. “I’ve never been so angry in my life. I couldn’t even look at her. I couldn’t say a damn word. I just...snapped. I told her I didn’t want to speak to her for a week. And she hasn’t been stupid enough to try to change my mind.”

“So, let me get this straight...she went all the way to France by herself?”

“Hopped on a plane the second I went to work.”

“How did she figure all of this out?”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter, Cane. She went there without saying a damn word to me. I told her I would do what I could for Adelina. She’s an idiot for thinking she’s smart enough to find a path that I can’t see. She risked her life, risked my whole world, by going there. It’s unforgivable. Un-fucking-forgivable.”

I had a distinct fondness for Pearl and admired her determination, but I had to agree with my brother this time. Her actions were completely naïve. If Crow and I hadn’t been formidable allies, Tristan would have done unspeakable things to her. She would have missed Bones—as crazy as that sounded. I thought my brother overreacted to a lot of things, but this time, his fury was justified. “At least she’s okay.”

He released a quiet growl. “That doesn’t sheathe my anger. If she really wanted to talk to Tristan that badly, we could have worked out a plan together. I could have met with him. I could have just called him. But she’s so arrogant that she thinks she can handle it by herself. Pisses me off.”

“Yeah...”

“Now Tristan and his men think I can’t handle my woman. It’s fucking embarrassing.”

Yeah, that didn’t look good either.



“And now he also knows we want to keep Adelina. That ruins any potential move we could have made.”

“We weren’t going to make a move anyway.” I was going to hand Adelina over in two weeks, and that was the end of the story. I would try to make the last two weeks of her life beautiful, meaningful. But that was the extent of my compassion. The only way I could save her was if I declared a blood war against Tristan and looked over my shoulder for the rest of my life. Bones was finally gone, and I was free. I wasn’t willing to walk back into the shadows—not for her, not for anyone. “What did Pearl say to Tristan?”

“I told you.” He ground his teeth together. “I don’t know.”

“Well, we need to figure it out. If Tristan calls me and I don’t have a clue, I’m going to look like a moron.”

Crow gave a slight nod.

“So talk to Pearl, and let me know what she says.”

“I told you I’m not talking to her.”

Damn, then this fight was serious. “You haven’t spoken to her since she came home?”

He shook his head. “And I’m not going to. I can’t...”

I didn’t ask why because I already knew the reasoning. He was just as pissed now as he was the day she came home. Calm people didn’t flip over a table with valuable weapons on top. He couldn’t keep his hands still or his anger sheathed.

“You talk to her.”

I stood beside him and looked at his profile. He wouldn’t meet my gaze head on. “Me?” Last time I checked, he didn’t want me anywhere near Pearl when

he wasn't around.

"Yes." He pivoted his body and looked me square in the eye. "You."

"What about all that mumbo jumbo about not being alone with her?"

"I don't give a damn anymore. She obviously doesn't care about her safety. Why the fuck should I care?" He walked past me, his muscled physique looking prominent in his tailored suit. He was about to head back to the winery now that he was finished yelling and breaking our stuff. "Tell me what she says."

I'd seen Crow and Pearl fight, but not like this. This was bad. "Okay." If Crow really thought Pearl were in danger, he would do everything he could to keep her safe. So making me talk to her was just the confirmation I'd been wanting to hear—that he did trust me with her. "I'll let you know how it goes."

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LARS ANSWERED THE DOOR AND GAVE A SLIGHT BOW. "MR. BARSETTI, MR. Barsetti isn't here right now. I'll let him know you dropped by."

"I'm not here for him. I'm here for Pearl."

Lars continued to block the doorway, not being the polite butler he usually was. He kept one hand on the door and wore a professional smile that wasn't genuine at all. The only time he seemed to really grin was when he talking to Pearl. "His Grace gave me very specific instructions about Pearl's company. I'm sure you're aware..."

Last time I was alone with Pearl, Crow flipped the hell out. "Yeah, I know. He's had a change of heart."

“Until I hear it from him, you’ll have to come back another time.”

“Come on, Lars. You can’t be serious right now.”

Lars dropped his smile then shut the door. He even locked it.

Wow, what a backhand. I called Crow, told him about the holdup, and then hung up.

A few minutes later, Lars opened the door again. “Please come in, Mr. Barsetti. May I get you anything?”

I rolled my eyes as I walked inside. “Don’t be all nice to me after you shut the door in my face.”

“Just following orders.” He trailed away with his arms behind his back. “I’ll whip up something to eat. Mrs. Barsetti hasn’t been eating lately. Perhaps you could motivate her.” He walked into the kitchen and disappeared.

I checked the downstairs living room but didn’t find her there. I went to the patio next, knowing she preferred to sit outside on a nice day like this. There she was, sitting in one of the lounge chairs in jeans and a black t-shirt. Sunglasses sat on the bridge of her nose, but they didn’t hide the sadness written all over her face. Even when she was exposed to direct sunlight, she looked as pale as a vampire.

I slowly walked toward her, my hands in the pockets of my jeans. A part of me felt responsible for the entire nightmare. If I hadn’t brought Adelina home, none of this would have happened.

But did that make me regret it? No.

I sat in the lounge chair beside her.

She didn’t turn her head in my direction. Her gaze must have flicked to me behind her black glasses. Otherwise, she should be somewhat startled.

I leaned forward with my elbows resting on my knees. My palms rubbed together, and I stared at the black ring I wore on my left hand. Black with a skull in the center, it symbolized a past I'd never forgotten about.

Pearl didn't say anything, just as silent as Crow was.

"So...how's it going?"

No response. She didn't even move. I wasn't entirely sure if she was breathing.

"That bad, huh?"

"What do you want, Cane?"

"Just making sure you're alright."

"Well, I'm not alright. Now what?" She pulled her glasses off and placed them on the table. The sun was directly overhead and no longer in her eyes. She didn't wear any makeup, and her eyes looked heavy-lidded and swollen.

I rubbed my palms together then massaged my wrist. "Anything I can do?"

"No."

"It'll pass. You know how Crow gets..."

"This time is different." She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins, pulling herself into a ball.

She was right. It was different.

"He won't look at me. He won't speak to me. It's been days...but it feels like years."

Pearl always saw the light even when there was only darkness. But now, she looked lost in the shadows. It broke me to see her like this. It even broke me

to see Crow so gloomy. It reminded me of the way he used to be before Pearl walked into our lives. He was never really alive, only a corpse with a working brain. “Then why did you do it? What were you thinking?”

“Patronizing me isn’t going to make me feel better.”

“But seriously, what were you thinking? If Tristan keeps slaves, why did you think it was a good idea to confront him?”

“I knew he wouldn’t touch me since I’m Crow’s wife.”

“In case you don’t remember, Crow stole you from Bones. There’s no reason why someone else wouldn’t want to steal you from him. There’s something about you that makes you more valuable than a bag stuffed with millions. It was risky. Frankly, it was stupid.”

She stared straight ahead over the vineyards. “I’m aware. Thanks for reminding me.”

“You’re always taking crazy risks. Crow has looked the other way most of the time, but this was too much. You know I’m usually on your side most of the time, but this time...I’m on his side. You risked your life needlessly, and Crow and I wouldn’t have been able to save you. Just because you possess the Barsetti name doesn’t make you invincible. Vanessa was raped and murdered. I’ve been shot three times. Crow has been blackmailed... The list goes on. If anything, you’re more vulnerable because you’re more valuable.”

Her eyes shifted down to her feet, and she stared at her toes in her sandals. It was a warm day in the hillside, but the light breeze blew the sweat off our necks. “I can’t let a woman suffer like this. It goes against everything I believe in. There was a woman who used to fix me up for Bones, and I despised her for it. There was no real difference between us. She could have easily been in my position if she just took the wrong turn. And for her to accept my imprisonment... It made me sick to my stomach. If I don’t save

Adelina, that means I'm no better than her."

Whenever she talked about her captivity with Bones, I tried to tune it out. I loved this woman, and knowing she suffered only made me suffer. It made me think of my little sister and what she endured before she was finally shot in the head, her blood spraying all over my brother. It was my job to protect her—and I failed.

Crow failed too.

"It's not easy for me either, Pearl. I don't want Adelina to go through that."

"Then don't send her back." She finally turned to me, looking at me for the first time.

"If it were possible, I would. What exactly did Tristan say to you?"

Her eyes shifted to the landscape again. "I offered to buy her, but he said she wasn't for sale."

I knew that's what his response would be, but I still felt the rush of disappointment anyway. It hurt more than I thought it would, bringing me lower than I already was. "Of course she's not..."

"He said he would only make an exchange—her for me."

That was exactly something Tristan would say. "Don't ever tell Crow he said that." I knew my brother would reach a new height of fury. He would tear down his entire house and drown it in gasoline before he made a huge bonfire. He would never be sane again. Business wouldn't matter to him. Tristan would be at the top of his vendetta list.

"I wasn't planning on it."

Despite how disgusting Tristan's statement was, I couldn't be too angry. Pearl was the one who went to his turf on her own. She had no business being

there, and I was certain she was a smartass the entire time. The fact that he didn't lay a hand on her was the ultimate sign of respect to both Crow and me. "And that's not an option—accept it."

"I couldn't take her place even if I wanted to."

At least she wasn't a flight risk. "Did he say anything else?"

"Just stupid banter. Said Adelina was his favorite whore, and he missed her." Both of her hands tightened into fists. "If I'd had a gun, I would have shot him."

"And you would be dead, so I'm glad you didn't bring one."

"I hate feeling this way," she whispered. "I want to get her out of this situation...she deserves better."

Adelina was an exceptional woman who had a strength that matched Pearl's. Her quiet beauty, her gorgeous eyes, the sound of her voice...all of it was hypnotic. "I wish I could help her too. But there's nothing we can do. You need to let it go and move on."

"There has to be something..."

"Unless I refuse to give her up. But that will lead to a war. And since he already has my shipment of weapons...the timing isn't great. Men will die. Crow and I will be vulnerable. You'll be vulnerable. It's not worth it."

She stared across the fields, solemn. "Then what will happen to her?"

"She'll suffer...then she'll die."

"I'd rather just die instead."

I debated telling Pearl what I'd offered Adelina. The cyanide pills would induce a heart attack. It would be painful, but it would be over quickly. It

would look natural, that the pressure of her treatment caused her to collapse. And then it would be over. She would finally be free.

I felt so sick.

“It hurts so much,” she whispered. “It hurts that I’m free and she’s not.”

“You got lucky, Pearl. If Crow hadn’t fallen in love with you, who knows what would have happened.”

“Yes, I’m very lucky. Or at least I *was* lucky.”

“He’ll come around,” I repeated. “He always does.”

“He hasn’t looked at me or spoken to me in days. My own husband wants nothing to do with me...”

My eyes shifted to the ground.

“But I’m angry with him too, so it’s not like I want to talk to him either.”

She was angry at him? I didn’t think she had any right to be. She was the one who stormed off and put herself in danger. “What did he do?”

“When I came back from seeing Tristan...he lost his temper.”

“What does that mean?”

“He slapped me.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “So?”

“So?” she countered. “I’m his wife, not his prisoner. He can’t treat me that way.”

“You walked right into the lion’s den. He needed to punish you so you would learn from your mistakes. If you ask me, he should have slapped you a few more times.”



Pearl looked at me like I was about to get a knife in the throat. “Excuse me?”

“You don’t listen. You put yourself at risk all the time. How will you learn? You’re like a child that needs to be spanked. But since you like being spanked, he needed to do something else.”

“I don’t put myself at risk all the time.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “You went shopping by yourself in Florence.”

“I can’t believe he told you about that.”

“And you took my place with Bones, leaving Crow without giving him a chance to do anything about it.”

“We both know he would have stopped me.”

“And he should have stopped you,” I snapped. “It was a stupid decision.”

She stared at me with fierce eyes that were as sharp as daggers. “You’re alive because of that stupid decision. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“But I wasn’t worth the risk. You should have let me die, Pearl.”

She shook her head.

“And now you’ve pulled this stunt. It’s obviously a pattern with you.”

She looked away, shutting me out.

“I know you don’t want to listen to me ridicule your decisions, but I’ve got to be honest. We live in a dangerous world. You need to be more careful. I’m not just saying this as Crow’s brother—I’m saying it as your brother too.”

Her pissed expression finally slipped away, and her features softened. She turned back to me, looking at me with blue eyes, unveiled and true. Her

hostility had finally evaporated like water on a hot pan, the steam drifting above our heads and headed somewhere else. “I know, Cane.”

**PEARL**

FIVE DAYS CAME AND WENT.

Crow and I didn't speak to each other. We took our meals in different rooms. I slept in the master bedroom, and he slept in a guest room on the second floor. Lars brought all of Crow's clothes to the guest bedroom so he didn't even have a reason to come into the bedroom we shared. Tensions seemed to escalate with every passing day rather than die out.

It was getting worse.

I was sick of the silent treatment. I was sick of the neglect. I would much rather listen to him yell at me than pretend I didn't exist.

The loneliness was the worst part.

He told me he didn't want to speak to me for an entire week. It'd only been five days, so I had to wait a little longer. Since I never usually listened to him, I decided to listen to him this one time. I pressed through the final few days, not eating or sleeping. Without his smell on the sheets, I couldn't close my eyes. Not sharing my meals with him made me lose my appetite. I felt like I'd lost more than my husband—but my entire life.

On the eighth day, I waited at the foot of the staircase. He'd have to walk past

me if he wanted to get to his room, and there was no way he would ignore me now. At five o'clock on the dot, he left his car with the valet then walked inside.

Lars greeted him and took his coat. "Good evening, Your Grace. Dinner will be ready in an hour."

Crow's only response was a nod. He loosened the buttons along the wrists of his collared shirt as he approached me. It took him three steps to realize I was standing there. He didn't break his stride, but his eyes darkened noticeably.

He was still livid.

He rolled up his sleeves to his elbows and stopped at the foot of the stairs. I stood on the bottom step, but he was still taller than me. His cream-colored shirt and pale blue tie contrasted against the darkness of his hair and eyes. Even when he was smiling, he still took on a formidable appearance. He was dark like the shadows, constantly consumed by the night. He looked at me with cruel indifference, not a single drop of affection.

Now that I was face-to-face with him, I didn't know where to begin.

Crow excused my silence by walking around me and heading up the stairs.

Were these past seven days easier for him than they were for me?

I turned around and followed him, trailing behind him until he reached his bedroom. He stepped inside and unbuttoned his collared shirt, preparing to get in the shower like he usually did right after work.

I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

He turned around and pulled his tie out of his collar. His shirt was open, revealing a tanned and muscular physique. His chest muscles were thick and hard like concrete. His chiseled stomach disappeared into his waistband, a

hint of the V noticeable.

His sexiness didn't distract me, but seeing him nearly shirtless made me miss him even more. I used to sleep right on his chest every night. Now I was on a completely different floor of this mansion.

Crow didn't speak, which was normal for him. But right now, it drove me crazy. I wish he would speak his mind so I would know what he was thinking. "Say what you came to say. If not, I'm getting in the shower."

Fucking asshole. "Has this week been easy for you?"

"No." He pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor.

I actually missed picking up his things.

"But that's because I'm still as pissed today as I was a week ago."

I crossed my arms over my chest, refusing to be intimidated by him. "I told you I was trying to help her. I had good intentions."

"I don't give a shit what your intentions were. Do you have any idea what would happen to me if you were taken?"

"But I wasn't—"

"My entire life would have ended." He took a step toward me, his dark eyes burning me like hot coals. "Everything I worked toward would be nothing. I'd have to kill Tristan and all of his men in retaliation. It would probably claim my life in the process. Cane's too. And even if it didn't, I would be haunted by the cruel and sick things they were doing to you. I'd have to suffer every single day until I got you back. And even if I did get you back, I still would have suffered. Just because Bones is dead doesn't mean my nightmares have stopped." It was the first time he had said that name to me since he was killed, no longer cushioning my feelings. "Sometimes I can't

breathe, Pearl. Sometimes I think about what he did to you, and my chest caves in.” He moved even closer to me, Crow’s frame making me step back. “I don’t show this side of me when you’re around. I take a drive to the countryside, suffering in my own captivity because I know you can’t help me. It’ll only make you feel just as terrible as I do.”

Moisture built up in my eyes, but I refused to let it turn to tears.

“And then I think about Vanessa... I couldn’t save her.” He pointed to my chest. “But I saved you. You fixed the hole she left behind. You make me feel sane, make me feel whole. Despite the burden of your past, you make me complete. And if I lost that...I would have nothing left. This house is nothing without having you to share it with. My life is nothing without having you to share it with. So when will you understand, Pearl?”

My eyes shifted back and forth as I looked into his.

“You took a knife and stabbed me with it. You ripped my heart out of my chest and stepped on it. You disrespected me, humiliated me. You risked the one thing that I can’t live without. All I want is to keep you safe and protect you. But you spit on that every single chance you get. Don’t apologize to me because there will be no forgiveness, Pearl. Not this time.”

“I wasn’t apologizing...”

His eyes narrowed in the fiercest glare I’d ever seen. “Think carefully before you speak, Pearl. Very carefully...”

“I was trying to save her.”

“And you risked my life to do it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You risked your life, which is the same as mine,” he hissed. “We are one

person, Pearl.” He held up one finger as he looked at me. “You told me this was important to you, so I tried to figure out a way to make this work. But there was no solution. You act like I didn’t try.”

“I know you tried...but I wanted to try harder.”

“This woman is a stranger. You risked our entire lives for this person you don’t even know.”

“She’s not a stranger. She’s a human being.”

He stepped back and sighed, trying to control his anger. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes looked frightening. “So we’re equal, then? Your husband and some stranger have equal value to you?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You’re right, it’s not. But it’s what you proved to me when you risked everything for her.” He turned around and rubbed his hand over the scruff of his jaw. His back rose and fell at a rapid pace as he did his best to control his rage. “Get out, Pearl. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“You can’t just ignore me again.”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want.” He turned around, looking more livid than he did before. “If you don’t want to get slapped, you should leave.”

“Don’t talk to me that way.”

“Then don’t betray me,” he snarled. “I don’t ask for much, Pearl.”

“You owe me an apology.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I owe *you* an apology?” He tilted his head slightly. “Are you insane?”

“You shouldn’t have hit me like that.”

For just an instant, his eyes softened. But his furious look returned so quickly I wasn't sure if I saw it in the first place. "You don't respect our marriage. So why should I?"

"Crow, I didn't do it because of us. I did because of this poor woman—"

"Then you need to put us first. It's that simple. I'm your husband. I should always be at the top of your damn list." He yanked his belt out of his loops then tossed it on the floor. "Get out. I don't want to look at you right now."

"Crow—"

He grabbed me by the neck and squeezed. His grip was tight, but I could still breathe. "Get. Out." He dropped his hand and walked into the bathroom, slamming the door just for my benefit.

Once the shower turned on, I let the moisture in my eyes turn into drops. I let the tears flood my cheeks, succumbing to the heartbreak.

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IT SEEMED AS IF THINGS WERE WORSE NOW THAN BEFORE.

I was sorry for hurting him, for causing him the kind of pain he described, but I couldn't apologize for being who I was. It wasn't in my nature to stand by and do nothing while an innocent person suffered. I couldn't stop until I tried every single outlet. If Crow and Cane had given up on me easily, then I wouldn't be alive right now.

I wish he understood that.

It was another night of bad sleep. I wondered if Crow was sleeping any better. He'd been an insomniac before I came around, usually drinking scotch until he passed out from the liquor.



I didn't want him to go back to that.

He had his breakfast in the dining room, the same place we used to have breakfast together every morning. Lars had been bringing my tray directly to my room, and I ate on the terrace.

But today, I walked into the dining room.

Crow was in his crisp suit and tie, the newspaper open in front of him. He was eating the same thing he always ate, egg whites with asparagus. He took his coffee black, dark just like him. He barely lifted his gaze when I walked inside. He took one look at me, seemed bored, and then returned his gaze to his newspaper.

I wasn't there to fight. I was there to take a step in the right direction. Despite his coldness and cruelty, I loved him so much it hurt. A life without him was one I couldn't contemplate. It would be the same as it was when I was back in Manhattan—empty of all feeling. “I going to go to Cane's place today and spend some time with Adelina. Do you have a problem with that?” It actually hurt my mouth to say the words, to ask for permission when I shouldn't have to ask for anything. But these actions would mean a lot more to him than an apology.

His eyes darted up from the newspaper, and he stared at me with a different gaze. It wasn't cold. It wasn't cruel. It resembled the same look he used to give me every single day. “No, I don't have a problem with that.” He was finished speaking, but he didn't turn his eyes back to the newspaper. His stare was reserved for me.

I missed that stare so much.

“Can I take one of the cars? Or would you rather drop me off?” These questions weren't as difficult to ask. When I gave him what he wanted, he responded positively. He was more handsome when he didn't look so fierce.

Both of his arms were resting on the table, his silver cuff links exposed and shiny. His tie was yellow that morning, bright in comparison to his dark suit. His hair was combed neatly, but he still hadn't shaved. His facial hair was coming in thick, thicker than I'd ever seen it. "I'll drive you. But I'd rather have the two of you at the winery. Do you have a problem with that?"

Instead of making a cold demand and expecting me to follow it blindly, he met me halfway. When I gave him what he wanted, he gave me what I wanted in return. I couldn't complain. "No."

He picked up the newspaper again. "I'm leaving in fifteen minutes."

"Okay." I knew the conversation was over, so I turned around.

"Button."

I halted in my tracks and felt tears sting my eyes. He hadn't called me that in over a week, but it felt like an eternity. I stood still, savoring his tone as well as the word itself. "Hmm?"

"Thank you."

---

CROW DROVE THROUGH THE COUNTRYSIDE ON THE WAY TO CANE'S HOUSE, bypassing the traffic on the busier streets. The scenic route was better anyway. It seemed like we were the only two people in this beautiful land.

He drove with one hand on the wheel while the other rested on the gearshift. He looked straight ahead, not giving me more than a glance. His silence wasn't as tense, and it wasn't outright hostile either.

We didn't try to have a conversation.

I looked out the window and didn't know how to talk to my own husband. I

knew he was still pissed at me. Otherwise, he would hold my hand on the drive. He didn't want to scream at me anymore, but our fight certainly wasn't water under the bridge.

We pulled up to the roundabout, and Crow honked the horn.

Adelina came outside a moment later, dressed in black jeans and a white top. Her hair was in loose curls, meaning she got her hands on a curling iron. Maybe Cane bought one for her. She got into the back seat and pulled her seat belt on. "Morning."

Crow was far nicer to her than he'd been to me. "Good morning, Adelina."

I almost glared at him. "Hey. Ready for another day at the winery?"

"Yes." She looked out the window as Crow drove away from the house. "I'm excited. It's so beautiful there. Not that it's not beautiful here...but I get lonely when Cane isn't around."

That implied she missed him when he wasn't there. It reminded me of how I felt about Crow in the beginning of our relationship. He was my captor, but I didn't like it when he wasn't around. The feelings were difficult to understand.

Crow drove to the winery, turning on the music and playing something Italian. I understood a few words here and there, but since Crow and Lars both spoke English to me, I'd never been pressed to learn it.

A few minutes later, we pulled up to the winery and got out of the car.

"Let me know if you need anything." Crow dismissed us and walked inside to his office. He didn't kiss me goodbye like he usually did. He walked away, treating me like I was nothing special.

It hurt.

Adelina didn't notice the strain. "What should we do first?"

---

WE FINISHED THE LAST WINE TASTING FOR TOURISTS AND THEN CLOSED UP FOR the day. I washed the wineglasses while Adelina corked the bottles and returned them to the small fridge. We wrapped up the leftover cheese and bread and saved them for the following day. Most of the tourists spoke English, and they seemed excited when they encountered someone who could speak their language so well. Only a handful of times had there been visitors speaking Italian and no English at all. In those instances, I had one of the other workers help me out.

"Everything okay?" Adelina dried the wineglasses with a towel then stacked them on the rack.

"Yeah. Why?" I folded the cheese in foil before placing it in an airtight plastic bag.

"Crow usually comes by a few times during the day. But he didn't come by at all." She stood on the other side of the bar, her eyes concentrating on her hands.

She was more observant than I gave her credit for. "We...we're in the middle of a fight right now."

"Oh...I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks."

"But whatever it is, I know you guys will work it out."

"Why do you say that?" Adelina didn't know us very well. She barely knew Cane since she'd only been living with him for a few weeks.

“I can see how much he loves you. And you wear that same expression for him.” She gave me a smile before she placed each wineglass within the cabinet. The tables in the warehouse were covered with bits of food and stains of wine, so she wiped them all down with a damp cloth.

I hoped she was right. “Yeah...I’m sure we’ll work it out.”

“Do you mind if I ask what you’re fighting about?” She knocked all the crumbs onto the ground before she tossed the towel in the dirty hamper.

Cane was probably going to tell her anyway, so there was no point in keeping it from her. I put everything away then took a seat at random in the lobby. The sun was going down over the hillsides. In the next hour, it would be dusk. “Well...I went to see Tristan in France.”

Adelina blanched at the sound of his name. After she halted for several seconds, she slowly walked to my table and took a seat in the chair facing me. “You went by yourself?”

“Yeah. I thought I could figure out a way to free you.”

She was overcome with emotion, and her eyes immediately watered. “Pearl... I don’t know what to say.”

“But he wouldn’t work with me. I offered to buy you, but he said you weren’t for sale.”

“I hope he didn’t hurt you.”

“No, he didn’t touch me. He wouldn’t cross Crow.”

“That was so dangerous, Pearl. You shouldn’t have done that.”

Now she was the third person to tell me that. “Crow thinks the same thing. That’s why he’s pissed at me. He’s upset that I risked myself like that.”

“I can’t blame him. When a man loves a woman, he’ll do everything he possibly can to protect her.”

“I guess. He’s just so angry...” I wouldn’t tell her the details of the fights we had. The poor girl didn’t need to hear about it.

“And passionate. It’s better to have a man obsessed with you than be indifferent.”

I’d recently learned that.

“And Tristan is a psychopath. I’m so glad he didn’t do anything to you. I know you understand what it’s like to be...you know...but he’s foul. He’s an absolute monster. No woman should be subjected to that.”

“Exactly, which is why I want to save you.”

She reached across the table and took my hand in hers. “I appreciate it, Pearl. Really, I do. You and Crow are so sweet...Cane is too. I’m so lucky that I met all of you, that I’ve been given these thirty days to be at peace...”

She was still a prisoner, but she considered herself lucky. Perhaps Cane really did treat her well.

“But don’t let this upset you. Don’t let the weight crush your shoulders. You’ve tried your hardest to help me, but there’s nothing that can be done. If Lizzie weren’t still a prisoner, things could be different...but I can’t turn my back on her.” Adelina gave my hand a squeeze before she pulled away. “The three of you have done enough...truly.”

She was the one consoling me when I should be consoling her. No wonder why Cane was so infatuated with her. “I’ll try to remember that.”

She pulled her hand away and leaned back against the chair. “Cane has done so much for me. He’s rough around the edges and he comes with a bite, but

he's a great man underneath all that armor. He's been taking me sight-seeing, stuffing me with more food than I can eat, and..." She took a deep breath as her eyes watered.

I waited on the edge of my seat.

"He took me to my parents...so I could say goodbye."

He did what? "Where do your parents live?"

"In South Carolina."

Cane took her all the way to America so she could see her family? When did he do this? Why did he do this?

"He said I couldn't call them. Phones are tapped, and it's too dangerous. But he brought me to their house in the middle of the night so I could see them for a while...so I could tell them what happened to me. I didn't want them to live the rest of their lives not knowing...and Cane gave that to me."

I couldn't form anything remotely coherent to say. Cane flew her all the way back to America, risked getting caught by the police, just to give her something she asked for. Her parents could have called the cops instead. He really risked his neck for this woman. "At least you got to see them..."

"Yeah. I'll never be able to thank Cane for his kindness."

"Even though he's a criminal and he's using you for thirty days?" It wasn't tactful or polite, but I didn't think Cane should get more credit than he deserved.

She considered her response for a long time before she said it. "I'm not saying Cane is a saint. But he's never made me do anything I didn't want to do. He doesn't hurt me. He talks to me. He says he would free me if he could...it's the most luxurious way of being a prisoner."

**ADELINA**

CROW DROPPED ME OFF AT THE HOUSE, AND I WALKED INSIDE.

Cane was at the stove, working the hot pans as steam rose to the vent. He was in a black t-shirt and black jeans, looking exactly the way I pictured a criminal would look—just without all the scars.

“What’s this?” Cane and I hadn’t slept together since we’d returned from South Carolina. I’d been too emotional for sex, and Cane must have picked up on that because he didn’t try to make anything happen.

I was lucky that he even cared.

Cane turned the fire down low then wiped his hands on a towel. “Dinner.”

“You cooked?”

“Now that you’re a working girl, I had to step up.” He wore a playful smile when he looked at me, telling me it was perfectly okay that I was gone all day while he was working.

“What a nice surprise.”

He placed everything on two plates and left the pans in the sink. We sat in the dining room, in front of the large redwood window that looked over the



vineyards in the distance. The sun was almost gone, and the birds were chirping outside. We drank a bottle of Barsetti wine as we ate.

Cane stared at me most of the time, chewing slowly with his eyes trained on me. He'd shaved that morning, so his chin was absent of hair. I liked the shaved look, but I also liked it when his beard was coming in. There wasn't a look that he couldn't pull off. "How was the winery?"

"Good. I helped Pearl with the tastings."

"Get a lot of people in?"

"A ton. Mostly tourists."

"I don't think they're big fans of the wine. I think they just love the property."

"It is beautiful." I swirled the glass I was holding. "But I do think the wine is delicious."

"I guess I'm just used to it."

"No. You just like to pick on your brother any chance you get." I smiled at him, telling him I was teasing him.

He shrugged and kept eating. "You seem to be in a good mood today."

I hadn't spoken much since we'd come back to Italy. I'd needed a few nights of sleep before I could get back to a state of calm. Seeing my parents made me more emotional than I could handle. "It was nice to get out of the house."

"Pearl keeps you company?"

"Yeah, but she and Crow are fighting right now."

When Cane didn't ask any questions about it, I assumed that meant he knew about it.

“She told you she talked to Tristan?”

He nodded then kept eating.

“I can’t believe she did that.”

“She’s an idiot. I won’t tell you otherwise.”

“I wouldn’t call her an idiot...”

“She a tough girl, but she thinks she’s stronger than she really is. Her overinflated ego has nearly gotten her killed a few times. I don’t blame Crow for being mad. I would feel the same way if my wife did something reckless like that.”

The idea of him having a wife suddenly made me sad. If he settled down and got married someday, I would be dead and gone—probably for years. He would love her, have children with her, and they would grow old in this big, beautiful house.

It was the kind of future I would never have. I would miss out on so many things, things I never had the opportunity to experience. My appetite was gone, but I kept eating, not wanting to make it obvious that statement hurt. I wasn’t jealous that he would be with someone else. I was just sad that he would move on with his life...and I would die in that cell with a cyanide pill in my stomach.

“Everything alright?”

Maybe I wasn’t as sly as I thought. “I just hope the two of them work it out.”

“Don’t worry about it. Pearl can do anything, and Crow will forgive her for it. Not because he’s a pushover, just because he loves her so damn much. He doesn’t say it a lot, but he makes it pretty damn obvious anytime they’re in the same room together.”

“That’s sweet.”

“I knew he loved her even before he did.” Cane wiped his plate clean, eating every single morsel like he’d skipped breakfast and lunch.

I ate a few more bites, but that was the most I could stomach.

Cane eyed my plate, which was still half full. “Can’t eat anymore?”

I knew he was trying to fatten me up on purpose. As soon as I went back to Tristan, I would be starved around the clock. Tristan wouldn’t like the weight I’d put on, so he would probably starve me on purpose. “I’m pretty full.”

Cane didn’t push it on me. “I’ll save this for you.” He took both of our plates and put my leftovers in a plastic container.

I moved to the sink and did the dishes.

“What are you doing?”

I glanced at him over my shoulder, seeing the stern look on his face. “Just trying to help out.”

“The maids will do that in the morning. Don’t worry about it.”

“You got maids? I thought my job was to cook and clean.”

“Well, you’ve been promoted.” He came to my side at the sink and turned off the faucet. “You only have one job in this house—and it’s not cooking or cleaning.”

---

HE SAT BESIDE ME ON THE COUCH, ENJOYING HIS SCOTCH WHILE HE WATCHED the Italian news. His arm rested around my shoulders as his knees sat far apart. His muscled thighs were noticeable in his jeans. He drank his scotch,

glanced at me, and then looked at the TV again. “What would you like to see tomorrow?”

“Like to see?”

“Any other parts of Italy?”

“Cane, you don’t need to keep taking time off work for me.” He’d already done enough for me. “I’m happy going to the winery with Crow and Pearl.”

“I don’t mind. I haven’t taken a vacation in a long time. So tell me.”

“Uh...I’ve always wanted to see Siena.”

“Then we’ll go tomorrow.”

“Well...thanks. Maybe Pearl and Crow could come along.”

“No. If I’m not around, then Crow needs to be available to handle a potential disaster.”

“What kind of disasters do you face?” I asked.

He took a long drink of his scotch. “People who think they can undercut us or overrun us. Stuff like that.”

I nodded even though I didn’t understand at all. “What time do you want to leave?”

“First thing in the morning. I want to beat the tourists.” He grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. “Let’s go to bed.”

I followed him upstairs and entered the bedroom. It was a cool night, so Cane knelt down and got a fire going in the hearth. He didn’t have a TV in his bedroom, but most of the other rooms had them. All of my things were stored in my bedroom down the hall, but I just assumed he wanted me beside him. I hadn’t been screwing him for the past few nights, but he expected me to sleep

with him.

I changed out of my clothes and pulled on one of his cotton t-shirts from the drawer. I'd probably just take this off anyway, but at least I had one picked out. I pulled back the covers and got into bed.

