

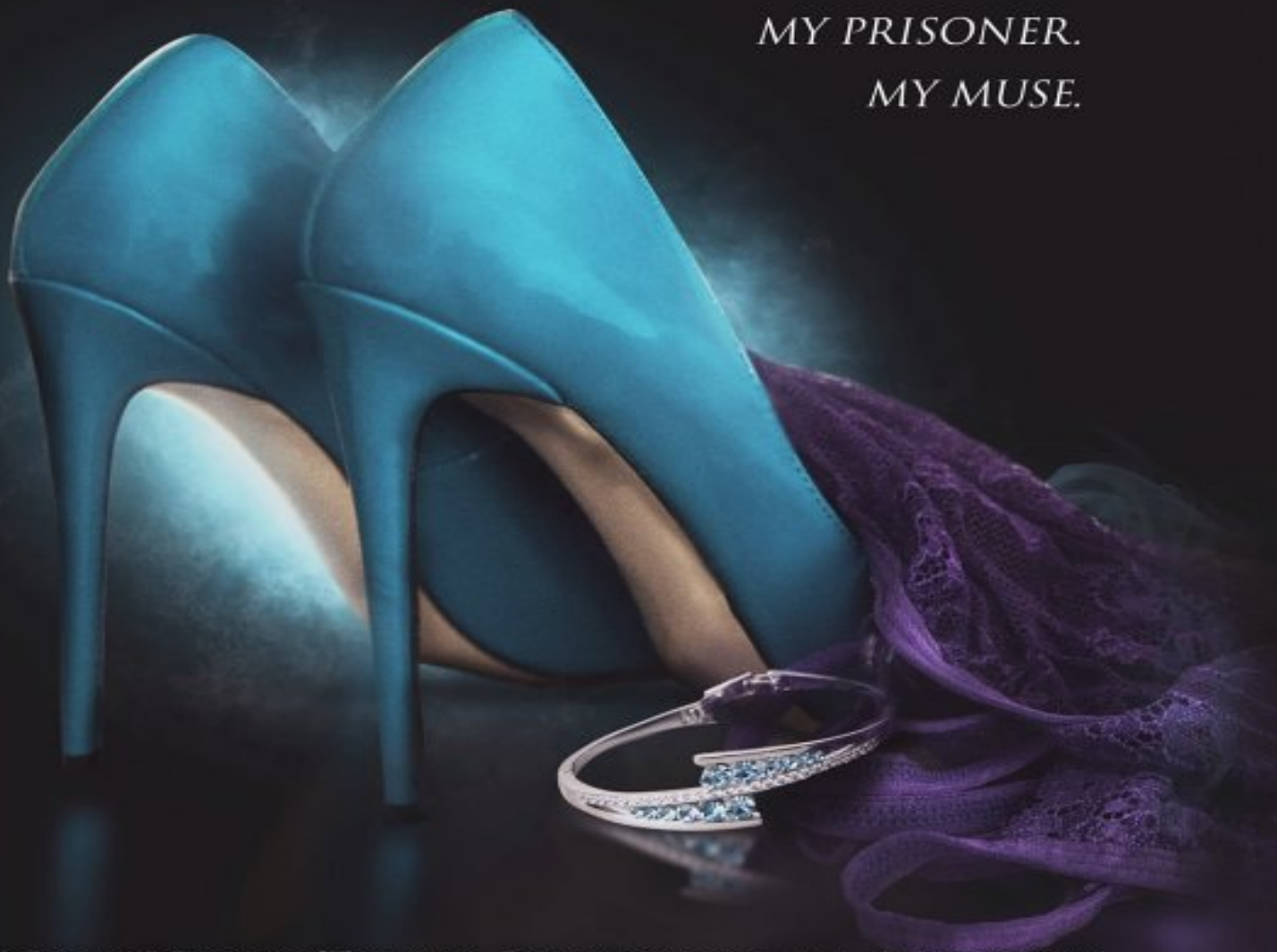
LINGERIE SERIES: BOOK ONE

MUSE

in

LINGERIE

*MY PRISONER.
MY MUSE.*



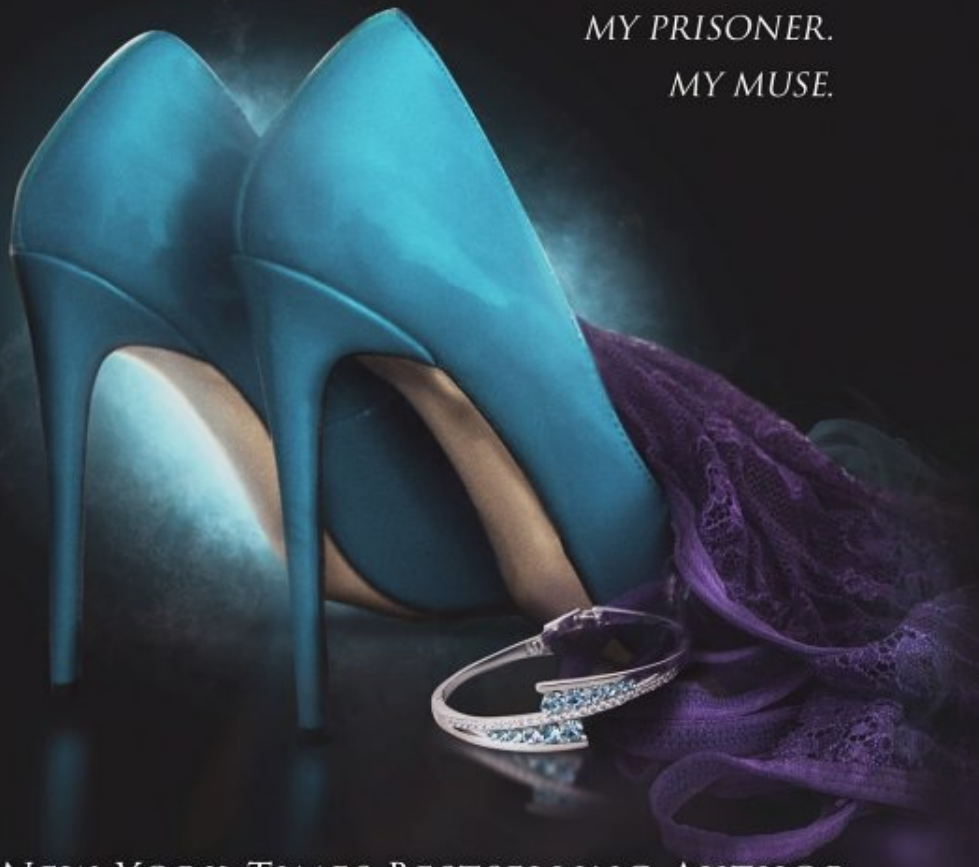
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

P E N E L O P E S K Y

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PENELOPE SKY

MUSE IN LINGERIE

Lingerie #1

PENELOPE SKY

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Muse in Lingerie

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Sapphire

I SAT ALONE AT THE BAR WITH A SCOTCH ON THE COUNTER IN FRONT OF ME. The amber liquid was strong down my throat, but not strong enough to fill me with the warmth I needed to survive this nightmare.

My mother's house had been repossessed by the bank. The single asset I inherited had been taken away from me with the snap of a finger. Now I didn't have a place to live, and what was worse, I still had to pay off the loan.

All because of my brother, Nathan.

His girlfriend left him, he got mixed up in the underworld, and he made a gamble he couldn't afford to lose. The guys killed him once his pockets were empty, and since Nathan had so much debt racked up, the government took the house to pay off everything he owed.

I couldn't believe this bullshit.

The house had been left to both of us, so we were both on the deed. Since I had better credit, and I was the more responsible one, the loan had been made out in my name. Now I had to pay for his stupidity by losing everything.

And I mean everything.

The house was gone. I still owed five hundred thousand dollars to the bank. My financial aid for college had been canceled because my credit was shit. Now I owed money for an education I couldn't afford to finish.

But that wasn't the worst part.

The crew Nathan got mixed up in hadn't been compensated for the money they were due. They couldn't take the house because the government beat them to the punch. Knuckles, the leader of their organization, was one of the biggest crime lords in the world. Everyone spoke of him like he was a myth because they hadn't seen him in person.

Lucky bastards.

He was untouchable by the police because he had more power than any man should.

They called him Knuckles because that was his weapon of choice—his bare hands.

And I was his next victim.

I stared at the piece of paper sitting in front of me. Scribbled in black ink were simple words.

Three days, sweetheart.

Knuckles liked to play with his food before he went in for the final cut. He was torturing me, watching me struggle without a penny to my name. In random places, I would find these notes, usually slipped into my backpack when I rode the subway. Since I was homeless, I was crashing on people's couches.

And lying about my circumstances. They thought my place was being fumigated.

It was such a stupid lie, I couldn't believe people actually believed it.

I only had three days of freedom left before Knuckles closed in on me.

And turned me into his personal sex slave. He promised there would be whips and chains. He promised there would be pain and pleasure. He promised he would get every cent he was due between my legs.

It was the final punishment for Nathan—even though he was long gone.

Knuckles warned me not to leave, that there would be dire consequences if I did. He had the resources to find me, and once he did, there would be a lot more pain than pleasure. There would be brutal torture along with his cock ramming me in every hole I possessed.

Fuck, I couldn't believe this was happening.

I wasn't sure who I was more pissed at. Nathan, Knuckles, or myself.

Myself because I should have known what Nathan was up to. I shouldn't have been so absorbed in my studies and work. I should have had a clue about what was going on around me. Nathan lived with me... How did I not see it?

I finished my scotch and ached for another, but I simply couldn't afford it. One was enough for the day.

The TV in the corner switched to Entertainment Tonight, and Lacey Lockwood appeared on the screen. One of the most beautiful models in the world, she was blond with blue eyes and a body that would make every man fall to his knees. She modeled the most luxurious lingerie created. It was the kind of stuff that every woman wanted a man to buy her. It was beautiful, simple, and elegant. "Conway Barsetti is a genius. Everyone compliments my appearance, but he's the man who deserves your praise. He's the most meticulous and brilliant man I've ever known. Even on my worst days, he

makes me feel beautiful.”

With a size zero and a smile like that, how bad could her worst day really be?

The image changed to Conway Barsetti, standing for pictures outside one of his fashion shows. In a gray suit that fit him like a second skin, he stood in front of the cameras with pure indifference. It was like dozens of people weren't taking his picture at all, the bright flash hitting his eyeballs over and over. His hands rested in his pockets, and his broad shoulders contrasted against his narrow hips. For a man who designed clothes, his tastes were very simple. He turned his head slightly to give another angle for the photographers, his intense expression hardening like he was annoyed.

Not once did he smile.

And he obviously wasn't going to.

He had deep brown hair that looked black without the sun hitting it directly. Green eyes smoldered with vibrant intensity. His jawline was chiseled like the bone had been molded from marble. His face had been cleanly shaven, but it was obvious he could grow facial hair overnight. A large Adam's apple protruded from his throat. Instead of looking like the designer who belonged behind the camera, he looked like he should be the focal point of everyone's attention.

He was damn gorgeous.

There were a few other interviews with the models, all gushing about the designer they worshiped like a god. Maybe they were being genuine, or maybe they were just kissing his ass to get a better spotlight. The show was taking place in Milan. Then the camera turned back to Lacey Lockwood.

“Conway Barsetti is always looking for the perfect woman to show off his art. I was sitting in a coffee shop when I was approached. My life changed

forever in that moment, and I couldn't thank him enough for giving me this opportunity." The camera turned back to Conway, showing him shaking hands with a few other men in suits.

As I sat there pissing away whatever money I had left on a good drink, I watched this beautiful man living the dream. Rich, admired, and a level of beautiful that could only be described as stupid, he had everything. Women were plentiful, and money wasn't an issue. He could order as many drinks in that bar as he wanted.

I'd never been jealous like this before.

I was never rich, but I'd always had everything I needed. I had a roof over my head, food on the table, family, and an education. If you ask me, that was living the American dream. Then suddenly, it was all taken away.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

I stared at the screen a while longer, watching the images change as they showed more aspects of Conway Barsetti's life. It showed his Italian villa in Verona, surrounded by vineyards and gorgeous land. It showed him posing outside a building in Milan, a bicycle leaned up directly beside him. Every image was more beautiful than the last, and not just because he was in it.

It was a beautiful place.

I'd never been to Italy. I'd never been outside the US. I'd been too busy being broke and going to school to afford such a lavish trip.

But now, I had nothing. Just enough money to buy a plane ticket.

Knuckles threatened to hurt me even more if I ran. In three days, I would officially be his possession. Calling the cops wasn't an option because he'd kill every friend I had. But the idea of letting that man have me made me sick to my stomach. I wasn't going to wait around until he caught me off guard

and wrapped his hand around my neck. I wasn't going to let someone turn me into a slave. I wasn't going to pay for a crime I didn't commit.

“Conway Barsetti's team just announced they'll have a special one-time opportunity for women to audition for a spot on the runway. The auditions will be held in Milan...” The reporter's voice trailed away once I tuned her out.

I left some cash on the table and grabbed my bag from the floor. Knuckles might be watching me that very moment, but I wasn't going to sit around until he appeared out of the darkness. I was going to run like hell until he caught me.

And I'd never stop.

Sapphire

EVEN WITH ONLY A FEW BUCKS IN MY POCKET, ITALY WAS A BEAUTIFUL place.

The most gorgeous place I'd ever seen.

The small towns were surrounded by vineyards, flowers, and marketplaces full of fresh produce along with homemade cheeses. Wine was more plentiful than water, and strangers had no problem sharing with someone they didn't even know. Not having money to pay for food wasn't an issue because everyone was so generous.