Cane washed his hands in the bathroom before he returned. He turned off all the lights so only the crackling fire brought illumination into the room. The heat slowly filled the bedroom, reaching the four corners and chasing away the chill.

He stripped off his clothes, dropping his boxers along with everything else, and then got into bed. The light from the flames licked his skin, highlighting the definition of his arms and shoulders.

He got comfortable beside me but didn't smother me with his masculine affection. His powerful arms didn't form a steel cage around my body. He didn't heat my side of the bed with his personal heating system.

I stared at him with the sheets pulled to my shoulders, wondering what he was thinking. His chiseled jaw was set firmly in place, and his green eyes didn't give anything away. He stared at me without blinking, his dark hair repositioning as he lay on the pillow.

It didn't seem like he was tired, judging by the pointed stare directed my way. But he didn't start a conversation or touch me. He just stayed put.

I knew this had something to do with our trip to South Carolina. He assumed I wasn't ready, was too much emotional to feel an ache between my legs. The restraint spoke to his kindness. I could be bleeding, but Tristan didn't care about my feelings. He took what he wanted like he'd owned me my entire life. But Cane gave me power the second I was in his captivity. I could do whatever I wanted—and we both knew it. I didn't even have to sleep with him, and he wouldn't send me back.

I was a very lucky woman.

Cane sold illegal weapons to clients, had a secret power over Italy. He and his brother were mixed up with the craziest characters, men who were so evil the police couldn't even retaliate. I'd seen that kind of barbaric cruelty, had been at the hands of it myself. Now that I knew what evil looked like, I didn't recognize it in Cane.

Not at all.

He was my friend, my confidant. He was my safe place. I knew I would think of him when Tristan had his hands around my neck. When things got really rough, I would think about the way Cane would look at me—just like this.

And when I took those pills, I would think of him until the darkness came for me.

When I thought of the future, it dragged me down like a weight tied to my ankle. I still had a few weeks before I had to think of that terror, so I put it out of my mind. Right now, I was in a comfortable bed with a roaring fire—and a handsome man was staring at me.

A handsome man who wanted me.

I scooted closer to him under the sheets and pressed my mouth lightly to his. The second our lips touched, I felt the shivers run all over my body. His lips were soft and full, and the hair around his mouth gently scraped against my skin. I liked feeling that hair, feeling the masculine shadow that was prevalent on his face every morning.

My hand moved to his chest, and I explored his muscularity, feeling the way each muscle combined with the next one. His skin was soft, but underneath that gentleness was concrete. My fingertips loved feeling his strength because it made me feel safe. Cane was my personal gate, my personal protection

against anything that could hurt me. For the next couple weeks, every single hair on my head was safe. No one could touch me, could get past this powerful man.

Once he felt my kiss, he moved his hand around my waist and felt the soft skin of my back. He explored the deep curve in the area between my shoulder blades. Sometimes his fingers felt my hair as it trailed down my back.

His kisses grew deeper, more intense. Sometimes he gave me his tongue, and sometimes he pulled my bottom lip into his mouth. He squeezed me, gripped me, devoured me. When his patience disappeared, he rolled me onto my back and held his mass on top of mine. “Are you ready?”

He gave me all the power and didn’t bother hiding it. He allowed me to make the decisions, to have the ability to override him. If I didn’t want this, all I had to do was say it. This kind of freedom was addicting, and the more he gave it to me, the more I wanted him.

The more I adored him.

“Yes...I want you.” I hooked my legs around his waist and locked my ankles together. I pulled him tightly against me, his cock pressed against my folds. I was already wet for him, my body getting ready to take his impressive length.

He spoke into my mouth, accompanied by a hot breath. “*Bellissima...*” He tilted his hips and pressed his cock inside me, slowly sliding inside as his length became coated in my desire. He breathed harder as he felt me, his body tensing in pleasure. He inched farther and farther until he was plunged deep inside me, our bodies connected.

I took a deep breath once I felt all of him. “Cane...”

He held his weight on his arms and burned his gaze into me, fucking me with his eyes as much as his body. He rocked into me slowly, getting used to me

like he hadn't had me in weeks instead of days.

I moved with him, matching his slow pace and pulling him into me by the hips. We were hardly moving at all, our thrusts slow and measured, but it felt better than it ever had before. My eyes were locked to his, and I felt my body already begin to betray me.

"Fuck..." He stopped when he was deep inside me, pausing as he closed his eyes.

"I'm gonna come too."

He breathed another sigh. "How could I forget how good you felt?" He started to move again, this time quicker than before. He rolled his hips at the end of every thrust, grinding against my clit as he tried to drive me into a climax.

"Right there..."

He thrust harder, his chest heaving with the breaths he took.

"Yes..." My hands gripped his hips, and I pulled him into me more. "God..." I came around him, my body clenching and tightening around his length. My eyes closed, and I struggled to breathe because my body only wanted to scream.

"Jesus Christ..." Cane pounded into me harder, making my climax more intense as he reached his own threshold. His cock thickened inside me as he released, giving me a heavy load of come. His thrusts slowed down as he finished, riding his high just as mine ended.

It was the shortest time it ever had taken me to climax. It'd only been three days since we were last together, but apparently, my body was used to having him on a regular basis. Once he was gone, my body didn't know how to handle it.



He stayed deep inside me, obviously having no intention of leaving anytime soon. “How do you expect me to last when you do that?”

“Do what?” I had no control over my body when we were together. When he kissed me, touched me, fucked me, I turned into a whirlwind of hormones. All I could do was feel, certainly not think.

He kissed me as he shoved his softening cock farther inside me. “What you’re doing now.” He rubbed his nose against mine as he stayed buried inside me. “Being beautiful.”

**CROW**

I WASN'T QUITE AS ANGRY WITH MY WIFE.

But still pissed enough.

I wanted an apology for what she'd done, an acknowledgment that she was wrong and she would change her ways. Until I got that, she would continue to be a victim of my silence. When she asked if she could pick up Adelina and spend time with her, it was a step in the right direction. Button would never ask me something like that normally, and I appreciated that she was trying.

But it wasn't quite good enough.

I continued to use one of the guest bedrooms as my personal space, rarely having interactions with her when I was at home. I spent more time at work because there was nothing waiting for me at home.

I knew my indifference was hurting her, but I wasn't ready.

Not after what she did to me. I would much rather bear the pain of catching her with another man than find out she'd put herself at risk with Tristan. It would break my heart to the same degree, but at least her life would never be in jeopardy.

Every time I thought about what she did, I was pissed all over again.

She could have died.

Or worse. And I didn't want to think about what worse meant.

I finished the day at the winery then walked into the warehouse where the wine tastings were. Button was done for the day and hung up the last wineglass in the case. The counters and tables were wiped down, and the place was ready to go for the following afternoon. I stood there with my hands in my pockets and watched her until she noticed me.

It didn't take long for her to figure out I was there. Like a sixth sense, she could feel me before she actually saw me. She picked up on my presence, my heavy mood. She turned around and looked at me, her eyes slightly affectionate. She tossed the rag into the hamper then pulled her hair over one shoulder. "Hey."

I wasn't in the mood for conversation, so I didn't say anything.

She didn't seem surprised by my silence. She joined me at the entrance to the warehouse and moved into my chest, about to stand on her tiptoes she could kiss me on the lips.

I stepped away before she could succeed.

Button released a quiet sigh of annoyance and walked back to the car with me.

Once we were on the road and headed back home, she spoke her mind. "So you're never going to kiss your wife again?"

"Who said anything about never?"

"It feels like it's been an eternity."

“When you’ve been betrayed, days feel like weeks.” I drove with one hand on the wheel while my other hand rested on the gearshift. My eyes were glued in front of me, driving through the hills and vineyards on our way back to my estate.

She sighed loud enough for me to hear then looked out the window.

I ignored her hostility. She thought she was mad, but she didn’t even know the definition.

I fucking coined it.

“You won’t believe what Adelina told me.”

I kept my eyes on the road.

“Cane took her to South Carolina so she could see her parents.”

Cane told me he left the country for business, but he never told me specifically what he was doing. He purposely kept it from me because he knew I would disapprove. Security was tight in America. It was surprising that he got Adelina in and out without any problems.

“I can’t believe he did that for her.”

Cane had a soul buried deep inside that empty chest of his. He didn’t have a heart, but at least he had spirit.

“Adelina talks about him like he’s a savior...that he’s made her life enjoyable. Maybe he has. But it still kills me that she has to go back. I know I need to let it go, but it’s hard.”

“Then stop thinking about it.”

She turned her head toward me, her eyes narrowed in anger. “I’m not heartless like you, Crow.”

“We both know I’m not heartless.” When I’d figured out where she was, my heart stopped. I’d actually lost my breath, and not in a good way. Someone pulled the earth from under my feet and made me topple to the floor. Everything in my body shut down because my heart took over. All I felt was pain, terror, and absolute fear. I’d almost died before, and that was exactly how it felt in that moment.

After a long stretch of silence, she threw her arms down. “Enough of this. You need to let it go.”

“Never.”

“Never?” she asked incredulously. “So you’re just going to be mad forever?”

I turned right and drove down the final street before the estate.

“Damn, you’re even more stubborn than I realized.”

I pulled into the roundabout in front of my house and handed the keys over to the valet. Pearl and I got out and walked into the house.

Lars greeted us. “Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Barsetti. Dinner will be ready shortly.”

“Thank you, Lars.” I stripped my jacket off and laid it over his outstretched arm.

“We’ll both be having dinner on the terrace this evening.” Button gave me a meaningful look, as if she dared me to defy her.

She obviously didn’t know me very well if she thought I wouldn’t.

Unsure what to do, Lars turned to me for direction. “Your Grace?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. She didn’t realize that when she was angry, she actually looked cute. But that cuteness didn’t have

any effect on me now.

Lars continued to wait.

“I’m having dinner with you wherever you go, Crow,” Button said as she walked to the staircase. “I’m tired of waiting.” She took the steps to the next floor, heading to our bedroom to shower after the long day in the heat.

The only response I gave to Lars was a nod.

---

SHE WAS ALREADY SITTING AT THE TABLE WHEN I WALKED OUTSIDE. I WAS IN jeans and a t-shirt, and so was she. Her thick, dark hair was curled and fluffed around her shoulders. Her makeup was heavy, her eyes smoky. She purposely did herself the way I liked, trying to seduce me with those red lips and thick eyelashes.

It wouldn’t work.

The second I sat down, Lars brought our dinner and filled our glasses with wine. The candles on the table were lit, and dusk settled over the fields.

Button drank her wine as she looked at me.

I cut into my food, hardly looking at her.

“This is ridiculous.” She set her glass down. “You must know that.”

“I agree. We shouldn’t be in this situation at all.”

Her eyes lit up with anger. “I already explained why I did it.”

“I never asked for a justification.”

“Then what are you looking for?”

My eyes zeroed in on her face, and I didn't even blink. "You know exactly what I'm looking for, Button." This was a recurring problem with my wife. I respected her fire, her drive, and determination. I loved the fact that she never gave up, no matter what odds she was up against. But her recklessness was infuriating. My patience had officially expired.

Her fingers rested on the stem of the glass, and she stared at me with the same intensity. "Spell it out for me."

"I want an apology. And I want a change."

"A change?"

"I want you to promise that this phase is over. That you won't go anywhere by yourself, that you won't interfere in things that don't concern you, and most importantly, that you will always put your safety above everything else."

"You can't expect me never to go anywhere alone," she snapped. "I want to go grocery shopping. I want—"

"And you can do those things after you inform me."

She rolled her eyes.

I stared at her harder. "You think this is a joke?"

She stared at her glass.

"You want us to move forward?" I asked coldly. "Then this is how it has to be. You've risked your life enough times. You've hurt me enough times. This conversation needs to happen. Your cooperation needs to happen. If you're truly sorry, this shouldn't be a problem for you."

"Compromising isn't a problem," she said. "But I can't live my life that way, Crow. I want to take our kids to get ice cream after school...stuff like that."

She definitely wasn't taking our kids out alone. "For a woman so bright, I don't understand why you don't get it." My ferocity was coming to the surface again, my patience disappearing. "Do you not understand what I do for a living?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you not understand that people want to kill me?"

"I get that, but—"

"Do you not understand that I can't have a normal life? I'll always have to look over my shoulder. I'll always have to be paranoid about someone trying to take away the most important thing in the world—you. I'm sorry you don't get to have an easy life with a nobody husband. I'm sorry you can't have the luxury of driving to the store whenever you want. But that's how it is, Button. You married me—this is what you get. If you don't like it, maybe we should talk about our options."

Her eyes flared like exploding grenades. "Don't you ever say that to me again."

"Then don't make me say it, Button."

Her ferocity dimmed, but only slightly. If the table weren't between us, she probably would have slapped me.

And I would have slapped her back. "Do you really not understand what I'm saying?"

After a long pause, she nodded. "Yes...I do."

"Now that I've made my feelings perfectly clear, what do you want to do?"

She didn't touch her food, choosing to look away from me and stare at the scenery.



“Button.”

“I heard you.”

“Then give me an answer.”

She remained silent, staring out into the night. The crickets started chirping, playing their uniform song as dusk disappeared and the darkness replaced it. Tonight, we were having salmon with greens, but our food was probably cold by now.

Like a snake, I had the utmost patience. I could sit there and stare at her all night until she finally moved. She was prey—and I was the predator. My eyes trained on her like a target.

“I am sorry, Crow...”

Finally, an apology.

“I’m not sorry for what I did, but I am sorry for hurting you.”

That was the most I was going to get out of her, so I accepted it.

“You’re right. I need to be more careful. I’m not invincible like I sometimes think I am. I forget that we live in a dangerous world because this place is so beautiful.”

Now we were headed in the right direction.

“It’s just hard for me...I’ve always had so much freedom.”

“And that freedom is how you wound up here.” She trusted a man she shouldn’t have trusted, and that was how she ended up in the hands of a madman like Bones. Under my supervision, she would never be in danger again—if she just listened to me.

Her eyes flashed with irritation. “And I don’t have a single regret.”

If Jacob hadn't sold her, she wouldn't have met me—and married me. It took a strong sense of love to feel that way, to suffer for so long at Bones's mercy just to be with me. But I didn't doubt that she meant it—and she would do it again if she had to.

“Crow, this is hard for me. But I understand why you feel this way.”

She'd better.

“I just don't like being told what to do.”

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy telling her what to do. “If we make these decisions together, I won't have to tell you what to do. That's the only way this is going to work.”

“Okay...”

“Will you promise to do as I ask?”

“Why do I have to promise?”

“Because that's the only way I can trust you.”

She grabbed her glass and took another big drink of wine. “Fine, I promise.”

“Promise what, exactly?”

“I promise I won't leave the house without telling you.”

“And?”

“I promise I won't put myself in harm's way.”

“And you need to promise me that you won't put yourself in danger to save someone else—anyone else.”

“I don't know about that.”

“You almost died when you took Cane’s place. You could have been captured when you spoke to Tristan. This is a pattern for you. Putting yourself in danger like that isn’t being brave—it’s being stupid. No more, Button.”

“What if you’re the one in danger?”

“Doesn’t change anything.” If I were captured and they would only release me if Button took my place, she’d better not do it. My life was worthless. Death didn’t scare me. Living had always been far more difficult anyway. I would much rather leave my legacy to Button, to let her live a long and happy life.

“Yes, it does.”

“I’d rather be tortured to death than let anyone touch you. Now, promise me.”

She wouldn’t.

“Button,” I pressed.

“I can promise not to put myself in danger for anyone else. But not for you.”

I slammed both of my fists on the table and made all the dishes clank against the surface. “If you die, then I’m dead anyway.”

“And you don’t think I feel the same way?”

“If you did, you wouldn’t have walked into Tristan’s lair.”

She sighed and looked down.

“Now, promise me.”

“I just want my husband back...”

“Then do what I ask. After all the shit you’ve put me through, you owe me.”

“I owe you?” she hissed.

“Yes. You fucking owe me. Now, promise me.” I slammed my hands on the table again.

Her wineglass tipped over and shattered on the patio.

She didn’t react to the sharp sound, her eyes focused on me.

“Button.”

“Fine...I promise.”

Finally, I got what I wanted. I got what I needed. Now I didn’t need to worry about her carelessness. If she went anywhere, she would tell me about it. She would work with me to do what she wanted in the safest way possible. She finally accepted she couldn’t walk under the sun without looking over her shoulder. She finally promised she wouldn’t ever risk her life again.

I could finally sleep at night.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at the table. Her breathing was slowly increasing, and the redness was moving into her cheeks. She was mad, she was emotional, she was everything all at once.

I knew she’d hit her limit.

I scooted my chair back from the table then patted my thigh. “Button.”

She was out of her chair before I finished saying her name. She moved into my lap and circled her arms around my neck. Her face pressed into my chest. Her breathing escalated further until the tears broke the surface.

She cried in my arms.

I adjusted her on my lap and held her closer against me, letting her pour out her emotions and feeling them soak into my t-shirt. She wasn’t the kind of

woman who cried, so her tears had heightened significance.

“I’m sorry...”

Those two simple words were enough to make me drop all my anger, all my resentment. She was given a blank slate, and like the incident had never happened, the only thing I felt for her was love. “I know.” I kissed her forehead, cherishing her the way she deserved. I’d ignored her for nearly two weeks, and I missed this affection as much as she did.

Lars stepped outside, ready to take our plates and refill our glasses. But the second he saw Button crying into my chest, he abruptly walked back into the house and tried to pretend he hadn’t been there in the first place.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too, Button.” I kissed her forehead again because that was the only skin I could reach. I felt her shake in my arms, felt her weep into me.

“I want to go to bed...”

I lifted her from the chair and carried her right against my chest. One arm rested behind her knees while the other was scooped behind her shoulders. She kept her face pressed to my chest as her arms remained around my neck.

I walked inside and headed for the staircase, listening to her quiet sniffles.

Lars appeared out of the kitchen. “Would you like me to save your dinner for later, Your Grace?”

“No thank you.” I walked up the stairs, my wife like a bag of feathers in my arms. “We won’t be eating tonight.” I carried her to the third floor and then into the bedroom I hadn’t been sleeping in. The place smelled distinctly like her now, most of my clothes and toiletries gone. Now her perfume, belongings, and clothes filled the space I once occupied.

I set her on the bed and removed her clothes, tossing her jeans and shoes aside. I stripped her down until she was naked then did the same to myself. Sex wasn't necessarily on my mind, but it was bound to happen.

I got into bed with her and held her. With her body on my chest, her hair trailing down my forearm, she felt perfect against me. Her skin was soft like I remembered, and I loved the way her scent washed over me.

She'd stopped crying, and now her eyes were puffy. Her makeup ran down her cheeks, the smoky coloring wiped away. She looked like a mess, but she was a beautiful mess to me. "I haven't slept well in a long time..."

"Me neither."

"I never want to sleep without you again."

I didn't like it either. It was weird having a big bed all to myself. It was strange not listening to her breathe throughout the night. I was the one who kept the bed warm, but it felt oddly cold without her. "Okay."

"Let's promise to always sleep together."

That was a promise I could make. "Okay."

She closed her eyes and tightened her arm around my waist.

I ran my fingers through her hair and stared at her, watching her as she slipped away and drifted off to sleep. It only took her a few minutes to fall asleep. Even though I was exhausted, I couldn't follow her.

I preferred to watch her.

---

SHE WAS ON TOP OF ME BEFORE I WAS EVEN AWAKE.

She straddled my hips, placed her feet flat against the bed, and slid down my length until I was completely inside her.

That warm and wet pussy woke me up immediately. Even in sleep, I recognized it. It'd been so long since I'd had it that my body was ready for it at any moment. My eyes opened to her lithe body on top of mine, her beautiful tits in front of me. Her nails dug into my chest, and she placed her weight against me so she could move up and down.

A moan escaped my raspy throat, and my hands automatically moved to her ass. I gripped her cheeks and helped her move up and down. I let her put most of her weight on me, using my strength to slide her along my throbbing cock.

I circled her waist then shifted up until my back was to the headboard. When I was in a better position, still partially asleep, I guided her up and down my length again. Her chest was level with mine, her beautiful tits firm and perky. My hips angled up to help me move inside her as she lowered herself onto my length.

Sleep had built up in the corners of my eyes, and I still felt the tendrils of slumber in my gaze, but that made the sex feel even better. It was heavenly, dreamlike. She started to breathe heavily, working her body to take me deep and slow.

I'd missed this.

Her hands moved to my shoulders, and she dug her nails into my muscles. "Crow..."

"Button."

She pressed her face to mine and breathed into my mouth, her nipples hard and rubbing against me. She bent her knees to take my whole length, hitting

my balls before she rose up again. I could feel her ass muscles tightening every time she lowered herself. She was strong—the way I liked her.

She gave me a hot kiss, full of her breath and some of her tongue. “I love you...”

I kissed the corner of her mouth and pulled her down so I was completely inside her. “I love you too.”

“I couldn’t wait for you to wake up.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” I moved her up again, cupping her luscious ass.

Her arms circled my neck, and she breathed with me as she kept moving up and down, her pace growing quicker and quicker. Her quiet moans became louder, her pussy got wetter. Her legs were shaking from the exertion, but that didn’t stop her.

She was about to come all over me. I could feel it.

She locked her eyes with mine, her blue eyes twinkling like Christmas lights. “Yes...”

I felt her pussy tighten around me. So wet. So tight. I wanted to join her, but I’d rather give her a head start.

She moaned into my mouth, making sexy noises that I knew by heart. Her moans always started off slow, flew high, and then simmered down to incoherent sounds. She did the same now, bringing herself to a climax accompanied by screams.

I couldn’t hold back even if I wanted to. My cock didn’t have the kind of patience he usually did. I hadn’t been getting laid on a regular basis. I hadn’t even been beating off like usual. I had been too pissed off to feel any kind of desire.



That made my orgasm strong.

Unbelievable.

So good.

She clung to me when she was finished, panting against me as she caught her breath. She sat on my cock, my entire length deep inside her along with all my come. “I missed this.”

“I missed it too.”

“Don’t make me miss it ever again.”

I couldn’t hide my smile at her demand, loving the sexy way she bossed me around. “Okay.”

When she saw my smile, her eyes softened. “I missed that more than anything else.”

My smile faded away, touched by the sincerity in her expression.

She ran her fingers along my jawline, feeling the thick hair across my face. She leaned in and kissed me on the corner of my mouth, her breaths falling over my face.

I squeezed her against me and held her in place. I was secured deep inside her, feeling my wife’s weight on my lap. Her tits were pressed against my chest, and she felt so good in my embrace. If something ever happened to her, I wouldn’t be able to go on. I’d put a gun to my head and pull the trigger.

I’d rather blow my brains out than live without her.

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I SAT ACROSS FROM HER AT THE DINING TABLE AND READ THE PAPER WHILE I

enjoyed breakfast. I was hungry from skipping dinner the night before. Button was ready for the day in a black dress with her hair pulled back. Her makeup was done, and this time it wasn't runny.

I liked these quiet moments we had together, when we would enjoy our routines without having to make conversation. Sometimes, I would look at her and catch her looking at me. And she would do the same to me.

She sipped her coffee then returned the cup to the saucer. "Crow?"

"Hmm?" I kept looking at the paper.

"I want to talk to you."

I shut the newspaper, knowing she wanted my full attention. I crossed my leg over my knee and looked at her, waiting to see what she had to say.

She was still a little upset from our conversation the night before. She was more timid, more quiet. "You asked me to make some promises because they're important to you. Well, I have a request for you."

"I'm listening."

"When you slapped me...that wasn't okay."

A sudden wave of guilt swept over me. Now that my anger was completely gone, I felt like shit for losing my temper. I'd never hit her like that in my life. I didn't treat her so badly even when she was just my prisoner. She instilled so much rage inside me that I didn't know what to do with it. I'd let my temper get the best of me, and I launched into an attack I should have controlled. I'd slapped her before, but she wasn't my wife at the time—and I didn't hit her as hard. Now that we were married, it felt innately wrong.

"I never want you to touch me like that again."

I could justify my actions, but that wasn't appropriate. She knew exactly why

I'd hit her. I didn't need to remind her. There was no excuse that I could give to pardon myself for the crime I committed. If she meant nothing to me, that would be one thing. But I gave this woman my name, decided to spend the rest of my life with her.

My actions were wrong.

And I knew it. "It won't happen again, Button."

"You promise?"

I looked her in the eye before I nodded. "I promise."

Maybe she thought that was going to be a longer conversation because she kept staring at me. Her mood didn't change at all, so maybe my promise wasn't enough.

"I'm sorry, Button."

Her discomfort slowly disappeared, the old Button coming back. She straightened in her chair as her unease died away.

"I shouldn't have done that. You're my wife...and I shouldn't treat my wife that way." I was man enough to admit when I was wrong, to admit the error of my ways. I'd never loved a woman before, never proclaimed to be a gentle man. But if I was going to share my life with this woman, I had to place her on a pedestal where she belonged. It didn't matter how much she hurt me. I would always respect her—because she deserved it. "I hope you can forgive me. I love you more than anything in this world."

She reached across the table and placed her hand on mine. "I know you do."

**CANE**

I USED TO ENJOY WORK. I LIKED MAKING MONEY, MAKING WEAPONS, AND being in charge. I handled most of our clients and their needs, and I was in charge of manufacturing. I'd hire the best engineers to come in and design the best weapons to put on the market. It wasn't the most meaningful job in the world—but I liked it.

But now I hated it.

Every second I was at work, I was away from her.

Adelina.

Maybe it was just because she was beautiful or because she was good in the sack, but now I couldn't stop thinking about her. It was becoming more difficult to focus on tasks because she was always in the back of my mind. I'd always been obsessed with pussy, but not like this. It didn't run my life.

But now there was only one pussy in particular that had my attention.

Crow walked into the complex in all black. Black t-shirt with black jeans and a black leather jacket. He almost never wore his suits when he was on the premises, either because he didn't want to get them dirty or because he didn't want to look like a douche in front of the men. We were in the business of

selling illegal weapons, not selling car insurance.

A pistol was on his hip, and I knew he had two more under his jacket. He spoke to a few of the men, got a rundown on what was going on, and then joined me at the table. I had the schematics of a new knife I was working on.

Crow pulled the paper toward him to get a better look. “I don’t get it.”

I pulled up the digital demonstration on the tablet to show him how it would work. “It’s a seven-inch blade that retracts.” I showed him the drawing. “The blade is hidden, and once the safety is off, all you need to do is hit the button and the blade appears. And it’s strong as hell. It’s not gonna break.”

Crow watched the demonstration a few times before he nodded. “I want one of these for Pearl.”

“That woman needs a gun, if you ask me. She knows how to use one.”

“I didn’t ask you.” He pushed the paper back toward me. “Bran just gave me the rundown. We have another buyer?”

“In Budapest.”

“Did you screen him?”

I pushed the folder toward him. “He checks out.”

Crow flipped through all the pages, reading every single word like he didn’t trust me to do my job right.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve been doing this for a long time. I know what I’m doing.”

“I think your ten-million-dollar whore says otherwise.”

The anger surged to my expression like it’d been sitting under the surface the whole time. “Don’t call her that. Insult me all you want, but leave her out of

it.”

Crow pulled his gaze away from the paper and turned it on me. It was the look I’d been getting since we were kids. It meant he was considering something, thinking something incriminating. “Pearl told me you took Adelina to see her parents in America.”

Adelina told her? Women really did talk. That was such a personal experience for her that I assumed she wouldn’t mention it to anyone. Did she mention the cyanide pills too? “Yeah. So?”

Crow cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowing. “So?” His deep voice didn’t change, but his expression hardened. “Awfully nice thing to do for someone you don’t give a damn about.”

I took the folder back from him and pretended to look through it. “Simon is clean. We don’t have anything to worry about. Shipment is already in progress.”

“Cane?”

I kept ignoring him.

“Is she going to be a problem?”

“What do you mean? When has she ever bothered you or Pearl?”

“Don’t play stupid with me,” he snarled. “You aren’t keeping this woman.”

“I never said I was.”

“Then you’re returning her as promised?”

“Yes.”

Crow stared at me like he didn’t believe me. “I’m not going to war for this woman. I’m not crossing Tristan for this woman. If your heart is softening for

her just the way your dick does every night, then you need to take a step back.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” He rested both hands against the table as he looked at me.

“Yes, I’m fond of her. But I will give her back like I promised.”

“You’d better because I’m not getting Pearl mixed up in this.”

“You have nothing to worry about.”

“Then why did you risk your neck taking her all the way to America? Security could have detained you, and everything would have gone to shit.”

“But that didn’t happen, did it?” I asked like a smartass.

His eyes narrowed further. “Why did you do it, Cane?”

“She wanted to see her parents one last time...”

“And why do you care?” he snapped.

“Because I’m not an asshole, that’s why. I wish I could have talked to Vanessa one last time even though I knew she was going to die.”

The second our sister was mentioned, Crow cooled his jets.

“Jesus Christ, get off my case.” I threw the folder down and stormed off, sick of my brother’s shit.

Crow followed behind. “And you’re taking her sight-seeing.”

“So? Maybe you should take Pearl around. I’m sure she would enjoy it.”

“I’m too busy working right now. And don’t worry about my wife being

entertained. She's plenty entertained."

"Didn't seem like it when I talked to her." I poured a glass of scotch at the bar.

"Don't stick your nose in my marriage."

"Don't stick your nose in my relationship," I countered.

"Relationship?" he hissed. "This is a relationship now?"

Very poor choice of words. "You know what I mean."

"Cane, I want your word that you're returning this woman. She's a nice girl and I feel bad for her, but she's not our problem. Do you understand me?"

I drank my scotch and ignored him.

"Give me your word."

"Fine. You have my word, alright?"

Crow still didn't look like he believed me.

"What do you want me to say?"

He grabbed his own glass and poured the scotch.

"I am fond of her." I watched my brother down the liquor as quickly as I did.

"I do like her. I don't want her to go back. I admit all of those things. But there's nothing I can do for her. She asked me to help her in another way... and I agreed."

Crow set his glass down, his eyes on me.

"She asked me to get her cyanide pills..."

Crow's eyes darkened in pity.



“So it’ll look natural, and they won’t hurt Lizzie.”

“It’s sad, but...it’s the best thing for her.”

“I agree.”

“Did you get the pills?”

I nodded.

“Then I guess you are returning her.”

I nodded again.

He finished his liquor and turned the glass over on the counter. “This stays between us, alright? Pearl doesn’t need to know about it.”

“I agree.”

“It’ll just get her upset again.”

“I know.”

Crow looked to the other side of the room, seeing the men haul equipment from the storage unit.

“You really should drop the fight. Pearl is pretty heartbroken about it.”

“We worked it out last night.”

“You did?” I asked. “Took long enough.”

“She needed to apologize to me.”

“Didn’t you slap her?”

His face immediately fell like I’d punched him in the gut. “We worked it out. That’s all that matters.”

“I’m either gonna get the details from you or her. So you may as well tell me.”

“Fine. She said she wouldn’t be stupid anymore, running off whenever she feels like it. And I promised her I would never...do that again.” He bowed his head, looking ashamed for the first time since I’d known him.

“Well, I’m glad that’s over. I was afraid the fight would never end.”

“We’ll always work it out. I just... I was so fucking mad at her.”

“I know, Crow. I was there.”

“What did she say Tristan said anyway?”

I definitely wasn’t telling him about the trade Tristan wanted to make. That would send Crow over the edge into the biggest rage I’d ever seen him have.

“That he would never sell Adelina. She’s invaluable.”

“Then you were right.”

Of course I was right. I was fucking her, wasn’t I?

“Did he say anything else?”

“No. Just told her not to come back. Said she was trying to act like one of the men when she’s just a stupid woman...” I pulled that out of my ass, but I had to make it sound believable. No way in hell was I telling him the truth.

Crow sighed in relief. “Thank god we’re valuable to Tristan. If any other woman walked in there...”

“Doesn’t matter. Pearl is home.”

“Yeah.” He eyed the bottle of scotch before he poured himself another glass.

“Simon checks out. The shipment looks good to me.”

“I didn’t need your input to know that.”

He clapped me on the shoulder before he walked away. “I know you didn’t, brother.”

---

I HAD A FEW THINGS TO WRAP UP AT WORK, BUT I DIDN’T WANT TO STICK around.

So I bailed.

I was taking time off to show Adelina around, so I needed to work longer days when I was at the base. But I didn’t end up working longer hours to catch up. So my work was starting to pile up on me, slowly drowning me. If Crow figured it out, he’d be pissed.

Who was I kidding? If? *When*. When Crow figured it out.

I pulled up to the house and walked through the front door, expecting to see Adelina watching TV or cooking in the kitchen. She wasn’t in either place. I investigated the house but didn’t find her in any of the bedrooms.

For a brief moment, I panicked. “*Bellissima?*” I walked back into the living room and glanced out into the backyard.

There she was. She was lying in one of the lounge chairs in her bikini. Her top was gone, and her perfect tits were exposed to the sunlight. She wore a large sun hat, and a book was sitting in her lap. A glass of wine was on the table beside her.

She looked like she was having a good day.

If I’d known she was sprawled out like this on the lounge chair while I was at work all day, I wouldn’t have gotten a single thing done. I stepped onto the

back patio, and she stirred when she realized I was home. She sat up and tilted her head back so she could look at me from under her sun hat.

I placed my hands in my pockets as I stared down at her, my eyes focusing on her tits more than her gaze.

“Hey.” She placed a bookmark between the pages and shut the book.

“Hey.” Her skin was golden brown, kissed by the powerful rays of the sun. She was getting excellent color, her already olive skin turning darker. Her skin was probably covered with sun block or tanning lotion, and I wouldn’t mind tasting it as I dragged my tongue across her body.

We stared at each other for a while, the moment tense but not awkward.

She seemed to have remembered her top was down because she grabbed the straps and prepared to tie them around her neck.

“Leave them.”

She flinched before she dropped the black straps of her bikini top. They fell down her tummy, leaving her tits exposed to the sunlight—and my eyesight.

I spotted the large bottle of sun block on the table, and a dirty idea popped into my mind. I grabbed the folded towel on the table and dropped it on the concrete. “Get on your knees.”

She eyed the towel, unsure what I wanted her to do.

I undid my belt and loosened my jeans. “On your knees. Don’t make me ask you again.” I dropped my jeans until they fell around my ankles. I kicked them away along with my shoes. I was in too much of a hurry to remove my socks, so I left them on.

She moved to the towel beside the chair, placing her knees on the pad so she would be cushioned from the concrete.

I took a seat on the lounge chair she'd just vacated and opened my knees so she was right between them. My hard dick was against my stomach, slightly tilted to the side and anxious for her. I grabbed the bottle of sunscreen and squirted a huge puddle into my palm.

She watched me through her thick sunglasses and her sun hat, looking like a beach babe who smelled like summer. She eyed my palms as I rubbed them together, spreading the lotion before I grabbed her tits with both hands. I smeared her tits with the thick cream, spreading it everywhere and lubricating the area between her tits. Her olive skin faded away as her chest turned white, and the overwhelming scent of sunscreen filled my nose. I thought of sand between my toes, the sound of the crashing waves, and making love to this woman right on the beach. I massaged her tits before I placed my dick right in her cleavage line, enclosed in the warmth of her skin. I slowly slid through the lotion as I squeezed her tits around my length. It felt so good, so soft.

My mouth moved to hers, and I immediately kissed her with my tongue. I breathed hard into her mouth, our lips moving together with aggression. I'd been thinking about her all day, and now that I was touching her, I could tell she'd been thinking about me too. She moved up and down with her knees, sliding my length through her beautiful titties.

Fuck, it felt nice.

Her hand moved to my balls as they dangled over the chair, and she massaged them with her fingertips so she didn't interrupt her pace.

So fucking good.

I tilted my face so I could access more of her mouth. I kissed her harder the more she pleased me, my mind locked on sex. My cock pushed through her firm tits. They didn't feel as good as her pussy, but they were still pretty damn incredible. She had a woman's chest, voluptuous and curvy. I could

fuck her tits all day.

Her lips quivered against my mouth as she took a deep breath, enjoying this as much as I was. I imagined her pussy was dripping for me, wanting me to be buried deep inside her to stretch her the way she loved.

We would get to that.

She massaged my balls a little harder, her fingertips hitting my nerves in the perfect way. Her chest moved up and down, and we worked together to slather my cock with her wet tits.

I wanted to come all over her. I wanted to see those white globs all over her chest and neck. When I was at work, doing this didn't cross my mind. But now that we were moving together, I wondered why we hadn't already done this.

*"Bellissima..."* I squeezed her tits harder and slowed her pace, knowing I was about to erupt. My cock was thickening, and my balls were tightening. I couldn't kiss her anymore because my mind was focused on one thing.

I came with a groan, splashing all over her tits and underneath her chin. I got her everywhere, hitting her like a target. The squirts continued, the trajectory losing momentum every single time. When I was finished, I kept sliding through her cleavage, the scent of sunscreen and come mixed together.

Man, that felt good.

*"Your tits are beautiful..."* I kissed the corner of her mouth, out of breath with my satisfaction. She pleased me like no other woman ever had. She had the sexiest expression during sex, like she was trying not to come the entire time. Her kiss was always full of passion, as if she couldn't get enough of me even though I was already giving her everything I had.

*"Your cock is beautiful."* She wore a playful smile, another thing I loved

about her.

I smiled back. “Thank you. No one has ever said that to me before.”

“But I’m sure they thought it.”

My cock was covered in sunscreen so I knew I couldn’t fuck her, but I definitely wouldn’t leave her hanging. This woman only had a few days left until her life ended. She had to make every day count. And I intended to give her an orgasm every single day—several, actually.

I rose from the chair as my cock continued to soften. “Sit.”

She moved to the lounge chair where I’d been just a moment ago.

I dropped my knees to the towel, getting in the exact position as she was just seconds before. I scooted her hips to the edge and wrapped her legs over my shoulders. Then I leaned down and pressed my mouth to her opening, my tongue doing everything that she liked.

It didn’t take her long to come, and of course, she yelled my name as she did.

Music to my ears.

**CANE**

I PULLED UP TO THE WINERY AND HEADED INTO CROW'S OFFICE. I HAD A PILE of paperwork for him to sign, and faxing or sending delicate information over the internet was a stupid idea. I ignored his assistant and walked inside.

Crow didn't seem like he was doing anything anyway. The back of his chair was to the door as he looked out the large window directly behind his desk. His phone was in his hand, but he wasn't using it. He propped his chin on his fingertips and stared outside blankly.

"When are you not moody?" I dropped into the chair facing his desk and slid the folder across the mahogany wood. "Every time I see you, you're staring out the window like a lost puppy waiting for his master to come home."

Crow didn't turn around. "My wife is outside picking grapes. I enjoy watching her."

"She is?" I walked around his desk and followed his gaze. Adelina was out there with her. They both had baskets as they moved through the rows and picked the thick purple grapes from the leaves. Sweat coated their foreheads, but they smiled as they carried on a conversation.

Now I understood Crow's fascination. It really was entertaining. I liked the way Adelina's top hugged her body. It was tight against her tits, the ones I'd



just fucked the other day. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore black jeans that were covered with dust from the earth. Adelina had a great form, and I enjoyed watching her move. “I see what you mean.”

“Adelina enjoys spending her days here. I can tell.” Crow’s fingertips rested over his mouth. “And I can tell Pearl enjoys having her around. She wants someone to talk to besides me.”

“No surprise there.”

He shot me a quick look of menace. “What do you want, Cane?”

“Work bullshit.” I walked back to the chair facing his desk. “Just need you to sign a few things.”

He opened the folder and looked through the papers, always checking everything before he signed anything, and then pushed the folder back toward me. “We’re finished here.”

“Was that your asshole way of excusing me?”

“No. If I were excusing you, I would just tell you to get out. That brings me to my next point...get out.”

I purposely stayed in the chair just to be a smartass.

Crow didn’t seem surprised, as if he was expecting the reaction. “What’s going on at the base?”

“Same old shit. You know the drill.”

“Any new clients since we released our new line?”

“Not yet. But it’s not like our prices are reasonable.”

“If they want the best, they have to pay for it. Heard anything about Rome?”

“No, still seems fairly quiet. But it’s only a matter of time before our next competitor takes Bones’s place.”

“I wonder who it’s going to be.”

“It could be us,” I suggested.

“We’ve had competition before, and it’s never affected us.”

I’d always be ambitious, wanting to move to the next level. Crow had his own business, so that probably explained why he didn’t necessarily crave more. His vineyards produced some of the best wines in all of Italy. A single bottle was worth several hundred dollars. But I didn’t know shit about anything besides weapons, so my business opportunities were limited. “But now that Bones is gone, why don’t we take his place? Why don’t we become the number one business in the world?”

When Crow realized I was being serious, he looked at me with his typically dark gaze. “Do you understand how much work that would be?”

“Yeah. So what?” I’d need a distraction once Adelina was gone.

“And how much work it would take to maintain the position? Other men are going to want what we have. We’d constantly have to fight their opposition to maintain order. Right now, we’re an independent business with a respectable reputation. Bones didn’t even try to overrun us because there was enough work for everyone. But if we do this...we’re asking for trouble.”

“And you aren’t cut out for trouble?” My brother had never been scared of anything. I’d seen him play Russian roulette and pull the trigger every time. He hardly blinked, barely took a breath during the entire round. When one of the men blew his brains out, Crow poured himself a drink like it never happened at all.

“Not anymore. You know that.”

“Because of her?” I nodded out the window.

“Yes,” he said coldly. “Her. She’s going to want to have children soon.”

“She said that?”

“Not exactly. But I know it’s on her mind.”

“And you want to have kids?” I couldn’t picture Crow as a father.

He shrugged. “I haven’t given it much thought, honestly. Having a family was never something I wanted. But then again, I never wanted to be married...and look where I ended up.” A slight smile tugged at his lips. “Whether we have kids or not, I’m not interested in getting deeper into the criminal lifestyle. I’m not always going to be around, Cane.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He was as strong as an ox. Nothing could take him down.

“One day, I’m going to retire from the business. It might be sooner than you think.”

“Bullshit.”

Crow gave a nod.

“Why the hell would you do that?”

“I already told you why.” He nodded out the window again.

“Then what are you going to do all day?” I asked incredulously.

“Run my winery. Become an honest man.”

“Our blood money paid for this place,” I reminded him.

“And this place cleaned all that money,” he countered. “If you ever settle down someday, you’ll understand.”

Adelina popped into my mind, and not an image of her tits and her ass. I pictured her lying on my lap as we watched TV on the couch. The blanket was pulled to her shoulders, and her hair stretched across the cushion. Her eyes were growing heavy from fatigue, and I'd have to carry her to bed. I shook the thought away and continued to stare at my brother. "If you're going to leave anyway, then perhaps I should move forward."

"It's way too dangerous, Cane. Don't you have enough money?"

"I could always use more."

"Money isn't everything, and you know that."

"But it means a lot—and you know that."

He eyed me across the desk, his gaze calculating. "For the amount of risk you'll be taking, it's not worth the reward. Keep what you have. Save lives and time."

As much as I wanted to move forward, doing it without Crow would make it very difficult. He was the brains and the muscle behind our business, as I was. People feared us since there were two of us—not just one. We were the Barsetti brothers, and people didn't fuck with us.

"Think about—seriously." He opened his laptop and touched the trackpad with his fingertips. "If we're done with the girl talk, I have stuff to do."

"Fine." I rose from the chair and excused myself. "I'm gonna kiss my lady and be on my way."

Crow narrowed his eyes on my face, his expression full of accusation.

I realized what I'd said when it was too late. I shrugged it off like it was intentional and didn't mean anything. "See you around." I shut the door behind me and instantly dropped my easygoing expression.

It was a stupid thing to say—and I knew it.

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I WAS IN MY OFFICE EXAMINING A NEW WEAPON WHEN BRAN WALKED INSIDE. I felt the sleek material of the metal, checked the empty barrel, and then tested the center of gravity as I held it in my fingertips. Having a weapon that was powerful was just as important as handling. A gun needed to be light and easy to adjust during difficult times.

It could save your life.

“What’s up?” I asked Bran without looking at him.

“I’ve heard rumors from Rome.”

Now the gun no longer had my attention. I laid the pistol on my desk as I gave him my full attention. “What have you heard?”

“My friend in the city said there’s been stuff going on at Bones’s old compound. One of his henchmen tried to take over, but...they were cleaned out.”

“Cleaned out?”

“Yeah...slaughtered. They didn’t even use guns, only knives.”

That specific detail painted a vivid picture in my head. Only one group of mercenaries preferred blades over guns. They liked to kill silently, in the dark where they couldn’t be seen. No one would even realize the carnage until everyone was dead. “What else did you hear?”

“Nothing else. That’s it.”

Just that afternoon, I’d spoken to my brother about escalating the business,

but if these enemies were who I thought they were, the idea wouldn't pan out. They were a formidable enemy. The only reason I knew that was because I used to be one of them.

The Skull Kings.

---

I WASN'T THRILLED ABOUT SEEING MY BROTHER TWICE IN A SINGLE DAY—BUT I was having shitty luck. I arrived at his house and let myself inside. Lars flashed me a look of annoyance, not appreciating the way I barged inside like I lived there.

“Is the doorbell out of service, Mr. Barsetti?” Lars approached me in his tux, standing upright so rigidly his back was straighter than a board. A black bow tie was perfectly tied around his neck, contrasting against the pearl color of his collared shirt. I'd never seen Lars in regular clothes before. Did he sleep like that?

“No.”

“Then why didn't you ring it?”

“Because I need to talk to my brother. It's important.”

“Either way, we'd have to have this conversation, so it didn't save you any time.” He approached the stairs. “I'll let His Grace know you're here. Would you like to wait in the dining room?”

Crow and I usually spoke in private in his office, so there was no point in getting comfortable. “I'll wait here.”

“Very well.” Lars walked up to the third floor and was gone for nearly ten minutes before he returned.

I should have just called Crow. He probably wouldn't have answered anyway. When he was home after five, I usually couldn't get a hold of him. Now that I had a woman at home with me, I understood.

Lars returned. "He'll meet you in his study. Can I prepare anything for you?"

"I'll just have some scotch." I headed up the stairs.

"Of course, Mr. Barsetti."

I moved to the third floor and got comfortable in his office. Vanessa's paintings were on the wall because Crow never moved them. He was proud of her artwork even when she was still alive. I stared at the buttons on the canvas for a long time, and I wondered if her artwork had anything to do with his wife's affectionate nickname.

Crow joined me ten minutes later, when I was on my second drink. "What?"

"Hi."

He sat on the couch across from me, clearly pissed that I was bothering him in the evening when he was obviously in bed with his wife. His hair was messy, and not because he just got out of the shower. Pearl had been running her fingers through it no doubt. "What?" he repeated.

"Would I bother you at home unless it was important, asshole?"

Crow grabbed the decanter and poured himself a drink. "Then what's so important, Cane? If it really were a potential disaster, you would just call me and spit everything out."

"Not really something I want to say over the phone. Bran told me there's been stuff going down in Rome."

When Crow heard that, he straightened noticeably. "What stuff?"

“One of the men working for Bones took over the warehouses. He had all the weapons, so he was in the process of filling Bones’s shoes. But then some group cleaned them out in the middle of the night—slit all their throats.”

Crow was about to grab his drink but chose to steady his hand.

I could read his mind just by looking at him.

“The Skull Kings.”

I gave a slight nod. “I thought they stuck to Greece, but they’ve obviously expanded their borders.”

“Maybe the assassin business is taking a hit.”

“Probably because everyone buys all the protection they need from us—and Bones.”

“So they’re cutting out the middleman...”

“And taking on both roles—the supplier and the militia.”

Crow sat back against the cushions of the couch and widened his knees apart. His eyes moved to the fire as his mind was overrun with endless thoughts. “That’s not good, Cane.”

“No, it’s not.”

“This is exactly what I warned you about.”

“How was I supposed to know they would turn into our competitors?” I asked incredulously. “I haven’t heard from them in seven years.”

“Have you spoken to Constantine in that time?”

“Not once.” Constantine was the leader of the Skull Kings. A ruthless leader with a strong appetite, he killed men without mercy. He took his commission



and did exactly as his client ordered. If he were told to torture a woman to death for cheating on her husband, he would do it in a heartbeat. Murder had no meaning when the right amount of money was thrown on the table.

“What do you think his attitude about us will be?”

“No idea. He may not see us as a threat.”

“But he might be ambitious—just like you.”

Constantine was a very ambitious man. He obviously moved into this sector because he saw an opportunity and decided to take it.

“If he turns on us, I’m walking away.”

“Like hell, you are,” I snapped. “We aren’t pussies.”

“It’s not about my pride. I have a wife, in case you’ve forgotten. They know the best way to get me to cooperate is by taking her—unless you forgot what happened to our sister.”

“This business is ours. Our family left it to us.”

“Regimes rise and fall every single day,” Crow countered. “We have more than enough money for the rest of our lives.”

“But nothing to do with our time. You have a winery. This is all I have.”

“Then find a hobby,” Crow snapped. “Find a woman.”

I already had a woman.

“I’m not going to war with Constantine. If Pearl weren’t around, it would be different.”

“She can handle herself.”

He squeezed his glass like he was about to throw it at my face. “Don’t tell me

what's best for her. I'm her husband. I'll make that decision."

I couldn't reason with Crow when he was like this. "You know me. I don't bow to anyone. I'll die fighting—always."

"I'm the same way—if it's worth dying for. You and Pearl are the only two things I would ever make that sacrifice for."

I knew he would do anything for me, but I was touched to hear the confession anyway. "We're getting ahead of ourselves here. For all we know, Constantine just wants Bones's old business—and nothing more. We ended on good terms. He shouldn't have any anger toward me."

"That's what you think. But you piss off a lot of people, Cane."

"That's just you, asshole."

"No," he said coldly. "It's everyone."

The door cracked open, and Pearl stepped inside. She was dressed in Crow's clothes, an oversized black t-shirt that reached her knees and gray sweatpants that also belonged to him. They were at least five sizes too big. "I could hear your voices across the hall." Her hair was tangled from the way Crow must have gripped it earlier. She moved to the couch beside Crow and sat next to him. "What are you talking about?"

Crow shook his head, signaling to me more than to his wife. "Business."

"Anything I can help with?"

"Not unless you know how to construct weapons," I said. "We got a shipment in, but everything is defective."

Crow's eyes shone in surprise at how easily I lied. But he shouldn't be surprised. I was a criminal, after all. I lied for a living. I'd even killed people for a living at one point.

“Then why are you here?” she asked. “That sounds like something that could be handled over the phone.”

Despite Crow’s annoyance, he slightly smiled at her intuition.

“Don’t be a brat,” I snapped. “Crow and I have private things to discuss. You don’t need to know everything.” I drank from my glass then set it down.

“I’m a Barsetti. So your discussion includes me.” She poured her own glass and took a long drink, proving she could down liquor like the two of us. “So spit it out.”

“I just did,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes in an infuriating way, but it was a pathetic attempt to intimidate me. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“Pretty stupid.”

She didn’t hesitate before she grabbed the glass and prepared to chuck it at my head.

“Whoa, Button.” Crow snatched the glass away and put it at the other end of the table. “What Cane and I were discussing doesn’t concern you, so drop it.”

Now she flashed her look of hatred on him. “You want me to throw that glass at your head instead?”

“I’d like to see you try.” He said it with a straight face, daring her to defy him.

Pearl was smart and didn’t make a move. She dropped the subject, probably deciding to interrogate him when they were alone. “You seem to like Adelina a lot.”

“She gives me sex,” I said dryly. “Of course I like her.”

Pearl leaned forward with her elbows resting on her knees, giving me a straight look that I couldn't shy away from. "She said you made her breakfast in bed this morning."

Crow's accusatory look was back on me.

"Yeah, so?" I demanded. "I made food and brought her the leftovers."

"You made her pancakes, potatoes, bacon, eggs, coffee, and freshly squeezed orange juice," Pearl snapped. "You made all of that for yourself? Bullshit. You don't even eat breakfast usually."

I wanted to snap that slender neck of hers. "I fucked her in the ass last night. I was just trying to make it up to her."

Pearl didn't buy that either. "She said you made love in front of the fireplace all night."

Crow's eyes narrowed even further.

Fuck. This didn't make me look good.

"There was no ass-fucking mentioned," Pearl said. "And that's because there wasn't any."

I'd love to fuck Adelina in the ass, but knowing all the horrible things Tristan did to her made me second-guess all my darker fantasies. She was a virgin before she was raped, and I wanted to show her sex could be good. It could be the most amazing feeling in the world. To use her for my own sick pleasures...was wrong. But if I admitted any of that, I would sound like a fucking pussy. Crow was already suspicious I wouldn't return her to Tristan. I didn't want to give him any reason to pressure me.

"Why are you lying, Cane?" Pearl pressed.

"I'm not lying," I countered. "Why don't you just mind your own goddamn

business?”

“Adelina is my friend. She is my business.”

“No. She’s my slave—not yours.”

If Pearl had a gun, she would have shot me. “She’s not a slave. She’s a person. I would be angrier about this if I didn’t know you were bending over backward to make her happy.”

“I’m not doing anything to make her happy. I don’t give a damn if she’s happy.”

“Then why are you taking her sight-seeing all over Italy?” Pearl asked. “Huh? Why did you take her to Siena the other day? Why did you show her Rome?”

Why the hell was Adelina blurting out every little detail? “I had to run errands there anyway.”

Pearl rolled her eyes. “I’m not buying it.”

Crow rested his fingertips against his temple. “I don’t think I’m buying it either.”

Standing right in the spotlight, I was on display. Crow and Pearl were both looking at me with incriminating gazes. It was getting difficult to hide my affection for Adelina, and not just from them, but from myself as well. “Give me more credit than that. You know I’m not evil. So what if I want to show Adelina a good time? So what if I want to make her happy before she kicks the bucket?”

“I’ve never seen you care about giving someone a good time,” Pearl said.

“You aren’t even nice to Lars when you come over,” Crow said. “And he serves you food.”

“That’s because he doesn’t like me,” I said bitterly.

“Because you tied him up and nearly killed me,” Pearl said. “I was cold and blue on the floor, and you were going to let me die that way. So don’t sit there and say you’re a nice guy who just wants to show her a good time. It’s not in your nature—we both know it.”

Once the shame washed over me, I looked away. I couldn’t look my sister-in-law in the eye when she reminded me of what I did. I’d kicked her around like a dog, stomped on her head, and punched her in the face. She’d forgiven me for it, but I would never forgive myself for the mistake I made.

“The only reason why you’re acting this way is because you actually like this girl,” Pearl said. “Only explanation.”

“She’s been living with me for three weeks,” I said. “It’s kinda hard not to like someone when you’re around them all the time. I think she’s a pretty incredible woman with an amazing spirit. She deserves more than the shitty hand she was dealt. But that’s all...”

Judging from the cold expression Pearl gave me, she didn’t buy it.

My brother didn’t either.

But I shouldn’t care about their opinion. “In a week, I’m returning her to Tristan. And that will be the end of it.”

“You’re really going to hand her over?” Pearl asked incredulously. “You just said she’s an incredible woman.”

“Lots of incredible women die every day.”

“So you’re gonna drop her off, go home, and just go to bed? Sleep all night?” Pearl asked. “You’re gonna be able to live with the guilt of walking away?”

I stared at my palms as I rubbed them together, refusing to meet her look.

“We’ve talked about this dozens of times... There’s nothing we can do.”

“But—”

“Crow.” I was already dealing with a million emotions at the moment, and I didn’t need Pearl to remind me of the difficult task I had to face. To not return Adelina would result in a war that we couldn’t win. Now that the Skull Kings could be a potential problem, there was even less I could do for Adelina—other than slip her the cyanide pills.

My brother knew exactly what I was asking for. “Button, drop it.”

Pearl would normally defy him, but she must have decided not to question his tone.

I gave him a slight nod in gratitude. “I should get going. Sorry for disturbing your night.” I finished my drink before I walked to the office door.

Crow followed me out, walking me all the way down the stairs and to the front door. Pearl didn’t come with us, probably because she knew she wasn’t welcome. We stepped outside the front door and to the gravel driveway. My car was still parked exactly where I left it, the valet knowing he wasn’t supposed to touch my things.

“Pearl hit a sore spot, huh?” my brother said. “She tends to do that.”

“I don’t have sore spots.” I unlocked the car with the press of a button.

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at me like he had more to say, but he refused to speak.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I massaged the keys in my hand, needing something to do with my fingers.

“Now that we have the Skull Kings to potentially deal with, you know we have too much on our plate.”

“I said I would return her, Crow.”

“And you better do it, Cane. We can’t fight a war on two fronts.”

“Are you even listening to me?” I snapped. “I said I would take her back like a dozen times.”

“I heard what you said, but it contradicts everything you’re doing. Pearl is right on the money, Cane. You know it.”

“I’m not in love with the woman.”

“Sure seems that way.”

I turned my back on him, sick of the conversation. “I’ll talk to you later, Crow.”

“How about I return her?”

After I opened the car door, I turned around to look at him. “What?”

“If I drop her off, we both know the job will get done. And you don’t need to feel like the bad guy.”

The option was almost tempting. I wouldn’t have to get my hands dirty or see the way Tristian punched her the second she was back in his captivity. But that would do a disservice to Adelina. I could comfort her during the travel. I could embrace her before she had to walk back into the devil’s arms. She felt comfortable with me—trusted me. It was the least I could do. “It has to be me. It’ll be a lot harder for her to go back if I’m not there. Plus, I’m not a coward.”

Crow finally abandoned the argument and walked back into the house. He didn’t say goodbye, dismissing the conversation with his silence. When the door was shut, the bolt clicked into the lock.



I got into my car and drove home.

---

ADELINA HAD ALREADY EATEN DINNER AND CLEANED UP THE KITCHEN. NOW she was in the living room on the couch, watching one of the English channels I got off my satellite. It was a rerun of a comedy that was popular in America. She was reading at the same time, the sound of the show just background noise. She looked up when she heard my shoes against the hardwood floor. “How was work?”

After the conversation I’d had with my brother, it really did seem like we were a couple. I didn’t want his words to get to my head, but they already had. “Good. How was your day?”

“Good. I had dinner a few hours ago. But I wrapped up a plate for you and put it in the fridge.”

“Thanks.” I was used to coming home to an empty house without anyone to care about my meals. Having a beautiful woman take the time to consider me felt nice. The last time I had that experience, it was with my mom and Vanessa. When Mom passed away, Vanessa quickly became the matriarch of the family. She made sure Crow and I ate well and took care of ourselves.

We never paid her back for her kindness.

I set my bag on the counter then loosened my gun from the holster. I set it on the table like it was a watch.

Adelina eyed it before she quickly looked away.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?” I opened one of the drawers and placed the gun inside so she wouldn’t have to look at it.

“No...” She turned back to her book. She was in one of my long t-shirts and her panties, lying around the house because she knew I was the only company she would ever have. Her hair was done and so was her makeup, stuff she’d picked up when we went shopping.

“Have you ever handled a gun?”

When she didn’t look up from her magazine, I knew she didn’t want to discuss it. “No.”

I dropped the subject and moved to the couch beside her. She had a glass of wine on the table, so I took a quick drink before I set it down again. I moved into her next, placing a soft kiss on her lips.

She was unresponsive at first, but after the initial contact, she kissed me back. Her soft, plump lips moved with mine, and within no time, her embraces were passionate. She gave me her tongue before I had a chance to give her mine.

It was something I loved coming home to.

My hand moved into the back of her hair, feeling the soft strands that were so nice to touch. I loved pulling on the curtain, but for now, I enjoyed caressing it. I pulled away first then rubbed my nose against hers. The affection was lame, but it came naturally with her.

She looked at me with affection in her gaze, all thoughts of that gun gone. “Why are you home so late?”

“Had a long day. Then I had to stop by Crow’s and talk to him.”

“Hope everything is alright.”

“It’s always alright.” I grabbed her glass again and took another drink. “What did my little chef make me?”

“Nothing fancy. Chicken and vegetables.”

“Sounds fancy to me.” I kissed her on the cheek before I left the couch.

Her eyes followed me as I walked into the kitchen. Even when the door was shut, I could feel her penetrating gaze. I reheated the food in the microwave before I stood at the counter and took a few bites. Home-cooked meals tasted so much better when that beautiful woman made them for me.

I was just about to carry the food into the living room when Adelina walked inside. The light in her eyes had been extinguished, and her soft mouth had dropped into a heavy frown. Even her eyes were slightly glossy.

I knew her better than anyone now, and I knew something was wrong. “*Bellissima*, what is it?”

She stood at the counter across from me and bowed her head, lowering her gaze to the granite countertop.

I set my fork down as I waited. “Tell me.”

“It’s hard to explain...”

“I’m a pretty smart guy, despite what Crow says. I’ll understand.”

She lifted her gaze again, her eyes shiny. “It’s really nice here. I just realized how much I’ll miss it...”

My heart began to sink.

“Something about you coming home while I’m on the couch...and then I left dinner for you in the fridge. It’s so mundane and meaningless, but it’s so nice at the same time. So comfortable.”

Now I was the one to bow my head.

“I don’t know how to explain it...”

“I know exactly what you mean. I like it too.”

“And not just because I’m used to being a prisoner. This place feels like home...away from home.”

I lost my appetite as I listened to the sound of her pain. I walked around the counter until I was at her side, seeing the tears up close. My arms circled her waist, and I stood behind her, my face resting against the back of her neck. “I’m so sorry, *Bellissima*. I wish you could stay...”

“Me too.”

I kissed her neck and squeezed her gently.

Her arms covered mine, and she rested her face against my chest, her scent sweeping over me. She was petite in my arms despite the weight she’d gained. She was heavier in the stomach and the thighs, but I loved her curves. I wanted her to be thick, to be prepared before she went back into that hellhole.

I wished I could fatten her up forever.

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I WAS PRESSED BETWEEN HER LEGS, MY ARMS PINNED BEHIND HER KNEES. MY hips thrust slowly into her, sliding through her wetness. My eyes were fixated on her, and I slowly made love to her like I wasn’t in a hurry to finish. I didn’t take her roughly from behind. I didn’t tie her up and pin her down. I didn’t fulfill all the dark desires I had deep inside my chest. When it came to this woman, I only wanted to be slow and gentle.

I only wanted to be good to her.

Every time she took a deep breath, her tits swelled upward toward me. Dark

and pink, her hard nipples were erect like tiny bullets. She had the plumpest tits, round and firm. I loved kissing them when she was on top of me, giving it to me slow just the way I did with her. Her small hands gripped my biceps, squeezing the powerful muscles as they flexed. I held my heavy body on top of hers easily, my core strong and my frame straight. Every time I moved inside her, I relished how wet and tight she was. It was a slice of heaven, a beautiful place that I got to enjoy exclusively.

Making love was for fools. But I guess I was a fool now.

“Cane...I’m gonna come.” She bit her bottom lip as I pushed myself entirely inside her.

“I know, *Bellissima*. You always come.”

She panted loudly, her moans escalating into full screams. Her fingers dug into my skin and her thighs tried to come together, but my body wouldn’t allow her to move. She arched her back, her beautiful rack reaching for the sky. More incoherent moans followed, and she screamed my name several times.

Now it was my favorite part. I loved the entire process, from the very beginning to the end, but nothing made me feel more masculine than dumping my desire inside her, stuffing her full of my seed. I gave a few more pumps before I sheathed myself to the hilt and released, giving her all of my come. My forehead pressed to hers, and I moaned. “*Bellissima...*” This connection was something I craved, something I loved. It felt so good, better than any other lover I’d ever enjoyed.

She grabbed my hips and tugged on me even though there was no more of me to fit. Her eagerness made me enjoy it more. She wanted my come as much as I loved giving it to her.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead before I slowly pulled out, my come shifting

to her entrance. My cock slowly softened as it hit the air, still covered in her exquisite juices. I kissed her inner thighs before I walked into the bathroom and hit the shower. I was in a slight daze, not really thinking about anything. Now I was utterly relaxed, satisfied in a carnal way. I stood under the water and closed my eyes.

Adelina joined me a moment later, her beautiful body looking even more amazing when it was wet. Her dark hair stuck to her wet skin, and her makeup immediately smeared as it was washed away. She stood under the water and tilted her head back, letting her hair move down the center of her shoulder blades.

I stared at her, mesmerized even though I'd been staring at her all night. My affection for her had quickly escalated since the first time I set eyes on her. I could have raped her then, but I didn't. I could have forced her to do what I wanted, but I didn't. I wasn't sure if I was truly a good man, or she just made me into one.

In either scenario, I respected her. And I knew she didn't deserve this. A woman as beautiful and warm as she was didn't deserve to suffer like this, to appreciate my niceness when I wasn't even a nice person.

It frustrated me.

I wished there was a solution. I wished there was a way I could save her without risking myself and my family. Now that I had a serious opponent on a different frontier, there was even less I could do for her.

Besides helping her commit suicide.

"What?" She must have noticed that I'd been staring at her for nearly five minutes straight without speaking.

"Just thinking."

“What are you thinking about?”

Things I’d rather not say. “Nothing that matters.”

“Why don’t I believe that?” She wore a slight smile, teasing me.

I couldn’t believe there wasn’t a solution to this problem, that the Barsetti brothers couldn’t figure out a way to save this innocent woman. I succeeded at whatever I put my mind to. “Have you ever used a gun?”

She flinched at the sudden question, her smile disappearing. “What?”

“Have you ever handled a gun? Like a pistol?”

“Uh...no.” She squirted shampoo into her palm then slowly massaged it into her scalp. “The first time I’d ever seen one was when I was captured...but I’ve never touched one.”

I had an idea—even though it wasn’t great. “What if I taught you?”

“What good would that do?”

“What if I trained you to use one, and when I return you to Tristan, you take one with you? Hidden under your clothes somewhere. Then when you’re inside, when you have the opportunity, shoot him between the eyes.”

“What good would that do? He has twenty men in that complex at all times.”

“Kill as many of them as you can. If you kill them all, you can escape.”

“And Lizzie?”

“Make Tristan tell you exactly where she is. If you have a gun pointed to his skull, he’ll talk.”

She rinsed the shampoo out of her hair with a defeated look in her expression. “Cane, I’m not you. I could never pull that off. You’re sending me back in a

week. To pull off secret-agent stuff like that, I'd have to train for months."

Time definitely wasn't on our side.

"Even if I kill Tristan, they're going to kill me anyway. Then I won't know if Lizzie was ever spared or not. At least if I die of natural causes, they'll forget about me."

"Lizzie will suffer anyway, even if she hasn't been killed."

Adelina's eyes filled with sadness.

"I respect your loyalty to her, but I bet she would want you to save yourself."

"We're in this together," she whispered.

"But you shouldn't be in this together," I said. "She would want you to run. If Crow and I were in this situation, I would want him to run too. That's the only victory we would have. I could arrange your escape and make it look legitimate. I could even have Crow shoot me in the arm to make it look credible to Tristan. We could leave traces of your escape so they'll have a scent to follow—"

"No. I already said no."

I sighed in frustration. "I just want to help you, *Bellissima*."

"I know you do. But you can't. You've done enough."

"It doesn't have to be this way."

"Yes, it does..." She turned around and faced the faucet, hiding her face from me. The water glided down the slender muscles of her back, a few strands of hair clinging to the center of her shoulder blades. "I've made my peace with it, Cane. We need to let it go."

"You told me you don't want to leave." My hands moved to her petite



shoulders, and I gave them a gentle squeeze. “And honestly...I don’t want you to leave either.”