If I were in America, I'd look like a beggar on the street.

I took the bus to the neighboring towns around Milan and explored them. It was easy to be a tourist when the most beautiful sights were all free. I slept under the stars because it was warm, and I showered in public restrooms. It wasn't my finest hour, but it certainly wasn't the worst either.

It was still better than being a slave.

At first, I looked over my shoulder every other minute, expecting to see that horrific man watching me. But three days had come and gone, and he obviously knew I was no longer in New York City. After a quick search, he

would find the manifest of the plane I was on. There was no doubt in my mind he'd tracked me to Italy. But since I was only using cash and not checking in to hotels, there was no way to trace me.

It was like I didn't exist.

Being homeless was a freeing experience.

The feds would keep searching for me since I owed so much on my mortgage, and they wouldn't stop until they put me in prison or took all of my wages from whatever job I managed to pick up. I would work forty hours a week just to be piss-poor for the rest of my life. I couldn't even afford to resume my education.

Starting over in a foreign country sounded like my only option.

I just hoped no one caught me.

I didn't have a false sense of my appearance. I understood I was pretty, but I certainly wasn't model material. But if I could ask for a job doing something else, like sewing or being an assistant, I could make some money to get by. And I would also work for a very powerful man. It might make it difficult for Knuckles to touch me. That was also the last thing anyone would expect me to do, get a job working for a famous person. People would assume Conway Barsetti would turn me in, but judging by the empty expression in his eyes, he wouldn't give a damn who I was running from. He had more important things to do—like count his money and his women.

I returned to Milan later that night with a bag full of bread, cheese, grapes, and crackers. The villagers I met had pushed more food into my arms than I could carry. I ate most of it when it was fresh and saved the rest for dinner. I slept in a hostel that night and had a bed and a real shower after a few days without that kind of luxury.

Tomorrow, I would head to the audition and hope for the best. I didn't have nice clothes, but my clothes shouldn't matter because I wasn't looking to be a model.

I'd even be a janitor—if it paid enough.

I HAD to check in like everyone else and was given a number to stick against my clothes. All the women there were already in heels and lingerie, dressed up for the part. Beautiful, skinny, and with enormous hair, they were all qualified to be the next model for Conway Barsetti.

I was the only one fully dressed—and that made me feel naked.

Most of the women raised their eyebrows when they looked at me then whispered something to their friends in Italian. Some even laughed at me, like I was an idiot for showing up dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. My makeup and hair were done, and I dressed nicely for a walk through the park, but in the context of the audition, I looked like the biggest freak on the planet.

Numbers were called, and women worked the stage like it was the real deal. They strutted, pivoted, flipped their hair, and threw smoldering gazes at the men sitting behind the table.

Conway Barsetti wasn't there.

He must have more important things to do than pick out his next model. Or maybe he was watching—but he couldn't be seen. I was a bit crestfallen when he was nowhere in sight. A beautiful man like that was fun to stare at.

They finally called my number, 228.

I walked up the stairs and passed the woman who just hit the runway. She

didn't contain her laugh as she passed me, wearing a silver bra and panties and heels that were so tall she was practically walking on her toes.

I ignored her and walked up to the table where the three men sat. All dressed in suits, they moved their eyes over my body, taking in every feature with experienced gazes. It wasn't the look I received from men when I went downtown in a short dress. It was pragmatic, completely observational.

The one in the middle spun his finger. "Turn and walk."

"I'm not here to audition to be a model." I kept my hands by my sides and didn't bother with a fake smile. I wasn't there to impress them with my appearance, but my mannerisms. "I have a lot of other skills I think will be useful to the Barsetti lingerie line. I can sew, clean, cook, organize... anything. I'm looking for work, and I'm willing to fill any position you may have."

The man in the middle had dark hair and eyes. A pen was held in his fingertips, and he absentmindedly rotated it within his fingers. His eyes were dark like coffee, with just a splash of cream. "Modeling is the position we're trying to fill. You want it or not?"

I immediately wanted to challenge him until he caved and directed me to someone who could hire me in a different field, but judging by the hostility in his eyes, he was already fed up with me. It was unlikely anyone spoke to these men that way, not when they could make dreams come true. "Do I look like the modeling type to you?" I'd shown up in jeans and a t-shirt with flat sandals on my feet. I wasn't photogenic like the rest of them. I didn't smile with perkiness or smolder with my sensuality. I was plain and boring. I knew it—and they knew it.

"I don't know," he said. "You haven't walked the runway yet."

"I don't think my ability to walk is the deciding factor here." I crossed my

arms over my chest. “Look, I’m desperate for work. I just moved here, and I’ve got twenty euros in my pocket. I can do anything.”

“Then walk the runway.” He flicked his wrist and indicated to the stage with his pen. “Or leave.” He challenged me with his dark look, telling me his patience had been officially drained. The other two men watched me in silence, hardly blinking.

I swallowed my pride and did as they asked. I’d seen two hundred and twenty-seven women walk that runway all afternoon, so I knew exactly what to do. I knew how to hold my shoulders, how to shake my hips, and how to pivot. I felt like an idiot for doing it dressed that way, but I was desperate.

And desperate people did desperate things.

I walked to one point on the stage and then turned back, walking with a straight back and tense posture. I didn’t smile or wear a smoldering expression. That was where I drew the line.

The man in the middle set his pen on his clipboard. “Scars?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you have scars?”

“No.”

“Lift up your shirt.”

My eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“I need to see your skin,” he said. “Blemishes, acne, etc.”

“Just take my word for it.”

He made notes on a piece of paper then snapped his fingers at me.

I placed my hands on my hips, regarding him with an ice-cold expression. Something told me that snap was specifically for me—and I didn't care for it. "Do I look like a dog to you?"

"Woof." An asshole smile spread on his lips. "Get your ass over here and take this. It has your instructions."

"My instructions?" I slowly inched forward, my eyes on the small piece of paper he held in his hand. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're going to the next stage." He placed the paper in my hand. "Show this to the men at the door. Otherwise, you won't get in."

"Whoa, hold on." My eyes scanned the information written down. It had an address as well as a time. "You're seriously considering me?"

"Yes, sweetheart." He still wore that asshole smile.

"Don't call me that." Anytime I heard that name, I felt the terror constrict my throat. Knuckles was the only man to ever call me that, so I'd developed a deep aversion to the horrific nickname. No man would ever call me that for the rest of my life. "And are you insane? Do you see all the gorgeous women out there?"

"You don't think you're gorgeous?" He cocked an eyebrow. "It doesn't matter what you wear. Real beauty can't be hidden. Now get off the stage. We have a lot of women to see."

I stared at the paper again, unable to believe what had just happened. I didn't know how much models got paid, but it was definitely enough to get an apartment and have a hot shower every day. It could be enough for me to start over. "When I said I wanted a different position, I wasn't lying. Is there really nothing else?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You're the dumbest woman who's ever

graced this stage. You just won the lottery, but you're too stupid to realize it. You'd rather sew in a factory than be a Barsetti model? No, you're the one who's insane." He leaned forward and stared up at me, his eyes burning like a raging forest fire. "Are you gonna take it or not? We're supposed to hand out ten invitations. If you don't want it, I'll give it someone who actually gives a damn." He reached his hand out to snatch it from my grip.

My hand immediately formed a fist around the paper, concealing it within my palm.

He leaned back and smiled. "Good...maybe you aren't that stupid."

"You're only choosing ten women?"

"Yes."

"And I'm one of the ten?" There were thousands of women lined up in the street, all dressed in their best. They were exotic, beautiful, and eager. I'd shown up hoping for a job mopping the floor or sewing buttons and lace, but I was given something they'd all kill for.

"Yes." He nodded to the stairs. "Now go before I change my mind."

I kept the invitation tucked into my palm, feeling my pulse pound around my grip. It was a sunny day in Milan, and the sun was beating on the back of my neck. I felt the sweat collect underneath my breasts in my top. But those physical nuisances paled in comparison to the choice I had before me.

The last thing I ever wanted to be was a model. I didn't judge women who took off their clothes to make a living, but I'd never been interested in the lifestyle. I didn't have the right attitude, and I was far too stubborn to follow directions. Knuckles threatened to torture me worse if I ran, but I did it anyway. Anyone would have told me it was the dumbest mistake of my life, but I didn't care.

I'd rather run than surrender.

Modeling for Conway Barsetti wasn't ideal, but it would give me something I couldn't find anywhere else.

Protection.

I'd be surrounded by people all the time, living in the shadow of one of the greatest designers of our generation. A man worth billions had serious power. He wouldn't care about protecting me, but he would certainly care about his brand.

Maybe this was a blessing in disguise. "I'll be there."

Sapphire

10.

They stuck the number against the tiny black bustier they'd provided. It was so tight I could only take a half breath. Even though models didn't wear thongs on the runway, I was required to wear one from his line—that way every detail of my body could be seen.

The black thong matched the lace of my top, and there was a tiny pink flower right below my cleavage line for color. I'd never worn lingerie in my life, so it was my first time being put on display like this.

And I had to wear it in a room full of strangers.

A woman did my hair and makeup, transforming me into a woman I hardly recognized. Body makeup was rubbed into my skin, hiding even the slightest blemish from being visible. My hair was three times bigger than usual, and there was so much mascara on my lashes that my eyelids actually felt heavy.

I couldn't believe I was doing this.

But what other option did I have? Anyone could judge me for making money with my body, but when I was on the run from a psychopath, I didn't have many options. I didn't speak Italian, so finding work was difficult. I needed

something that required very little talking.

And modeling required no talking.

The other nine girls were perfect for the part. Tall, beautiful, so thin I wondered if they ever ate, and perfect. Some of the girls made friends with each other, and none of them could contain their excitement for being selected in the top ten. I wasn't sure how many models they were looking for, but I would assume only half of us were likely to be picked.

I doubted I would make it to the next stage.

But then again, I didn't know how I got here to begin with.

“Line up.” A middle-aged woman in glasses clapped her hands and pointed across the stage. We were inside one of the Barsetti studios, an entire auditorium full of rows of seats. The balconies were decorated with elegant Italian designs, and an enormous fresco was painted across the ceiling.

The girls filed into place, starting at number one.

From left to right, we formed a line. I was the last one in line, and I wondered if my placement had anything to do with my odds. Maybe the best candidates started at the front.

The man who had selected me stood in one of the aisles, the other two men sitting with their clipboards. He held his phone to his ear, listened to something, and then shoved it into his pocket. “Conway Barsetti is arriving.” He sat down with the other two men, leaving the aisle seat open.

It turned dead silent in the auditorium. People weren't even breathing. The girls sucked in their invisible stomachs and pinned their shoulders back, ready to impress a man who was impossible to impress.

I straightened my posture and mimicked them as much as possible, but it

didn't stop me from feeling stupid. I didn't know how to be sexy. These women were masters at it, knew exactly what a man like Conway Barsetti wanted to see. I was totally clueless when it came to stuff like this.

But if he didn't pick me, I would ask for other work. I wasn't leaving this place until I had an income. Italy was expensive, and I couldn't rely on good people giving me free food all the time. I had to pull my own weight. I would clean toilets if that's what it came down to.

The silence continued to stretch endlessly, everyone afraid to breathe too loudly like it would disrupt the anticipation. I hadn't seen a room become this tense for anyone in my life. Even when the President of the United States appeared on TV, people weren't this rigid. It seemed like I was waiting for a king.

A ruler.

At the exact same time, both doors swung inward and opened the entryway. Sunlight entered the room, and the silhouette of a man appeared. In a black suit and royal blue tie, a man bearing broad shoulders and endless power entered the auditorium. His presence infected every inch of the room, filling the air with his potent authority. I felt it with every breath I took.

A young woman followed behind him, a clipboard in hand with her pen held in her fingertips. She constantly stayed a few feet behind him, her body just as poised as the models on the stage.

Once he was away from the sunlight, his visage was finally visible. His chin was marked with a noticeable line of scruff, but it was expertly manicured. His hands rested in his pockets, and a shiny watch reflected the stage lights. He held himself with more grace than all of us on stage.

All eyes were on him.

He knew it, but he didn't seem to be affected by it.

He took a seat in the chair reserved along the aisle for him. The woman who followed him around took a seat directly behind him. The men who had escorted him there shut the doors then lingered in the back, turning into motionless statues now that they weren't needed.

Quite a performance.

The woman on stage with us addressed us again. "Now that Conway Barsetti is here, let's get started. When I call your number, you'll walk to the edge of the runway, pose, and then return to your position. Cue the music."

Instantly, music erupted from the speakers. The lights were cranked higher.

My eyes looked at the spot where Conway was sitting, but I couldn't make out much of his features. His green eyes slightly reflected the lights coming from the stage, and it seemed like he was staring at me.

But that must just be in my head.

Number one went and strutted to the edge of the stage. Her heels clanked against the floor, but she didn't falter in her steps. She posed at the end, flipping her hair profoundly before she turned and walked back. She was in a thong just the way I was, but she obviously didn't feel even remotely uncomfortable showing her entire ass to the men in the audience.

I kept my posture, but the sky-high heels were already killing my feet. After five minutes of wearing the damn things, I was in pain. How did models bear the discomfort and still strut like they owned the stage? It was a mystery to me.

Number two went next.

My eyes moved back to Conway Barsetti's figure in the audience. His elbows

rested on the armrests, and his hands came together in the center of his chest. His watch was more noticeable, and he wore a black ring on his forefinger. His face was still mostly hidden in the shadows, but now there was no mistaking what he was looking at.

Me.