“But we can’t have what we want. Life isn’t fair. I’m just grateful my life was so wonderful before I was taken. And you’ve been so good to me too.”

My arms circled her waist, and I kissed her shoulder. My kindness was only in her perception. I took her as a bargaining chip, treated her like livestock rather than a human. I pumped her with my come before I sent her back to where she came from. The only true kindness I showed her was hot meals and a place to sleep.

“I have a lot to be grateful for. That’s what makes it so much harder.”

How she could see the good when there was only bad was beyond me. It took a special person to see the light when there was only darkness. “I wish there were something I could do. I’m not just saying that.”

“I know that, Cane.” She slowly turned around and faced me again, still wearing a sad expression but looking a little more optimistic. “Did you get those pills?”

I’d had them for a while, but I didn’t want to mention it. Even now, I didn’t want to say the words out loud. I only gave a slight nod.

“How many do I need?”

“Just one. But I’ll give you a few. Just in case.”

“What will happen?”

The last minutes of her life would be painful. Letting her know the details would only make the wait worse. “Doesn’t matter. When you’re ready, just pop one in and swallow. It’ll be over in less than five minutes.” When I pictured her going through with it, it brought me a profound sense of

heartbreak.

She nodded. “Okay...less than five minutes. I can do that.”

A bullet to the brain would be kinder, but she didn’t have that luxury. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Cane. It’s not my fault either.”

“No, it’s not...”

“If anything, I should be thanking you. You’ve been kind to me since the first time we looked at each other. You’ve been a blessing in disguise. A light in all this darkness. Crow and Pearl too. I’m very lucky to have met all of you.”

“No.” I rested my lips against her forehead. “I’m the lucky one.”

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I SAT AT MY DESK AT THE BASE WHEN MY PHONE RANG.

It didn’t have a name.

It didn’t have a number.

In fact, it didn’t say anything at all. All identification was completely hidden. It wasn’t a person calling at all. It was the kind of screening only someone with something to hide employed.

I didn’t have a clue who I was dealing with.

That didn’t stop me from answering with the same confidence. “Cane Barsetti. What can I do for you?”

A long pause ensued for nearly thirty seconds.

But I wasn’t gonna say another word. I addressed the person casually. I

wasn't going to fall for any more bait.

Finally, something was said. "It's been a long time, Cane." Masculine, deep, profound, his voice sounded exactly the same as it used to. I'd been given orders from him enough times not to forget that tone. Constantine still exuded his calm patience, his silent authority. I hadn't spoken to him in seven years, since the day I left his cult. "How are things in the arms dealership?"

The rumors Bran had heard were true. Constantine wasn't making his intentions subtle. But that was how he played the game—he didn't play the game. "No complaints." I wasn't going to give away more than I had to. After all, this conversation wasn't meant to be deep. He would make his point soon enough. "How are things in the skull business?"

"Never better. Wiped out an entire family last night—every single generation. Now they're just names in a historical book—if anyone cares enough to look them up."

I hadn't suspected his ruthlessness changed. If someone paid a high enough price, Constantine would do whatever they asked. He didn't understand compassion, remorse, anything at all. People said the Barsettis were heartless. We were saints compared to this guy and his crew. "Then you must be tired."

"Not really. Haven't gone to sleep yet. You know how the adrenaline is, Cane."

I joined the Skull Kings a long time ago. I needed the money when I was in debt. I followed orders without asking questions. Once I did my time, I left the organization and never spoke of it to anyone—except Crow. "I remember."

"Gives you the jitters...but in a good way."

I sat in silence, waiting for him to make the next move. I knew exactly why

he was calling, but I wasn't going to make any exceptions.

"I'm calling to share my gratitude. Once you and your brother removed Bones, taking over his affairs has been fairly easy. We have a warehouse full of product, schematics of new designs, and a crew of men who are eager for jobs. Honestly, I'm surprised you didn't move in when you had the chance."

I handled my response carefully, but I didn't take too long to figure out what to say. Pauses were good, but pauses that were too long hinted at incompetence. "My brother and I have all the business we need. No interest in monopolizing the market."

"You know who says that?"

I waited for the insult.

"Idiots. When there's money on the table, and you still walk away...that's idiocy."

"Money isn't everything, Constantine."

"I guess I can see why Crow would say that...since he just took a wife. But what's your excuse?"

An image of Adelina came into my mind. "I have hobbies, Con. Maybe you should look into getting a few."

He chuckled into the phone, sounding like a robot. It wasn't genuine at all. A little terrifying, actually. "All my hobbies are about money—and power."

"I have all the money and power I need."

"Is that so?" he asked. "Then you wouldn't have a problem stepping down and leaving all the business to us, right?"

It was exactly what I feared. I didn't let the silence stretch on for long. "I

think there's too much business for one person. Your eyes are too big for your stomach, Con. If you eat too much, you're gonna get sick."

He chuckled at my analogy. "You were always good with words, Cane. But I was always good with actions."

Before he could issue some kind of threat, I took control of the conversation. "It would be easy for both of us to overrun the market. Bones did a great job running his business, but even his influence only reached so far. You always need another set of eyes watching your back. You can watch mine, and I can watch yours."

Constantine chuckled. "You want to do business together."

"Not together," I said. "But if I can't take on a client, I'll refer him to you. If I know of anyone else who's dealing, we can take them down together. I understand your confidence, but you're coming into a brand-new business. I'm the veteran here. You're just a rookie."

Silence.

Maybe I'd said too much. "We coexist peacefully. I just killed Bones. I would hate to kill anyone else..." Issuing threats needed to be avoided at all costs, but if I didn't show strength, he might doubt my power. It was best to remind him that I was a formidable enemy even if he thought he had a greater advantage. Crow was ready to fold the second things got difficult, but I didn't want to take that route. This business was all I had. I could retire and spend the rest of my life drinking wine. But I needed something to get me out of bed every morning. I wouldn't have a wife, so I needed something else.

"I would hate to kill someone too, Cane," Constantine finally said. "Especially someone I actually like..."

**CROW**

I SAT AT MY DESK AT THE WINERY, BUT MY MIND WASN'T ON ORDERS, reports, or clients. Button had just gone into the fields in a white blouse. She picked a few grapes and checked the line as she ran her fingers through her hair, looking like a vision under the sunlight. A small amount of sweat collected around her neck, and I wanted to lick it away.

I could stare at her all day.

She'd walked back into the warehouse where the barrels of wine were stored fifteen minutes ago, but I hadn't stopped thinking about her. Adelina was with her, probably talking about wine or Cane.

I eventually abandoned what I was doing and walked to the warehouse just outside the main office. I walked down the cobblestone path and stepped inside the shadow cast by the building. Button was opening a box full of brand-new wine while Adelina was washing dishes on the other side of the room.

I walked up to Button, and it took her a few seconds before she realized I was there. The indifferent look in her gaze immediately faded away, hardening into an affectionate look mixed with a hint of excitement. She set down the bottle she was examining and gave me her full focus. "Hey."

I rested my arm against the bar and gently crowded her, looking down at her as property rather than a person. I had a distinct reaction to my wife that no one else ever received. It wasn't the kisses or the embraces. It was the harsh way I stared at her, the way I took her space without asking for permission. I said more words to Lars and Cane on a daily basis, but I communicated with her far more. Right now, my intentions were abundantly clear. I wasn't in the mood to talk because I'd never been a conversationalist. I wanted her legs spread, her wet pussy full of my enormous length. I wanted her to bite her bottom lip so she would stay quiet until I was finished. Call me old-fashioned, but that's what I'd come to expect from my wife. I worked and provided for her—her job was to fuck me.

“What?” She set the bottle on the counter and met my intense gaze.

All I did was nod to the office.

“That's it?” she asked. “I don't get a single word out of you?”

I narrowed my eyes in hostility then walked away. I should have just called her, but that would have required me to say words. I would have texted her, but even that was too much work. I'd rather just stare at her and tell her what I wanted.

I headed back to my office, knowing she would eventually follow.

When I was back inside, I'd already dropped my jacket and tie. I'd just reached the bottom button of my collared shirt when she walked in, pretending to be annoyed, even though she was nothing of the sort. “You can't boss me around—”

“Watch me.” I dropped my shirt then patted the desk. “Get on the desk.”

Her eyes immediately burned in offense at the rude way I spoke to her, but just as I predicted, she sauntered into the room and unbuttoned the front of

her blouse until it was open, showing her pearl-white bra underneath. She removed her pants next then slowly slid down the black thong that hugged her hips perfectly.

I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her onto the mahogany desk. My slacks and boxers moved to my knees, and I hooked one of her legs over my shoulder. I yanked her to the edge of the desk and slid inside her, greeted by her wet arousal immediately. She'd probably started to soak the second I joined her in the warehouse.

She lay with her back against the desk, her tits pushed up in the bra she wore. She grabbed my hips and hung on as I pounded into her, not in the mood for sweet lovemaking. Once I saw her bend over in the fields then wipe her forehead with the back of her hand, I only had one thing on my mind.

I wanted to fuck her.

But my wife loved to be fucked, so she didn't mind one bit.

Her leg extended to the side of my hips as she kept her knee to her chest. Her fingers maintained a tight grip on my waist so she would never be too far away from me. My hips pounded into her, and my cock plunged deep inside her over and over. As much as I enjoyed screwing her, I didn't make a single sound.

Button, on the other hand, struggled to keep her mouth shut the entire time. My assistant was just on the other side of the door, and she could hear the slightest noise. But I didn't care what she overheard. This was my vineyard and my office. I could fuck my wife all day if I wanted to.

A quiet moan escaped Button's lips and then she held her breath, trying to stay quiet as her orgasm came. She dug her nails into my abs and clawed at me, panting and moaning uncontrollably. Her pussy constricted around my shaft, giving it an erotic hug. For having an attitude about being called in



there, she sure came pretty damn fast.

I slowed down my thrusts because I was about to come. I didn't need any further stimulation because watching my wife try to be quiet during a climax was erotic enough. I shoved myself completely inside her then leaned over her. "When I tell you to get on my desk, you get on my desk. Understood?"

"Yes."

"When I want to fuck you, I fuck you. Alright?"

"Yes."

When she had a thick cock inside her, Pearl was strongly cooperative. All that bullshit attitude was left at the door. I was balls deep and ready to explode. "Tell me you love me."

Her hands moved up my chest, and she dug her nails deep, nearly cutting me just the way I liked. "I love you, husband."

Nothing got me off more than that. I used to slap a woman before coming. Sometimes I whipped a woman until she bled. When tears were in her eyes because my cock was too big for her ass, that's when I came undone. But all those dark fantasies no longer excited me. Now the sexiest thing in the world was listening to my wife tell me she loved me.

I'd turned into such a fucking pussy.

I came hard, filling her pussy with all the seed I had. My balls were depleted as I gave her everything, dumping all my love as well as my desire. I was so pissed at her for betraying me, but my anger only reminded me how deeply I loved this woman. Without her, there was no meaning to life. There was no life at all. There wasn't even me. It was strange to think I'd lived most of my life without her, that my sister died, but I kept moving forward. This little woman had been present for nearly a blink of an eye—but it felt like a

lifetime. I would never be able to move on if I lost her.

I finished but stayed buried inside her, considering this pussy to be home. I could stay inside her all day, and I'd done that plenty of times. But now I had to get back to work. The rest of the fun could wait until later.

"Cane, wait—" My assistant's voice came through the phone.

"Don't worry," Cane said as he got to the door. "He's expecting me."

"Fucking asshole." My jacket was lying on the other side of the desk, so I snatched it and threw it on top of Pearl, completely covering her so that my piece of shit brother wouldn't see her.

Cane burst inside like he owned the place. "Hey, we've got some...shit." His face froze when he saw my pants around my ankles and my bare ass.

I gave him a mirthless glare, a threat that didn't need words.

"Uh, I'll wait outside." Cane quickly walked out the door and shut it behind him, making it slam.

I didn't care if my brother saw me with my pants down. The only person I cared about was Button, who was safely hidden under my coat, my come still dripping out of her entrance.

"Is he gone?" she whispered.

"Yeah." I pulled the jacket off her then pulled my pants up.

"Doesn't he knock?"

"Never." I fastened my belt then pulled on my collared shirt.

"What a jackass." She quickly pulled on her panties then got her jeans on.

"Maybe you need to lock the door."

“No. I just need to break his nose.”

Button adjusted herself so it didn't look like she'd just gotten fucked on my desk. She fixed her hair with her fingertips then buttoned the front of her blouse. “Well...I should get back to work. Not sure how I'm gonna look at Susan.”

“She already knows what we do in here.”

Button sighed before she walked out. “I'll kick Cane in the nuts on the way out.”

“That's my girl.” I pulled my jacket on before I sat behind my desk.

Cane walked in a moment later, wearing a guilty expression like a dog that just pissed in the corner. He shut the door behind him then slowly approached my desk. “Alright...I'll knock from now on.”

“If you don't knock again, I'll kill you next time.”

“Looking at your ass was punishment enough.”

“Then don't pull that stunt again.”

Cane took a seat.

“So what the hell is so important?” I demanded, frustrated that my wife had to rush out of here before I could even give her a kiss goodbye. It was pretty rude to come inside a woman and ship her off like that with come running down her ass.

“Constantine called me,” he said with a sigh.

So this was important. “Give it to me straight.”

“He made some veiled threats. Said he wasn't sure if there was room for both of us.”

I rubbed my temple. “And what did you say?”

“I said we could have a peaceful partnership that’s beneficial to both of us.”

“And what did he say?”

“He’s not so sure he wants that. So I reminded him what we did to Bones, and that we wouldn’t have a problem doing it again.”

I narrowed my eyes at my brother. “You threatened the leader of a cult that skins the heads of its victims?” I couldn’t keep my voice down, not even for Susan’s sake. “Are you insane?”

“I know how these guys work,” he said. “Trust me.”

“Trust you?” I snapped. “You just barged in here like an idiot.”

“That doesn’t mean I am an idiot. It seems I don’t understand privacy—two different things.”

I dragged my hands down my face, feeling the anger boil under my skin.

“And if I don’t stand up to him, he’ll know he can run all over us.”

“Then let him.”

Cane’s eyes darkened in disappointment. “I get you’re married now, but that doesn’t make us pussies. We don’t let anyone push us around.”

“I just finished a war. I don’t have the energy for the next one.”

“But when it comes knocking on our door, we can’t just ignore it.”

“If he wants to be the only arms dealer in this hemisphere, then let him,” I argued. “It’s not that important. It’s not worth fighting for.”

“Our business is my whole life,” Cane said. “It’s all I have. I can’t let it go.”

Did I need to remind him what we were up against? “They skin their victims and collect their skulls. Do you understand what that means?”

Cane rolled his eyes. “Only when they’re commissioned.”

“And what if they commission themselves to take us out?” I snapped. “I have a wife, Cane. I know you don’t understand what that means, but I can’t let anything happen to her. She’s been through enough. I’m not gonna drag her through another ordeal over a business I don’t even care about. So why don’t you take over, and I’ll step back?”

He gave me an incredulous look. “You would turn your back on me like that? Your brother?”

“I’m not turning my back on you. You know my situation has changed.”

“Who was the one who risked his neck to save your wife?” he demanded.

“And who’s the one who nearly killed her in the first place?” He had no room to talk like I owed him something.

Cane sighed and shook his head. “We’re talking about a billion-dollar business.”

“Cane, we have money. We both have more money than we know what to do with.”

“But we’re gonna let some glorified bully come in and take over?” Cane leaned toward my desk. “We’re Barsettis. We don’t do that shit. We fight for what’s ours and never stop.”

“But these aren’t bullies on the playground. These guys are psychopaths. You worked with them for years, so don’t downplay how evil they are. Women and pride used to be important to me, but now that I have a wife, I realize there are more important things in life. I want a quiet life—where we can go

places without looking over our shoulders. Is it really the end of the world to retire?”

Cane shook his head with his jaw clenched. “I just can’t believe you would let someone push us around like this...”

“I’m not letting anyone push us around. I just don’t care enough about this to fight. If we needed that money, this would be different. But we’re both wealthy enough to support generations to come. You can always find another way to make money. Go into the wine business with me. It’s lucrative even though it’s clean.”

“I don’t want to go into business with you, Crow. And I don’t give a shit about wine.”

“You sure like to drink it.”

“You know I prefer scotch.”

“Then go into the scotch business. You can talk to Crewe about it.”

He rubbed both of his temples at the same time. “What the hell happened to you, man? You were never afraid of anything. Now you’re a dog with your tail tucked in between his legs.”

If he’d had something as precious as I did, he would understand. But since he would have no one once Adelina was gone, he would be alone in his mansion, suffocated by his own thoughts. He didn’t need the business for money—he needed it for purpose. “I’m not afraid of anything—that concerns me. But I am afraid for Pearl. When I married her, I promised to take care of her. If Constantine wants war, he’s going to go after casualties. And you know Pearl will be the biggest target. She’s the only person in the world either one of us care about—besides Lars.”

Cane tilted his head to the floor, knowing I was right.

“You told me you loved Pearl like a sister, that you would do anything for her. You were ticked when I said I didn’t want you to be alone with her.”

Cane looked at me.

“So prove it. Protect her.”

He looked at the floor again, the annoyance in his eyes. “Not the same thing. This is our business we’re talking about. We were doing this long before she came around.”

“And it’s this business that got Vanessa killed.” Did I need to remind my brother how we lost our only sister? If we hadn’t continued the weapons business, we wouldn’t have been a direct competitor with Bones. The blood feud would have been over. We could have ended it by walking away—but we didn’t. “And I’m not letting the same thing happen to my wife. I learned my lesson.”

He sat back in the chair and looked out my window, ignoring my outline in front of him. He clenched his jaw tightly, the hair around his face coming in thick because he hadn’t shaved in a while. “I get what you’re saying. Our family is so small now, and I don’t want it to get any smaller. But it goes against everything I believe in to let someone push us around like that. I’d rather die fighting than surrender.”

“If this were a different enemy, then I would agree with you. But these guys are more terrifying than Bones. They make him seem boring. Plus, there was only one of him. There’s twelve of these guys—all of them equally gruesome.”

Cane nodded in agreement.

“So we can have all the men and weapons at our disposal, but we could still lose. I know these guys are crazy, but they’re also smart. There’s only two of

us, Cane. I'd have to send Pearl somewhere they couldn't find her until they're all dead. And I may not be able to kill them all, and the ones who do die will have someone to avenge them. So is it really worth it?"

"Then what are you suggesting? If push comes to shove, we fold?"

I nodded. "We don't have any other choice. We aren't two singles anymore."

"That was your decision, not mine."

"Whether you like it or not, she's your sister. Maybe one day our family will grow, and the Barsetti name will outlive me. We both know you aren't going to have any kids."

"Hey," he said defensively. "It could happen."

I rolled my eyes. "Get a wife first, and I'll reconsider." Adelina was the closest I'd ever seen him have to someone who resembled a girlfriend. But she had an expiration date—one that was fast approaching.

"I need to think about it..." He looked out the window again, working his jaw hard. "Maybe that's where the conversation will end. Maybe he'll understand there's enough business for the both of us. There doesn't have to be a conflict of interest unless we make one."

"Maybe."

He got out of the chair and purposely avoided coming close to my desk. "Don't want to go near that..." With both hands in the air, he walked to the door. "You know, you should try locking the door sometime."

"And you should try knocking."

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“THANKS FOR GIVING ME A RIDE.” LIKE EVERY OTHER DAY, ADELINA SAID the same words before she got out of the car.

“No problem, Adelina.” I didn’t go out of my way to be particularly nice to the woman, but I did show her my respect any chance I got. I always said her name, giving her the attention she deserved. She was about to return to a living nightmare, a destiny my wife had escaped from.

It would have been so easy for them to trade places. Just the thought made me sick.

Button waved as we pulled away.

Adelina used the key Cane had given her and walked inside the house.

I pulled out of the roundabout and drove back to our estate that was positioned a few miles away. Cane and I had always been close together, even when he was in Florence. And even though we disliked each other most of the time, we always had to be near each other. It had saved both of our lives a few times.

Button looked out the window with her sunglasses perched on her nose. “What did Cane want to talk about?”

“Work.” I wasn’t going to tell her anything. It would only scare her.

“Why wouldn’t he just call you, then?”

I hated it when she analyzed everything. She was smart, and I liked that most of the time, but not during times like these. “He wanted to check on Adelina.”

“He never stopped by.”

“Maybe you just didn’t see. You were naked on my desk, remember?”

“Like I could forget. I had to go commando for the rest of the day because

my panties were soiled...”

I grinned like the arrogant asshole I was.

Button smacked my arm playfully. “If I hadn’t had to rush out of there like a hooker, that wouldn’t have happened.”

“Maybe Cane should interrupt us more often, then.”

She smacked my arm again. “You know you’re going to have to tell me what’s going on eventually. Why do you keep procrastinating?”

“Why do I have to tell you anything?” I challenged. “It doesn’t concern you.”

“Doesn’t concern me, huh?” she asked. “So my financial stability and my safety aren’t my concern?”

“What makes you think it has to do with either of those things?”

“Because Cane looks as pale as a ghost,” she argued. “You’re hiding something big. I can tell.”

She was practically a detective.

“So you may as well just tell me. I’ll have Adelina pull it out of Cane if I have to.”

And he’d definitely crack for pussy.

She looked at me through her dark sunglasses. “Crow.”

I sped through the fields, driving twenty miles an hour over the speed limit, like usual. “Remember when I mentioned that someone would eventually take over for that piece of shit?”

“Yes...”

“Well, someone has. Cane knows the crew. The Skull Kings.”

“That’s what people actually call them?” she asked incredulously.

“And for good reason. They skin the heads of their victims and keep the skulls.”

Her cheeks immediately turned pale as milk.

“They’re a group of assassins that are trained to kill for commission. They don’t have a refund policy because they never miss their target. They’re known for their brutality. They’ll take on any job—even if the person is innocent. In their eyes, there’s no such thing as good or evil. There’s just living and dead.”

Button’s flare had died away, understanding how serious of an enemy they were. “How do you know this?”

“Cane used to be their twelfth man.”

Her glasses blocked her reaction, but it was obvious her face had fallen. “Cane?”

I nodded. “It was almost ten years ago. He needed the money. The gigs pay well.”

“So he killed people?”

“Yeah. A lot of people.”

“He skinned people’s heads?” she asked incredulously.

“Well, not that part. Constantine prefers to do it...”

She looked out the window with her fingertips resting against her mouth. She turned even whiter, as if she might faint.

“Cane told me they’ve taken over, and they aren’t happy about sharing business with us.”

“What does that mean?” she whispered.

Unlike most wives, she didn’t want to live in peaceful bliss. “Constantine may want us to step down from the arms dealership.”

“And what if he does?”

“Then we’ll be forced to.”

“We won’t fight?” she asked.

“No. Not worth it.”

“Cane agrees?”

I thought about my answer before I gave it. “He’s undecided.”

“Undecided?” she asked. “That doesn’t sound like him. He has a strong opinion about everything.”

I kept my eyes on the road and spotted our home in the distance.

Pearl turned to me when I didn’t say anything else. “He wants to fight, doesn’t he?”

“Doesn’t matter what he wants. I told him I’ll withdraw if that’s the case.”

“You’ll withdraw? As in, you won’t help him?”

“As in, I’d no longer be involved in the business and would have nothing to do with it.”

“Why wouldn’t you help him? This is your business, Crow.”

I took my eyes off the road and looked at her. “You know exactly why, Button. We already went through hell with Bones. I’m not doing that again. I’m not risking you again.”

“But that business is your life.”

“It’s just money. You’re my life.” My hand moved to her thigh. “I can make wine all day and come home to you. That’s enough for me.”

She smiled before she placed her hand on mine, her warm fingers surrounding me. “That’s sweet, Crow. But I don’t think you can do that to your brother. You have to stand by him—no matter what. You either both walk away together, or you fight together.”

“No.”

“Even if you walk away from the business, that doesn’t mean the Skull Kings won’t target us. We both mean a lot to Cane. They could use us both to get what they want. We have to be in this together—all three of us.”

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I COULDN’T SLEEP.

I had a nightmare—and this time, it wasn’t about Bones.

It was Constantine and the Skull Kings—people I couldn’t put a face to. But in my imagination, they were terrifying. They took away everything that meant anything to me. They took my brother—and then they took my wife. I saw her pinned to the bed while they each took a turn—and forced me to watch.

I woke up in a feverish sweat and went into my office. It was a cold night, so I started a fire and grabbed my decanter of scotch. Even though I wasn’t cold, I sat on the couch in front of the fire and watched the flames dance. They gave me enough distraction to clear my head, to stop me from thinking about the horrible things my nightmares just made me witness.

I used my scotch like a crutch and leaned on it for support. It'd been my friend through all the hard times. Our relationship started when I was sixteen. I wasn't even a man yet before I started relying on liquor to get me through life.

I was an alcoholic. I admitted it. No one gave me shit about it because I could control my temper, unlike most people. I hid the usual symptoms so I could drink all I wanted—until my wife cut me off.

I sat there for an hour, my lidded eyes glued to the flames as they slowly burned away to embers.

The door cracked, and Button popped her head inside, wearing one of my cotton t-shirts. It was five times too big and reached her knees. She stepped inside and stared at me, her dark hair a messy array from the way I'd fisted it before bed. Now that my wife had almost been taken away from me—again—I treasured her even more. I made love to her as much as I could. We never knew how long we had on this earth, and I had to make every minute count.

Button grabbed the glass from my hand and took a drink. She downed half of it in a single gulp, obviously to make a point since she made her distaste for my favorite beverage known. She set the empty glass down then sat beside me. There was a blanket over the back of the couch, so she pulled it over her thighs to stay warm.

I didn't want her to be cold, so I tossed another log on the fire, rustling the embers and getting the flames going again. I wiped my palms on my sweatpants and returned to my seat, feeling my wife stare at me.

"Can't sleep?" she whispered.

"Guess not."

"Crow," she pressed.

“I had a nightmare...couldn’t fall back asleep.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Not even slightly.” I refilled my glass and took another drink.

“How many of those have you had?”

“Too many.”

She didn’t press the argument, knowing I was in a foul mood. “I can’t sleep when you aren’t beside me.”

“What did you do when we didn’t sleep together for days?”

“I was sleep deprived,” she said simply. “Only got a few hours on and off. Then I would take a nap in the middle of the day.”

I didn’t sleep any better, but at least I wasn’t having nightmares like this.

“Since I’m not sleeping, I thought you might like the company.”

I always loved it when she was with me. I didn’t do a very good job showing it because I acted like an asshole most of the time, but I did appreciate her company. She was one of the few people who had suffered as much as I had, who had lost people the way I had.

She turned her face toward me and watched me, her eyes studying me like they had a brain of their own. Her emotions were obvious on the surface. Even when she didn’t say anything, I could tell what she was thinking.

She could tell what I was thinking too.

“Are you scared?” she asked.

“I’m never scared, Button.”

“Everyone is scared sometimes.”

“I don’t care for my sake. I made my peace with death a long time ago. He’ll come for me, and I won’t fight it. The only thing I do care about is you. Losing you is what scares me. You’re the greatest thing that’s happened to me—but also the worst. I have something I value more than anything I own. You’re priceless, irreplaceable. That’s the kind of shit that scares me. The world knows I love you. My enemies know you’re my world. They could strip me of everything I have and not leave a mark. But if they placed a hand on you...it would kill me.” I stared at the flames, unable to look at her. “So Cane is going to back down, even if I have to make him. You and I deserve a quiet life together. One where we aren’t scared to be free.”

“What if backing down makes him want to hurt you even more?” she asked. “He sees you as weak, so he takes everything you have?”

“Walking away from a business that’s already been profitable for years isn’t weak. That’s retirement.”

“So you think it’s the best decision?”

“It’s our only decision.”

Button scooted closer to me on the couch and rested her chin on my shoulder. Her arm hooked around my waist, and she snuggled close to my side. Her even breathing was a great consolation, a melodic rhythm that chased away my fears. “No one can keep us apart, Crow. Bones tried to take me away, and he failed. These men won’t succeed either.”



**ADELINA**

I ONLY HAD A FEW DAYS LEFT.

In a few days, all of this beauty would be gone. I wouldn't have a strong man to keep me warm in the middle of the night. All of my rights would be stripped away from me. I would be naked, cold, hungry, and afraid. My ankle would be cuffed at all times so I couldn't run away when Tristan walked inside.

I'd have to stare at Tristan's ugly face again.

A face I'd tried so hard to forget.

I knew I would have to go back since the beginning of my stay. My departure wasn't a surprise. It certainly didn't sneak up on me. Time went by fast, but I didn't struggle to judge the passing.

I just didn't think it would be this difficult.

I wanted to stay here forever.

Cane wasn't the perfect guy, but he showed me the light when I was in a pit of darkness. He showed kindness when he easily could have been cruel. That was the true definition of someone's character—when they could be evil but chose not to. Cane had blood on his hands and he was a criminal, but to me,

he was innately good.

I would miss him as much as my own family.

It was hard to sleep that night. All I could think about was the time I had left. The second I was back in Tristan's captivity, I'd be punched in the face. That was probably how he would greet me. He wouldn't see a single mark on my body, and he would see the weight I'd gained. He would see how well I was treated and work twice as hard to make me feel worse.

I knew him so well.

My heart was beating so fast in my chest. It wouldn't slow down. Sweat covered my palms and my neck. The anxiety took over, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. I was panicking in terror.

Panicking over the short time I had left.

I sat up in bed and kicked the sheets away. Cane was dead asleep beside me, naked and muscular. Even in sleep, he was hard as a rock. I dangled my feet over the edge and let the air evaporate the sweat off the back of my neck. All I could do was concentrate on my breathing, so that's what I did.

I did my best to calm myself.

Cane must have heard me because he sat up a moment later. "*Bellissima?*"

It was my favorite nickname, my favorite way to be addressed. That was what I would miss the most. It was so tender and gentle, a complete contrast to the harsh way I was treated in Tristan's captivity.

"What is it?" He scooted across the bed until he was directly behind me. His lips moved to the back of my shoulder, and he gave me light kisses everywhere, cherishing me.

"I just...had a bad dream."

“Want to talk about it?”

I pulled my knees to my chest and circled them with my arms. “No.”

He opened his legs on either side of me and sat directly behind me, his arms locking around my waist. “I’m here to listen if you change your mind.”

I continued to breathe erratically, my heart racing a million miles an hour. I was still warm and sweaty. I did my best to hide my anxiety, but there was no way he couldn’t feel it as he held me against him.

*“Bellissima?”*

“Hmm?”

“Talk to me. You’ll feel better.”

“I just... I’m scared.”

He rested his face against the back of my neck.

“I don’t want to go. After being here for a month, it makes me understand just how terrible it really is. You’ve been so good to me, have become such a friend to me. I’ll miss you...”

He took a deep breath. “I’ll miss you too.”

“I only have a few days left... Time went by so quickly.”

“It did.”

“I’m trying to stay calm, but I can’t. I feel like I can’t breathe.”

“You know what I do when I’m scared?”

“I thought you said you’re never scared?”

“Well, I lied,” he whispered. “I just think about something else, something

that makes me happy or makes me laugh. When I think about it long enough, I stop thinking about the thing that makes me upset.”

“When was the last time you did this?”

“When I nearly killed Pearl... Crow wouldn’t speak to me. I thought I’d lost my brother forever. The idea of not having him in my life anymore hurt so much. It would make me panic. It would make me lose sleep. So I just tried to think about something else, something positive. It usually got me through the night.”

I nodded.

“You like working at the winery, right?”

“Yeah...”

“What do you like about working there?”

“The view,” I said. “It’s so beautiful all the time. The grape leaves smell so good. I love the wine, I love the people. It’s a great atmosphere. And the cheese... I could eat the cheese all day.”

“What else?”

I told him about this old couple that had come to Italy now that they were retired. They put their kids through college and decided to spend something on themselves for once. They did the wine tasting and bought five bottles before they left.

“That sounds nice.”

“Yeah...”

He pulled me against his chest and turned my face toward him. He rubbed his nose against mine before he gave me a gentle kiss on the lips.

Just like that, my troubles melted away like soft butter. I didn't think about my doom, my hour of death. I didn't think about how the final minutes of my life would be. I didn't think about the way Tristan would hurt me.

I just thought about Cane.

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WE'D FINISHED AN AFTERNOON WINE TASTING, AND NOW PEARL AND I WERE cleaning up. We didn't speak to each other much because we were busy attending to the tables inside the warehouse. Most of the customers asked us what it was like to live in such a beautiful place. Pearl had better responses than I did. I'd only been there for about a month and had done limited sight-seeing.

But I was grateful I got to do any sight-seeing at all—thanks to Cane.

Pearl corked the leftover wine and put the bottles in the fridge.

I wondered what her life would be like after I was gone. Would she keep working here? Would she have a family to raise? “Pearl?”

“Yeah, honey?” She scooped up the leftover wineglasses on the counter and set them in the sink.

I approached the bar and leaned the broom against the counter. “Are you and Crow going to have kids anytime soon?”

“Soon?” she asked. “No. Definitely not soon.”

“But you guys are going to have them someday?”

She rinsed the glasses with soap and water, her eyes on her hands. “I would like to. Crow is open to the idea but not in love with it.”

“He’s not a family kind of guy?” I’d always wanted a family of my own. I wanted to have three children. I didn’t care if they were girls or boys, as long as they were healthy. I wanted to have a house near the ocean so I could take my kids to the beach every day.

“He doesn’t think he is. But he definitely is.” She set the glasses on the counter beside her and dried them with the towel. “He and Cane are so close, and he’s never gotten over losing Vanessa.”

“Who’s Vanessa?”

“Their sister.” She eyed me as she gently cleaned the glass. “You don’t know about Vanessa?”

“I think Cane mentioned her once...”

“Well...the man that took me captive...he’s the one who killed her. He kept her as a prisoner, and before Cane and Crow could rescue her, he shot her. Both of them have never really gotten over it.”

My heart broke for the woman I never knew, for the woman who shared the same fate I was about to accept. Cane possessed a particular darkness that had nothing to do with his criminal preferences.

He was heartbroken.

“I’m surprised he never told you that,” she whispered.

Since I was in the same position, he probably didn’t want to scare me, to remind of the fate I was about to experience. “He and I don’t do a lot of talking...” It was mostly kissing and touching, among other things.

She dried the last glass before she put it off to the side. “Adelina, can I ask you something?”

She was my only friend in the world. She could ask me anything. “Of

course.”

“Are you in love with him?” She looked me square in the eye, watching even the slightest reaction I made.

The question took me by surprise. I thought she would ask me about going back to Tristan, about how I felt about it. I didn’t think Cane was on her mind. I was fond of Cane and really cared about him, but the thought of love never crossed my mind. “Uh...I don’t think so. I mean, I love being with him. He’s a sweet man. He only pretends to be rough and cruel, but he’s soft on the inside. When I’m with him, I’m happy. But falling in love in my position just isn’t possible.”

“Why?”

“Because our relationship is so short. In two days, I’m going back to Tristan.”

Pearl kept staring at me, like she expected me to say something else.

“Why are you asking me this?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes I wonder if he’s in love with you.”

Cane had been nothing but good to me since I arrived here, but I didn’t think he was capable of feeling anything more extensive. He said he was going to return me to Tristan. If he really loved me, he wouldn’t do that. “He’s not.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I just am. We have a connection now, a bond. I know he’ll miss me when I’m gone. I’ll miss him too. But love isn’t something that’s possible. I don’t think I could ever fall in love with a man under these conditions. It’s not how I pictured romance.”

“I didn’t picture meeting my husband the way I did, but I wouldn’t change

anything.”

“I didn’t mean anything offensive by that...”

“I know,” she said quietly. “I’ve just never seen Cane act this way with anyone.”

“Well, he does pity me...”

“And he doesn’t pity anyone.”

“He has more of a heart than he lets on. He’s been nothing but good to me since I arrived. He’s never made me do anything I didn’t want to do. He’s given me as much freedom as he could within four walls. He’s kind to me... makes me happy. He’s been a real blessing. He’s helped me believe that there are good people...that there’s hope for everyone.”

Her eyes fell in sadness. “I’m so sorry, Adelina...”

“I know you are, Pearl. But don’t feel bad. There’s nothing you guys can do. I understand that, so please don’t feel guilty.”

“I don’t feel guilty,” she said. “I just feel heartbroken. This shouldn’t happen to you, to me, to anyone. Men shouldn’t be allowed to look at us as property, as things that can just be taken. They shouldn’t have this kind of power, to own us just because we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I hate it so much, Adelina...you don’t even know.”

I heard the pain in her voice, the memories that still haunted her. She’d suffered much longer than I had. I’d only been Tristan’s plaything for a week before Cane came around. From what I understood, she was subjected to Bones’s torment for months before she escaped. There were thousands of women all over the world who had to suffer in the exact same way. It was innately wrong, a crime against humanity. “I know.”



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CANE WRAPPED HIS ARMS AROUND MY WAIST AND SQUEEZED ME INTO HIS chest, his back against the headboard and his eyes dark in heated intensity. He pressed his forehead to mine and guided me up and down his length. We were both sheathed in arousal, our bodies wet with slickness. He moved deep inside me slowly, with purposeful gentleness that felt good. It'd been weeks since we screwed like animals. Now every time he was inside me, it was deep and slow, full of passion without violence.

When he was inside me like this, I didn't think about the limited time I had left. I only thought about those dark eyes as they bored into mine. I only thought about those soft lips, that hard jaw, and the way his hair curled when I ran my fingers through it.

My legs had been forced apart, and my virginity had been taken away from me. It was cruel and painful. Being with Cane was completely different, like I'd been given a second chance to enjoy something that nearly broke me. He taught me it could feel good, that even if he was big, it didn't hurt. He made me crave it when we were apart all day. He made me want it in the middle of the night. He made me want something I once despised.

“*Bellissima...*” He took a deep breath as he squeezed my ass cheeks. He kneaded my ass with his fingertips, digging into the muscle. His cock continued to stretch me wide apart with every thrust, his length digging in deep inside me. “You torture me when you look like that.”

“Like what?”

“I call you *Bellissima* for a reason.” He pressed his face between my breasts and licked me, spreading kisses across my warm skin. He sucked my nipples into his mouth while he kept moving me down his length over and over. His hands glided up my full hips, and he kissed my neck, his warm breaths falling

across my skin.

I tilted my head back and rode him a little harder. “I’m gonna come...”

He nibbled my neck, being more aggressive than before. He pulled me down his length harder, pushing through my tightness and sheathing himself in my soaking arousal. His hand moved between my legs, and he rubbed my clit aggressively.

Like I needed any extra stimulation.

I knew he needed me to come as quickly as possible because he couldn’t contain his excitement any longer. He was about to burst, filling me with all of his seed.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on to him as I came, pushing down his length harder and deeper. I screamed in his ear, but he didn’t turn away. Moisture pooled between my legs and soaked his length. My entire body enjoyed him, soaring up high into the sky as I reached heaven and above.

“*Bellissima...*” He grunted as he came, filling me with all of his desire. He moaned against my ear as he enjoyed the same pleasure I’d just experienced. He gripped me harder even though I wasn’t about to slip away. His fingers dug into me, and his chest was slick with sweat.

I buried my face in his neck as I caught my breath, my body tightening and relaxing at the same time. My eyes closed, and I clung to him, feeling the only form of happiness I would ever know. When it was just the two of us, I didn’t think about what lay ahead. I only thought about the quiet peace that existed between us.

Cane pulled away and looked me in the eye. He wore that tender expression he didn’t show often. It was gentle, showing the soft man underneath all that

hardness. He kissed the corner of my mouth before he rolled me to the bed.

We lay together, covered in sweat and warmth. His arm was still around me, his gloriously hard body rising and falling with the deep breaths he took. His large hand gently squeezed my waist, the area where most of my new pounds had settled.

I noticed how much my body was changing from sitting around and eating amazing food all day long, but Cane didn't seem to mind. The heavier I was, the more he wanted me. It was every woman's dream come true.

He rested his face in my neck and held me close, his body keeping mine warm once our bodies returned to a state of calm. His powerful muscles acted as a personal heater for both of us to enjoy.

I couldn't believe I only had a day left.

Just one day.

Cane pulled his head away from my neck and rested his face near mine. He looked me in the eye as his fingers grazed against my cheek. He tucked my hair behind my ear, his jaw tightening as he looked at me.

Even his features were dark. He was tall, dark, and handsome, and he exuded danger. If I'd met him somewhere at night, I'd be afraid. Even now, he was still a little scary. But underneath that hard surface, he was a man with a heart as big as mine. He was a gentle giant, a friendly monster.

A dark angel.

He sighed as he looked at me, his thoughts resting on the surface of his eyes.

This hurt him as much as it hurt me.

"Thank you for being so good to me," I whispered. "I've had the time of my life here."

“Don’t thank me.”

“But you deserve to be thanked.”

“No. Don’t act like you’re leaving. We still have time. Let’s not waste it.”

**CANE**

THIS WAS HARDER THAN I'D IMAGINED.

I'd promised to take her back, but now that was the last thing I wanted to do.

I shouldn't care about her. The last month had given her peace and quiet, lots of food, and lots of great sex. I was gracious, and I even gave her the means to end her life so she wouldn't have to suffer anymore.

But I didn't want that for her.

I wanted her to enjoy the Tuscan countryside every day. I wanted her to eat whenever she wanted. I wanted her to smile every single day. I'd never cared about someone else's happiness, but I certainly cared about hers.

But there was nothing I could do. I had to take her back. That was part of the deal.

Pearl had already confronted Tristan and tried to purchase Adelina like some kind of livestock. But Tristan wasn't an idiot, so of course, he didn't say yes.

Maybe I could try again.

Make him an offer he couldn't refuse.

I shut the door to my office on base and made the call.

It rang several times, telling me he might not pick up at all.

But he did. “Cane Barsetti. I thought I would be hearing from you sometime soon.”

“Tristan.” It was difficult for me to be cordial. He was about to take my woman away, my *Bellissima*. “How are those weapons treating you?”

“Worth every penny. You and your brother know what you’re doing.”

“We do.”

“So, your beautiful sister-in-law stopped by.”

I’d suspected this would come up.

“She’s got a mouth on her. I like it.”

“My brother does too.”

“I can see why. She asked to buy Adelina, but I compromised with a swap. She didn’t go for it.”

Because she wasn’t an idiot.

“Frankly, I thought it was a little disrespectful that she walked in here like she owned the place.”

I wasn’t going to apologize for it, not when I had no idea she’d done it until after the exchange was over.

“If she were anyone else, she’d be tied up right now. In fact, she’d probably already be dead. But I spared her...since I like you and Crow. But don’t expect me to be so gracious next time. Because I won’t be.”

The threat wasn’t veiled, but I couldn’t rise in anger since he was justified in making the statement. It was a stupid thing for Pearl to do, and I couldn’t

make an excuse for it. Her neck could have been snapped. She was too arrogant, wearing the Barsetti name. Thankfully, it protected her. “Like I said, she’s a handful. But my brother is into that.”

Tristan chuckled. “I understand. Adelina is the same way.”

Now I wanted to snap his neck. If only I’d seen Adelina first, she could have been my slave instead. She would have been treated well, treated with respect. She wouldn’t have even felt like a prisoner.

“I expect you to be here tomorrow at seven in the evening. I’ll have the wire transfer ready.”

I had little more than a day left with her. She was already out of my grasp even though she was still sitting in my house. “I have a business proposition for you.”

“Really?” he asked. “This can’t wait until tomorrow?”

“No. Keep the second deposit for the weapons. And let me keep Adelina.” I’d just put ten million dollars on the table. Even to rich men like us, that was considerable money. He’d only enjoyed Adelina for a week, so it wasn’t like he would be missing much. He could have his wallet stuffed with cash and keep the artillery at the same time.

Tristan was dead silent.

I couldn’t gauge how he felt about my offer.

When Pearl walked into his lair, she didn’t have an offer. She didn’t have money to give. She was a terrible negotiator. Maybe dealing with me would have a different outcome.

“You want to buy my whore?” he asked coldly.

“Yes.”

“I told Crow’s whore she wasn’t for sale.”

I’d normally defend Pearl’s honor, but now wasn’t the time. Pearl would understand that. I was trying to leverage Adelina’s freedom—her life. “Everything is for sale—for the right price. Ten million dollars is a lot of money. We both know that.”

“Yes. But that whore is priceless.”

I clenched my jaw at the way he insulted her. I’d never called her such a thing. Never even thought about calling her such a thing. “Money is priceless, Tristan. How about fifteen million?”

“No. I’ll swap her for that cunt that stopped by. That’s it.”

“You don’t want her,” I said. “She’s a pain in the ass.”

“And I wouldn’t mind being a pain in her ass.”

My blood started to boil, infuriated he would speak of Pearl so viciously. “Twenty million.”

“The more you offer, the more her value increases.”

“Fine. Unlimited weapons for your soldiers—for a lifetime.” Maybe that would get him to reconsider.

He was quiet.

Hopefully, he was seriously considering it. It didn’t have an exact price tag, but it was a resource he could use forever. That added up to more than twenty million dollars—easily. It had to at least tempt him.

Tristan broke his silence. “No.”

My heart somersaulted into my stomach. If he didn’t take that offer, then there really was nothing else I could give him. His fascination for Adelina



matched my own. There was nothing that could replace her. She really was invaluable—priceless.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Cane. And if you cross me...you know what will happen.” Click.

I listened to the line go dead before I tossed my phone on my desk.

A shadow was covering the sky, and I couldn’t see a thing. Everything was turning dark. A war loomed over the east, and now it was stretching to the west. Tristan was a powerful enemy I didn’t want to fight. Most of the wars of the world had been started over a beautiful woman.

I wasn’t going to be one of those stupid men.

I had to let her go.

I had to let her suffer.

And let her die.

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CROW STOPPED BY THE BASE IN DARK JEANS AND A T-SHIRT. HE WALKED inside my office without knocking, probably payback for what I did to him a few days ago. My feet were on the desk, and I was enjoying a full bottle of scotch by myself. My mood was sour, my jaw was clenched, and I had a migraine that an entire bottle of liquor couldn’t fix.

Crow stepped inside and examined the scene in front of him.

I didn’t even glance at him. I held the cool glass against my temple, using the temperature to numb my migraine.

Crow grabbed the bottle and helped himself to a glass. “I’m surprised you

didn't take the day off."

I should be home with Adelina, comforting her before I had to drop her off tomorrow. But I needed time alone, time to cushion my painful disappointment. I needed to drown myself in alcohol to feel numb. "I'll head home in a little while." I took a drink and stared at the other wall.

"You doing alright?"

"If you're going to say stupid shit, don't say anything at all."

Instead of walking out, Crow pulled up the chair and took a seat.

"I called Tristan." I set the glass on the desk and rubbed my temple.

"And what was said?"

"I offered to buy Adelina from him."

Crow sipped his drink as he swallowed my words. "I'm guessing he didn't take your offer."

"No. I put twenty million on the table, and he didn't blink an eye over it."

"Bones did the same thing for Pearl."

"Then I offered to commission him with weapons forever if he let me keep her."

Crow's silence burned with anger.

"Don't worry, he didn't go for that either."

"That must have been hard to turn down."

"Didn't seem like it."

Crow took another drink. "So now what?"

“I have to hand her over tomorrow at seven.”

“I’m sorry, Cane. I know you’re fond of the girl.”

I was too fond of her. I’d just told Crow I’d buy her for twenty million dollars. There was no hiding it now.

“I already made this offer, but I’ll make it again. I can take her if that’s easier for you.”

“No.” It had to be me. I wasn’t gonna be a coward. I’d have to be strong for her, to make her feel strong. “But thanks anyway.”

“Is there anything I can do, Cane?”

The only response I gave was a shake of my head. “Just leave me alone.”

Crow didn’t move. He stayed in his seat, his drink still in his hand. “How about I be alone with you?”

“Why?”

“That’s what family is for, right? So you always have someone to be alone with.”

---

I DIDN’T SLEEP LAST NIGHT.

Neither did she.

We made love a few times, but it wasn’t the same. We were both thinking about the next day, the moment when I had to hand her over. She was thinking about the grotesque look in Tristan’s eyes, and I was thinking about his hands all over her body.

It was horrific.

I told myself it would get easier as time went on. Year after year, I would slowly make my peace with it. But it didn't seem like that would ever happen. I would always feel terrible for what happened to Adelina.

That I didn't save her.

The next morning, she packed. I'd bought her a lot of nice things since she'd come to live with me, mainly designer clothes and hair accessories. She took up half my closet with her things. She opened her bag and began to stuff everything inside, but then she faltered.

Because she knew there was no point in taking anything.

She couldn't wear the beautiful things I'd bought. She'd be stripped down until she was naked, chained to a wall in a cage. She wouldn't have a closet. She wouldn't get to shower. She would be a pig in a sty.

Watching her return the clothes to the closet was the most painful thing I'd ever seen.

She didn't cry or issue a snuffle. But her body sagged with depression. Her spine curved, and her shoulders hunched forward. She sat at the edge of the bed and crossed her arms over her stomach, her knees pulled to her chest.

I sat beside her, refraining from touching her.

She stared at the floor, her chest rising and falling deeply. "Do you have the pills?"

"Yes."

"Can I have them?"

I didn't move. "Where are you going to put them?"

“I don’t know...I’m not going to be wearing anything for long.”

I cringed at the thought. “They won’t dissolve in your mouth. You can put one on the inside of each cheek...”

“And then I can hide them in my room when he leaves me alone.”

“Yeah...” I closed my eyes when I pictured her lying on a stone floor, her ankles chained to the wall and tears in her eyes. She was dirty, her scalp was oily, and she was skinny. The image was too difficult to bear, so I wiped it from my mind.

She extended her hand, her palm facing the ceiling.

I opened my nightstand drawer and pulled out the small plastic bag. I dropped it into her hand.

She examined the pink pills, the perfect color to blend into her mouth.

“It’ll be over in less than five minutes...”

She nodded then placed them into her front pocket.

I sat beside her in silence, watching the minutes trail by before we had to leave. Her essence was heavy in the bedroom, in the entire house. It would take a while before the smell finally disappeared, for me to sleep in the middle of the bed because I no longer had to share. I wouldn’t see her hair in the shower drain or her toothbrush sitting on the counter. This house would return to being empty, to being silent. Ever since the first day I’d moved in here, she was here with me. I’d never truly lived here alone.

Now I would.

It was hard to imagine coming home from work without seeing her. It was hard to imagine talking to Pearl and Crow like everything was normal when Adelina was obviously missing. I knew Pearl was thinking about both of us

that very moment, knowing exactly what was to come.

I waited for Adelina to cry. But she didn't.

I waited for her to shake. She didn't do that either.

She stayed absolutely still, staring at the opposite wall.

There was nothing I could say to make this better, so I didn't say anything at all. Words meant nothing at a time like this. She was literally marching to her death. The only consolation I gave her was those pills.

They would end it quickly.

My hand moved to hers, and I grabbed it, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Her fingers responded to the touch, and she interlocked our fingertips. Her sight never left the wall, her breathing just as deep and even as before.

I sat with her and didn't say anything at all. Being there with her seemed to be the final gift I could impart. She was still with me, and as long as she was mine, she was safe.

I just wished she could always be safe.

---

A SHORT PLANE RIDE LATER, WE WERE IN SOUTHERN FRANCE. WE DROVE from the airport to Tristan's lair on the coast. There wasn't another building for miles, and he had direct access to his own personal harbor. It made smuggling all the easier.

I drove ten miles below the speed limit, taking my time getting there. I was in no rush, and neither was she. I said I would be there at seven, but I didn't give a damn about being late. Tristan's anger didn't impress me.

My hand held hers tightly on her thigh. I never removed it. I could gradually feel her pulse quicken as we came closer to Tristan's place. Her breathing never accelerated, and her eyes didn't fill with tears. She wore a cold expression, her walls already fully erected for what was about to happen.

I admired her more than I ever had.

She could break down and cry, but she didn't. She could panic and scream, but she didn't do that either. She faced death with her head held high and her shoulders back. She did it with both dignity and grace. Tristan could do whatever he wanted, but she would still be the most elegant thing in the room.

She reminded me of Pearl.

We reached the final road, and the mansion came into sight, the water in the background. The sun was already setting, and a beautiful sunset acted as the background. Like the sun was saying goodbye just to her, it slowly sank over the horizon.

Tristan's men were stationed outside, their eyes on the car as I pulled up. I turned into the roundabout but purposely stayed parked a good distance away, giving her space as long as possible. The men spoke into their mics, telling Tristan we were there.

Adelina stared out the window before she looked at me, somehow looking more beautiful than she ever had before. Her brown hair fell perfectly around her shoulders, and her bright eyes glowed softly. All the bruises she'd had faded away shortly after she stayed with me. Now her skin was soft and flawless. She looked like a beautiful woman who belonged in a mansion with a diamond tiara on her head. She should be at home with a husband and children, enjoying a life where she could experience old age with joy.

She shouldn't be here.

But saying all of that would make it worse.

I said the only thing that would mean something to her. “I admire you.”

Her eyes softened slightly.

“You’re so brave.”

She squeezed my hand. “You make me brave.”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “It doesn’t matter what they do to you. They can’t take your mind, your heart, or your soul.” My hand moved over her chest where her heart was beating fast. “So keep being brave.”

A soft smile formed on her lips. “Okay...” She fished into her pocket until she found the bag of pills. She took two out and placed them in the inside of each of her cheeks. “If I accidentally swallow...whatever.”

My eyes fell.

Tristan stepped outside with a few men, his hair just as greasy as it was before. He was in a black leather jacket and black jeans. At over six feet, he was a behemoth of a man. He stared at us down his crooked nose, annoyed that we were still in the car after seven.

Like I gave a damn.

“Thank you for everything,” she whispered. “You’re a good man, Cane. If you ever doubt your worth, just remember what I said.” She grabbed my hand and kissed my knuckles.

Now I would miss her even more than before.

She placed her hand on the door and took a deep breath before she opened it. With her back perfectly straight, she stepped out and stood tall.



I got out of the car and came to her side. Without thinking, I cupped her face between my hands and kissed her. It was a soft kiss, a delicate embrace that I'd given to her hundreds of times. It was full of respect, friendship, and adoration. This woman had become my friend, my muse. I wanted to protect her, and I felt powerless when I couldn't. "I'll never forget you, *Bellissima*. You'll live forever." I placed her hand over my chest. "In here."

Her eyes watered, and I knew it wasn't because she was scared.

I took her hand in mine and began the slow march back to Tristan. We were hundreds of yards away, and the walk was unnecessarily long. But I wanted to give her every moment that I could, give her fresh air for as long as possible.

Within the blink of an eye, we were face-to-face with Tristan and his crew.

His eyes were only for Adelina. "I've missed you, Adelina."

She stared at him coldly, her hand still in mine.

"I hope you haven't forgotten me. If you have, I'll enjoy reminding you." He extended his hand.

She didn't take it.

His eyes narrowed. "This is off to a good start. I enjoy punishing you."

My heart was racing fast. I could hardly breathe. I was lightheaded. I was sick. "Where's the money?"

Tristan turned his expression to me. "I have to admit, I thought you wouldn't show up today after I rejected your offer."

Adelina's eyes shifted to me.

"Twenty million dollars for one whore." Tristan shook his head. "Didn't put

it past you to run. But your offer only makes me want her more.”

I wanted to pull out my pistol and shoot him right between the eyes. His goons would incinerate me, but it would be worth it.

Adelina’s eyes stayed on me before she looked away.

Tristan turned to one of his men. “Send the money.”

A man in all black worked a tablet, tapping the screen with his fingertips. Tristan stared at me as he waited, and I didn’t drop my expression. I met his fiery look with my own. The man finished up and handed the tablet over. “It’s done.”

Tristan held up the device so I could see. The money went through to my account. It was done. “Satisfied?”

I gave a slight nod.

Tristan handed the tablet back. “Now your end of the bargain.”

I didn’t drop Adelina’s hand. She’d have to make the first move. I would stand there as long as she needed me to.

Tristan snapped his fingers. “Come. Whore.”

Adelina’s expression didn’t change. She slowly pulled her hand away and took a step forward.

I felt weak the second she was gone. I felt dead the moment she was no longer mine. My world changed in that instant. It twisted and turned, making me feel sick. She was the center of my world for the past month. Now she was gone, just like the setting sun. But for me, it would be eternal night. My sun would never rise again.

Tristan wore a smile that looked like a grimace. “Good girl.” He grabbed her

by the neck and pulled her to his side.

Both of my hands tightened into fists.

“Welcome home, cunt.” Tristan pressed his lips right against her ear. “I have a welcoming party planned for you.” He grabbed her by the hair and yanked on her scalp until she was thrown to the ground.

My body immediately lurched forward.

One of his men grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me back. I was surrounded by five men, all with machine guns. One false move and I was dead. It wouldn't change Adelina's fate.

Tristan turned to me, his eyes narrowing. “The deal is done. Leave.”

I couldn't move. I knew exactly what would happen to her once I was gone. The second she crossed the threshold, she would be stripped and pushed onto a bed. He would fuck her a million ways until she was sore and in tears. She might swallow both pills then and there.

When I didn't move, Tristan grabbed Adelina by the hair and yanked her back to her feet.

She didn't make a single sound.

Like a man guiding a horse, he pulled on her hair like reins back to the three-story house right on the water. Even when she kept pace with him, he yanked on her anyway. His men moved with him, the two guards posted outside the house watching me.

I just stood there.

Tristan opened the front door then shoved her violently across the threshold. The door shut a minute later, and all was silent.

I remained where I stood, my chest rising and falling at an accelerated rate. All I felt was pain, unbridled burning pain. Air was circulating in my lungs, but the oxygen wasn't reaching my blood. My muscular legs suddenly felt weak. I felt like I'd lost everything when I still had it all. Only a month had passed, and nothing was different.

But now nothing was the same.

I needed to turn around and go home. I needed to get back to my life. I was fine before Adelina came into my life. I would be fine again.

But I wasn't sure if I could believe that.

I finally turned around and got into the car. Even when I was behind the wheel, I couldn't start the engine. I was in no condition to drive. To an outsider, my face was stoic, and I didn't share a single emotion.

But inside, I was dying.

Inside, I was broken.

All I could think about was her suffering, what Tristan was doing to her, how she was begging for death in that very moment.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and pressed it to my ear.

Crow answered immediately. "Hey, what—"

"It's done." The emotion didn't escape my voice.

Crow was quiet for a while. "I'm here if you—"

Click.

I turned off my phone and threw it onto the seat beside me, onto the leather that was still warm from Adelina.

I finally turned on the car and drove away.

But I drove away as a different man than when I first arrived.

**CROW**

I LISTENED TO THE LINE GO DEAD.

I didn't bother calling him back because I knew my brother so well. The phone was already off. He didn't want to talk to me. He didn't want to talk to anyone. Even if Pearl approached him, he would blow her off.

Cane's voice didn't sound any different than usual, but I could feel the pain in his tone. I could hear the crackle of anger. I could feel his sadness, his brutal pain, over the quiet line. My brother claimed he didn't love this woman, but if it wasn't love, I didn't know what else it could be.

When I turned around, Pearl was standing there with her arms crossed over her chest. She searched my face for clues as to what just happened. She wanted confirmation, but she also didn't want to hear it at the exact same time.

"It's done." I repeated my brother's words to her, finding them short and effective.

Her eyes immediately watered, quicker than I could snap my fingers.

"Button..." She darted around me and left our bedroom, dismissing me without a backward glance. Her light footsteps pounded against the hardwood

floor as she practically ran down the hallway.

My initial instinct was to go after her, but she obviously didn't want me with her. In her eyes, I was somehow responsible for this. Since I wasn't willing to risk my life as well as hers for this woman, I was somehow evil.

Adelina was a nice woman who deserved better, but I would always put my wife first.

That was how this cruel world worked.

---

WHEN IT WAS LATE IN THE EVENING, I FINALLY LEFT MY STUDY AND WENT after her. She'd had enough time to grieve, to let her emotions clean out her tear ducts. Logic would descend once again, and she would understand this wasn't her fault or mine.

Life just sucked.

I found her sitting outside on the patio, one of my sweaters bundled around her. Instead of making her look bulkier, she seemed even smaller in the oversized clothing. I walked up behind her then took the seat in the armchair beside her.

She stared across the vineyards even though practically nothing could be seen. There was a soft breeze in the air, slightly cold from the approach of fall. Sweet grapes were on the wind, along with the smell of olives from the trees.

I waited for her to say something, to feel out her mood.

But she was dead silent.

"Button." I watched the side of her face, seeing the anguish in her expression.

“She’s my friend...”

“I know. I liked her too.”

“Right now, as we speak...” She never finished the sentence. She let it die away on the tip of her tongue.

“Don’t think about that. She even told us not to feel guilty. She knows we couldn’t do anything for her.”

“It’s still so horrible. I feel like she died.”

She was dead. In just a matter of days, Tristan’s men would be weighing her corpse down into the sea. She would probably swallow the pills sooner rather than later. I debated telling Pearl the truth. It might give her some comfort, but it also might make her upset again.

It was better not to say anything.

“How’s Cane?”

“He’s okay.”

“How can he be okay?”

“I only talked to him for two seconds. He hung up on me. I can tell he’s hurting.”

“How can he not be hurting? I know how much he cared about her. I saw it every time he looked at her.”

I saw it too. I kept expecting Cane to go back on his word and run off with her. But he obviously couldn’t risk my well-being as well as Button’s, not when Constantine was a potential risk.

Button sniffed then the tears came.



There was nothing I hated more than listening to her cry. The sound was obnoxious from other women, high-pitched and irritable. When Button cried, it wasn't annoying at all. It was heartbreaking for me to listen to it. Whatever pain she felt, I felt it a million times more. All I wanted was for her to be happy. I worked hard to make sure that would happen. I wanted my wife to be safe from everything, hidden away in my mansion where no one could ever touch her. But pain found a way inside—always.

“Button...” My hand moved to her cheek, and I wiped her tears away.

She sniffed again before she helped herself to my lap. She cuddled into my chest and hung on to me as she allowed herself to break down, to mourn the loss of the woman she'd come to care for as a friend.

I was grateful she didn't push me away, that she didn't see me as the bad guy. I rested my chin on her head and rubbed her back, comforting her in silence. Button was a tough woman who didn't give in to tears, but this was a painful subject for her. I knew she pictured herself in Adelina's shoes. She understood better than anyone what it was like to be a captive. She knew exactly what Adelina was suffering right at that moment.

That was something Cane and I would never understand.

“You know I would fix this for you if I could.”

She nodded into my chest. “I know...”

---

I WENT TO THE BASE EVERY DAY TO CHECK IN ON CANE WITHOUT MAKING IT obvious I was only there to look after him.

But he didn't come into work.

He responded to Bran via email, but he didn't set foot on the compound. He did everything from home, handling email and clients electronically. He obviously didn't want to be around people right now.

When I called him, his phone was still off.

Since he wasn't in immediate danger, I couldn't stop by his house to pry. He wanted his space right now, and it would be wrong for me not to give it to him.

But that didn't mean I stopped worrying.

He was my younger brother. Concern was a natural compulsion.

Button was quiet around the house. She wasn't interested in sex or food. She chose to spend her time reading or walking through the vineyards. She didn't come to work with me, choosing to stay home.

But as the days passed, she slowly came out of her shell. She talked to me about the book she was reading, ate a little more at dinner, and would at least snuggle with me in bed. I wondered if her lack of sex drive had anything to do with Adelina. Sex probably reminded her of what her friend was going through. It felt wrong to enjoy it when Adelina was obviously in so much pain.

"Have you talked to Cane?" she asked as she lay beside me in bed.

"No."

"I wonder if he's okay." Her face was close to mine, and her hand rested against my chest. Her makeup had been washed off, and her hair was pulled into a loose bun. I liked the way she looked right before bed, when everything was removed, and it was just her natural features underneath. When we woke up the following morning, she would look even more beautiful after a long night of rest.

“He’s working with the men through emails. He’s fine.”

“Maybe physically....”

“His phone is still off. I don’t think he wants to talk to anyone right now.”

“Do you think I should stop by?”

I shook my head. “No. Leave him alone.”

“What if you stop by?”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me either. When he’s ready, he’ll let us know.”

“Yeah...I guess you’re right.”

It’d been three days since the last time we’d made love. Our schedules were centered around our sex lives. We always got busy in the morning before I went to work, when I came home from work, and then right before bed. Now there wasn’t any action at all because she was too emotional to be excited about anything. I didn’t want to be insensitive, but I was beginning to become frustrated.

I hugged her into my body and pressed a kiss to her lips.

She kissed me back, but barely.

I wasn’t going to stop, so my hand reached underneath her shirt until I found her panties. I slowly pulled them down her hips.

She grabbed my hand. “Not tonight, Crow.”

I didn’t hold back the snarl that escaped my lips. In any other situation, I would just yank them off and do it anyway. But I took her voice on this matter very seriously. She was obviously distraught, and I wasn’t going to push her if she didn’t want to be pushed. I pulled my hand away. “It’s been three days.”

“Lots of couples don’t have sex for three days.”

“Not us.” I rubbed my nose against hers. “I know you’re upset right now, but shutting me out isn’t accomplishing anything. We should enjoy each other as much as we can. I’m your husband, and I have needs. And let’s not pretend that your needs aren’t the same as mine.” My hand moved up her thigh, and I gripped her ass. I watched the resistance fade in her eyes before I leaned down and kissed her again.

This time she kissed me back, her hand moving across my chest.

My hand moved to her thong, and I pulled it down again, this time making it to her ankles. My thighs parted hers, and within seconds, I was plunged deep inside her. I was balls deep in the pussy I was obsessed with, right where I belonged. She wasn’t as wet as she normally was, but it was definitely enough for us to move together.

I pressed my face to hers as I moved deep and slow, exploring her like I’d never felt her before. The arousal came within minutes, sheathing me to the hilt. Soon enough, she started to rock with me, to moan for me.

And it felt right again.

It was her and me—and no one else.

**CANE**

“FUCK.” I JOLTED UPRIGHT IN BED AND THUDDERED MY SKULL AGAINST THE headboard. I straightened myself out and gripped the sheets as I felt my bare back become exposed to the air. I was covered in sweat, and it slowly evaporated in the cool air.

I was breathing hard, my lungs screaming for air they weren’t receiving. I dragged my hand down my face, and I felt the sweat on the bridge of my nose. I was covered in sweat everywhere, and I was boiling hot. I kicked the sheets away and slowly took in my bedroom.

It was dark, and the sun hadn’t come up yet. I didn’t know what time it was, but it must have been a few hours before sunrise. I leaned against the headboard and ran my fingers through my hair, feeling more sweat.

The nightmare still lingered behind my eyes, the image impossible to forget.

*Bellissima.*

She was in so much pain.

She was being tortured, raped, beaten...

Her tears haunted me.

She was calling my name, asking me to protect her.

She was dying.

She swallowed the pills and convulsed as the heart attack swallowed her up and snuffed out her life.

Now she was gone.

I couldn't even get my breathing. I couldn't calm down. The adrenaline was still thick in my blood, still painful in my veins. When my vision was clear, I got out of bed and walked downstairs to the living room.

I needed a drink.

The bedroom haunted me because it still smelled like her. Her clothes were in my closet. I saw them every day. Every part of the house was heavy with her ghost. But the bedroom was the worst place of all.

I made a drink and sat on the couch. I turned on the TV and got the fire going, needing something to distract me from the horrific thoughts that were circling in my head. I couldn't eat because I felt too guilty. I couldn't sleep because that made me feel like shit too. I couldn't concentrate on anything since I knew what she was going through.