Number two did her best work and returned to the line, but Conway Barsetti missed her entire performance.

He couldn't actually be staring at me, not when there were nine better candidates performing for him right at that moment.

Number three took off.

His green eyes were locked on me, not even blinking. He stared at me with an intense gaze that was almost hostile. It wasn't clear whether he hated me or wanted me. Maybe he was ticked his assistants had placed me in the top ten. Perhaps it irritated him that such an unworthy woman wore one of his greatest designs.

Number four went next.

His eyes were still on me.

I turned my eyes away, his heated gaze becoming too much. I suddenly felt vulnerable, like an antelope standing in the tall grass of the Serengeti. There was a lion watching me. I couldn't see him—but I could certainly feel him.

I'd been threatened by worse men, Knuckles being the top pick. But I always hit back with the same force they struck me with. If a man tried to disrespect me, I did the same to him. Allowing myself to be intimidated simply wasn't an option. To live your life in fear was to not live at all. Despite learning all those lessons, I felt trepidation when he stared at me.

I felt like he could see right through me, see all my fears and doubts. He could read my mind like words on a page. He could feel every emotion like it was wafting from my skin. He could sense my vulnerability, knowing I was slowly coming undone.

His image on TV was nothing compared to the real thing.

He might be beautiful, but damn, he was terrifying.

He was thirty feet away from me, but his presence projected so far it seemed like he was standing right in front of me.

The lights put me on display, and all I could do was stand there and take his stare. I was already nervous to walk in my heels, but now that his harsh eyes were watching me like a pair of binoculars, I didn't feel as strong as I had before.

I felt like a mess.

Now, we were on number six.

She didn't make it to the edge of the stage.

As if Conway Barsetti was speaking through a microphone, his voice projected throughout the entire auditorium, but he accomplished it without raising his voice. "Numbers one through nine, you're dismissed."

Number six froze at the edge of the stage, in mid-pose. She looked over her shoulder at the older woman in charge of the audition, shocked and seeking direction. The other girls looked at each other too, devastated by the announcement.

Then they all looked at me—furious.

The woman in charge faltered before she found her voice. "Uh, head backstage, please..." Judging by the fear in her voice, this had never

happened before. Conway Barsetti hadn't even seen all the models before he dismissed them.

He hadn't even seen me move yet.

He was about to be disappointed.

Heels tapped against the stage as all the girls walked off, their silent fury audible in my ears. They moved behind the curtain, and within a few seconds, the sound of their heels ended. Then all I could hear was my own breathing.

And it was loud.

Conway Barsetti didn't move from his seat. Everyone was rigid around him, waiting for whatever would come next.

Was I supposed to do something?

The woman who was telling us what to do a second ago had disappeared with the other girls, so there was no one to give me any direction. I kept my posture as long as I could, feeling my shoulders ache from pulling them back so tightly. It was difficult to tell exactly what Conway was doing because the audience was a haze when the bright lights hit my face so hard.

Then he spoke again. "Leave us."

He'd dismissed the others, but now, he seemed to be dismissing me.

Everyone seated in the audience rose to their feet and started to leave.

I turned away and did the same.

"Not you." His voice rose slightly. "Stay."

Somehow, I knew he was talking to me. I slowly turned back around, watching everyone else walk out the double doors. They shut behind them,

and after that loud clank, it was silent again.

Now it was even quieter than before.

Conway rose to his feet, buttoning the front of his suit at the same time with elegant grace. He moved to the center of the wide aisle, his hands sliding into his pockets. Now that he had moved away from the shadows of the seating area, his whole face was on display.

His eyes never looked so green.

His wide shoulders hinted at the power underneath his suit. He was in the audience and I was the one on stage, but he seemed to be the center of focus. For a man like Conway Barsetti, he didn't need a stage. He was always the star.

I crossed my arms over my chest, hiding my bare stomach from view. Now that it was just the two of us, I felt even more on vulnerable. I was aware of the way the lingerie pushed my boobs tightly together to form a dramatic cleavage line. I was aware of how revealing my thong was. My bare skin pebbled just from a single look from him.

“Don't slouch.”

It took me a moment to process the order. I was used to firing back with smartass comments, but he was potentially my new employer. So I dropped my hands to my sides and stuck out my chest.

“Good.” He took the stairs and slowly reached the stage, his heavy footfalls echoing due to the acoustics of the auditorium. He approached me from behind, making me feel like a small fish being circled by a shark.

Now I was even more aware of my bare ass.

I could feel him stare at it.

He slowly circled around me, coming around my left until he was directly in front of me. His hands remained in his pockets, and his eyes combed over my body, examining the roundness of my shoulders and the hollow in my throat. He moved farther south, taking in the sight of my cleavage then progressed downward.

I wanted to cross my arms over my chest again. I felt fire all over my skin, the heat in his gaze. I felt defenseless against this man—like I had no power whatsoever. That was a recurring theme in my life lately. Everything had been taken from me, but now this man was about to take whatever was left.

Once his examination was over, his eyes met mine. “Name?”

I didn’t want to have a name. I wanted to leave my old identity behind and start fresh. I didn’t want anyone to trace me back here. I was running from the American authorities and the mob at the same time. My odds of success weren’t great. “Does it matter?”

He must have expected me to answer him obediently because he couldn’t control the slight rise of his right eyebrow. He was nearly a foot taller than me even in the five-inch heels I wore, but I could still see his reactions easily. “You’d rather I called you Ten?” The baritone of his voice was mesmerizing. It had a hypnotic ability to stop me from thinking about anything. It was like a spell.

“Call me whatever you want. I don’t care.”

“If you don’t care, why don’t you just give me your name?”

Not only was he handsome and authoritative, but he was smart too. No wonder he was a billionaire and the most respected lingerie designer on the planet. “Ten, it is.”

His eyes narrowed this time. “The only reason a woman won’t give her real

name is because she's running from something—or someone.”

“I won't bore you with my baggage, Mr. Barsetti. But yes, you're right.”

“It's Conway Barsetti.”

“My mistake...”

“Fine, Ten.” He stepped away, his cologne lingering in my nose once he passed. “Walk.”

“Where?”

He never answered me again. He only snapped his fingers.

My eyes immediately narrowed at the action.

“Don't waste my time, Ten. There and back.”

He wanted me to walk the runway like the other models. I sucked in my stomach and then did as he asked, mimicking their movements the best I could. When I saw fashion shows on TV, I never understood just how difficult it really was until I tried to strut in insanely tall heels. I walked to the edge, posed, and then turned around and walked back to him.

His eyes didn't linger on my face. He watched all of my movements, from my arms to my legs. He brushed his thumb along his bottom lip and furrowed his brow, as if he was really thinking about what he was seeing.

I returned to the spot where I started.

“Poor mechanism. Loose control. Not enough confidence. Shoulders back farther...widen your steps.” He circled around me, eyeing my legs and my hips. “You need a lot of work.”

“I need a lot of work?” I snapped. “Then why don't you pick one of the other nine? They were flawless.”

He circled behind me then came back around. “Don’t question me.”

“Don’t question you?” I asked incredulously. “You just insulted me.”

“I critiqued you.” He stopped in front of me again. “And you’re going to have to get used to it if you want to be a Barsetti model.”

“So that means you’ve chosen me?”

“Would I be here otherwise?” He stepped toward me and placed his hands around my rib cage just below my breasts.

It took me a second to understand he was touching me because it happened so quickly. It was one thing to stare at my nakedness, but another to touch me like he had every right to do whatever he wanted. “Uh, do you mind?” I slapped his hands away.

His face was just inches from my face, and he stared at me with arctic coldness. “Do you always interview for a job like this?”

“Do you always assault your employees like this?”

He dropped his hands and stepped back, his eyes touching me even more than his hands did. “I need to understand your body. I need to feel it, to measure it. If you can’t handle being touched, then this isn’t going to work.”

“You could have asked permission first.”

“I don’t ask for permission,” he snapped. “Every model who wears my lingerie belongs to me. I can do whatever I damn well please. Now, if you want to work for me, your attitude is going to have to change.”

“Asking me to change my attitude is like asking me to change my personality.”

“Then control it.” He slid his hands into his pockets and headed to the stairs.

“We have a lot of work to do. Be in my dressing room at six tomorrow morning—and expect to be touched.” He took the stairs until he was back in the aisle.

“Six in the morning?” I asked incredulously. I usually wasn’t up until eight.

“Yes.” He adjusted his cuff link then looked at his watch. “I start my day at four.”

Jesus Christ. If I were a billionaire, I’d allow myself the luxury of sleeping in every day. “I know this is a weird request, but I need to be paid under the table. If that can’t happen...then I can’t do this.”

Once he was finished with his sleeves, he looked up at me again. His bright green eyes cut into me like they were knives. He watched me with distinct coldness, the ice reaching every corner of the room. He could replace me with another beautiful woman at any moment. People didn’t make requests like mine unless they were hiding something illegal. I definitely was, and he might not want to help a fugitive. “I accept your terms. But that means you better accept mine.”

Conway

I USED THE TOP FLOOR OF THE BUILDING FOR MY STUDIO. I HAD VIEWS OF THE historic cathedral and the rest of the fashion capital of the world. The city was at my feet, and I liked looming over it like a powerful statue.

Watching the sun rise from the window gave me one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. It made me appreciate what I had, appreciate how much I'd conquered this beautiful planet.

A knock sounded on the office door.

“Come in.” I flipped through my sketchbook at the table, looking at the design I'd been composing for the past week. A gray push-up dress embedded with real diamonds, it was made for a queen about to be conquered by a king. Only the wealthiest woman could afford such a gorgeous piece of lingerie—or the man she was fucking. I was eager to feel the fabric with my fingertips, to secure the material with real diamonds. When I presented it at the show next week, it would be the masterpiece.

Now I just needed the right woman to show it off.

Lacey Lockwood stepped inside, holding two cups of coffee. “Morning.”

I didn't pull my gaze away from the sketch. “You're up early.”

“Going for a long run with some of the girls.” She set the coffee cup directly next to my hand. “I went by the bakery around the corner...the one you like so much.”

When I raised my gaze to look at her, I watched her sneak a peek at my drawing. I suspected she’d seen it before. “Nicole can do that for me.”

“I don’t mind. It was on my way.” Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, and she wore black leggings with a teal sports bra. A few strands of blond hair came loose and hung around her face.

I never slept with my models. It was a rule I refused to break. Lacey obviously thought she could change my mind. She wanted to be the woman on my arm, to feast on my power and riches. And she wanted to be my number one girl—the one with all the spotlight.

“I should get to work, Lacey.” I stepped away from her and ignored her coffee. “Enjoy your run.”

My back was to her so I couldn’t see her expression, but I was certain she didn’t care for the rejection. Her voice wasn’t as confident when she spoke. “Thank you. Have a good day...” She let herself out.

Once she was gone, I tossed the cup in the garbage can.

Nicole stepped in a moment later. “Good morning, Conway. I have everything you asked for.” She set the folders on the table and went through the orders with me. I needed specific fabrics from Turkey, and Nicole handled all the important things in my life.

“Thank you, Nicole.”

“And here’s your morning coffee.” She set the cup on the table. “I’ll be back with your breakfast in a little bit.”

I grabbed it and took a drink. “Thank you.”

She walked out, leaving me alone with my work again.

Exactly at six o’clock, there was a knock on the door.

I knew who it was. “Come in.”

The door opened, and Ten walked inside. She was in jeans and a t-shirt, looking more like a tourist than a model. Flat sandals were on her feet, and her hair was pulled back into a lazy ponytail. She didn’t put a single ounce of effort into her appearance whatsoever. “If you want to be a model, you need to start acting like it.”

“Good morning to you too, asshole.”

My neck snapped in her direction because I couldn’t believe what I just heard. Someone just called me an asshole—to my face. No one else had the stupidity to do such a thing—or the bravery. I dropped my pencil and faced her head on. “If you think I’m an asshole now, you should see what I’ll do if you walk in tomorrow looking like that.”

“What’s wrong with how I look?”

For a woman walking on the street, she was beautiful. No denying it. I would have noticed her just like every other man. But I didn’t appreciate her lack of professionalism. Models didn’t come into my studio unless they were looking their best. “Everything.”

Her blue eyes narrowed immediately, and without moving, it seemed as if she coiled like a snake. She wanted to sink her teeth into me and drain me of all my blood. “At least we have something in common, because *everything* is wrong with you too.”

No one ever talked to me that way, but yet, I kept letting it go on. “When you

walk down these hallways, I expect you to be ready to hit the stage. That means your hair should be done, your makeup should be flawless, and you should be kissing the floor in gratitude.”

“Gratitude? I should feel grateful for being insulted?”

“Yes, when those insults come from me.”

She pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head. “You’re far more arrogant than I ever anticipated.”

“Yes, and I have every reason to be.” I turned back to my sketch. “Have some coffee and then pull on a pair of heels. I’m teaching you a few things.”

“You don’t pay someone else to do it?”

I finished the mark I wanted to make against the paper. “Not when I want it done right.”

She moved behind me, walking to the silver heels sitting on the other table. “I’m sure you don’t give a damn, but I got kicked out of my hostel. There wasn’t enough room so I didn’t have a shower this morning. Otherwise, I would have looked nicer.”

My pencil froze against the paper, and I felt my heart tighten in my chest. A wave of guilt overtook me, and I felt sick to my stomach. This woman was living on the street, which meant she barely had a few euros in her pockets. She probably didn’t have dinner last night or breakfast this morning. “You’re right. I don’t give a damn.” I closed the notebook and watched her sit on the chair as she pulled on the heels. “There’s a shower down the hall. You can use it tomorrow.”