It hurt so fucking much.

I wasn't supposed to care. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and she had to suffer the unfair consequences. If she were anyone else, it wouldn't matter to me. I wouldn't lose sleep over it. I wouldn't give a damn at all.

But now I couldn't even function.

It shouldn't be her.

I wished it were me.

---

THE DOORBELL RANG.

Who the hell stopped by to see me? Anyone who knew me understood I didn't want to be bothered right now. I didn't want to look at anyone's face. My phone was still turned off. The battery was probably dead too.

I walked to the front door and spotted my brother standing on the other side of it.

What did he want?

I opened the door, giving him a threatening glare. "If you need shit done, talk to Bran. He's handling everything for the time being."

Both of his arms hung by his sides, and he stood in a black suit with a blue tie. He obviously hadn't been to the base. He was working at his winery down the road. His visit had nothing to do with business. "Not why I'm here."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Your phone has been off. Started to get worried."

"I can take care of myself, Crow." I started to shut the door.

He wedged his foot inside so it would stay propped open. He helped himself inside, walking into my home like he'd been invited. "Never said you couldn't. But it's been a while now. Thought you would bounce back."

"Sorry if I need a little more time," I snapped. I walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge even though I wasn't hungry or thirsty. I felt the cold air

rush over me, quieting my anger, before I shut it again.

Crow stood at the counter, wearing an expression of indifference. "I can handle the base. Take as much time as you need."

"Great. Then you can leave."

He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "Is there anything I can do for you, Cane? I'm at your disposal day and night."

"No." I moved to the other side of the kitchen island and gripped the edge of the counter.

My brother continued to stare me down.

"You can go now."

"Just talk to me."

"We don't talk," I argued. "We never talk."

"Things change," he said. "You were there for me when I went through a hard time with Button. You know I'm always here for you."

"Well, I'm fine. There's nothing to talk about."

Crow eyed me coldly, calling my bluff without actually saying it.

"What?" I said with a sigh.

"You haven't been to work. Your phone is off. Not to mention, you look like hell."

"Nothing has changed, then."

"Cane," he said with annoyance. "You're taking this hard."

I gripped the edge of the counter and looked at the basket of molding fruit.



“How can I not? She’s an incredible woman, and now she’s...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I couldn’t dive into the details. It would only make the nightmare more real. “When I dropped her off...it was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to.”

“I can only imagine.”

“You can’t even begin to imagine.” I closed my eyes and wished the pain would stop. I wished I’d never taken Tristan’s offer. Or better yet, I wished Adelina had never gone to Greece in the first place. I wished we’d never met. We both wouldn’t be suffering right now otherwise.

“Does she have the pills?”

I nodded. “I hope she’s taken them already...but I also hope she hasn’t.” I didn’t want her to suffer, but knowing she was a lifeless corpse made me want to hurl all over my kitchen.

“Maybe Tristan found them. Maybe he hasn’t. I think he would call you if she died.”

“Why would he?”

“He’s a paranoid man.”

“It makes the death look natural.”

“She’s twenty-three,” Crow said. “People at that age don’t have heart attacks.”

“Unless they’re under extreme circumstances...”

“I just don’t think she’s dead yet. Tristan would have said something.”

“Maybe.” That made me feel good but also bad.

Crow continued to watch me, wearing his knowing gaze. “How are you

doing?”

“I think we covered that pretty well...”

“But you haven’t actually told me anything. I’m your brother. You can talk to me about this.”

“We’ve never been the kind of brothers who talk.”

“But you’ve never been in a situation like this. I know you’re hurting.”

I stepped back and crossed my arms over my chest. “There’s nothing you can do, Crow. There’s nothing anyone can do. I just want to be by myself. I just want to be alone.” I looked out the window, not wanting to look at my brother’s eyes that were identical to my own. “Just go, alright?”

Crow didn’t press the conversation any further. It was futile at this point. “You know where to find me.” He left the kitchen and walked out the front door. I could see him through the front windows. He got into his black car, started the loud engine, and then drove off.

When I was alone again, I didn’t feel any better.

I felt just as bad.

---

I WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AGAIN.

From a nightmare.

Just as before, I was covered in sweat and stunned. I felt the heat stick to my back as my chest heaved to breathe. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand and realized it was only one in the morning.

I had just gone to sleep an hour ago.

Not only could I not make it through the night, but I couldn't even make it through some of it.

I went downstairs and made a drink like last night. I sat on the couch, turned on the TV so I had something to distract myself, and spotted the book she'd left behind. She'd been reading it for the past week. It was hardbound and a little dusty. I wasn't sure where she got it because I didn't read. It was probably a gift from Pearl.

Looking at the book only reminded me that she wasn't here. It reminded me of the comfortable schedule we had. I'd come home from work and see her sitting on the couch. Dinner was already prepared, and she was wearing one of my shirts.

Now I sat in an empty house.

It didn't even smell like her anymore.

I didn't want to look at this book. I didn't want to think of her every time I walked into the room. I grabbed it and contemplated throwing it in the fire. Once it burned to ashes, I wouldn't have to think about it ever again.

But would that really erase her?

Did I want to erase her?

I spotted the bookmark she'd left in the center of the pages. It was regular white stock paper, something she'd grabbed from my printer. I pulled it from between the pages for no particular reason, just wanting to see if my hunch was right.

It was paper from my printer.

But my name was written in her handwriting.

Cane.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

I unfolded the paper with shaking hands and spotted the handwritten note she'd left for me. It was short, her feminine writing filling the pages with stark black ink. My eyes stared at the words without reading them, unsure if I could handle her message.

I wanted to close it and ignore it forever, but I couldn't. Not reading it would haunt me forever.

*CANE,*

*By the time you read this, I might already be dead.*

*And if I am, don't pity me. I'm in a better place.*

*I just wanted you to know that you changed my life. I was taken from my family, but somehow, I felt at home with you. My innocence was taken from me, but you somehow gave it back. I'd only seen cold and cruel men, but you taught me that good people are everywhere. You weren't the Prince Charming I'd been waiting my whole life for, but you were so much better. Because you were real. You were deep, complicated. You wanted to hurt me, but you couldn't do it. Your heart is too strong. You're far too kind. And you made me feel like a queen even while I was a prisoner. You've made this horrific ending a little easier to bear, gave me a little more life to live.*

*Thank you for everything,*

*Bellissima*

---

I WALKED INTO CROW'S OFFICE WITHOUT KNOCKING. I DIDN'T LEARN MY

lesson the first time because lessons didn't matter right now. Everything else could wait. Nothing was more important than what I had to say.

Crow looked up when I stormed into his office, but he didn't give me any of his sarcasm. He only looked at me with surprise, his eyebrow arched. We hadn't spoken in days, and when he'd come by the house, I'd basically kicked him out. "Everything alright?"

"No." I sat in the chair facing his desk as I rested my elbows on my knees. I leaned forward, the anxiety gripping my chest. "I'm gonna get her back."

"Get who back?"

"Adelina." I couldn't bear it anymore. I couldn't stand aside and let this happen to her. I couldn't let her be grateful to me when I was the one who abandoned her. I should have fought for her. I should have killed all those men before they laid a hand on her.

Crow's surprise deepened into disbelief. "You can't be serious."

"I am serious. You said you would be there if I needed anything. Well, I need something. I need her."

Crow slowly rose from behind his desk, moving to his full height and blocking most of the window. "I understand this is hard for you, but we can't get her back. She's gone, Cane."

"She's not gone yet. You're right. Tristan would call me."

"We have no idea if I'm right," he snapped. "Tristan has dozens of men with him at all times. Not to mention, they're equipped with the finest weapons in warfare. It's a suicide mission."

"Yeah, it probably is."

"Then, what's the point?"

I couldn't suffer through those nightmares anymore. I couldn't live my life without that woman beside me. I had to get her back or die trying. Instead of letting her go, I should have fought for her. But now I was going to save her. "I'm going after her whether you come with me or not. I'm taking as many men as I can."

Crow shook his head. "This is fucking stupid."

"I know. Doesn't change anything."

"If this is what you wanted, you shouldn't have handed her over. This is going to be a million times harder. Even if we get in there and kill everyone, she could be dead. It could all be for nothing."

"I'm willing to risk that."

"Tristan is not a man you want to cross."

"I'm aware."

Crow tightened his jaw and shook his head. "You know I can't help you."

"Why not? I risked my neck to save Pearl."

"It's because of Pearl that I can't do anything, and you know that. I can't risk her safety."

"Then send her somewhere."

"Where?" he demanded. "The safest place in the world for her is at my side. If I send her to another country, I have no guarantee that she's safe."

"Then bring her in on this. She's tough. She's smart."

"That's not funny," he said coldly. "My wife stays out of this. She's been through enough."

“I know her as well as you do,” I said. “She would want to be a part of this. She would want to save Adelina.”

“We both know I don’t give a damn what she wants.” He slammed his hand into his chest. “All that matters is what I want. She’s a brat with a head too big for her little shoulders. She’s naïve and thinks she can take on the world. She’s not getting involved in this. Final decision.”

I understood my brother was protective since he’d almost lost her a few times. She was his entire world. Without her, he would go back to the miserable shadow that used to stand in the corner. But he forgot why he fell in love with her to begin with. “She’s not some weak little girl. You’re forgetting how tough your chick is. When I was doing...that horrible thing to her...she never showed a sign of weakness. When she was captured by those bounty hunters, she escaped. When she took my place and went back to Bones, she killed him. I understand why you’re protective, but don’t forget the woman we’re talking about. She’s not some damsel in distress. If she heard us call her that, she’d kick us both in the nuts.”

Crow stared at me with the exact same expression, cold and quiet. He didn’t jump to his feet and argue with me, and he let the words soak into the air around us.

“I have to get her, Crow. I can’t live like this another day. If I die in the attempt, so be it.”

Crow sighed, his eyes cringing. “Take a second to think about what you’re doing. You’re declaring war against a hostile ally—over a woman. You’re starting a blood war the likes of which we just ended. This could go on for generations. Think about how this will affect Pearl and me. All we want is a quiet life in the countryside, making wine. You’re risking all of that by doing this.”

I bowed my head and stared at the floor.

“This would be different if we still had her. We could have done something to make it look like she ran away or died. Breaking in to his compound and waging war on everyone inside is going to be nearly impossible. Even if we kill everyone, there could be more somewhere else. Do you understand the magnitude of this?”

“Yes.” I rubbed my palms together, my eyes glued to the floor.

Crow sighed. “We can find you another woman, Cane. We can find you one just as pretty and just as feisty. Most women would kill to be rescued by us. We could go to the underground market and pick one out.”

“Fuck you, Crow.”

“I’m being serious.”

“I don’t want some other woman. Losing her isn’t difficult because I’m lonely and horny. It’s difficult because...I’m in love with her.”

Crow was dead silent.

I didn’t raise my head to look at him. It was easier to stare at my hands. It was easier to downplay the powerful confession I’d just made. I’d never said those words in my life, and they jumped off my tongue so easily.

Crow continued to be quiet, letting the words sink in further.

When minutes passed and we didn’t speak, I finally straightened in my chair and looked at him. “I wish I didn’t feel this way. I never wanted to feel this way...but I can’t sleep because of it. I can’t breathe because of it. If she dies...I’ll never be the same. It was a mistake to let her go in the first place. It was a mistake not to protect her. Now all I feel is regret. All I feel is pain.”

Crow watched me with his dark eyes.



“I know this puts you in a difficult position. I understand you have to protect your own family. If you don’t want any part in this, I won’t hold it against you. You and Pearl can hide somewhere until the dust settles.” I sighed and looked at my hands again.

“Cane.”

My gaze met his.

“If you love this woman, you know I’m in.”

My eyes immediately filled with emotion, touched by his loyalty.

“It changes everything. If she’s going to be a Barsetti someday, then she’s my family. And I have to protect her.”

“Thank you...”

He sank back into his chair, his eyes heavy with the task. “But I need to make arrangements for Pearl. I have to place her somewhere where she can’t be found, where she’ll have everything she needs if I don’t survive.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Give me a day or two to figure that out.”

A day or two was too long, but I couldn’t expect him to drop everything. “Okay.”

“In the meantime, gather up all the soldiers you can find. Let’s work on a plan for this.”

I knew Crow didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want any part in it. All he wanted was a quiet life for him and Pearl. All of that was going to shit because of me. “Thank you, brother.” The rest of our family was gone, and the only thing that filled the void in my chest was Crow. He was all the

family I had left. We fought, insulted each other, and seemed annoyed with one another most of the time. But the bond of blood between us was unbreakable.

Crow met my gaze without blinking. “You’re welcome, brother.”

## PEARL

THE LOSS OF ADELINA WAS HEARTBREAKING.

It was wrong.

I'd managed to escape and live a beautiful life. Why wasn't she so lucky? I shouldn't be angry with Crow or Cane because it wasn't their fault. If there were something that could have been done to save her, they would have figured out a way.

But there wasn't a way.

In time, this would get easier. But for now, it was like a pill that was too big to swallow.

It moved down a dry throat and made me cough.

Crow came home at the same time that day. He walked into the bedroom and dropped his jacket on the floor. Shoes were kicked off and tossed in two random spots in the room. His tie came next, sliding out of his smooth collar.

I put my book down and greeted him by the door, noticing the testy look in his eyes. He was definitely irritated about something. There was usually something on this mind every day, but today, it was more obvious than usual.

“What is it?” I walked up to him, my hands moving to his chest. I’d been distant with him lately. We only had sex last night because he demanded it. I shouldn’t be so cold toward him when he’d done his best to spare Adelina. I was still upset over what happened, but I missed him more. I missed those kisses as soon as he walked in the door, the way he ran his hand through my hair.

He unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall to the floor. “It can wait.” He scooped me into his arms and carried me to the bed. He set me at the foot of the bed and yanked up my dress. My panties were ripped off, and his slacks were dropped to the floor. An instant later, he was inside me, every inch of his long length stretching me.

I gripped his arms as I took a deep breath, my mind immediately drifting to the clouds above. All I felt was the lustful connection between us, the romantic passion based on intimate love. All I felt was my husband between my legs, the only man I’d ever fallen so deeply in love with. “Crow.”

He moved farther over me, my ankles tied around his waist. He deepened the angle so I could take all of him, stretch me wide apart as he moved inside me. His hand slid into my hair, and he gave me hard thrusts, hitting me deeply every single time. He breathed with me, his hand continually grabbing my hair.

“Crow...”

He kissed me hard on the mouth, his tongue moving with mine. He kissed me like he loved me, like he hadn’t just made love to me earlier that morning. “I love you, Button.”

My arms snaked around his neck, and my heart throbbed at his words. They were sweet and significant, something he didn’t say as often as I did. He showed it in every other way. But when he said it, it was so much more

meaningful. I could feel it in his words rather than just hear it. “I love you too...”

---

AFTER HE SHOWERED AND CHANGED, HE SAT ON THE COUCH IN THE LIVING room just in front of the patio. He was in jeans and a t-shirt, his hair ruffled because it was still slightly damp from the shower. He stared at the cold fireplace, his green eyes dulling to match the color of the ashes sitting at the bottom.

I came up behind him and rubbed his shoulders, feeling the tension as well as the knots. “What is it, Crow?” I could feel his silent trepidation, his quiet unease. He wasn’t angry, just worried. I knew him so well that I could understand the difference easily.

He patted the seat beside him.

I dropped my hands and walked around the couches until I was sitting beside him. My hand went to his thigh, needing to touch him as well as let him be touched.

He continued to look at the fireplace. “Cane wants to save Adelina—and he asked me to help him.”

“He did?” My heart immediately picked up in excitement, in relief.

“At first, I said no. I told him I’m not interested in war anymore. I’ve got my own family to take care of.” His hand moved onto mine as it rested on his thigh. “But then he told me he was in love with her.”

My eyes fell shut with emotion. I knew there something more between them. Cane bent over backward to make that woman smile. He gave her the world on a silver platter. He wouldn’t do that for just anyone. “It’s the right thing to

do, Crow. We have to get her out of there. She deserves to be free.”

“That’s not why I’m doing it. I’m only doing it because of the way he feels. If something happened to you, he would be there for me in a heartbeat. He would take a bullet in his neck if I asked him to.”

“You’re right, he would. I think it’s fair that we do what we can to save her. She’s a good person...she doesn’t deserve this.”

He released a quiet sigh, his shoulders tensing. “There’s no *we*, Button. Just me.”

“What does that mean?”

“You won’t be involved in this.” He turned his head toward me, prepared to see my appalled reaction. “it’s just Cane and me, along with our crew.”

“She’s my friend, Crow.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re my wife first.”

“I can help you—”

“No.” He stared me down, colder than ever before.

“*No?*”

“No,” he repeated. “It’s way too dangerous.”

“Then what do you expect me to do? Stay home and read while all of this is going on?”

“Actually, I’ll be sending you somewhere safe. Lars will go with you.”

“What?” I shrieked. “You’re gonna send me off? Like a child to boarding school?”

“Just until everything is over. They’ll come after you. And if I die, I need to

know you'll be taken care of."

"Let's not even talk about that—"

"It could happen, Button. I'm strong, but I'm not invincible. One wrong move and it could all be over. I know how strong you are, but you've never been in a gunfight before. There's too much going on and not enough time for me to train you."

"Then I could do something else. I could be a driver or something."

"No. I'm not going to change my mind about this."

"Do you think I care if you change your mind or not?"

He clenched his jaw as he looked at me, his anger coming to the surface. He did his best to tuck it away, to keep it bottled up inside before he screamed at me. "You can either cooperate, or I'll make you. I've already made arrangements for you and Lars. You'll have a team of a dozen men with you at all times. You'll be safe until I'm ready to get you...or...I don't come back."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Too bad."

"Crow, I'm serious."

"And I'm more serious. I'll still put a needle in your neck just like last time. Don't underestimate me."

My cheeks puffed with rage, and I struggled not to scream. I wanted to slap him so hard he saw stars. Instead of being treated like a partner, I was viewed as a child. I was livid, out of my mind.

"Button, listen to me."

“No.” I stormed out of the room and took off, knowing he wouldn’t come after me. We’d already had this fight before, where he was pissed when I put myself in danger. We didn’t speak for weeks, but that memory wasn’t enough to stop me. He wanted to send me away somewhere else, somewhere far away with the possibility he wouldn’t come back. If he died, I wanted to die too.

Simple enough.

---

CANE ANSWERED THE DOOR WITH A FURROWED BROW. HE LOOKED SICK, malnourished, and paler than cream. He stared at me with my walls surrounding me on all sides, prepared for an attack he hadn’t anticipated.

I welcomed myself inside. “Crow told me about your plans.”

Cane shut the door and trailed behind me until we were in the living room. He crossed his arms over his chest and stood behind the couch. “Then why are you here?”

“Because I’m pissed at him, and I had nowhere else to go.”

“So you decided to bother me instead?” Just like his brother, he grabbed a decanter of scotch and poured himself a drink.

“He told me he’s going to send me away. He said I can’t help you get Adelina back.”

He sat on the couch, his glass in his hand. “Yeah, I’m aware.”

I paced in his living room, my anger simmering. “How can he say that to me? I care about Adelina. I want to help her.”

“I know you do. I said the same thing. I reminded him that you’re a tough



cookie.”

I threw my arms down. “Thank you.”

“But since I’ve been home, I’m been thinking a lot about it...”

I turned back to him, my guard back up.

“And he’s right, Button. This is going to be intense. Tristan and his men are ruthless. They won’t hesitate to shoot you between the eyes, or worse, take you as a prisoner. It’ll be too difficult for Crow and me to focus if we’re worried about you the whole time. I have to do my best to get Adelina out of there. If Crow is taken down because he’s too busy protecting you...it could jeopardize everything.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “What happened to me being a Barsetti?”

“You are a Barsetti.”

“Then I’m part of the team.”

“You don’t have enough experience. Trust me, I want all the help I can get. But this isn’t your fight.”

“You forget what I did to Bones. You forget I tricked him into loving me, that I survived the brutal way you beat me, that I escaped those bounty hunters, that I sowed a knife into my shoulder and ripped it out to kill Bones. Give me the credit I’ve earned.”

“I know you’re badass, Pearl. I never said otherwise. But this is way too dangerous. I’m on Crow’s side for this.”

“I think you’re only on his side because he agreed to help you.”

He shrugged. “He has my back. I have his.”

---

WHEN I CAME BACK TO THE HOUSE, CROW WAS STANDING OUTSIDE WAITING for me. He must have watched my GPS signal the entire time I was gone. He knew I went to Cane's, and he watched the dot head back to the house I shared with him.

He stood with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his expression indifferent. He didn't seem angry by my outburst, probably because I went to Cane's instead of driving aimlessly across Tuscany.

I left his car in the roundabout and walked toward him, still irritated with the way he'd spoken to me.

He watched me with his cold eyes, his head not moving as he examined me. "We're sleeping together tonight. If I'm going to die in a few days, we should enjoy every minute we have left."

I stopped in my tracks and stared at him, my expression hardening with an outburst of pain. "Don't say that to me again."

"It's the truth, Button. I won't lie to you."

I tore my gaze away, feeling my eyes water.

He continued to watch me.

I finally moved into his chest and wrapped my arms around his waist.

Like he'd been expecting it, he wrapped his powerful arms around my shoulders. He brought me close to him, brushing a kiss against my forehead.

"If you die, I should die too."

"No, Button."

"I don't want to live without you...I can't."

“Yes, you can. You’re the strongest woman I know.”

I shook my head as I buried it in his chest.

“I’ll do everything I possibly can to make it out of there alive, Cane and Adelina with me. I’ve made it this far, and I’ve been in worse situations. There’s probably nothing to worry about at all. But if I don’t make it back... you know I love you.”

I nodded. “I love you too...so much.”

---

CROW WAS IN HIS STUDY LATE THAT NIGHT, TALKING ON THE PHONE AND getting things prepared. He asked me to stay in the bedroom and give him space to get everything done. If I overheard everything, it would probably just make me upset.

Even though he intended to send me away, I wasn’t sure if I would go.

I would just refuse until I got what I wanted.

I understood the situation would be dangerous, but I wasn’t going to part from my only family in the world. I was far more afraid of living without them than dying. Carrying on when Crow was gone was a fate far worse—in my eyes.

Crow walked into the bedroom after midnight, his hair messy from running his fingers through it nonstop. He carried a slender folder and placed it on the coffee table. He didn’t look at me once.

I knew this would be a difficult conversation.

“You’re going to Santorini with Lars.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“An island in Southern Greece. It’s quiet, remote. I have a house there under a different name. It can’t be traced back to me.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, watching him with dread in my chest.

He nodded to the folder. “All the information you need is in there. All of my assets have been consolidated into an account that only you can access. We’ll lose this house and the money I have here in Italy, but that will throw them off the scent. A new identity has been made for you. You’ll be very wealthy and never have to worry about a single thing for the rest of your life.”

Was that supposed to make me feel better? “I don’t care about that, Crow.”

“I do.”

“I’d rather die with you than live in luxury without you.”

He stared at me with a heartless gaze. “I don’t care what you want. I only care what’s best for you.”

“What’s best for me is you.”

“And everything will probably work out that way. But we have to prepare for the worst.” He pulled his shirt over his head then got ready for bed.

I wanted to save Adelina, but I didn’t want to endure this. Just talking about an existence where he wasn’t around was something I couldn’t tolerate. It was far too painful. I hoped death came for me before it came for him. Or better yet, it came for us at the exact same time.

Crow came to the bed when he saw the tears in my eyes. “Button...”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You can’t stay.”

“No.”

He grabbed my hand.

I yanked it away. “I’m a good shot, and I’m smart. I can help you.”

“Cane and I both don’t want you there.”

“You’re making him say those things.”

“I’m not,” he said calmly. “He loves you too. Doesn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Crow, please don’t do this...”

He kissed my temple and wrapped his strong arms around me. “I’m sorry, Button. I have to do the right thing here. If I have to drug you, I will.”

“You promised you would never do that to me again...”

“And I promised I would always take care of you.”

---

I DIDN’T SLEEP WELL THAT NIGHT. I KEPT WAKING UP FROM A NIGHTMARE. Horrible things came to my mind when I wished they wouldn’t. I kept losing Crow over and over again. He was taken from me, shot in the chest or in the skull.

So when morning came, Crow went to work and I slept in. I was in bed until ten, which was the latest I’d ever slept. I woke up with a migraine and downed the water at my bedside, hoping the ache was due to dehydration.

Lars knocked on my door. “Mrs. Barsetti?”

I pulled on Crow’s sweatpants before I answered the door. “Yes, Lars?”

“Just wanted to check on you. You’ve usually finished your breakfast by nine.” The sweet old man didn’t smile at me like he usually did. Instead, there was fatherly concern in his eyes.

“I just had a bad night of sleep....”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He lifted up a brown paper bag. “I thought I would bring this up. I’ll get breakfast started and send that up straight away. Please don’t hesitate to ask for anything else.”

“What is this, Lars?” I opened the bag and peeked inside. There were tampons.

“I apologize if I’ve made you uncomfortable. I just know it’s that time of the month, and you’re running low on these...” He blushed in discomfort and walked down the hallway, his back as straight as ever despite the awkward conversation.

I walked back inside the bedroom and stared at the tampons, thinking about what Lars said. Whenever my period came, I was usually in agony. For a few nights, I hardly slept because the pain was so excruciating. Those were the mornings I woke late, like today. It wasn’t surprising that Lars thought it was that time of the month.

But then I realized...it was that time of the month.

I opened my nightstand and found my pack of pills. I counted them, making sure I took them exactly when I should have.

They were all accounted for.

But my period was late.

It was really late.

**CROW**

CANE AND I MET AT THE BASE. THE WINERY WOULD FUNCTION WITHOUT ME for the time being. My assistant knew exactly what to do in my absence. Honestly, I was just a figurehead at the compound. The only reason why I was there was because I enjoyed the view, the scent, and getting out of the house.

We stood in the warehouse where no one would overhear us, surrounded by weapons of destruction. One explosive in this place could result in a bomb that was nearly atomic. There were crates of grenades everywhere. They would create the most damage.

I slowly paced the area, rubbing my fingers along my jawline. “How many men do we have?”

“Sixty. But I think I can get twenty more.”

“What are you paying them?”

“A lot,” Cane answered. “But I got the best men on the job.”

“What’s our plan?”

“Pretty straightforward. We ambush them straight on.”

“How do we know Tristan is even there?” I challenged.

“A source of mine said he just returned from a meeting in Croatia.” Cane leaned against the table with his arms over his chest. He still looked sickly, getting progressively worse every day Adelina was a prisoner.

“You need to eat something. You look like shit.”

“And I feel like shit,” he said darkly.

“What about Lizzie?” I questioned. “She’s the biggest problem here. The whole reason Adelina didn’t run in the first place was to protect her.”

“She’s either dead or being held somewhere else,” Cane said. “Tristan said she was ugly and no one wanted her. Maybe she’s in a different part of the house. Or maybe they killed her because she wasn’t useful.”

“Did it sound like they killed her?”

Cane shrugged. “He wouldn’t give me a concrete answer. Smart asshole.”

“I saw we hit the whole building hard. If she’s there, great. If she’s not...then that’s too bad.”

“I agree. Adelina will just have to deal with it.”

I kept pacing, my hands moving to my hips. “Nightfall?”

“Yeah. I think it’s the best time. We’ll have a boat approach from the coast. We can hit them on two sides.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“We’ll blow out all the windows and hit as many casualties as we can. Then we’ll strike from the front.”

“But what if Adelina is in the way?”



“Her room is in the front of the building.”

“But there’s no guarantee that she’s there,” I reminded him. She could be with Tristan in his bed for all we knew.

Cane swallowed the lump in his throat. “I suppose.”

“I say we enter the house on all sides and take out the guards silently. The less time we give them to prepare, the more likely it is we can get out with Adelina.”

“Alright. Let’s do it your way.”

“Okay.” I kept pacing.

“How’s Pearl taking all of this?”

“You already know the answer to that, Cane.” I stopped in front of him and eyed the tables with nearly completed weapons. My whole life had been about guns. It was more comfortable to hold a weapon than a glass of scotch.

“Is she going to be a problem?”

“Definitely. I’ll have to drug her and smuggle her out.”

He sighed. “Why am I not surprised? I’m sorry you have to do that.”

“She wants to hit Tristan with us...says she’d rather die with me than live without me.”

Cane’s expression hardened. “You don’t have to do this, Crow. If you want to leave with her, I completely understand.”

“No. I’m in this—for better or for worse.”

Cane nodded in gratitude.

“When should we do this?”

“Tomorrow night,” he said. “If we wait any longer...”

He didn’t need to finish the sentence. “I agree. Let me know when you have the other twenty men.”

“I will.”

“And should we recruit anyone else?” I asked. “As backup?”

“I’m not sure if anyone would help us, considering who Tristan is. They probably want to stay out of it.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“I’ve made all the arrangements for Pearl. Lars is going with her.”

“Good. Would hate for anything bad to happen to that old man.”

Lars had been with my family since I was born. I’d never seen him slow down or take a break. We were his family, and he enjoyed serving us. “If we die, I know his loyalty will shift to her. She needs someone to look after her.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

Button could handle herself, just not in a gunfight. “Do you think she loves you?”

“Yeah. She seems annoyed with me most of the time, but I know she—”

“Not Pearl. Adelina.”

Cane’s face fell at the question. “I don’t know... I hope she does.”

Hopefully, this wouldn’t all be for nothing. Even if we got her out and defeated Tristan, it would be shitty if she returned to America and moved on with her life. It would make all of this sacrifice a bigger burden. But that probably didn’t matter to Cane. Whether she wanted to be with him or not,

Cane would risk his life to save her anyway. “Well, you’re about to find out.”

---

I CAME HOME LATER THAN I USUALLY DID SINCE I WAS ORGANIZING THINGS AT the base. Button probably already had dinner, and she was anxious for me to get home. We would have another argument about her staying behind.

An argument she would lose.

I suspected she was going to fight me every step of the way. I’d have to arrange for the men to transport her while she was unconscious. She would wake up in a beautiful place, one of the few places on earth that matched the beauty of Tuscany. She would be pissed at me—but she was always pissed at me.

She wasn’t in our bedroom when I came home, probably avoiding me. I showered then went downstairs into the dining room. She wasn’t there either. It didn’t smell like food, so it seemed like dinner had never been served.

I left the dining hall and ran into Lars.

“Hello, Your Grace. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I’m looking for Button.”

“She’s outside, Your Grace.”

“Thanks, Lars.” I walked past him.

“Your Grace?”

I turned around. “Yes?”

He wore a restrained smile. “Not everything is as bleak as it seems...” He drifted away and walked back into the kitchen.

I had to scratch my head at the comment. Lars had never been cryptic before. Perhaps his comment had to do with the fact that they were both leaving tomorrow. If that was his way of trying to make me feel better, it was a waste of time.

I walked onto the patio and found her sitting on one of the lounge chairs. Her legs were crossed and pulled toward her body, and she sat perfectly straight. She had the posture of someone doing yoga without the mat.

I took a seat beside her.

She didn't look at me or acknowledge me. Her eyes were focused far ahead, looking deep into the night. There was a breeze, so the leaves of the trees rustled and moved. The property was surrounded by grapes and olive trees. I'd spent my life growing up here, and while there were painful memories, there were a lot of great memories too. It'd been in my family for generations. It would be difficult to ever part with it. I'd imagined growing old here with Button. Hopefully, that would still happen.

I stared at her profile, willing her to speak to me. I knew she was in a bad mood, still upset about the decision I'd made. But it didn't matter how hard she fought me, she wouldn't get her way. I wouldn't be able to risk my life knowing she was risking hers. I had to keep her safe. It was my entire life's purpose.

"I hope you aren't still angry with me. Because I would hate to spend my last night with you like this."

She closed her eyes for a long time, like my words pained her.

I waited for her to say something, to snap out of this mood. Maybe my words made her feel guilty. I hoped she felt guilty. I was only trying to do the right thing for her. If I did otherwise, I would be a terrible husband.

“I’m not angry with you, Crow. And I think I should go to Santorini with Lars.”

She’d actually come to her senses.

But she never came to her senses.

She always fought me tooth and nail, refusing to give up until it was over.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t suspicious. “I’m glad you’ve had a change of heart.”

She opened her eyes again and gave a slight nod. “It’s for the best.”

I liked it when she was cooperative like this. Made my life a lot easier. But this wasn’t the woman I married. My wife was fiery, argumentative, and so stubborn I wanted to strangle her. “Why are you being so reasonable right now?”

She continued to stare straight ahead, not looking at me.

I knew there was a reason for her attitude change. I could feel it all around her. Her mood was entirely different. She was docile, submissive, quiet. She was sitting outside in the backyard because she was contemplative. She’d been thinking about this all day.

“Button?” I pressed.

She finally turned her face my way, and in the light of the moon, I could see the reflective moisture in her eyes. I could see the way they shone with emotion. When she blinked, a tear bubbled over and streaked down her face. “Because I’m pregnant.”

It was the last thing I’d expected her to say, but when the words hit my brain, they had no impact at all. They bounced right off, not penetrating my hard exterior. It took long seconds for me to digest what she said, to absorb it until

it finally took on meaning.

I was going to be a father.

Button was having my baby.

I watched the tear roll all the way down her cheek until it reached her chin. It pooled into a heavy drop before it fell to the chair underneath her. Normally, I wiped away her tears with my thumb. Sometimes I kissed them, tasting the salt on my tongue. But now I just stared at her.

The timing couldn't be worse.

I was about to risk my life to save Adelina. I might not survive. I could leave Button and my baby all alone. She was smart and strong, and she had millions to cushion her through life. But it would be so much easier if I were around to take care of them both. My baby might grow up without a father. My wife would be a widow.

They would be alone.

I knew this wasn't intentional, so I couldn't be angry. We hadn't talked about raising a family just yet. It was something on Button's mind, but we had years before we had to talk about it. This was sudden, unexpected.

Button watched my reaction, her eyes glued to my face. She didn't break down into tears, but the fear was in her expression. She was afraid of what I might say. She was afraid of my disappointment, my anger.

I wasn't disappointed.

I wasn't angry.

I wasn't sure what I was.

I didn't consider myself to be a family man. Raising kids didn't fit into my

limited patience. But the idea of making something with the woman I loved, having something that would outlive us both, made my chest feel warm. Just as Cane and I were the legacy of my parents, I would have my own legacy.

How could I be anything less than happy?

My wife continued to watch me, scared and uneasy. She knew I wasn't ready for this. She knew a baby didn't fit into our plans.

Minutes later, I finally spoke. "Button." My hand moved into her hair, and I kissed the corner of her eye, absorbing the moisture onto my lips.

She released the breath she was holding, obviously relieved by my soft reaction.

I kissed her other cheek before I pulled away. "Everything is going to be okay."

"You aren't angry?" she whispered.

"How could I be angry?" My hand moved to her flat stomach even though there was nothing to feel. She was just as slender as always. But deep down inside, there was life in her. Our love had created something, something that would soon have a heartbeat. "You know how sexy you're gonna look pregnant?"

She finally smiled, her eyes still wet.

I smiled back. "Nothing to be scared of. We were going to start a family someday anyway." I had mounds of stress on my shoulders. I was afraid for my life as well as hers. Even without Tristan in the mix, I had the Skull Kings to worry about. But I wasn't going to put that stress on my wife. Many women waited their whole lives to be pregnant. I wasn't going to take this glowing happiness away from her.

“But the timing—”

“It is what it is.” I rubbed my hand across her stomach.

“It was an accident...”

“I know.” I brushed my lips along her hairline. “It’s a good accident. In nine months, we’re gonna have something we love more than anything in the world—including each other.”

She nodded, new tears bubbling. “I was scared of what you would say...”

“You’re giving me a gift, Button. All I feel is happiness.”

“Really?” she whispered.

“Yes.” I pulled her into my lap and placed her legs over my thighs. She was the same weight as she’d always been, but now she seemed so heavy. I was carrying my wife and my baby, a baby that couldn’t be seen. I buried my face in her neck as I held her, comforting her. “It’ll be alright, Button. I promise.”

---

“WHAT’S UP?” CANE WALKED INTO MY STUDY LATER THAT NIGHT, A PISTOL on each side of his harness. He was ready for the ambush even though we had a whole day ahead of us. He helped himself to the booze on the coffee table and took a seat.

The fire was roaring, and there was a bucket full of ice cubes. Button had gone to bed, and now I could finally be alone with my thoughts. I’d made love to her slowly, my eyes on hers the entire time. With every thrust, I buried myself inside her. I loved her in the way she needed to be loved. I told her everything would be okay without words. I promised to take care of our family, all three of us. “I can’t help you, Cane.”



He stared at me with his glass in his hand. “You changed your mind?”

I nodded.

He sighed in disappointment before he downed his entire glass. He set it on the table then wiped his mouth with the back of his forearm. He stared at the fire, his face a mask of annoyance. “I respect your decision, but you should have told me sooner. I’m gonna have to rework this plan.”

“I told you as soon as I could, Cane.”

“Did she change her mind about the whole thing?”

“No...I did.” I rubbed my hands together before I told him the news. “Pearl is pregnant.”

His face completely changed the second the words were out of my mouth. He turned from disappointment to shock. The surprise slowly faded away from his face as the news hit him in the heart. He visibly softened, and soon enough, a smile emerged. “Shit...congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“I... This was an accident, right?”

“Completely.”

“Wow.” He ran his hand through his hair before he dragged it down his face.

“I mean...wow.”

“Yeah.”

“How do you feel about it?”

“The timing is terrible. But that doesn’t matter. We’re having a baby, and I want her to be happy.”

“But are you happy?” he pressed. “Come on, it’s just us.”

“I am happy,” I said honestly. “I’m not ready to raise a family right now, but that’s my son or daughter. I already love whoever they are. But now that there’s a baby in the picture...I can’t help you with Tristan.”

He gave a slight nod. “I understand, Crow.”

“I can’t leave my child fatherless.”

“You’re right. I understand why Pearl feels that way too.”

“I haven’t told her I’m staying with her.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “We haven’t done much talking since she told me...”

He chuckled. “Gotcha. Then what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m gonna take her to Santorini until this blows over. I don’t want both of us to be stuck in the cross fire.”

“That’s a smart idea...just in case things go south.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help you, Cane. You know I would be there—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Cane raised his hand to silence me. “You belong with Pearl. I don’t think less of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Wow, I’m gonna be an uncle.” He leaned back into the couch and interlocked his fingers behind his head. “That’s crazy. I never thought I would be an uncle.”

“Just don’t be one of those annoying uncles that disobeys me the second I turn my back.”

“Oh, you know it’s gonna happen. Let’s just be honest.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Do you think it’s a boy or a girl?”

“I just found out she was pregnant three hours ago.”

“So?”

“I don’t have a guess.”

“Are you hoping for a son?”

“I couldn’t care less what they are. Boy or girl, I’ll love them the same.”

“I just hope they don’t have your mean stubbornness. If you’re lucky, they’ll take after her.”

Since Button was the better version of me, I didn’t disagree with that. “If I’m lucky.”

Cane stood up and straightened his jacket. “Well, I’ll let you get back to... whatever you were doing. I’ll let you know how it goes.” He stood on the other side of the coffee table, his hands in his pockets.

I stood up. “Thanks. Good luck.”

He nodded. “I’m optimistic.”

“He might suspect you’re coming.”

“I know.” He continued to stare at me, out of words to share.

I stared back, wishing I could say something good. This could be the last time I ever saw my brother. We had our differences and he pissed me off, but he meant the world to me. I came around the table and hugged him. I hadn’t hugged him in years.

He hugged me back.

“Love you, man.” I stepped back when the affection lingered a little too long. I had to throw the word man in there to make it less intimate, less emotional. Cane and I didn’t do this sort of thing.

“Love you too, brother.” He stepped away and cleared his throat. “I’ll be seeing you.”

“Yeah...I’ll be seeing you.”

---

WHEN I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, I FELT LIKE A DIFFERENT PERSON. MY life had changed overnight. My responsibilities had shifted. Button had been my number one priority, but now she shifted down to number two.

And I didn’t even know my baby.

But their existence changed everything. I wasn’t the same man anymore.

Pearl woke up shortly after I did and turned over to look at me. She was exactly the same, the same size, the same shape...but now she was different. She was glowing when there was no evidence of a light. She was somehow more beautiful when nothing had changed. “Morning.”

“Morning.” I kissed her on the lips then tucked my head under the sheets. I found her bare stomach and kissed her above her belly button. She was petite and slender with no evidence of pregnancy, but I knew my son or daughter was in there. They hadn’t even begun to form yet, but they were a part of my life.

I lay beside her again and looked into her eyes. Today was an important day. My brother was about to go head-to-head with a formidable enemy. I felt like

a coward for staying behind. It was a betrayal. He was my brother. I should lay down my life for him. I should do whatever he needed me to do.

But I couldn't now.

Not when I had someone to protect.

I somehow loved my baby more than my own wife.

How was that possible?

Button hugged me close to her and released a painful sigh. "How much time do we have?"

"A few hours."

"Okay..."

"But I'm coming with you, Button."

She shifted her eyes back to mine. "What?"

"I'm coming with you to Santorini. We'll wait it out until the dust settles."

"What about Cane?"

"He knows I'm not coming. He's okay with it."

"I don't understand..."

My hand moved to her stomach. "My job is to protect you—both of you. If I die...my child won't have a father. I can't let that happen. Cane knows that."

"I..." Her hand moved over mine. "I want you to stay with me too, Crow. But you know you can't."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't turn your back on Cane. He needs you."

“I know. But my duty is to our child. They’re the most important thing to me now.”

“I know...but he’s your brother.”

“He understands, Button.”

“Look, I don’t want you to go either. I don’t want to lose my husband. I don’t want our baby to lose his father. But I understand you’re all he has. He’s your brother, your family—”

“You are my family too, Button.”

“I know...but it’s different. You already said you would help him, and you can’t turn back now. He needs you, Crow. Adelina needs you.”

“I’m surprised you feel this way.”

“I hate it,” she whispered. “It would be so easy for us to run off and forget about it. But I know you, Crow. I know it’ll haunt you forever. If the situation were reversed, what do you think Cane would do?”

He would have my back—always.

Button knew my answer just by looking me in the eye. “You have to go.”

I sighed as I explored her stomach with my hand. “You can be selfish, Button. All you have to do is ask me to stay, and I will. Any other woman would want her husband to stay by her side and protect her.”

“I know how much your brother means to you, Crow. You have a bond just as powerful as ours. I know you’ll do everything you possibly can to come back to us. I know you won’t hesitate to slaughter everyone in there to make it back to me. We’ll just have to take the chance...and hope for the best.”

“You’re sure, Button?” I whispered. “Because we don’t have much time for

you to change your mind.”

She cupped my face and kissed me. “Yes...I’m sure.”

**CANE**

“ARE YOU SURE YOU ABOUT THIS?” THE CARS WERE LINING THE DRIVEWAY AS the men prepared to take Pearl and Lars away. They were leaving the estate and retreating to Greece, to a small island where people wouldn’t look twice to find her.

“Yes.” Crow’s expression didn’t change as he held my gaze.

“Because you don’t have to do this. I understand, Crow.”

“I know you would be there for me if this were reversed.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re obligated to do this.” Whether I would do it for him was irrelevant.

“I’m in, Cane. Pearl is too.”

“You’re certain she’s okay with this?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

I knew Crow wouldn’t change his mind. “Alright. Thank you...”

Crow nodded before he stepped aside.

Pearl walked up to me, looking exactly the same even though everything was



different. "Please get her out of there."

"I will."

"And please...bring Crow back to me."

"I'll make sure that happens," I whispered. "I'd rather die than keep that from happening."

She nodded slightly, tears in her eyes.

"Congratulations on the baby."

"Thank you." Her hand immediately went to her stomach. "We weren't expecting it...but now it feels right, like it was meant to happen."

"I'm excited to be an uncle. I told Crow I would feed them lots of candy and get them into all sorts of trouble."

I got her to laugh, but it was weak. "I'm sure you will."

"And you're gonna be a great mother, Pearl. If you have a daughter, she'll be strong. If you have a boy, he'll grow up to a man."

"Thank you, Cane."

I brought her into my chest and hugged her, holding her like a sister.

She rested her face against my chest and breathed hard. "I love you, brother..."

"I love you too, sis."

She pulled away from me and walked to the car. The drivers were ready to take her away along with Lars. She would have all the protection she needed as well as most of Crow's money. If we both died, she would be okay.

"We'll leave after I say goodbye to her." Crow walked toward her in the

entryway. The rest of the men and Lars stepped away to give them privacy. The engines were running, and the house was dark since all the curtains were drawn.

Crow rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes.

She did the same, but the tears started to fall.

Neither one of them said anything.

They just stood there.

After a moment, Crow tilted his head back and looked at her. “I love you, Button.”

Tears streamed down her face, and she started to sob. “I love you too...”

He cupped her cheeks then kissed all of her tears away, treasuring her with his love. He rubbed his nose against hers before he pulled his hand away and abruptly walked away, turning his back on her so he wouldn’t have to watch her get into the car.

But I knew the real reason he turned around.

He walked toward me, his eyes visibly red and wet. He walked past me and stepped underneath the olive tree. His hands were in his pockets, and he stood absolutely still, listening to the car doors shut as they prepared to leave. Soon, the tires rolled as they pulled out of the roundabout and left the property.

Crow didn’t watch them drive away.

When they were gone and out of sight, he finally turned back toward me.

With tears running down his face.

---

BRAN GRABBED MY WRIST THEN POINTED THE GUN AT THE UNDERSIDE OF MY forearm. He hit the trigger, and the tracker went inside.

Crow hadn't said anything since Pearl left. He was dead silent. He quickly wiped away his tears and returned to the stoic man I'd always known. It was like nothing had happened at all. When our parents died, he didn't shed a single tear. When Vanessa was shot in front of him, he didn't express a single emotion.

But watching his pregnant wife drive away broke his heart.

Bran turned to Crow. "You're next."

Crow extended his arm without looking at him.

Bran inserted the chip, and Crow didn't flinch.

"That way we'll be able to locate each other if we ever lose track of one another. They shouldn't be detected if we're captured."

"Good idea," Crow said quietly.

"It can detect a pulse too. That way we know...you know."

"Yeah."

We prepared ourselves for the attack, stocking up on ammo, grenades, and guns. I had a pistol on either side of my holster, a knife in my boot, and I was going in with my machine gun. I wasn't messing around, and I was going with only one intention.

Killing everyone in that compound.

I couldn't let a single man escape. I couldn't let a single phone call be made. I had to wipe out every last man in that complex so no one would know it was us. It could look like a random hit, a robbery.

And I could get Adelina the hell out of there.

I hadn't slept much that week. It was a miracle that I was still functioning at that very moment.

I had sixty mercenaries recruited for the operation, all skilled men that I trusted to have my back. Even if Tristan were ready for us, he would have a difficult time defeating us. We would get in and get out quickly, taking Adelina to safety.

I couldn't believe I let her go in the first place.

I didn't want to think about all the suffering she had already endured. She might be dead for all I knew.

Bran rounded the men into the Hummers and then came back to Crow and me. "We should get going if we want to be there by three."

We were driving all the way there since flying wasn't an option with our kind of artillery. "Last chance," I said to my brother.

He turned his eyes to me. "Let's do it."

---

HOURS LATER, WE WERE A MILE FROM THE HOUSE.

Crow was in a different Hummer with his own team of men. We were executing this in waves. The first group of us were supposed to take out as many men as possible silently. The second wave was backup, taking down all the men once they were aware what was going on.

I wasn't sure exactly where Adelina would be. I suspected she would be in her room. If she were, that would make this operation a lot easier.

I pressed my fingers to my ear. “Crow, you there?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Alright. Let’s move.”

We drove to the compound with the lights off. There were no gates around the mansion because he tried to blend into the coastline. When there were gates and fences, it looked more suspicious than leaving it totally open. Plus, it made a strong statement.

Two men were already on foot, taking out the guards that were posted outside.

John came on to the mic. “All four guards down. We’re clear.”

“Roger that,” I said back.

The cars pulled into the asphalt entryway that was as big as a parking lot. We parked two hundred feet from the house, not wanting the sounds of our engines to be a dead giveaway to anyone who was sleeping. We killed the engines, and it turned silent.

The ocean waves were in the background.

My team got out of the cars and moved in.

My heart was beating so hard.

So much adrenaline.

So much ferocity.

My woman was in there—and I wasn’t leaving without her.

I frisked both of the men at the entryway and placed one of their mics directly into my ear. Now I had radio communication with the enemy. I tried the door

and was surprised it wasn't locked.

What kind of idiots were they?

I stepped inside the pitch-black house. There was a large entryway opening to a living room.

No one in sight.

My team moved farther inside and examined every room. Guards that were posted were looking at their phones, so they were easy to take out silently. But I wasn't naïve enough to think that was it.

Then someone screamed.

Gunshots fired off, and the war began.

I sprinted down the hallway and opened the first door.

A gun was pointed right at my face.

But I fired first. I took out two men then cleared the room before I moved forward. My goal was to find Adelina. Everyone else's goal was to kill anyone inside that building. I searched more rooms, killed more men, and then finally made it to the final bedroom on the bottom floor.

There she was.

Naked.

Dirty.

Her ankle cuffed to the wall.

There wasn't time for tears or emotions. There wasn't even time for anger.

She covered herself with her hands when I first stepped into the room, but once she recognized me, her hands slowly dropped. "Oh my god..."

I shut the door behind me and got to work. I didn't have a key for the chain, and I wasn't going to bother looking for one. "Don't move."

"What are you going to—"

I shot the chain until it snapped in half.

Adelina let out a scream.

"Come on." I grabbed her hand and pulled her up. There was nothing to cover her with, but her nakedness wasn't important right now. I had to get her out of there. "Stay behind me." We moved back into the hallway and walked over the dead bodies back to the front door.

Some of the men were mine.

One of Tristan's dead men was wearing a sweater. "Take it off him and put it on." I kept my eyes trained around us, prepared for unexpected company.

Adelina did exactly as I commanded and yanked it off him. She pulled it over her body and zipped up the front. The fabric stopped just above her knees.

"Let's go." I guided her out the front door, the sound of gunshots still going off upstairs. "Come on."

The men in the cars covered both of us as we made it back to the bulletproof SUV's. I opened the back door to one and pushed her inside.

"Cane—"

"I don't have time to talk." I shut the door and ran back into the house. My primary goal had been completed, but the job wasn't done yet. I had to kill every single asshole in there. "Crow, what's your status?"

"Killing these assholes. What the fuck are you doing?"

I ran to the second floor and helped my men, but I didn't see Crow.

“Cane.” Crow’s voice came over the line. “Tristan jumped out the window. He was on the second story.”

“I’m on it.” I darted back downstairs, knowing Tristan was heading for the ground floor. He was probably trying to get to the cars left on the side of the compound. I rushed into the night and scanned for him everywhere.

That’s when I heard the sound of an engine.

A boat.

Tristan was inside a speedboat parked in the harbor. He must have jumped to the bottom floor and kept going.

“No!” I sprinted down the dock then took aim as he sped off. I fired all my ammunition, determined to sink that asshole into the deep ocean. It was too dark, and I ran out of bullets. I had no idea if I hit my mark or missed it. He was too far away for me to hear the engine. “Fuck.” Even if I sank his boat, there was no guarantee he was dead. He could have missed the bullets, and he could swim to safety once we were gone.

Crow’s voice returned. “All clear. Did you get him?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you not know? What the fuck, Cane?”

“He drove off in a boat, and I fired all my rounds. It’s pitch black, and I can’t see a damn thing.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, fuck.”

Crow and some of the men ran out onto the deck with me. The black waves were choppy as the wind picked up. If it weren’t for that, we might actually



be able to hear something. We scanned the horizon left to right, as if we might see something jump out at us.

Crow released a frustrated sigh beside me. “All of his men are dead. Where would he go?”

“He probably has his phone on him. Could call someone.”

“What’s the likelihood that you hit him?”

“I don’t know. I fired off until I was empty. Chances are, I hit my mark.”

“And even if you did, the asshole can probably swim...”

“Yeah.”

“I say we leave a team behind until morning. All of his stuff is here, and the rest of the coast is mostly cliffs. This is probably where he would swim back to.”

“Agreed.”

“Then let’s head out. You got Adelina?”

“Yeah, she’s in the car.”

He clapped my shoulder. “Good. I’m glad this wasn’t for nothing.”

I didn’t have a single second to contemplate the fact that Adelina was safe and in my custody. I’d barely had a chance to speak to her, to think about her condition when I walked into that room.

“Cane?”

“Hmm?”

“I have some bad news.”

He was alive, and Adelina was safe. There was nothing he could say that would ruin my victory. “What?”

“Lizzie is dead.”

I looked into his dark face and didn’t see an ounce of sadness.

“She was wrapped in a bag downstairs. Looks like they were about to toss her into the ocean.”

“How do you know it’s her?”

“Fits the description. And there were no other women in the building.”

I’d suspected she would already be dead. I figured they’d killed her a long time ago. “Adelina will take the news hard.”

“Or it might give her peace.”

---

BEFORE I REACHED THE BACK DOOR TO THE VEHICLE, SHE PUSHED IT OPEN and slid to the asphalt. In her oversized sweater with messy hair and bruises all over her face, she jumped into my arms and locked her arms around my neck.

I scooped her from the ground and held her to me, letting her rest against me. The rest of the team packed up and prepared to leave. Everything had been swept clean, and the perimeter had been checked. We should leave now before the sun rose, but I knew Adelina wanted to be held—by me.

“It’s alright, *Bellissima*.” My lips brushed against her hairline as I felt her breathe heavily against me. She was safe in my arms, but she still felt terrorized. She’d suffered worse now than she did the first time. She couldn’t just brush that off. “I’m here. It’s over.”

“You came back for me...”

“I shouldn’t have let you go in the first place. I’m so sorry...” I should have shot Tristan right between the eyes and pulled Adelina out of there. I should have forced Tristan to take the money for her payment. I should have run away with her, taking her to all the beautiful places in the world, giving her the life she deserved to live.

“No, Cane. Don’t ever apologize...”

I wanted to hold her like that forever, but we needed to leave. “We need to get going. I have a meal packed for you in the back. You’re probably hungry...” Because she’d been starved the second she stepped foot on that compound.

“I am. You’re going to sit with me, right?”

I was planning on driving, but when she looked at me with those terrified eyes, I knew I couldn’t leave her side. “Yeah, I’ll sit with you.” I traded positions with one of the other men and got into the back seat beside her. I pulled off my jacket and laid it across her legs, covering every inch of her body so I wouldn’t have to look at her bruises. I pulled out the cooler and opened the sandwich, chips, sliced apples, and orange juice.

Adelina took everything and scarfed it down like she hadn’t eaten in months.

I couldn’t look at her. It was too painful. The bruises made me sick. The dirt in her hair made me angry. All the scars I couldn’t see made me want to hurl across the back seat. I kept my eyes out the window, doing everything I possibly could not to look at her. It was hard to look at her the first time, but it was nearly impossible the second time.

“It’s a long drive,” I whispered. “You should get some sleep.”

“Okay. I haven’t slept in a while... I’m pretty tired.” She lay down across the

back seat, resting her head on my thigh. She immediately closed her eyes, exhausted and weak.

If I weren't surrounded by my men, I'd probably break down in tears. My fingers moved through her hair, and I gently caressed her, touching her the way a woman should be touched—delicately.

Crow's voice sounded in my ear. "How's she doing?"

I kept my voice low so she wouldn't wake up. "She's okay. Just ate. Now she's getting some sleep."

"You want me to arrange for a doctor to come by your place in the morning?" Crow never offered to do anything for me. He was there when I asked, but he didn't do thoughtful things like that. I knew he was asking out of concern for her—not me.

"Please."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. Are you going to bring Pearl back?"

He paused before he answered. "No. Not until I know if Tristan is dead or alive."

That was the cautious thing to do. "Good idea."

"Let me know if Adelina needs anything."

"How come you never ask if I need anything?" I asked quietly, trying to lighten the mood.

"Because I actually like her. And we both know I don't like you."

---

WE ARRIVED AT MY HOUSE AT DAWN. I CARRIED ADELINA INSIDE THE HOUSE, back to the place where we'd spent the last month getting to know each other. When I set her on the couch, her eyes fluttered open. She was still in the oversized sweater, a cut on the corner of her eye and her cheek purple and swollen. Underneath her pain, she was still beautiful. There was nothing that Tristan could do to her to hide her resilience.

She slowly sat up and looked around the living room, recognizing the place. "Your house..."

"We're back." I sat beside her and ran my fingers through her hair.

"I never thought I'd see this place again." She sat up and pulled her favorite blanket over her legs, hiding her bruised thighs. Perhaps she was cold. Or perhaps she just didn't want me to see all the other places she was injured.

My hand grabbed hers. "You're safe, Adelina. Nothing can ever hurt you again."

The crew came inside and installed security precautions, cameras and an alarm system. Tristan could still be alive. I wanted to be prepared if he was. He didn't know where I lived, but it wouldn't be difficult to figure out.

Adelina eyed the men as they walked by, her usual fire dormant. She naturally projected confidence and strength, but now she was more submissive than I'd ever seen her. She was disturbed. Just the night before, horrible things were being done to her.

Crow joined us. "Adelina, I'm glad you're alright."

Her face slowly changed, and her eyes lit up with pure joy. She quickly got to her feet and hugged him, squeezed him around the rib cage hard enough to make him release a quiet grunt. "Crow...I'm so happy to see you."

He patted her on the back awkwardly, probably uncomfortable by the

embrace since he never touched anyone but Pearl. He wasn't an affectionate guy in general, so this display of sentiment wasn't his thing. "You too."

"Thank you for saving me. It means a lot to me."

"Of course," Crow said. "You mean a lot to my brother. And if you mean a lot to him, you meant a lot to me." He stepped away and waved for the physician to come over. "He's gonna do a quick examination. Make sure you're doing okay."

Adelina eyed him warily.

"You guys can enter the first bedroom on the left," Crow said.

Adelina immediately turned to me. "I want you in there too, Cane." It wasn't a request, but a command. She obviously didn't want to be alone with a man she didn't know. She was more scarred than I realized.

"Of course, *Bellissima*." She never needed to be scared of anything again—not while I was around.

**PEARL**

SANTORINI WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACE ON EARTH. THE MEDITERRANEAN Sea was deep blue and so clear, the islands in the distance stood tall like statues, and when the sun set, it was the most glorious sight I'd ever seen.

But it wasn't home.

And I was alone.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I knew I needed to stay calm because I had a little Barsetti growing inside me, but until I heard that Crow was okay, I wouldn't be able to sit still. I marched back and forth on my patio. The home Crow had bought was enormous, remote, and gorgeous. I wondered why he'd never told me about it. Perhaps it was in anticipation of times like this.

Lars stepped outside with me, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Ever since I arrived in Italy, I'd never seen Lars in anything but his tuxedo. Even if I spotted him in the kitchen in the middle of the night, that's how he was dressed. I wouldn't be surprised if he slept like that.

But right now, I didn't care what he was wearing.

Lars stood at the balcony and watched me, his eyes full of sadness. "Mrs. Barsetti, it'll be alright."

“We don’t know that.” I placed my hands on my hips as I walked back and forth, doing my best to get air into my body and out again. “Lars, if something happens to him—”

“Nothing will happen to him, Mrs. Barsetti.”

“Please just call me Pearl.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t. I follow Mr. Barsetti’s orders even when he isn’t around.”

I dragged my hands down my face. “It should be over by now...”

“I’m sure we’ll get a call any minute.” Lars stood in front of me with his hands behind his back. He gave me a pitiful smile as he watched me suffer. “I’ve known Mr. Barsetti since the day he was born. I remember the day he came home from the hospital, his favorite toy, and the first time he was grounded. I’ve watched him grow into a man—the strongest man I’ve ever known.”

I searched his blue eyes, finding consolation in the image of Crow as a young boy, playing with his toys on the living room floor.

“He’s been the exact same man since the day he turned sixteen. His attitude, habits, and beliefs have all been the same. But when you came along, he changed again. He grew into a different man, an even stronger one—because he knew he had something to protect. There’s no doubt in my mind that Crow will come back from this. It’ll take a lot more than a few bullets to slow him down. So just relax, Mrs. Barsetti.”

---

IT WAS TWO IN THE MORNING, AND I SAT ON THE PATIO LOOKING OVER THE water. The island curved to the left, so I could see the lights of the city. The



waves crashed against the rock just below, but despite their soothing sensation, I couldn't really enjoy it.

The phone was beside me on the table.

I checked it every half hour to make sure the battery wasn't dead. I made sure it wasn't accidentally off. I looked through my messages and ensured I didn't miss anything. I should be sleeping right now, but I couldn't.

Lars was wide awake with me, refusing to sleep unless I slept too. I wanted to sleep just for him, but I couldn't.

I was a mess.

Crow should have called by now.

Why hadn't he called?

Cane hadn't called either.

Finally, the phone rang.

I lurched at it and answered the call while hitting a bunch of different buttons at the same time. I didn't even check who the caller was before I answered, needing it to be my husband. "Crow? Are you alright? Tell me you're alright. Are you there?" I talked a million miles a minute without taking a breath.

"Button, I'm okay." His deep and calm voice sounded through the phone, the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

I closed my eyes as the tears streaked down my face. I went from panic to sobbing in less than five seconds. I heaved into the phone, my chest rising and falling as I hyperventilated over the line. My reaction was overwhelming, even to me. I had been so scared this phone call would never happen. I had been so scared Cane would call and say his brother didn't make it, that I'd lost the love of my life.

“Button...”

I covered my face with my hand and kept crying, knowing I was overreacting to good news. I should be happy. I should be smiling. But the emotion was more powerful than a tsunami. It swept over me with the force of nature, drowning me as I sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Crow patiently waited for me to calm down. He stayed on the line, silent.

I listened to my own tears for minutes, reminding myself this was real. This wasn't a dream. My husband was okay. My husband was safe. My family was safe.

“Shh,” he whispered. “Take three deep breaths, okay?”

“Okay...” One. Two. Three. I stopped crying and felt my soaked cheeks. Without looking into a mirror, I knew my face was puffy, red, and hideous. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.”

“I was just so scared...”

“It's over. No reason to be scared anymore.”

“If I'd lost you—”

“You didn't. I'm here.”

Cane and Adelina didn't even cross my mind until then. All I cared about was Crow. “Is Cane okay?”

“He's fine. Adelina is home with him. Everything went well.”

“That's great... I'm so glad to hear that.”

“We lost a few men, but casualties are always expected.”

I was relieved he was okay, but I wished I could touch him. I wished I didn't have to only hear his voice through the phone. "I want to see you."

"I want to see you too."

"Can I come home now? Can I leave now?"

He paused for a long time. "You have to stay there."

"What?"

"Just for a little while longer."

"Why?"

"We killed everyone in the compound, but we aren't sure what happened to Tristan. He got away on a boat. It was dark, and we couldn't see. Until I have a confirmation that he's dead, you can't come back."

"But, Crow—"

"It's not up for discussion, Button."

My hand went to my stomach, knowing I couldn't risk the life growing inside me. My life never had seemed valuable to me, but now that I was going to be a mother, everything was different. My life was invaluable because I had to take care of someone else. I had to protect the little person inside me at all costs. "How long will it be?"

"I don't know. Hopefully, not too long."

I was disappointed, but Crow was alive, so I should only feel grateful right now.

"It's beautiful there, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is..."

“How do you like the house?”

“Empty without you.”

“It’ll be over soon, Button. You know I can’t take any risks...not when it comes to the two of you.”

“I know,” I whispered.

“How’s Lars?”

“He’s been keeping me calm. He’ll be happy to hear that you’re okay.”

“I’m assuming you haven’t slept much?”

“No...”

“Then go get some sleep, Button.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“At the house. No one will expect me to be there.”

“Please be careful.”

“I’m always careful, Button. You know that.”

I didn’t have anything else to say, but I wanted to keep him on the line. His silence was better than his absence.

“Cane and I had transmitters inserted inside us, the same thing that you have. I’m gonna send you the tracking details. That way you can see where I am at all times on your phone.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you.” We would still be apart, but at least I had a piece of him.

Anytime I was uneasy, all I had to do was pull up his location on my phone. It would curb my anxiety. “That’ll help...”

“Now you can keep an eye on me just how I keep an eye on you.”

“Payback,” I teased.

He chuckled. “Yeah, payback.”

## ADELINA

I HAD A LOT OF CUTS AND BRUISES. BUT WHAT I HAD MORE THAN ANYTHING else was pain.

I hurt everywhere.

The doctor examined me and gave me antibiotics. I had a wound in my leg, and it was beginning to show signs of infection. I also had a UTI because I'd lived in such unsanitary conditions. My head was pounding from dehydration, and my entire body hurt. Tristan hurt me more than he did last time.

That was how much he missed me.

I'd only been there a week, but it felt like a lifetime. It was so much worse than the first time I was there. He was more aggressive than before, and I also remembered exactly how it felt to be pampered and adored.

It was such a drastic change.

The only reason why I hadn't taken those pills was because I lost them. I had them stashed between the mattress and the floor, but Tristan decided to keep me in his room on the floor. When I was finally returned to the cot soaked in urine, the room had been changed around.

And the pills were gone.

If Cane hadn't come for me, I would have miserable for a long time.

I never expected him to come to my rescue. Thoughts of him were the only thing that kept me going, the only thing that stopped me from collapsing. When Tristan raped me, I tried to pretend Cane was there with me. I pictured his handsome face and the comforting words he would normally say.

When I heard the gunshots, I had no idea what was going on.

And when Cane walked into my room, I almost didn't believe it was him.

The doctor left, and I sat alone in my old bedroom. It was the first place Cane brought me when I became his prisoner. It had a king-size bed with a duvet softer than a rose petal. There was a fireplace, a TV, and Tuscan style furniture. It was beautiful, like a page inside a magazine. It felt like home.

Cane walked in a few moments later, his eyes heavy with exhaustion. He was still dressed in all black, a bulletproof vest strapped around his chest. His hair was messy because he'd been fingering it nervously. All of his habits continued, but that shouldn't be surprising since it'd only been a week since I'd seen him.

Though it had felt like an eternity.

He sat at the edge of the bed, purposely putting five feet between us.

He didn't need to do that.

It was hard to look at him because I saw the pain etched into his features. His jaw was tight, not in annoyance, but agony. His dark eyes were heavier than usual. His beard was thick because he hadn't shaved since the day I left. He looked as broken as I was.

I wanted to shower and rinse all the dirt away. I wanted to scrub away the

evidence that Tristan had ever touched me. But I wanted to be with Cane, to sit with him just like this. This man saved my life. He risked everything to get me out of there.

How could I ever repay him for that?

Cane cleared his throat. “I want to tell you that you can talk to me about what happened...that I’ll listen and be there for you. But honestly...I don’t think I can bear it.” He closed his eyes and swallowed. “I know that’s selfish, but...I just can’t.”

“I understand,” I whispered. “There’s not much to say anyway.” I didn’t want to relive the pain. I wanted to move forward with my life and forget that horrible week. When I’d stayed with Cane for that month, he’d somehow put me back together. He made me feel like a person, not a victim. He didn’t look at me like I was stained or dirty. He looked at me like I was beautiful—always.

“Maybe you could talk to Pearl...if you need to.”

“Yeah...”

He stared at the floor, his elbows resting on his knees. “Do you want to be alone for a while?”

“Not particularly.”

“Okay.”

I watched the side of his face, watched the way his expression hardened.