She tightened the strap around her ankles. “Thanks...” Her word barely came out as a whisper, probably because she hated thanking me even though I didn’t completely lack compassion.

“Stop.”

She had one shoe on, but she stopped before she pulled on the other.

“Clothes off first.”

“I’m not taking my clothes off.” Like my words were gasoline, she immediately fired up.

“What did I tell you last night?” I crossed my arms over my chest and stared down this ornery woman. I offered to respect her privacy and ignore her past if she was cooperative. I was giving her a chance no one else would extend. The only reason I was putting up with this bullshit was because she had a unique quality. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but it was impossible not to see. The other nine models on that stage were just as beautiful, but they paled in comparison to the woman before me. Even in jeans and messy hair, she was gorgeous—but I refused to tell her that.

She barely hid her sigh of annoyance before she pushed the shoe off her foot.

“Strip to your panties and bra.”

She rose to her feet but still hesitated, like I was asking her to do something much worse.

I watched her, seeing the way her chest rose and fell deeply. The battle was raging on her face, the fight for her dignity and her need to survive. Her cheeks were paler than they were last night, but that could be because her makeup was gone. Her eyes shifted back and forth before she finally pulled her shirt over her head.

I wanted to remind her that she didn’t have to do this. She could just walk out if she wanted to. But the selfish man inside me didn’t want to let her go. I needed this woman. The second I laid eyes on her, I knew she was special.

She set the shirt on the table, standing in a black bra that looked like it was from a typical outlet store. The straps were thin and cutting into her shoulders incorrectly, and the cups were slightly too big for her size, as if she had lost weight recently. But her attire couldn't diminish just how beautiful she was underneath.

Her skin actually glowed. With a bright complexion and a sprinkling of freckles, her body was a blank canvas. She didn't even need foundation on her shoulders or back because she was blemish-free. She was gorgeous—from head to toe.

She removed her jeans next, pulling them down until she stood in a black thong. Her tanned skin complemented the dark lace. Her legs were sculpted and toned, and her ass was big like a bubble. She was one of the curviest models I'd ever seen. She had a tiny rib cage but an incredible bust size. The length of her torso was perfect, on the longer side but not too long. Her legs were the perfect length, and they would rock anything I dressed her in.

She sat down again and pulled on the heels.

I leaned against the table and watched her, seeing her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. It was long and shiny. I remembered the way it looked last night when it was done with big curls.

Nicole knocked before she stepped inside. She set the tray on the table where she placed my breakfast every morning. "Anything else, sir?"

"No." My eyes remained on Ten, watching her get the heels on.

Nicole understood my moods better than anyone, so she let herself out.

When Ten was finished, she rose to her feet and faced me. She couldn't mask the irritation in her eyes, but she did the best she could. Taking off her clothes was something she didn't enjoy doing—clearly.

She would get used to it. “Perfect.” I walked to the other side of the room where there was twenty feet of open space. I turned back to her and crossed my arms over my chest. “Walk to me.”

She took a few steps—and they were all horrendous.

“Stop.”

She halted in her tracks. “What?”

“Walk like you aren’t touching the ground.”

Her fire erupted again. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Walk with grace. I know you can do it. You just walked in the door a few minutes ago.”

“But I wasn’t wearing *these*.” She pointed at her feet. “I’ve worn heels a lot in my life, and these are not heels. These are death shoes. I’m walking like a ballerina.”

“The girls do it every day. You will too.”

When she knew I wouldn’t budge, she sucked it up and did it.

“Shoulders back.”

She improved her posture.

“Straight spine.”

She adjusted herself again.

“Put all your weight on your toes. That’ll stop your heels from wobbling.”

She shifted her stance again, and this time, she finally looked perfect. She stopped when she reached me, her gaze boring into mine.

I looked her up and down, admiring her curves and her beautiful skin. She reminded me of a doll, someone so beautiful they couldn't be real. Her hair was pulled back and her features weren't highlighted with makeup, but that didn't stop her from stealing my entire focus.

And making me hard as fuck.

“Turn around.”

She hesitated before she cooperated.

My hand immediately grabbed her ponytail, and I tugged the hair tie out until her hair was finally free. It expanded down her shoulders, a slight crease in the strands where the tie had gripped the hair. Slightly wavy, it trailed down her body to the middle of her back. “Walk.”

She walked across the room, incorporating everything I just told her. She looked elegant and smooth, a natural at being the sexiest thing alive. The heels tapped against the floor at a perfect rhythm and her ass shook in time to her steps.

My eyes drilled into her luscious ass, admiring those rounded cheeks. She had a body women would die for. She was tight in all the right places, and all woman in others. The curves between her hips and ass were proportional. The crease underneath her cheeks made me want to squeeze her ass with my bare hands. A woman that looked this flawless would make my art a million times more desirable.

It would make all the difference in the world.

AFTER SHE PUT her clothes back on, I pulled out the chair at the table.
“Sit.”

“Do you order everyone around like that?” She fixed her hair with fingertips as she looked in the mirror.

I talked to everyone however I wanted. “Yes. Now sit.”

She obeyed, but with silent attitude. She took a seat and looked at the tray Nicole had placed there thirty minutes ago. “What’s this?”

“Breakfast. Are you hungry?”

“Uh...” She licked her lips instinctively as she stared at the egg whites with the side of sautéed kale, mushrooms, and tomatoes. There was also a slice of sourdough bread and a few pieces of avocado. “Isn’t this for you?”

“I already ate. Help yourself.”

She didn’t put up a fight and immediately picked up her fork. She started eating, placing the food in her mouth at a rapid rate, but retaining her elegance and eating properly at the same time. She hardly looked up because she was more interested in her food than me. It was like I wasn’t there at all.

Knowing she was starving and had no place to sleep at night made me wonder what she was running from. I shouldn’t care, so there was no point pondering it. If I asked, she wouldn’t answer me anyway. She wasn’t wanted for murder, I knew that much. She had quite the mouth on her but not a violent bone in her body. She didn’t seem like someone who would break in to someone’s house and rob them. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be sleeping on the street. She’d be squatting on someone’s property. Whatever her offense was, she wasn’t dangerous. But that only made her more mysterious to me.

I had a small safe in my office, so I cracked it open and pulled out a pile of Euros. I stuffed them into an envelope then set it on the table beside her. “This is for you.”

It was the only thing that could get her to stop eating. She chewed her food

slowly and swallowed it before she stuck a thumb inside and expanded the opening. “What’s this?”

“An advance.”

“There’s got to be two thousand Euros in here...”

“It should get you what you need for the next few weeks.”

It was the first time she showed me a genuine reaction. Her eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning, and she gripped the envelope tightly, as if I might snatch it back. But then she put it back on the table and pushed it toward me. “I can’t accept it. I haven’t done anything. All I did was spend a few hours with you...”

I pushed it back. “Take it.”

“No.” She pushed it back again. “I appreciate it...but it would be wrong.”

It was hard to believe this woman would be so proud when she had so little. She cared more about her dignity and self-respect than taking the easy way out. It showed a kind of bravery I hadn’t seen...ever. Now I understood why it was so difficult for her to take her clothes off for me. This woman lived by a different code of ethics than everyone else. “I take care of my girls.”

She eyed the envelope one last time before she turned away. “My final answer is no.”

I wanted to force her to take the money, but I didn’t know how I could make that happen. I would just deposit it into her bank account, but since she didn’t have that, that wasn’t possible. “Where will you go tonight?”

She pushed her eggs around with her fork. “That’s not your problem. Don’t worry about me.”

It was impossible for me not to worry about a beautiful woman alone on the

streets. She was hungry and dirty, and she deserved more than that. “How about this? You see that bed over there?” I nodded to the corner, where a large king-size bed sat. It was covered with soft sheets and decorative pillows.

“What’s it for?”

It didn’t matter what I used it for. “Sleep here until you’re on your feet. There’s a bathroom down the hall, and the break room always has leftover food. What do you say?”

“I...I don’t know.”

My patience had officially expired. “Ten, you’re taking one or the other. Now, pick. As one of the Barsetti models, you’re my property. I can’t have a dirty, sleep-deprived, starving woman on the runway. You’re hurting me as much as yourself. So choose.”

She eyed the bed in the corner, her eyes lidded and heavy. “This is so embarrassing...”

“I’m not judging you, Ten.”

“I never should have told you. I should have just kept my mouth shut.” She left the table even though she hadn’t finished the meal sitting in front of her. She grabbed the heavy bag she’d left by the door, and I hadn’t even considered how odd it was that she would bring such a big bag with her. But then I realized it contained all the possessions she had.

“Ten.” I didn’t need to raise my voice to establish my power. All anyone needed to do was listen to it, and they would know not obeying wasn’t an option. “If you walk out that door, you’re fired.”

She held one strap over her shoulder and continued to stare straight ahead.

I was bluffing, but I hoped she didn't realize that. "You're taking the money. It's an advance, not charity." I grabbed the money then came up behind her. I unzipped the biggest pocket and dropped the money inside. "Now, leave. I have shit to do." I turned back to the table, where my sketch was waiting for me to finish. Lingerie was so simple that it was difficult to constantly reinvent old styles. With clothes, there was a wide array of different things to choose from. That made my job more challenging, but I enjoyed every second of it. I wasn't a fan of clothes or fabrics.

I was simply a fan of sex.

Ten slowly turned back to me, doing her best to hide the moisture that was quickly building up in her eyes.

I purposely stared at my sketch so I wouldn't have to look at it.

"I take back what I said...you aren't an asshole."

My fingers gripped the pencil tighter, more annoyed by those words than pleased. "Just because I'm not an asshole doesn't mean I'm a nice guy. And trust me...I'm not a nice guy."

Sapphire

I TOOK HIS MONEY BECAUSE HE FORCED ME TO.

But I was grateful that he made me.

I was able to get myself a real dinner and a room at a decent hotel. I went to bed that night with a satisfied stomach and lay on a bed that hadn't been devoured by moths. The crazy lady in the bunk next to me at the hostel couldn't keep me up all night when I slept alone.

It was really nice.

I'd been living my life like this for two weeks, and I'd finally reached my boiling point. It was harder in New York City because people weren't as generous or compassionate there. If you asked for food, they pretended not to hear you and just kept walking.

If it weren't for Conway, I wasn't sure what I would have done.

Slept on the street again.

He was the one who insulted me first, so I didn't feel bad for calling him an asshole. But when he gave me food and money...I wondered if I misjudged him. Maybe he wasn't the cold and arrogant man he constantly projected.

Maybe he had a soul underneath all that hardness.

Or maybe he just cared about protecting his brand.

He obviously wanted me in his lineup. He wouldn't take the time to help me unless it benefited him in some way. So perhaps that was all he really cared about. If I wound up dead or got jumped, he wouldn't be able to use me anymore.

Whatever the case, I was grateful.

It was nice to feel safe in a hotel room...even if it was just for a little while.

When I walked into his building, the other models there immediately turned up their noses when they saw me. Gossip had spread fast, and they all knew I was the one woman who showed up to the audition fully clothed. They also knew Conway Barsetti hadn't even bothered with the other nine models because he only seemed to be interested in me.

So, of course, they all hated me.

I took the stairs to the top level and knocked on his office door.

"Come in." His deep voice sounded exactly the same as it did yesterday, powerful and masculine. He could command an entire army based on his voice alone. He also had the look of a commander as well...a man with the whole package.

I stepped inside.

Conway was too involved in work to look up at me, but he must have known it was me because he wouldn't let a random person share his space with him. He stood at the table, his broad shoulders filling out his suit perfectly. His back was ramrod straight, and his head was dipped slightly forward as I watched his hand scribble across the notebook.

Like any other time I was around him, I felt the tension settle on my shoulders. It was like being locked in a cage with a snake. There was a violent animal in the same space...and it was bound to strike. It just wasn't clear when.

Today, I didn't bring my bag because I left it at the hotel. I'd had room service brought right to me, something I hadn't done since my parents took me on vacation fifteen years ago. Now I examined his studio more closely, seeing the pictures on the walls. They were all models dressed in his lingerie, sexy women who did his clothes justice. Some of them were too scandalous for publication, so it made me wonder if they were pictures just for him...as gifts. A mannequin sat next to the table, and a black bra was fastened on the figure. It was clearly in the process of being constructed because it didn't look complete.

His large table was black, as were his walls. The hardwood floor underneath my feet was a deep cherry wood. The bed in the corner seemed out of place, and it made me wonder if his relationship with his models wasn't always professional.

Of course, it wasn't.

I slowly trailed around the room, looking at the pile of clothing pins on the table along with the random pieces of fabric thrown everywhere. It was cluttered but organized at the same time. I patiently waited for him to address me.

He kept working, sipping his coffee as he stared down at his drawing.

“You know I'm here, right?”

He kept sketching. “And I'll pretend that you aren't until I'm finished.”

As if yesterday hadn't happened at all, we were right back to where we'd

been before. “I would have kept sleeping if I’d known you’d be busy.”

“Your time is my time. Get used to it.”

I rolled my eyes then walked up to the table where he was standing. I looked around his arm and watched his fingers sketch a corset and thong. It was a rough drawing, but he added so many details with little room. He made notes along the side, writing down the fabrics and gems. He worked quickly, as if this idea came into his skull five minutes before I walked through the door.

When I stood this close to him, I could smell the scent of his cologne. It smelled like pine wood and body soap. Maybe it wasn’t cologne at all, but just his natural aroma. I imagined the scent clung to him just after he stepped out of the shower. When I pictured him in the shower, all man, muscle, and skin, I shook the thought away.

He finally set down his pencil. “Next time, you will wait until I’m finished before you speak.”

“Why?”

He shut the folder with an audible thump. “Because I don’t have to give a reason. Just do it.” He turned his body toward me, ready to lean into my face and say something else rude. But his mouth shut, and his eyes narrowed on my face. He took in my features slowly, his anger softening and a different expression coming over his face. Instantly, the rage he’d expressed toward me disappeared altogether. “Perfect.” He was just inches from my body, and the second he stepped away, he took all the warmth with him.

Since I had a hotel room, I was able to shower, use a blow dryer, and look in a mirror to do my makeup. He obviously noticed the change and seemed slightly struck by it.

“Clothes off.”

Now the moment was officially over. “Should I just drop everything the second I walk in the door?” I asked sarcastically.

“Yes.” He grabbed a different notebook and a measuring tape. “Why don’t I hear clothes hitting the floor?”

Now that I’d taken his money, I couldn’t disobey. I was committed to this out of obligation. I would have to get used to removing my clothes in front of this man I hardly knew. It would be one thing if he was gay...but he definitely wasn’t.

I peeled off my jeans and t-shirt and set them on the stool next to the full-length mirror. I stood in my white bra and panties, thankful I’d shaved everything in the shower that morning. When I looked at my appearance, I saw a thin woman with an hourglass figure and a little too much junk in the trunk. I never had struggled with self-esteem because I knew I was attractive. But not once in my lifetime did I ever think I’d have the potential to attract the biggest designer in the world. Not once did I think I had the right look for something that thousands of women would die for.

I still didn’t think that.

I felt his stare directly between my shoulder blades. I didn’t need to see his reflection in the mirror to know exactly where he was. His presence was heavy enough, and his stare was even more powerful.

“Turn around.”

I swallowed my pride and did as he asked.

He sat down in a black armchair and rested his ankle on the opposite knee. One elbow was propped on the armrest with the measuring tape held in his fingertips. He gently rolled his thumb against the circular surface, his eyes grazing over my body like he’d never seen a woman in a thong.

His gaze started at my neck and then slid down my body. He paid attention to my tummy the most, homing in on it before he looked at my thighs. “Do you lift weights? Run?”

“Neither.”

His fingers stopped playing with the measuring tape, and his eyes narrowed on my face. “Then what do you do?”

“Nothing.”

That obviously wasn't the right answer. “A woman doesn't have an ass like that from doing *nothing*.” His fingers started to move on the tape measure again.

“I'm on my feet twelve hours a day with school and bartending.”

“You were a bartender?”

Why would that interest a man like him? “Yes.”

“What's your favorite drink?”

“Scotch.”

His eyes narrowed in intensity, as if that answer meant something to him.

“Why?”

“It's simple and effective.”

“That's my father's favorite drink. My mother hates it.”

“It requires a certain palate.” I was talking about drink choices in my underwear the way I would with a lover. It felt so comfortable that it actually made me uncomfortable.

His eyes finally left mine and returned to examining me. “You're beautiful

from head to toe.” He started his perusal again at my neck then slowly moved to my feet. “Perfect skin, perfect curves, perfect everything...I wouldn’t change a thing.”

I didn’t know if I should say thank you for being objectified so casually, so I didn’t. “You must say that to all your models.”

“Actually, I don’t.” His eyes shifted back to mine. “Every woman is unique. Some have the perfect eye color to complement their skin. Some have the perfect legs that look amazing in a teddy and garters. Some have the perfect shoulders for a sweetheart top. They all have something amazing other than being thin...but none of them have everything.” His eyes burrowed into my skin with his heated look, seeing me skin-deep. His visceral look wasn’t lustful in nature, rather almost respectful. I certainly felt like a lamb when I was around this lion, but I also felt like a goddess at the same time. He insulted me when I didn’t reach his expectations, but when I did, he did nothing but flatter me. “But you do.” He left the chair and approached me, pulling the end of the tape measure. “I’m going to take some measurements now. That’s as close to me asking for permission as you’re going to get.”

He wrapped the tape measure around my rib cage first. Then he moved to my hips, adjusting the tape as I became wider. He must have memorized the numbers because he never wrote them down.

He took measurements that I never expected, from my shoulder to my chest, and from one shoulder to the opposite breast. He even wrapped the soft tape around my neck. It took him nearly twenty minutes to map out my entire body, measuring the size of my calves as well as my thighs. When he measured my legs, he measured from the knee to my waist then took a separate measurement of my ankle to my knee.

I didn’t have a clue how he remembered all of that.

He walked to the table and scribbled his notes, the tape measure sitting beside him. His masculine hand made the pencil look even smaller because of the size difference. I could hear the scratch of the pencil tip against the paper, probably because he was pressing so hard into the parchment.

I didn't put my clothes back on because I assumed he would tell me to take them off again.

When he was finished, he set the pencil down and then took another drink of his coffee.

I was grateful he was facing the other way. His callused fingertips had brushed against my skin in the most perfect way. It made me afraid but also excited. I liked the way he was so meticulous with his work, making sure every measurement was as exact as possible. He wore a particular expression, a hard look from his concentration. His jaw was harder, and his green eyes took on a deeper shade. His eyebrows furrowed as he studied all the movements he made with his fingertips. The focused expression made his handsome face even more captivating. It made me wonder how his face looked when he was buried between the legs of a beautiful woman. Was his expression the same? Or was it even sexier?

I felt my skin flush at the thought.

Conway turned back to me. "I've seen some of these numbers before...but here and there. I haven't seen every single one attached to one woman. That's pretty incredible." He slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks and slowly walked back toward me, approaching me with a distinct gentleness that contradicted the way he'd aggressively touched me and measured me.

"Thank you..." It felt out of place to say that, but it felt even more awkward to say nothing at all. I held his expression as he stood in front of me, seeing the green eyes along with the stubble on his face. My nipples hardened inside

my bra and pushed against the fabric. Thankfully, the bra was padded so my hardness wasn't visible.

His hand slid into his pocket, his thumb hooked on the outside. When he created these tense moments, he didn't seem to be bothered by the stern silence the way everyone else was. He was naturally intimidating, a skill that affected everyone else but him. Maybe he was aware of it. Maybe he wasn't.

I refused to allow myself to be cowed, to allow this man to make me stand on pins and needles. But when he wore such a handsome expression mixed with distinct darkness, it was hard not to.

Was I afraid of him? Or was I attracted to him?

Could it be both?

“Why are you uncomfortable?”

Like I was words on a page, he read me like an open book. I didn't like being transparent, but maybe I wasn't. Maybe he just had a powerful skill of reading human emotion. “I'm pretty much naked right now...”

“And what's wrong with that?” He held himself with perfect posture at all times. Even when he stood at the table and stared down at his notebook, his shoulders were still squared. He practiced what he preached, never slouching.

Everything was wrong with it. “It's unnatural...I hardly know you.”

“Unnatural?” he whispered. “A woman's naked body is the most natural thing in the world. It's beautiful, erotic, sensual...breathtaking.” His eyes glided down my body again. “You should never feel ashamed of that beautiful skin. No woman ever should be. You have more power than you realize. I make beautiful things, but I can only be inspired by something just as beautiful. You have all the power in every situation, Ten. Men would gladly lay down their lives just for a look at your perfection. When you walk

across that stage, you should own it. You should burn with confidence and power. I will make you look like the goddess that you are—but you have to be the goddess. Don't ever feel ashamed or insecure when you stand there like that in front of me. I think you're stunning. You hardly know me now, but that will change very soon. Soon, you will trust me more than anyone else on this earth."

His words immediately changed my perception, immediately made me feel more at ease standing like that in front of him. I suddenly felt invigorated, no longer on display. A new burst of confidence shot through me.

"My job isn't just to make a woman look beautiful—but feel beautiful." He stepped closer to me, officially in my personal space. It was the closest he ever had come to me, his mouth lingering just inches from mine. "I like to fuck women, so I know exactly how I want them to look when I'm fucking them. I know what men want. I know what fantasies they have. So I design lingerie that fits those desires. Any woman who wears my clothes will feel gorgeous—because she'll know it's what a man wants." He tilted his head slightly, looking down at my body.

I felt the bumps form on my arms, felt my breath come out shaky. It was like standing in front of an inferno where the flames licked my skin. A combination of his power, authority, and confidence wrapped around me. He paralyzed me.

He brushed the backs of his fingertips against my shoulder and slowly dragged them down my arm. He moved slowly, stopping at the crease in my elbow. "You inspire me...because I know exactly how I would fuck you."

Conway

I LEFT MY BUILDING AND WALKED THROUGH THE QUIET, DARK STREETS OF Milan. The tall buildings were cast in shadows as the short lamps only highlighted the street. A couple passed me as they enjoyed their gelato. I was dressed in a navy blue suit with a matching tie, and my outfit was worth thousands of dollars. If someone was desperate for money, just my clothes had enough value to change their life forever.

But no one was stupid enough to cross me.

I didn't just have a famous face, but a respected power. I could make things happen with the snap of my fingers. I could make people disappear if I wanted. I had the authority to change the course of the future—if I wanted to.

I turned the corner and approached the entrance to the club. The bass of the music thudded from the inside, reaching the street and the people waiting around to get in. Women stood outside in heels and sparkling lingerie, the humid temperature keeping their delicate skin warm.

Once I approached, the men immediately recognized me. They parted the crowd and surrounded me like soldiers protecting their king. I was blocked off from the long line of men waiting to pay a thousand euro just to experience the elite club. The women stared at me like I was a god.

The doors opened, and they escorted me inside.

Once I was surrounded by the darkness and the music, I felt right at home. Women were dressed in my lingerie, bustiers, corsets, and tiny thongs that hardly covered anything. Some of them were my models, and some of them were women who only wished they were.

I created an invisible ripple, and anyone in my way immediately stepped aside. I seemed to emit a high-frequency pitch that surrounded me on all sides. People could hear it without even realizing it. They stepped back, giving me more space than necessary.

The black walls were covered with pictures of my models wearing the sexy clothes. Some featured diamonds, other lace, but in every single photo, the piece of lingerie was specifically designed for them. My job was to make the perfect ensemble for every woman, treating each individual on a personal level. Every woman had a different body type, and each one was beautiful in her own way.

“Here’s your scotch, sir.” A man appeared from the shadows with my drink on a tray. “Carter is waiting for you on the second landing.”

I took the glass. “Thank you.”

He disappeared just as quickly as he’d appeared.

I moved to the stairs and felt every pair of eyes fall on me. Women admired me with lust, and men despised me with jealousy. But every single person in that building had to bow to my power.

I owned all of them—and they didn’t even realize it.

I reached the second landing and spotted Carter sitting in a corner booth. A woman was under each arm as he sat back in the leather seat, an enormous picture of Lacey Lockwood positioned on the wall behind him. She was my

biggest model, the one people recognized the most. She had the right confidence and the perfect legs. She wanted to be my biggest star—and most people predicted she would be.

Carter didn't see me coming because he was too busy with his private entertainment. The blonde on his left rubbed her hand across his chest then nibbled on his earlobe. The other woman rubbed his thigh, getting dangerously close to his crotch. Both were in my lingerie, sparkling with rhinestones and glitter.

I sat in the leather seat across from him, setting down my scotch and leaning back into the comfortable seat. Without checking my surroundings, I could feel all the eyes staring at me. It would be less than a minute before a couple girls made their move and sank into the seat beside me. They would assume they were special, that maybe they had a unique quality that could capture my attention for more than five minutes.

Not possible.

My entire existence revolved around sexy women. I dressed them in clothes for the purpose of getting fucked. I fulfilled the fantasies of men everywhere by incorporating them into my designs. I dressed women like Lacey Lockwood in the perfect bodysuit with a crotch that unfastened for a quick screw. All I thought about all day long was sex...with beautiful women.

I'd become desensitized to it.

It was impossible to impress me anymore. Women were all the same, but beautiful in their own ways. Sex was purely physical without a single hint of emotion. I kept it empty on purpose because that fueled my inspiration.

Men didn't care about love, only lust.

So I had to design my lingerie that way.

The only exception to that was the new model I'd recently acquired.

Ten.

There was something unique about her that drew my attention instantly. When the ten models took the stage, the other nine were faceless blurs. They were beautiful but ordinary. They were the top ten picks from my trusted assistants, but they paled in comparison to the single woman standing at the very edge.

Ten.

I wouldn't say she was exceptionally beautiful. Her allure was far deeper than some superficial characteristic. But she possessed a quality that stole my complete focus. She had the same effect on the guys—that was why they picked her in the first place. Jeans and a t-shirt couldn't mask her innate sex appeal.

Her body was unique. The proportion between her hips and her stomach was significant, making her curves even more startling. She had lean and toned thighs, but her ass was plump and juicy. She was endless curves, smooth skin, and the most sensuous woman I'd ever seen. The curve in her back was so steep it looked like the concave side of a spoon. Making clothes with her specific dimensions felt like an honor.

I'd never seen a woman with her kinds of measurements. It was like she was specifically made to wear lingerie, to be the ultimate symbol of female sexuality.

When that woman overran my thoughts, I forced myself to focus on Carter.

Carter broke the kiss he was sharing with one of the girls and dropped his arm. "I need to take care of some business, ladies."

The blonde gave his thigh a tight squeeze before she walked away with the

other girl. Their lingerie shimmered under the low lights, and their heels tapped against the floor until they were no longer in hearing distance. The music wasn't loud in this section, which was intentional. It was the best place to do business.