I scooted to the edge of the bed and sat directly beside him. I was the one who had been tortured and beaten, but I wanted to comfort him. He seemed to be holding on by a thread, about to be swept away in an undercurrent. “Why did you come for me?”



His eyes were still on the floor. “I couldn’t stand the thought of you in there. I couldn’t sleep...couldn’t eat...it killed me. I went to Crow and told him I had to save you. I regretted letting you go the second your hand was gone from mine.”

“I don’t know what to say...”

“You don’t need to say anything, *Bellissima*. You don’t need to thank me. You don’t owe me anything.”

My hand moved to his arm, and I caressed his skin.

He flinched at the touch.

“Do you not want me to touch you...?” Was he disgusted by me because Tristan was the last person to lay his hands on me?

“No. I just assumed you didn’t want to be touched for a while...”

“I don’t,” I whispered. “But I like to touch you, Cane. It makes me feel good.” I leaned my face against his shoulder and sat there with him.

A moment later, he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer to him. He didn’t say anything else, choosing to hold me in silence.

And all I wanted was to be held.

---

IT TOOK THIRTY MINUTES IN THE SHOWER TO WASH EVERYTHING AWAY. THERE was so much dirt, oil, and blood. It was the first time I’d showered in a week, so I stayed under the water much longer than necessary. I hadn’t brushed my teeth either, and thankfully, my old toothbrush was still in the bathroom.

I scrubbed hard.

I scrubbed deep.

I shaved my entire body, removing everything I possibly could. Like last time, I wanted to step out of there as a new person. I wanted to wash away the old and step into the new. I wanted to shed my damaged skin and become another person.

I liked who I was with Cane. It was the perfect place to recover, to get back on my feet.

I finished the shower and dried off before I pulled on fresh clothes. A new set of clothes and a shower already made me feel better. I was a human being again. I had rights. I had power.

I walked into the kitchen because I was starving. Cane fattened me up before I left, but most of that weight had been shed immediately because I only ate once while I was a captive. Cane was in the kitchen when I walked inside, just finished preparing lunch. He had two plates of spaghetti.

He knew it was my favorite. “Hungry?”

“Starving.”

His eyes fell at the comment. He carried the plates to the table, and we ate in silence.

Cane still didn’t look at me. He seemed to avoid it whenever possible. When I was here before, he could barely take his eyes off me. A constantly intense expression was on his face, his eyes boring into mine like he owned me. He wasn’t afraid to possess me with just a single look. Now he refrained from even allowing me to be in his line of sight.

It made me feel disgusting. “Cane?”

“What’s up?” His eyes turned to his food.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

“Of course I look at you.” His face moved up, and he met my gaze.

“But you do everything you possibly can to avoid it. You used to stare at me all the time... Now you try to pretend I don’t exist.”

He sighed and looked down at his food again. “That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“Then what is it? I thought being back here would make me happy...but it seems like you don’t want me here.”

“Of course I want you here. I’m just... I assumed you wouldn’t want me to look at you.”

“Why would you think that?” I whispered.

“After everything you’ve been through, I assumed it would make you uncomfortable. You wouldn’t want to be stared at, touched...stuff like that. I’m just trying to give you space. You must be disturbed. I don’t know how to handle this...”

“What did you do last time?”

He turned his expression on me.

“You stared at me all you wanted. You touched me when you wanted. Nothing has changed.”

“That was different... I didn’t care about you then.”

“I think you did.” He would have been worse to me if he hadn’t. “I want you to touch me, Cane. I want you to look at me. I don’t think about anyone else when I’m with you. With you, I feel safe. With you, I feel like I’m at home.”

His eyes softened.

“I’m not ready to jump back into bed right away—”

“I never expected you to.”

“But I want everything else. I don’t want you to look at me like I’m damaged. I don’t want you to look at me like you pity me.”

“How can I not feel that way?” he whispered. “The idea of you suffering makes me sick to my stomach.”

“Well, I’m not suffering anymore, Cane. Now I’m in this beautiful house with a beautiful man. I have a plate of food in front of me, I took a long shower... Everything else will get better in time.” I slid my hand across the table with my palm up.

He eyed it before he took it. Her fingers interlocked with mine, and he gave me a gentle squeeze. “*Bellissima...*”

---

CANE STRIPPED DOWN TO HIS BOXERS. HIS MUSCLED PHYSIQUE WAS JUST AS strong as ever. Hard lines marked the grooves between his muscles. He was still the powerhouse I remembered, the strong man who could knock over a house if he just pushed hard enough. His shoulders were broad, his hips were slim.

He was beautiful.

He was dark outside like the other men I encountered, but he had a distinct brightness in his eyes. He had a soul underneath that hard chest. He was a killer, but he was also a healer. “Are you sure you want to sleep in here?”

I was already under the sheets with one of his t-shirts on. “I don’t want to sleep alone.” When I slept on that cot, I listened to every sound outside the

door, waiting for Tristan to come back for me. I spent all of my time alone, even when Tristan was pounding into me. My mind was the only thing he couldn't touch. He desecrated everything else, but my mind was too strong to be demolished.

But now, my walls were gone because Cane was there. I didn't need to protect myself from him. I would sleep all through the night without being jerked away. No one could touch me when he was beside me.

Cane pulled back the covers and got into bed beside me.

I immediately moved to his side of the bed and wrapped my body around his. I loved the way he felt under my fingertips, the way his muscles shifted under the skin. He was warm, like a roaring fire in the hearth. His heartbeat was a lullaby. I crowded his side of the bed and clung to him with no intention of letting go.

He turned his head toward mine and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

I missed those kisses. No other man had ever given them to me before.

His arm hooked around my waist, and he pulled me tight against his body. We were perfectly placed against each other, complementing one another perfectly. I hadn't felt this comfortable in a long time.

Within seconds, I felt his length harden against me. All nine inches formed, thick and long. He was warm, and the sensation was unmistakable. I'd felt him against my hip too many times not to recognize it.

Cane didn't shift his body. "I can't control it."

"That's okay..."

"Doesn't mean I expect anything."

"I know, Cane."

“I can move if you want.”

I hugged him harder. “No.” Feeling him desire me after everything I’d been through only made me feel beautiful. I didn’t feel like damaged goods or someone’s leftovers. Cane didn’t think about Tristan when he was with me.

He only thought about me.

---

CANE STAYED HOME WITH ME FOR A FEW DAYS. HE COOKED ALL MY MEALS for me and made sure I took my medication. He spent the afternoons lounging by the pool with me. At nighttime, he watched TV while I read in front of the fire.

We didn’t talk much.

But it felt the way it used to. It was quiet and comfortable, an unspoken routine established between us. The pain between my legs faded away, and I started to sleep all through the night. I wasn’t as hungry as before since I was getting plenty to eat. My body tissues swelled with hydration and nutrition. I hadn’t had a nightmare yet, and that surprised me.

Cane was my dream catcher.

Despite everything I’d endured, I felt the flame of attraction when I was around him. I missed kissing him, missed the way he would grope my tits while I sat on his lap. I missed his cock deep inside me, coming over and over.

My enjoyment of sex had been untouched. What I went through with Tristan wasn’t sex at all. That was something else entirely, just violence. I didn’t think the two acts were comparable since they had nothing in common.

My desire for Cane would never stop.

I was still in pain between my legs from the way Tristan had fucked me without lubrication. I bled often because I was so dry. My ass still hurt from the things he did to me. Even if I wanted to have sex, I didn't think it was possible right now.

But that didn't mean we couldn't do other things.

Cane stepped out of the shower with his hair slightly damp. A towel was around his waist, and he dropped it in the middle of the floor when he opened his drawer and pulled out a fresh pair of boxers.

I stared at his physique without shame.

He didn't notice my stare and came toward the bed. "Want me to make a fire tonight?"

I rose on my knees in the center of the bed and pulled my shirt over my head. I was just in my panties, my tits on display for him to view. I still had bruises sprinkled across my skin, but now they were faded.

He stopped and stared.

"Come here." I patted the bed beside me.

He slowly approached the bedside but didn't climb onto the mattress. His eyes were glued to my tits for a long time before he met my gaze again. "It's too soon, *Bellissima*."

"You're right. But that doesn't mean we can't do something else..."

He stayed put. "I think we should wait. We both know I want you, but...I'm in no hurry."

"And we both know I want you. So don't make a woman in your bed ask for

you again.”

His eyes darkened at my comment before he dropped his boxers. He climbed on the bed then positioned me until my head was on the pillow. He held himself over me, his thighs separating mine.

My ankles locked together at his back, and my arms circled his neck.

He looked down at me with the same dark expression, but he didn’t do anything. He only stared. “What do you want, *Bellissima*?”

“To kiss you.”

“Anything else?”

“I want you in my mouth...”

His expression tightened noticeably. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know I don’t. I want to.” My hands moved up and down his chest.

“Can I go down on you?”

I was too sore for intercourse but feeling his soft mouth against my entrance would probably feel amazing. “Please...”

His hand snaked into my hair, and he prepared to kiss me. “Just tell me when to stop.”

“I’m not going to want you to stop.”

His mouth was on mine, and he kissed me softly, deliberately restraining his passion. It was the first time he’d kissed me on the lips since I’d been rescued, always pressing his lips to my hairline or my forehead. His lips caressed mine, and then he breathed into my mouth. His hand tightened on my hair, and he kissed me harder, his passion making me come alive.



My week of hell didn't change anything between Cane and me. I wanted him as much as I always had. Our kisses were purposeful, our embraces tender. He gripped me harder and tighter, wanting more of me.

My thighs squeezed his hips, and I moaned into his mouth as my fingers ran through his hair.

He abruptly left my mouth and moved down my body, sprinkling kisses down my belly and between my thighs. He got to my opening then pressed a gentle kiss to the entrance, touching me with the softness of a rose petal.

“Cane...”

He took his time as he started, giving me light pressure against my clit. He circled slowly before slowly entering my slit. He tasted me then circled me again. Every touch was meaningful but light. He was going easy on me, kissing away my scars and getting my body reacquainted with goodness.

The longer I moaned, the more he got into it. He widened my legs farther and kissed me harder, working my clit just the way he used to. He kissed harder and harder, pushing me over the edge like he was determined to make me fall.

And I fell hard.

His name escaped my lips like it always did. My fingers dug into his hair, and I writhed on the bed, feeling amazing for the first time in over a week. I didn't think about the pain on Cane's face. I didn't think about the past. I didn't think about my bruises and cuts. I just thought about the natural goodness this man just gave me.

I felt alive again, like I'd never suffered.

Cane moved over me, his lips smeared with my arousal. “I love listening to that sound.”

“I love making it. Now it’s your turn.”

“Not yet,” he said. “I won’t be done for a while.”

**CANE**

I LOVED HAVING HER IN MY LIFE AGAIN.

I loved the way she smelled, the way her hair got stuck in the drain, the way she cuddled with me all through the night. I loved the way she took forever to chew her food. She'd just been taken as a prisoner, but she never once looked at me like I was a captor. She trusted me—felt at home with me.

She wanted me as much as I wanted her. She wasn't ready to open her legs to me, but she still wanted what she could take. She kissed me like we'd never been apart—and her orgasms were exactly the same.

I'd risked everything for this woman—but she was completely worth it.

The bruises faded with every passing day. The nasty colors lightened and returned to her normal skin tone. She became stronger, showing a nice sense of humor. She smiled a lot more often. Vase of flowers started to decorate my home, and her waistline returned to normal.

I hadn't returned to work because I didn't want to leave her.

I wanted to stay inside this house forever.

But I had responsibilities to get back to. I had a business to run. And I also had to figure out what to do about Tristan. Crow hadn't called me, but it was

only a matter of time before he showed up on my doorstep.

“You’re leaving?” Adelina asked when she saw me in my jeans and jacket.

“Yeah. I have things to take care of at the base.”

“Oh...” She moved her hands to my hips, and she didn’t mask her disappointment. “I guess it was stupid to think you’d stay with me all day, every day.”

“I would if I could.” My hand slid around her neck, and I regarded her with the possessiveness I used to show. This woman was my whole world. I adored her. I loved the life that had returned to her cheeks, the strength that made her stand so straight. She was worth everything I’d risked to get her back. “But I’ll be back later.”

“Alright.”

I kissed the corner of her mouth. “I’ll set the alarm. The cameras are set. I’ll be able to keep an eye on the house even while I’m gone.”

“Okay. Is there a chance I could be in danger?”

“It’s very unlikely. But I’d rather be safe than sorry.” I pulled away and grabbed my keys off the counter.

“Can I have a gun?”

I turned around and flashed her a look of surprise. “Do you know how to use one?”

“I get the gist.”

I pulled open one of the drawers and pulled out a pistol. “Of course you can. But maybe I should teach you first.”

She nodded in agreement.

“It’s in here if you absolutely need it.” I shut the drawer again. “But let’s wait until I get home. I’ll teach you the basics.”

“Okay.”

I wrapped my arm around her waist and kissed her again. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Alright.”

I walked to the door and snuck a look at her before I walked out. With long brown hair and a tight shirt, she looked like the woman I’d been dreaming of my entire life. She was beautiful, strong, and she had a resilience even Crow and I couldn’t match. It took all my strength to shut the door and walk to the car.

---

CROW WAS IN A PISSED-OFF MOOD. I COULD TELL JUST BY LOOKING AT HIS furrowed eyebrows.

“What’s up?” I asked as I took a seat.

“What’s up?” he asked sarcastically. “While you’ve been playing with your toy, I’ve been trying to track this asshole down. You know, so I can be with my wife again.”

“I haven’t been playing with my toy,” I snapped. “I’ve been helping her, in case you’ve forgotten what she’s been through.”

“And what do you think I’m going through? My wife is pregnant, and she’s in Greece by herself.”

“With Lars and a dozen guards,” I argued. “She’s fine.”

“Well, I’m not fine,” he snapped. “We need to find Tristan.”

“What did the team say?”

“No sign of the boat.”

“Anywhere?”

“Nope.”

I put my feet on the desk as I considered the announcement. “If he survived, he had to take it somewhere.”

“Or it sank,” he said. “In that case, he could have swum to shore or drowned. So he’s as likely to be dead as he is to be alive.”

“The only reason why I want him to be alive is so I can kill him with my bare hands.” What he did to Adelina was unforgivable. And the fact that I let it happen was even more unforgivable. She was my woman. She was my life. How did I walk away from her? How did I let this happen?

“I just want him to be dead so I can get back to my life.”

“We’ve got eyes and ears everywhere,” I said. “I’ve already told our distant crews we’re looking for him. If the guy is in public at all, word will get back to us. We took out his entire team. Tristan has no one right now. He’s totally helpless. If he tells anyone it was us, then everyone will be more terrified of us than him.”

Crow nodded in agreement. “True.”

“He’ll turn up soon. If weeks go by and he doesn’t...we’ll just assume he’s dead or has gone into hiding.”

“I don’t think I can handle weeks of this...” He rested his fingertips against his temple like he was fighting a migraine. His black wedding ring matched

his exterior, cold, dark, and hard. It was difficult to believe he loved a woman with all of his heart.

“It’ll be over soon. Pearl can come home, and you can get ready for the baby.”

He rubbed his temple. “I don’t know shit about babies...”

“But Pearl does. She’s got that natural maternal instinct.”

“You’re right, she does.”

“You could always go to Greece and wait it out with her. I can take over the manhunt and let you know when it’s all over.”

He grabbed the glass from the table and took a drink. “As tempting as that sounds, I don’t want anyone to follow me. It would be a moot point if I led the trail back to my most prized possession.”

“True...”

“I’m staying until this is over.”

“Alright. Then let’s buckle down.”

---

“HOW’S ADELINA DOING?” CROW ASKED.

“She’s handling things pretty well, actually.” I closed the folder when I didn’t find what I was looking for. “She’s resilient. Anyone else would still be shaking. But she’s holding her head high. She’s strong.”

“Reminds me of Pearl. I never felt like she was a victim. More like a survivor.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m sure you have something to do with her calmness. She feels safe around you.”

“Yeah...I think she does.”

“Have you told her how you felt?”

I shook my head.

“Are you going to?”

“I don’t know... I feel like it’s pointless.”

“How so?”

“I risked my life as well as yours to save her. It’s pretty damn obvious how I feel about her. If she doesn’t already know, she’s an idiot.”

“She might just think you’re a good guy.”

I snorted. “She knows I’m not a good guy. She knows I’m not evil, but not good either. That’s why I like her so much. She knows exactly what I am and accepts it.”

“And you know where acceptance comes from? Love.”

“I’m not sure how she feels. I’d think she was a little crazy if she fell in love with me when I accepted her as payment...”

“Pearl fell in love with me.”

“But she is an idiot,” I said with a smile.

His eyes narrowed.

“Come on, you know I’m kidding.”



If he didn't know that was a joke, he would have murdered me right then and there.

Bran approached our table with straight shoulders. He was always a serious guy, but he seemed more serious than usual. "There's someone here to see you."

"Who?" I asked. Judging by the expression on his face, it was the Queen of England.

"Constantine," Bran said quietly. "Says you know him."

I wished I didn't know him.

I exchanged a look with Crow.

This was bad news. And even worse timing.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"At the entrance to the warehouse," Bran answered. "Has a few men with him."

Of course he did. "I'll be there in a second."

"Alright." Bran walked away, so we were alone once more.

Crow's expression didn't change, but he was tense. He was harder than a steel beam. The anger lurked behind his eyes, as it often did when he felt threatened. "We both know this isn't good."

"No, it's not."

"We'll handle it together." Crow rose from his seat.

My brother had already risked his life to save my woman. He already had his issues with the business with Constantine, so I wasn't going to make him deal

with that too. “No. You said you wanted nothing to do with this. I’ll handle it.”

“It doesn’t matter if I want nothing to do with this. You’re my brother. We’re in this together.”

“Not this time. You’ve done enough for me. Stay here.”

Crow continued to stand, but his arms rested gently by his sides. He bowed his head slightly, backing off.

“I’ll let you know how it goes.”

---

“CANE BARSETTI.” CONSTANTINE WAS ALWAYS DRESSED TO IMPRESS. HE didn’t wear jet black like most of us did. He always wanted to make a statement. He always wanted to be remembered. He wore black jeans that had holes all up and down, and he wore a bright yellow shirt with a skull in the center. A red handkerchief was tied around his neck, and every inch of his skin was covered with black ink from his tattoos.

“Constantine.” I met him outside, wearing a confident expression and not blinking an eye over the men he brought. They were all packing. But the hundred men inside my facility were packing too. No matter how ruthless these guys were, they’d lose.

We both knew it.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” I asked.

“A beautiful day to do business,” Constantine said. He crossed his arms over his chest, revealing the assortment of blades that hung along his belt loop. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said...peaceful coexistence.”

“Pretty good idea, if you ask me.”

“I’m not so sure.” He nodded to the warehouse. “I know you’ve got a lot of inventory in there, a lot more than I have.”

“Your point?”

“Not sure if there’s enough competition for two big fish like us.”

The key was not to be a pushover. If they detected fear, even the slightest hint, they’d run with it. “You’re right. Maybe there’s only room for one of us.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’ve always liked you, Constantine. I respect your fire, your brutality. As dark as it is to say, I think you’re essential to the food chain.”

“How so?” he asked.

“You make problems go away. Problems that can’t be solved. And I would hate to lose you.” I didn’t threaten him directly, but I did drop a veiled threat. Even if Crow and I folded and left the business to them, we couldn’t do it easily. It had to be some kind of a fight. Otherwise, they would haunt us forever.

Constantine smiled even though my words pissed him off. Everything about him was contradictory.

“Did you hear about Tristan?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Heard his compound got wiped out. No one knows who did it. And we know we didn’t,” he said with a laugh.

“I know you didn’t,” I said. “Because I did.”

His smile faded away.

“I hit him hard and annihilated everyone. Tristan was flourishing, and now

he's a nobody." I snapped my fingers. "Just like that. He was a good client. But he crossed me in a way I couldn't forgive. The only solution to the problem was to end him."

Constantine smiled again even though there was nothing to smile about. "Looks like you learned a lot from us."

"I did...and I picked up a few other things elsewhere."

Constantine's crystal blue eyes bore into mine. He was studying me like a wild animal caught in a cage.

"I have a lot on my plate right now. Worrying about competition over business is boring. Bones operated for decades without any clash. I couldn't pick up his clients even if he wanted me to. You act like you could handle my business when you've been in the game for only a few weeks. So why don't we be eyes and ears for each other? With our long history, I think that's pretty reasonable."

Constantine's expression didn't change. "We do have a long history."

"If there's nothing more to be said, I should be getting back." I pulled out my wallet and grabbed the business card I'd just acquired. "I picked up a new client today, but I'm maxed out on inventory. Tell him I recommended you."

Constantine eyed the card before he took it.

"Have a good day, gentlemen." I turned my back and walked back into the warehouse. Exposing myself to potential bullets was stupid and risky. But I had to take the chance. I had to tell Constantine that I wasn't scared of him.

That I wasn't scared of anyone.

---

I WALKED BACK INSIDE AND FOUND CROW EXACTLY WHERE I'D LEFT HIM.

"What happened?" he blurted.

I told him the story, including the dialogue that I could recall.

Crow pinched the bridge of his nose and accompanied his actions with a sigh.

"You're playing with fire, Cane."

"Trust me, it's how it has to be. If I cave right away, they'll take us for everything we've got. Our houses...our women...they don't respect weakness. Only strength."

"But to threaten them?"

"I had to do it, Crow. Trust me on this."

"Now what?" he asked. "What do you think they'll do?"

"They'll use my contact and fill the order. That'll either satisfy them and they'll forget about it...or they'll get greedy and try to overrun the business again."

"And if that happens?" Crow pressed.

"I don't know."

"We both have women we need to protect now. We should abandon it."

"This business has been in our blood for generations, Crow. We aren't just walking away from money. We're walking away from the legacy our parents left us. It would be an insult to let someone take it from us. It would be one thing if someone offered to buy it. But to steal it?" I shook my head. "I can't let that happen."

"All things come to an end. And we are their legacy. Just as our children will be ours. Cane, it's a superficial, physical thing. It's not worth fighting for. It's

not worth dying for.”

“I know...I get it.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“Think about it,” I said. “If Pearl and Adelina weren’t around, we’d be giving these guys hell. We wouldn’t let them walk all over us like this. It’s turned us into pussies, and I never thought that’s how I would end up.”

“I’m not happy about it either, but I’m tired of looking over my shoulder all the time. I’m tired of my wife complaining that she can’t go anywhere alone. We can always go into the wine business together, and that will be a legacy we leave behind. It’s clean, it’s legal, and it’s something to be proud of.”

“Crow, you know I don’t know shit about wine.”

“It’s not like you can’t learn.”

I turned my head the other way and sighed, frustrated by the overwhelming events. I just got Adelina back a few days ago, Tristan was still missing, and the Skull Kings wanted to pick a fight.

“Maybe this is personal,” Crow noted.

“What is?”

“Constantine. Maybe they’re doing this to antagonize you.”

“Why?”

“Maybe they’re mad you left.”

I shook my head. “I left seven years ago. They’re over it. It’s not like I left on bad terms.”

“Maybe Constantine doesn’t see it that way.”

“That guy has a lot of pride, but he wouldn’t hold on to that kind of resentment for seven years. They’re just hungry for money and power. They always want more. What they have is never enough. They see a perfect opportunity to monopolize the market, even though it’ll be impossible to fulfill orders in that magnitude. They’re so greedy they can’t think.”

“What do you think Constantine will do?” he asked.

“I really don’t know. It’s a coin toss.”

Crow rested his fingertips against his lips. “Fuck, maybe I will just move far away with Pearl...”

“Doesn’t sound too bad, honestly.”

---

THE SECOND I WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, *BELLISSIMA* WAS ON ME.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me in the doorway, embracing me like a wife welcoming her husband home from work. Her kiss was exactly what it used to be, full of tongue and affection.

My hands explored her body, and I immediately fell into the passion. My heart was broken over what she’d been through, but my body couldn’t deny its carnal desires. I viewed her as the sexiest woman in the world—regardless of what happened. My desire wasn’t quenched. My respect never faltered. I saw her as a shining jewel that would never be covered with dust.

She pulled away with her hands on my cheeks. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“I picked up on that,” I said with a smile.

“I made dinner.”

“That sounds great. But I should be cooking for you.”

“No. I want to cook for you. I miss it.” Her fingertips trailed down my arms and to my hands.

“I miss it too.”

“You wanna eat now?” she whispered.

“Yeah, sure.”

“I thought we would sit on the terrace and watch the sun go down. We never do that...”

“Yeah, that’ll be nice.” Sometimes it worried me how easily she brushed off her nightmare with Tristan. But if this was how she handled her demons, by moving forward without letting it haunt her, then I respected that. Not too many people were strong enough to do that. Pearl was the only one I knew.

We sat at the table outside and shared a bottle of wine. The sunset cast a perfect glow over Adelina, highlighting her cheeks and perfect nose. I began to understand Crow’s affection for Pearl, how his entire world changed once she walked into his life.

I knew my life would never be the same.

I didn’t want another woman.

*Bellissima* was all I wanted. I would do anything for her, do anything to make her happy. I never wanted to be with anyone else. She made me a better man. She made me do the right thing when it was easy to do the wrong thing. She made me want more out of life. Her innocence made me less callous.

She felt my endless expression on her face. “I like it when you look at me like that. I don’t know what it means...but I like it.”



My hand moved to hers on the table, and I squeezed it. “It means I love you.”

Her smile slowly faded away like the setting sun. Her eyes were lit up by the glow over the horizon. Instead of pure happiness coming into her gaze, she looked at me like she hadn’t been expecting me to say that.

I felt her pulse quicken under my fingertips. I felt my own pick up in pace as I waited for a reaction. I’d never said those words to another woman, other than my mother. But I meant these words in a whole other context.

Still, nothing came out of her mouth.

I started to worry. Maybe she didn’t feel the same way.

“I...I don’t know what—”

“It’s okay, *Bellissima*.” I had to swallow the hurt in my throat and push forward. I was so certain she felt the same way that I would have gambled my life on it. But she didn’t, and letting the tense moment linger would only make her uncomfortable. I’d just gotten her back. The last thing I wanted to do was push her away. “You don’t need to say it back. I just wanted you to know how I felt.” I pulled my hand away so I could grab my glass and take a drink of the wine. I only did it to cover up my disappointment, the painful burn inside my chest. I’d never put myself out there like that, and it hurt like hell to get shot down.

I’d given up so much for this woman.

And she still didn’t feel the same way.

## **CROW**

I SEARCHED THROUGH THE KITCHEN UNTIL I FOUND SOMETHING TO EAT.

A frozen lasagna.

Lars always prepared for the worst.

I popped it into the oven then called Button.

She answered before the first ring could even finish. “Please tell me you found him.”

This separation was hurting her a lot more than it was hurting me, even though I was pretty miserable. I knew it was because she was pregnant. She was scared I would never come back to her, and our child would never know his father. She wasn’t usually this emotional, but I understood that she was alone and sad.

“I’m sorry.”

She growled into the phone. “I hate this.”

“I know, Button. But it’ll be over.”

“When?” she pressed.

“Soon. Just be patient.”

“How can I be patient when I spend all day reading pregnancy books?”

“You know you’re in Greece, right?” I challenged. “One of the most beautiful places in the world?”

“It’s not beautiful without you, Crow. I would love to be here with you, to make love all day and then look at the ocean over dinner. But this isn’t a vacation when you aren’t here. I’ve been spending all my time with Lars, and that’s driving me nuts.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing. He just constantly waits on me all the time.”

“That’s his job, Button.”

“Well, he can take a break. I’m just sitting around and getting fat.”

“Pregnant, not fat.” I eyed the oven and the timer that was ticking down. “At least you have someone to cook for you. Thankfully, Lars froze a lot of meals for me. But they aren’t as good as fresh.”

“I’m glad Lars did that for you.”

“He’s always prepared for a catastrophe.” A sound erupted in the house, like a locked door being yanked.

“Now if only Lars could hunt down Tristan and kill him.”

I kept the phone pressed to my ear as I walked out of the kitchen. I flicked off the light then stuck my head out into the entryway. Just when I got a view of the windows, gunshots fired.

Fuck.

I dived down with the phone still at my ear.

I'd never heard Button scream like that. "*Crow!*" She heard the gunshots as loud as I did. They were unmistakable, nearly blowing out my eardrums.

"I don't have time to say anything else, so listen to me."

She held her breath.

"Call Cane. Tell him I'm at the house. Follow my tracker."

"Okay—"

"I love you."

She was already crying. "I love you too—"

I hung up and pulled my pistol out of the back of my jeans. Button was the last thing on my mind right now. All I could think about was survival, how I was going to take out at least a dozen men alone. There were no guns stored in the kitchen because this was Lars's fortress.

Men's voices could be heard in the house.

"He's here."

It was Tristan.

They must have followed me. They knew I was in the house. I couldn't fight them off, so I had to run.

I moved to the other side of the kitchen and to the back hallway. There was a window just big enough for me to break through. I took out my knife and cut through the hinges.

"Hands up."

A man was standing behind me, a pistol pointed at my back.

I slowly raised my hands.

“Good. Now—”

I spun around and shot him right between the eyes. I didn’t have time to wait, so I smashed my fist through the window, making it shatter and echo through the house. They definitely knew where I was now.

I jumped through the window and landed on the dirt on the other side.

Then I ran like hell.

“There!” Flashlights turned in my direction.

A man jumped in front of me, a shotgun pointed right at my chest.

Another man appeared to my left, wielding a machine gun.

Fuck.

“He’s over here!” One of the men called.

I kept my hands by my sides, my hand still on my gun. If I could only take one shot, I knew exactly who I was going to take out.

“Crow.” Tristan’s sneer was obvious in just his tone. “Nice to see you again.” He slowly circled me until we were face-to-face. “Finding you wasn’t that difficult. But your wife...I’m having a hard time locating her.”

I was so grateful I sent her to Greece. I’d never been more thankful for my paranoia until then. Death didn’t scare me. Watching my wife die the way my sister did scared me a lot more. There was nothing Tristan could do to get her. I wouldn’t talk no matter how much he tortured me, and Cane wouldn’t either.

Tristan continued to glare at me. “Tell me where she is, Crow.” He raised a pistol and pointed it between my eyes.

“Why are you interested in her when you have me?” I stared down the barrel without flinching. I’d been in this position before. Still wasn’t sure how I got out of it. I knew Pearl would have called Cane immediately. He was probably on his way now. If I stalled as long as possible, it might save my ass. “I was the one who broke in to your compound. I was the one who took Adelina. My wife is good for nothing besides spending my money.”

Tristan gave me a cold smile. “I know you don’t feel that way, Crow. But nice try. Tell me where she is.”

“You already know how this is going to go,” I said calmly. “You aren’t going to get anything out of me, even if you torture me. So I suggest you find some other use for me, or you kill me. Personally, I hope you kill me.”

“Is that so?” he asked. “You’re awfully brave when there’s a gun pointed at your head.”

“Not my first time, Tristan.”

His eyes narrowed. “You think this is funny?”

“Not at all. But I do think it’s a waste of time.”

One of his henchmen exited the house. “He was on his phone. Someone is probably coming this way.”

Fuck.

Tristan lowered the gun. “Let’s get moving.”

A guy from my left moved suddenly and smacked his gun against my skull.

I lurched to the ground.

Rope was bound around my wrists, I was kicked in the stomach, and then I was dragged to one of the black vans parked in the driveway. A migraine had

already started to form, the rope was too tight around my wrists, and I knew was in deep shit.

But I had my tracker. If Cane could find me before they figured it out, I had a chance.

I had to get back to Button.

I had to meet my son or daughter.

But I was grateful she wasn't there. I was grateful I took her life so seriously. I was grateful I'd prepared everything she needed if I didn't make it back to her. Tristan could do whatever he wanted to me, drop each of my limbs into the ocean along with the rest of my corpse.

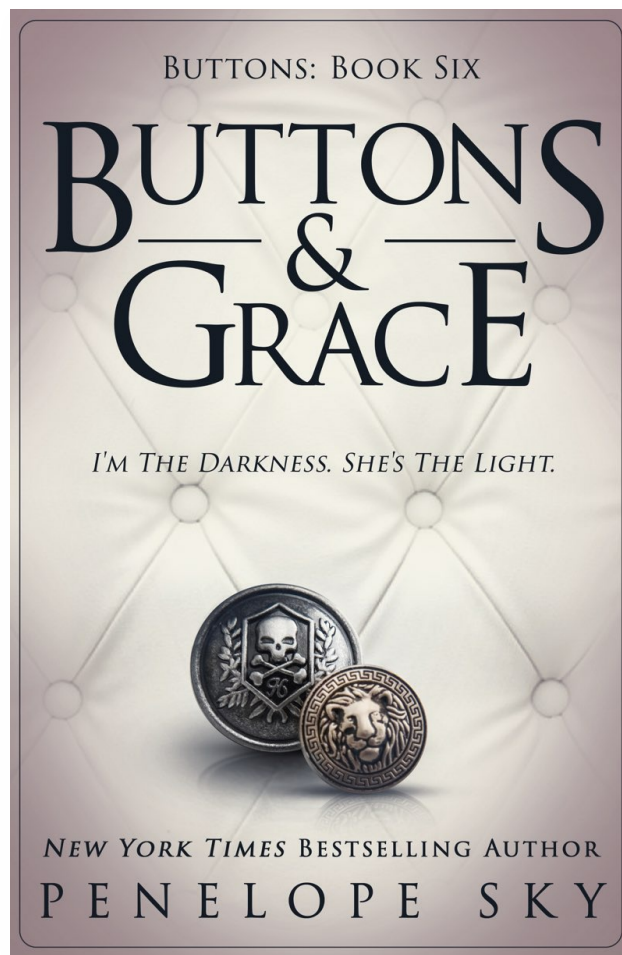
As long as she was safe, I could accept that.

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