Carter wore a black suit with a matching tie. His dark hair was identical to mine, and he inherited the coffee-colored eyes of his mother. He hadn't shaved for a few days, and now a shadow covered the bottom part of his face. We looked so similar that people mistook us for brothers on a daily basis. "I heard you have a new girl."

"Where did you hear that?"

"The girls."

Every model I had obsessed over who would get the biggest spotlight. Who would be on the cover of *Vogue*? Who would be my grand finale in the fashion show? Who would be the inspiration for my next piece? They all competed for my affection, trying to touch me in the right way or say the perfect words to capture my attention.

Maybe they were just trying to get ahead in their career.

Or maybe they just wanted to be my muse.

I didn't give a damn because it didn't matter.

No woman would ever mean anything to me.

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do with her yet."

"Is she being featured in the show next weekend?"

"Maybe." She still needed a lot of work. Her posture was better, but once she lost focus, she dropped her shoulders and slouched forward. She was a bit of a conundrum because she exhibited intense confidence when she talked back

to me or told off some of my men, but when it came to modeling, she closed up tighter than a clam. When her clothes were off, she was even more beautiful.

But she felt uneasy.

It didn't make sense.

It was the first time I'd had a model who lacked enthusiasm. Ten couldn't care less about the opportunity. She didn't kiss the ground I walked on. She had no problem calling me an asshole to my face.

It was an interesting change.

The only reason why she was there was because she needed the work to survive.

She didn't give a damn about me.

Maybe that was what caught my attention.

Carter drank his gin then lit his cigar. "I heard she auditioned fully clothed."

"That's what I was told."

"She sounds interesting."

"She has a bit of a mouth on her."

"For sucking, I hope." He grinned before he inhaled from the cigar.

"Not that kind of mouth."

"Too bad. That's the best kind." He took another drag before he set the burning cigar on the tray. His ankle rested on the opposite knee, and he leaned back as he glanced at the women hanging out on the balcony.

"How's the car business?"

“No complaints. Not quite as sexy as your enterprise, but still great.” Carter was a designer and producer of luxury cars in Italy. He sold his cars all over Europe and exported a few to the US if people were willing to pay the right price. We worked in very different sectors of business, but it benefited us both sometimes.

“Working on anything new?”

“I’m always working on something new.” He drank his gin again then wiped his mouth with the back of his forearm. His suit was as expensive as mine, but he was so wealthy he didn’t bother taking care of it. “But enough with the small talk. We’ve got business to take care of.”

I rested my arm over the back of the couch and rested my ankle on the opposite knee. “I’m listening.”

“Ten million.” He leaned forward with his elbows resting on his knees. He massaged his knuckles as he stared at me with his coffee-colored eyes. His skin was fair, which contrasted more against his dark hair and eyes. His Italian blood was obvious, as was mine.

That was one of the biggest sums we’d ever been offered. “Who is she?”

“The daughter of some wealthy investor out in California. I guess his net worth is nearly a billion dollars.”

Nearly? Well, mine was over a billion dollars. “He can’t handle this himself?”

“The Skull Kings are crazy. I advised them against it.”

They were indeed crazy. They brought a whole new definition to the word. They were unpredictable and ruthless. They started as arms dealers, but when that didn’t satisfy their greed and bloodlust, they turned to trafficking instead. Now they captured desirable women from happy families—because they got

off on it. They sold them at the Underground and made a fortune.

“This is getting dangerous, Carter. These guys are mad, but not stupid. They’ll figure out what we’re doing eventually.”

“And what are they going to do?” he asked incredulously. “We’re both untouchable.” He brought the cigar to his mouth and took a deep drag. “And we aren’t undermining their operation. They make the money. It’s none of their business what we do with the girls once they’re our property.”

“They might think we’ll turn them in.”

“Turn them in to whom?” Carter asked incredulously. “The feds? We both know they won’t do shit. Those psychopaths are untouchable. They know we aren’t stupid enough to declare war against them. Besides, this is a business for us too. I’m not doing this shit out of the goodness of my heart. I’m doing this because it’s easy money—and tax-free.”

There was a lot of money on the table. Carter and I had split fifty million dollars two ways a couple of times. As a billionaire, I didn’t need more money. But when cash was that easy to get, I wouldn’t look the other way. “Then you go to the Underground and bid on her.”

“You know I can’t. It has to be you.”

When I bought the girls, I turned them into models for a few shows. Once they were finished, they were released back to their families. The Skull Kings thought I just had a weird fetish for slaves, and I was parading my property in front of the world because I thought I was above the law.

But once the girls did their time, they were sent back to their families. It was the only way to extract them without risking their necks and ours. The Skull Kings had more important things to worry about, so after a few weeks, they were on to the next batch of slaves they wanted to sell.

“Like I said, we can’t do this forever,” I said. “Our fathers warned us what these guys were like. I don’t think we should take that lightly.”

“I don’t take it lightly,” Carter said. “But I’m not a pussy either.”

I finished my scotch, letting the amber liquid slide right down to my belly.

“Besides, if we don’t do this, who will? You know what will happen to those girls.”

They’d be raped, tortured, and then burned alive. Women like that didn’t become pets of good men. They became punching bags of men who wanted to exercise power over their enemies. When a deal went south, taking their enemy’s daughter seemed to be the most effective form of revenge.

But the girls had nothing to do with it.

“I think we should have someone else do the bidding.” We had loyal men that had been working for us for decades. It didn’t take a genius to bid on a woman until they won her. “That way we no longer have to be involved in it.”

“You know that won’t work. They want faces. They want identities of rich and famous men. By taking away anonymity, it keeps everyone in line. It keeps it legitimate. They don’t just let anyone in there. If you send someone in your place, they’ll think it’s suspicious. And that will be our downfall.”

Wealthy men in our inner circles actually believed I bought slaves for pleasure. I had so much cash that I spent it on eccentric things, like people. Selling lingerie and treating women like objects complemented that belief very well.

Even though it was completely false.

I already had more power than most men. I didn’t need to buy a slave to feel

powerful.

I already was powerful.

“Are you in?” Carter asked.

If I refused, this woman would suffer and die. It was a matter of life or death. I couldn't let that guilt weigh me down. “You know I am.”

“Great.” He pulled out a piece of paper from his back pocket and opened it up so I could see it. “Anastasia Purkov. She's the daughter of a Russian investor. She went to the grocery store on a Saturday afternoon and never came home. She had just been selected for the Russian ballet when she went missing. Her father got in touch with my people, and that's how I received his message.” He pointed at her picture. “She's a beauty.”

With dark brown hair and blue eyes, she was definitely eye-catching. If a woman was attractive, it was even more likely she was captured for trafficking.

“Her father pissed off one of his clients in Budapest. I think that guy commissioned the Skull Kings to do this.”

It was disgusting. Men paid other men to capture an innocent woman just to piss off their enemy. And then that woman was sold for another profit so she could be a slave. Then she was purchased for a third time—by us. The amount of money being spent on a human life was horrific—just because of the pussy between her legs. “When is the auction?”

“Tomorrow night.”

I folded the paper and stuffed it into my pocket. “I'll get her.”

“Put her in your lineup for the next show. Then we can give her back.”

Anytime I rescued a slave and told them what was going on, they were silent

and cooperative. They didn't talk to the other models, and usually kissed the ground I walked on. When I returned them to their families, the fathers were always crying the hardest. "Alright."

Carter smoked his cigar again. "Who knew being a hero could make us so much money?"

"We aren't heroes," I said coldly. "Real heroes don't get paid."

"Money or no money, without us, those girls would never get out."

"And what about all the rest?" I asked. "We leave them to their fate just because they don't have a rich family member to buy them out."

"Even if they did, you know we can't save them all. If you bought every slave in the joint, the Skull Kings would definitely be onto us."

Saving an innocent woman for a paycheck didn't make me feel like a good man. There was nothing noble about what we were doing. We were both greedy, and there was no sugarcoating that fact.

"Tomorrow, then?" Carter knew I already agreed to the terms, but he must have picked up on the hesitancy in my voice.

"Tomorrow."

I WALKED to my building in the dead of night alone. I didn't take a woman home with me because I wasn't in the mood. I could have had any woman in that club that I wanted, but nothing interested me that night.

I made the call and placed the phone against my ear.

Innocent and beautiful, she answered. "It's one in the morning, Conway."

I sighed in relief even though there was no real reason to be scared. The sound of her voice was the greatest assurance that I needed. She meant more to me than I ever told her, and the idea of someone taking her the way so many other women were captured made me sick to my stomach. She was the only woman in the world who turned me into a gentleman. Only when she was present did I behave. “Are you home?”

“It’s one in the morning on a Tuesday. I’m sleeping, obviously.”

My little sister was a grown woman, but I would always see her as a little kid. She was living in Milan because she was studying to be a painter. She went to a fancy art school on my parents’ money. Since my parents lived in Tuscany, they were a five-hour drive away. I was the eldest son of my family, so it was my job to look after her. “Just wanted to make sure.”

“You don’t need to check on me, Conway. If I need something, I’ll ask.”

“You’re too stubborn to ask for anything. We both know that.”

She sighed into the phone again. “Can I call you tomorrow? I have to be up at sunrise.”

“We both know you aren’t going to call me.”

“Well, call me tomorrow, then.” She hung up before I could get another word in.

My paranoia got the best of me, and I acted on my fear too easily. My sister was a beautiful woman, taking after my mother with a few attributes from my father. When I was growing up, my father never let her do anything alone. He watched her like a hawk constantly. When she moved away for school, I’d never seen him so shaken up about it. It was hard for him to let go.

But I realized it was even harder for me to let go.

Now I was as protective as he'd ever been, especially in this cruel world. Women were treated like dogs, sometimes as currency.

I never wanted her to know that.

There was a deep underworld right outside her door—but she was too innocent to see it.

TEN WALKED in the door right on time, her hair and makeup done. She was in jeans and a t-shirt, the typical attire I'd always seen her wear. Her hair was thick and curled, framing her face perfectly and accentuating her features.

I was standing at my table with my sketchbook.

She stepped inside the room and immediately undressed.

I didn't even have to tell her to this time.

I looked up from my notebook, and I took her in her beautiful skin. It was unblemished and unmarked. Perfectly smooth and polished, she had the skin of a doll. Her complexion only enhanced the curves of her gorgeous figure. With a tiny waist I could wrap my hands around and an ass that looked plump, she was nothing but perfection. The fact that she achieved such beauty with no effort made her even more of a goddess.

She was all natural.

I grabbed my notebook and walked over to her in front of the mirror. "You're learning." I stood behind her and stared at her shoulders. They were perfectly straight, the muscles on either side totally symmetrical. My fingers rested directly over her spine, and instantly, she took a deep breath in response.

My hand slowly slid down her spine, following it all the way to the top of her

ass. She was so petite, I could feel my hand completely span across her body. I could reach both hips with my forefinger and thumb.

She breathed harder.

Last time I spoke to her, I told her I knew how I wanted to fuck her. Maybe that made her uncomfortable, made her a little afraid.

I certainly felt no shame.

My hands gripped her shoulders then I slowly moved around her, taking in her angles under the light.

Her eyes followed me. “What are you doing?”

My hands wrapped around her arms, and I looked down at her body, admiring her features. I was examining her skin tone, the way her white panties contrasted against her slightly olive skin. “Working.”

“Looks like you’re just staring.”

My eyes lifted to her face, her stunning blue eyes that resembled jewels. “Staring is part of my job.” If I stared at any of the other models this way, they’d be beaming with pride. But not this woman. She didn’t give a damn.

“I thought making clothes was part of your job.”

“Yes. And I want to make the perfect lingerie for the perfect woman.” When I stood this close to her, I could lean in and kiss her. I could feel those soft lips against my mouth, feel her warm breaths enter my lungs.

But I never kissed anyone—and I wouldn’t kiss her.

I went to the fabric table and grabbed the strip I’d set aside. I pressed it against her rosy skin and imagined the perfect bra pressing her tits together, the creamy flesh beautiful under the bright lights. If I added a hint of gold

glitter underneath, it would add just a bit of texture. With gold heels, the ensemble would be a provocative piece.

I sat in the black armchair and opened my notebook. Then I began to sketch the seductive piece of lingerie while looking at the woman who inspired it. I glanced up at her body, determining how the provocative garment would be placed on her body. She had a long chest and a flattering torso, so the material could be a little longer than usual. I added a slit from underneath the bra that stretched to her stomach. When she walked the runway, the material would open and reveal her sexy belly button. I worked on the thong next.

“Do you want me to pose or something?”

“You are posing.” My fingers worked the pencil hard, etching the image into the thick parchment. I outlined her hips then worked on the thong. I wanted it to be the same material, but I wanted there to be a deeper splash of gold. I wanted her to look like a jewel, to highlight the sapphires in her eyes. With that dark hair and gorgeous skin, those colors would look wonderful on her.

Before I even finished, I got another idea.

Teal. She would be gorgeous in teal.

I turned the page and started another design.

MY NOTEBOOK WAS fatter than usual because I'd used so many pages. The constant touching and flipping had made the pages thicker than normal, so the notebook looked like it was stuffed with tissues. I'd created more designs in a few hours than I usually did in an entire month.

Ten knew how to inspire me.

“You can go.” I wrote down a list of fabrics I needed so I could get to work on constructing the lingerie with my bare hands. Once I had it perfect, I would send everything to the factory for it to be mass-produced. It was too late for the fall line, but lingerie wasn’t prey to the seasons. It could be constructed at any time of the year. It might be too late for the fashion show next week, but if I worked all night, I might make it in time.

Ten hadn’t said anything for a few hours. She stood there in her underwear, and when I didn’t speak to her for a long time, she practiced walking back and forth in her heels. She pulled her shoulders back and stuck out her chest, watching herself in the mirror at the same time.

Ordinarily, it would be distracting. But I was so focused on my new pieces, I managed not to stare at her bubbly ass. She’d improved significantly now that she was taking it seriously. Accepting the advance on her pay had straightened her out.

But that didn’t stop her smartass remarks.

She pulled on her shirt. “Are you done for the day?”

“No.” I grabbed the fabrics from the pile and laid them out on the table. “I’ve got a lot of work to do tonight.”

She pulled her jeans over her perky ass then buttoned them up. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No.” I situated the mannequin where I needed it to be then grabbed my pins.

She took a seat at the table, like she didn’t plan to go anywhere.

That made me look up. “What?”

“If there’s anything I can do, I’d like to help. You were generous enough to give me that money...I’d like to earn it.”

I grabbed the tape measure and the scissors. “You’ve been here all day.”

“I’m like a mule...I can go for a long time.”

It was a poor comparison, especially when she was far more beautiful than a mule. If she was any beast, she would be a majestic white horse.

“I can even clean if you’d like.”

“No. I have a much better use for you.” I directed her to my side of the table and had her hold the edges while I cut and sewed. Having another person there made the process a lot smoother. I usually had one of my assistants or Nicole help me out with things, but since it was after hours, everyone was already home for the day.

Once she got the hang of it, she was of better use.

Then we worked in comfortable silence. I got a waft of her hair when she moved sometimes. Every once in a while, her arm would brush against mine. Her hair was pulled over one shoulder, and her eyes began to narrow in fascination for what I was doing. Then she started to ask questions.

“Where did you learn all of this?”

“I’m self-taught.”

“You taught yourself how to design clothes?” When she was being herself, she had naturally perfect posture. Her shoulders were back, her stomach was in, and she had a phenomenal arch in her lower back. It made her ass stick out even more. She had an elegance to her that wasn’t fake like it was on the runway. But that beauty only came out when she was comfortable in her surroundings—comfortable with her clothes on.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t go to school?”

“School is a waste of time. If there’s something you want to learn, you can just teach yourself.”

She watched my hands work the fabric underneath the sewing machine. “What made you want to design lingerie?”

“I already told you.” I wasn’t much of a talker as it was, and I hated stupid questions even more.

She shifted her gaze to my face, watching me concentrate.

“I’ve been obsessed with sex since I hit puberty. I love women, and I love fucking them. I know how to make a woman feel sexy, to feel more desirable than she ever has before. And I know exactly what men want to see. I’ve turned my addiction into a living.”

She turned her gaze back to my hands, having no comment on what I had just admitted. “That means you’re a sex addict?”

“No. But I love sex.” I carried the fabric to the mannequin and pinned it in place so I could add the final touches.

She crossed her arms over her chest and slowly circled the figure. “That means you don’t have a girlfriend?”

“Never have. Never will.”

She took a seat and crossed her legs, watching me. “Do you get lonely?”

“I’m surrounded by a sea of people on a daily basis. And I’m surrounded by women on a nightly basis. No, I definitely don’t get lonely.”

Her blue eyes moved to my face, watching my expression as I worked.

“You’re asking me a lot of questions. How about I ask you some questions?”

“Depends on what you want to know.”

Once the two fabrics were perfectly placed together, I worked on the bottom piece. “Leave a boyfriend behind?”

I wasn’t sure if she would answer since it was a personal question. I went straight to the heavy stuff. “No.”

I shouldn’t care that she wasn’t in love with someone, but a jolt of energy surged through my veins. I didn’t like the idea of a faceless man fucking her. My possessiveness probably stemmed from the fact that she was one of my models, but I’d never been very protective of any of them. “What about your parents?”

“Dead.” She said it without a single sign of emotion. Heartless and cold, she seemed like she didn’t feel anything at all.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” My hands halted momentarily before I started working again.

“It was a long time ago. My dad has been gone ten years. My mom has been gone for five.”

“Siblings?”

“One brother...but he’s dead too.” She breathed in a deep sigh like she was trying to steady invisible tears.

“I’m sorry.” That time, my remorse was real.

“I’m all that’s left...”

Maybe she fled to a new country because she didn’t have any reason to stay behind. Maybe she wanted to start over while she was still young. Or maybe she murdered her entire family, and now she was on the run.

I hadn’t looked into her past, but I didn’t care.

But now I started to care. “Any friends?”

“I left a few people behind...but I didn’t tell them I was leaving.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“No.”

I placed the thong on the mannequin and stared down at her. “Then what are you running from?”

She looked away, dismissing my question.

“You know, I might be able to help you.”

“No one can help me...” She ran her fingers through her hair then walked to the table. She grabbed a few pins before she returned and helped me with the bottoms. “I’m not your problem, and I don’t want to become your problem.”

The more she refused help, the more I wanted to give it to her. She reminded me of my sister in a lot of ways, fearless and stubborn. Sometimes it made me admire her. And other times, she was just being stupid. “What’s your name?”

“You know my name.”

“I’ve been taking care of you, but you can’t tell me your name?” If it weren’t for me, she’d still be on the street right now. There were a lot of men out there who would quickly take advantage of her. Rather than let that happen to her, I made sure she had what she needed. Not too many people would be so generous.

“I thought it didn’t matter what my name was?” She crossed her arms over her chest, closing herself off from me.

“What are you afraid of?”

She wouldn't meet my gaze. "I don't want you to know anything about me. I need a clean slate."

"Did you kill someone or something?"

She scoffed, like the mere suggestion was ridiculous. "Do I look like a killer?"

"Just because you don't look like a killer doesn't mean you aren't one."

"I don't know about that..."

"Well, do I look like a killer?"

She turned her eyes back to me, unsure whether she should answer me or not.

"It doesn't matter if I do or not. Doesn't mean anything." I finished the bottom piece and put it together well enough to show Nicole. It would require more detailed sewing and elasticity before it was ready for completion. "Did you rob a bank?"

"No."

"Did you piss someone off?"

Her eyes shifted away. "Enough with the questions."

I pulled the lingerie off the mannequin. "Put this on."

She didn't hesitate before she removed her clothes and pulled the lingerie onto her body. She left her thong on underneath and turned the other way when she removed her bra and pulled the top on.

I enjoyed the view while she was turned away, seeing the way her hair reached halfway down her back. The slight curls at the end were sexy, and I imagined how those strands would feel wrapped around my fingertips.

She turned around slowly, her feet flat on the floor. But she didn't need heels for her body to look marvelous. Just as I expected, the gold sparkle and the deep black looked perfect on her. The measurements of the material fit her body exactly as I planned. One of a kind and perfect, it made her ready for the runway without all the extra makeup and preparation.

She really was a natural.

I'd never made a piece of lingerie like this. It was simple but spectacular. I hadn't drawn on the inspiration from a different piece or something from a dream. The idea formed in my mind just by looking at her gorgeous figure.

She was the one who did this.

"Perfect." Now that she had it on, I never wanted her to take it off. I wanted her to lie back on the bed and open her legs to me, silently begging me to slide between her thighs. I wanted the fabric to part over her belly and show her bare skin. I wanted to see that sexy belly button and drag my tongue across it.

Instantly, I was hard.

And not just a little hard. So hard it actually hurt.

Conway

NICOLE WALKED INSIDE MY OFFICE AT NINE IN THE EVENING. SHE WAS usually gone by five and never had to work late, but this was important. A quick text message got her down there in ten minutes.

She made an incredible living working for me, so she would do anything I asked. I could replace her with another eager employee in five minutes. Actually, in five seconds.

Nicole set her folder down and held her pen, ready to take my instructions. “What can I do for you, Conway?”

“I have to get these down to the factory tomorrow.” I placed the pile of lingerie on the counter, the seven different ensembles I’d created just from looking at Ten’s luscious body. “I want to have them ready by the show, if possible.”

She went through the pile, examining each piece with a designer’s scrutiny. She’d been working with me for ten years, and she saw every design that I created. Some she adored, others she didn’t care for. But she knew my work well and wasn’t afraid to critique it. “Wow...these are gorgeous.”

I organized everything on the counter because I’d made a mess when I was

working with Ten. “Thank you.”

“There are seven here...did you do all these tonight?”

“Yes.”

She looked through them again before she stared at me through her round glasses. “That’s the most you’ve ever done in one sitting—by a landslide.”

Ten’s endless curves, bright blue eyes, and the sexy hollow in her throat got my imagination expanding. I wanted to show off every feature of her body, highlight all of her gorgeous attributes with the perfect fabric. I needed the right lingerie to accent the woman, but I also needed the right woman to accent the lingerie. “I guess I was inspired.”

“Conway, these are all incredible. It’s truly remarkable...your best work.”

I was passionate about my work, taking it seriously when others scoffed at it. Sex was the most beautiful and obsessive thing on the planet. We all thought about it every single day. We all meticulously picked out our outfits before we went to a bar with our friends. Why wouldn’t we do the same in the bedroom? Why shouldn’t a woman look her best before she gave herself to a man? It made fucking more sensual, more erotic. There wasn’t a single man on the planet who didn’t love lingerie—unless he didn’t know how to work a bra. “Thank you.”

“We have to get these into the show this weekend. I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you, Nicole.” I relied on her to do everything for me. She was a smart woman and a dedicated worker. I never needed to micromanage her because I trusted her to do her best. Her best interests were my best interests.

“You haven’t made a decision about your grand finale.” She walked over to the silver halter dress hanging on the wall. It took me three weeks just to conceptualize the piece. I didn’t design it with a specific woman in mind.

That wasn't the way I designed anything. The women in my head were usually faceless, just naked women with gorgeous tits and a perky ass. "Are you going to have Lacey Lockwood feature it? She's been asking me about it almost every day..."

Lacey was definitely impatient. "I'm not sure."

"Do you have someone else in mind?"

Ten immediately popped into my mind, the most gorgeous woman I'd ever laid eyes on. Perfect in every way, she looked like someone put her together in a factory. She was too beautiful to be true.

"Shayla is another favorite. She'd be great."

No, not Shayla.

"Meredith?"

I shook my head.

"Lacey definitely has the most experience, and she's the most famous model of the brand. You can't go wrong with her."

Lacey was a veteran. She had perfect grace, a dazzling smile, and she knew how to smolder for the crowd. I'd used her in a lot of photographs and live performances. She was in three different pictures on my walls at that very instant.

But she didn't feel right.

"I want to use the new girl."

Nicole hardly ever questioned my decisions, but she gave me a skeptical look now. "The one who was in here this morning? The brunette?"

"Yes."

She set her pen on her folder. “Conway, I’m not sure if that’s a good idea. She doesn’t have a lot of experience, and the grand finale is the part of the show everyone is anticipating. Don’t get me wrong, she’s a beautiful woman. But Lacey has a lot more experience. With her—”

“No. I want it to be her.”

Nicole slowly shut her mouth, accepting her defeat. “Alright. Would you like me to have someone work with her?”

I needed her to be flawless, and the only one who could make sure that happened was me. “No. I’ll handle it.”

I WAS CHECKED at the door before I walked inside.

The basement of the old opera house was filled with circular tables covered by red tablecloths. Low burning candles sat in the center of each table, creating a light so dim it was difficult to make out the appearance of everyone else in the room. Their policy for no masks almost seemed pointless.

I was escorted to a private table with a number on a paddleboard.

A scotch was brought to me instantly, and then I was left alone.

Each table was reserved for a single man, creating space between each competitor. Sometimes when a woman was particularly beautiful, the bidding war between men became heated. Then it turned into a pissing contest—who had more money. I’d seen slaves sell for twelve million dollars before—far over their value.

I enjoyed my drink and didn’t make eye contact with anyone. I’d left my phone in the car because those weren’t allowed either. They didn’t want any

of us being traced, and they didn't want these events recorded.

They waited an extra five minutes for any last-minute stragglers.

Then it began.

One by one, the naked women were pushed forward, and the bidding war began.

I made a few bids just so it wouldn't be obvious there was only one woman I wanted.

These women were forced to stand naked so all the pigs in the room could see exactly what they were buying. But a woman in lingerie was far sexier than one in the nude. The thin material hugged her body perfectly, accentuating her flaws. It made her nakedness the grand finale.

The girl I was there for stepped forward, a complete mess. She cried during the bidding, her wrists secured behind her back. She was over eighteen, but far too young to be sentenced to such a horrific death. Watching her cry made me think of Ten.

She would never cry. Even if she were buck naked in a room full of assholes, she would still keep her dignity.

Fortunately, no one particularly wanted this girl, so I got her for a good price.

When they took her off the stage, she sobbed even louder.

There was nothing I hated more than a crier.

SHE WAS FULLY CLOTHED ONCE she was handed over, wearing jeans and a t-shirt so she wouldn't draw suspicion on the street. But once the men

escorted her to my car, she started to wail louder.

I couldn't tell her what was really going on, so I shut her up in the best way I could.

I slapped her across the face. "Keep crying and see what happens." I became the monster they thought I was. I kept up the charade so they would believe I was a perverted bastard who didn't possess even a quarter-inch of a heart.

She shut up instantly.

I got her in the passenger seat and drove away.

For fear of being bugged through my phone or car, I didn't tell her the truth. I drove to the building I owned near my studio, parked in the garage, and then forced her into the elevator until we reached my space on the top floor.

By the time we arrived, she was crying again.

I cut off her bindings then set my phone in a different room.

When I returned, her arms were wrapped tightly around her body with her knees pressed together. She obviously expected me to rape her right then and there.

"You can calm down, Anastasia. I'm not going to hurt you." I poured her a glass of water and made a sandwich for her at the kitchen counter.

She didn't move an inch, her eyes watching the way I handled the knife when I sliced the sandwich in half.

I returned to her with the water and the sandwich. "Come on, I know you must be hungry."

She still wouldn't take it.

I set everything on the coffee table. "Long story short, your father paid me to

buy you at the Underground. The Skull Kings are a psychopathic group of criminals that capture privileged women from their rich fathers and sell them for cash.”

It was the first time she'd taken a real breath since she'd stepped inside my apartment. She covered her mouth with her hand as tears streamed from the corners of her eyes. “Daddy...”

“So, you're safe now.” I sat on the couch and patted the seat beside me. “Now, eat.”

She finally approached me with her guard down and took a drink from the glass. “So, does that mean he's going to pick me up? Are you going to take me to him?”

“No. This is the shitty part. In order for my cover to be legitimate, I need you to work for me for a short while.”

“What do you do?”

“I'm a lingerie designer. I need you to model for me a few times. That way, the Skull Kings will think that's what I bought you for. After a few weeks, they'll forget about you and move on to their next project. That's when I'll take you back.”

She grabbed the sandwich in both of her hands but didn't take a bite. “How long will that be?”

“A few weeks. Maybe a month.”

Her happiness immediately died away. “Oh...can I talk to my parents?”

“Of course. Tomorrow. It's not safe to do it right now.”

“Okay...I can wait until tomorrow. What will I do in the meantime?”

“You’ll stay here with me. I have a spare bedroom with a private bath.”

“Thank you... That’s really nice of you.”

I didn’t want her gratitude. “Your dad paid me ten million dollars to get you out. I wouldn’t risk my own neck for nothing.”

“But still, I’m so glad to be out of there. Those poor other girls...”

I didn’t want to think about their fate. “Did they hurt you?”

“Pushed me around a bit...hit me a few times.”

“But did they...?”

“No,” she said immediately.

I nodded. “Help yourself to whatever you want in the house. I’ll take you to work with me in the morning.”

“What should I say to people?”

“That you’re a new model I discovered. You were eating in a coffee shop when I noticed you. That’s all you need to say.”

“Alright...I think I can do that.”

I left the couch and moved away from her to give her some space. Even though I admitted I wouldn’t hurt her, that didn’t mean she was comfortable around me. I was a complete stranger—and I was a man.

There was no guarantee I wouldn’t take her father’s money and fuck her before I returned her.

People did some fucked-up things, after all.

I turned on the TV before I headed down the hall. “Good night.”

Her weak voice followed me. “Good night...”

I could head to the lingerie club I owned and pick up a woman for the night. I could sneak off into a corner there and get a nice blow job in the darkness. She would already be wearing my lingerie so it would be perfect.

But the work didn't seem worth the reward.

Not when I could just jerk off—and think about someone else.

Sapphire

I WAS BACK ON THE STAGE WHERE I FIRST AUDITIONED WITH THE OTHER NINE girls.

Conway stood in the aisle between the two rows of seats. He was several feet below me, but he still felt like the biggest thing in the room. He adjusted his watch before he stripped off his jacket, revealing his musculature in the cream collared shirt. He tossed it onto the nearest chair then slid his hands into his pockets. Straight, rigid, and strong, he stood upright with his chest opened to the stage. A black tie hung down his chest over the buttons of his shirt. The clothes covered most of his skin, but the distinct formation of his strength was outlined in the way the fabric hugged his body. It was tight over his strong biceps and his expansive shoulders. It was ironic he designed clothes for models when he easily could have been a model himself.

The lights were on high like they were last time, so I could actually see him in the audience. I wore a black corset with a sweetheart top and matching black panties. A diamond necklace was placed around my throat, and my brown hair had been teased for volume and curled for texture. Whenever I was done up by his staff, I had to admit I'd never looked better. And his clothes made me feel sexier than I'd ever felt. In the beginning, I was uncomfortable standing nearly naked in front of this man I hardly knew. But

once I saw his kindness and generosity, it didn't feel quite as strange.

“We aren't leaving until you get this right. So I suggest you give it your best effort.”

Conway Barsetti had more important things to do than babysit me, but yet, he spent most of his time with me. He used me as the basis for his designs, and now he worked with me personally to get my performance down. This building housed dozens of employees. He couldn't get someone else to do it? “Why is that?”

“Why is what?” He slowly approached the stage, his posture perfect with every step he took.

“Why are you working me like a mule?”

“Because I don't accept anything less than the best. If you want to wear Barsetti lingerie in front of the world, you'd better be worthy of it. The rest of the girls would kill for this kind of attention.”

“Then why aren't you using them instead of me?” It was impossible for me to control my smartass remarks. Not taking bullshit was ingrained in my blood. It might get me killed someday. Instead of submitting to Knuckles, I disobeyed him and took off. It was a stupid move, and if he ever caught up with me, I would pay the price. It didn't matter if I was buck naked on that stage. I refused to let anyone speak to me like I was a household dog.

Conway tilted his head slightly, regarding me with his ice-cold gaze. The silence filled with tension, and at times like this, it seemed as though I could be taking my last breaths. Conway Barsetti was a frightening man, but he was never more frightening than when he stood in complete silence. The anticipation was worse than his actual response. He had more power than I'd seen a single person possess. The models worshiped at his feet, and everyone else in the world respected his unbelievable success. But he never responded

to my question, stepping away into a different spot in the audience. “There and back. Go.” He hit a button in his pocket, and the music began.

I straightened my body as best as I could and then walked, moving across the stage while thinking about keeping everything straight and tucked in. My hands were positioned on my hips so I could feel the way my body shook from left to right.

Conway slowly paced down below, his fingertips resting against his smooth chin. He shaved that morning, so the hard lines of his jaw were clearly visible. His rugged knuckles were noticeable too, the way the veins stretched out over his hands. Everything about him was masculine, from the darkness in his eyes to the end of his fingertips. “Straighter.”

“This is as straight as I go.” I kept walking, imagining my spine as a straight line.

“You’re being sloppy.”

“How am I being sloppy?” I reached the edge of the stage and stopped. “Just the other day you said I was better.”

“Better doesn’t mean perfect. Better is the worst compliment anyone can receive. Better means absolutely nothing.” His voice didn’t rise, but his anger escalated. The sound of his voice grew quieter, but that implied more rage. Very few people could be more intimidating by generating less noise.

Conway Barsetti nailed it.

He walked up the steps at the side of the stage, his jaw clenched tighter now that I was nothing but a nuisance to him. He walked behind me, his footsteps thudding with power. “This is what irritates me about you.”

I tried to swallow my pride before I could blurt out an insult.

“I’ve watched you more than you realize.” He moved to my opposite side, circling me like a shark calculating when he would strike. “And when you think you aren’t being watched is when you start to perform. It’s when you hold yourself with grace, power, and confidence. It’s when you show who you really are. I know you’re capable of it, but you’re very selective on when you show it.” He stopped directly in front of me. “So, stop being selective. Show it at all times. In life, we’re always performing. We’re always on stage—even when we think no one is watching.”

WE WORKED FOR HOURS STRAIGHT, but Conway was never satisfied. As a perfectionist, even perfect wasn’t quite good enough. He left his seat in the aisle and walked up onto the stage to my side. Without warning, his bare hand moved to my lower back.

I hadn’t been expecting the touch, so I stiffened. The muscles in my lower back immediately tightened, forcing the sides of my body to curve back. My shoulders moved back at the same time, and I immediately sucked in my stomach. His touch stimulated my heart, making my blood circulate at an exponentially faster speed. My breaths turned ragged, and my fingertips suddenly felt warm. The heels were killing my feet, but the pain suddenly disappeared. Anytime he’d touched me in the past, my body reacted the same way. The stimulus never faded in effectiveness.

Conway stood behind me, his breaths falling on the back of my neck. “Perfect.” His warm fingertips caressed my bare back. “Pretend my hand is just like this all the time. You’re cradling your body back, changing your center of gravity. Now, walk.”

I slowly stepped forward and felt his warm hand slip away. I walked to the edge of the stage, pretending that touch was still pressed against me. The

ache was gone from my feet, and my shoulders were naturally snapped back because of the way my spine was aligned. I still felt the fire in my belly from the way he touched me, because his touch did surprising things to me. It made me feel alive but dead at the same time. It made me feel like a lightning bolt had struck me from head to toe. I was burning alive from the inside out.

“Stop.”

I halted at the edge of the stage, his invisible hand still pressed against me.

“Halfway there.” His footsteps tapped against the floor as he approached me from behind. He took his time when he headed anywhere—because he knew people would wait. He came to my side and looked at my face instead of my body. “This is the tricky part. I need you to project your fire to the audience.”

“Project my fire?” I asked.

“Your presence,” he explained. “Your attitude. Your personality. But you have to do it wordlessly. Most of my models not only look like queens, they behave like queens. Their self-respect and authority bring extra appeal to the lingerie. It makes people associate these clothes with power, like a crown for a queen. This is something that can’t be easily taught like placing a hand against your lower back. This is something you have to draw from yourself. I know you have it because I’ve seen it before. I was sitting in this very audience when I saw you for the first time.”

I remembered that moment, but I didn’t remember projecting anything. “I was just being myself.”

“Then do it again.” He moved away, his hand remaining in his pockets. “Combine everything together and own this stage.”

“Are you going to put me in the show this weekend?” I’d heard him mention it to Nicole a few times. He’d designed seven different articles of lingerie this

week, and he rushed the order so the designs would be ready in time for the show.

“Yes.”

“If you’re unhappy with my performance, maybe you should put me in a later show.”

“No.” He walked in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest. “You’re going to be my grand finale.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the last model to show my most revered piece. It’s called Queen of Diamonds. I want you to be the woman to show it to the world.” He surveyed the empty audience before he turned back to me.

He wanted a rookie to do the most important part of the show? That sounded ludicrous. “I’m sure one of your other models has more experience for something like that...”

“I don’t want another model to do it. I want it to be you.”

“Why?”

He faced me, his dark eyes narrowed in sinister hostility.

I guess I shouldn’t have asked that question.

“It doesn’t matter why. You’re doing it—and you’d better not disappoint me.”

MILAN WAS A BEAUTIFUL CITY, full of timeless history and innate power. It was at the top of the country, close to the borders of France and

Switzerland. I'd only experienced the far northern part of the country, not taking in the sights like Venice and Verona. But my short time here had shown me how special it was. America was twenty times the size of this place, but it didn't have quite the same character.

It was easy to get lost in the beauty sometimes.

From my hotel, I could walk to anywhere I wanted. The large sidewalks and cobbled streets took me to markets, coffee shops, and small grocery stores where I could buy my necessities. And the view from my window, even though I didn't face the countryside or the river, was still wonderful.

But it didn't make me forget what I was running from.

Who I was running from.

Knuckles was one of the most ruthless criminal warlords in New York City. He was famous by name, but still untouchable by the police. That meant he had more power than anyone—if he didn't have to hide his face.

Even if I'd called the police, they wouldn't have done anything. They might have filed a report, but they wouldn't have acted on it. And then they would have taken me into custody for failing to pay my property taxes and foreclosing on the enormous loan I had with the bank.

Fucking Nathan.

He fucked me over big-time.

Almost made me glad he was dead.

Almost.

Now that I'd been in Milan for a few weeks, I knew I had to embrace this new life. This was my home now. There was nothing waiting for me back home besides a few friends who probably wondered where I disappeared off

to.

I was a lingerie model.

It was the last thing I expected to do for an occupation, but that didn't matter. I was desperate, and desperate times called for desperate measures. I had to put aside my morals and values and do what was necessary.

So I kept my head high and moved on.

I went to work the next day, stepping inside the historical building that looked more like an art gallery than an office. In New York, all the skyscrapers looked the same. Some were more unique than others because of their height, but they were just a sea of windows that reflected the sun as it passed in the sky.

I went the extra mile to make myself look amazing all the time, but I missed the days when putting on a bit of mascara and lipstick was good enough. Jeans and a t-shirt were perfectly acceptable. But now I had to spend an hour just doing my hair, and my makeup required layer after layer of texture and color. When I walked out the door, I was ready for a photoshoot.

I walked down the hall and approached Conway's studio. Anytime I knocked, he was busy working on something and barely gave me the time of day, so I didn't bother knocking this time.

Conway stood in front of his mannequin, but today, he wasn't in a suit and tie. He was in dark jeans that hung low on his hips and a black t-shirt that hugged his biceps perfectly. His back was turned to me, so I could see the way the fabric stretched across his shoulder blades. This clothing was a lot more revealing than his suit, so I could see the way his wide chest slimmed to his narrow hips. His triceps were distinct and separate from his biceps. His forearms were even more chiseled than I realized. And the dark color of his shirt matched his tone perfectly, from his irritable personality to the short,

dark hair on his head.

With arms crossed over his chest, he stared at the silver babydoll top hanging on the mannequin. Flawless diamonds reflected the art lights from the walls. Without seeing the price tag, I could only guess how expensive something like that would be.

Like, as expensive as my mother's repossessed house.

"It's stunning." Any woman would feel beautiful wearing something that gorgeous.

Conway slowly turned around and regarded me, this time without an ounce of irritability. He always seemed to be pissed off about something, disappointed when things weren't meticulously perfect. But he was in a better mood. Or maybe my compliment meant something to him. "I think it'll look even more beautiful on you." He snapped his fingers and directed me to the spot beside the mannequin.

Instantly, my eyes narrowed in offense. "Conway, I'm grateful to be here, but I won't let you treat me like a dog. Enough with the snapping." I snapped my fingers back at him to reinforce how annoying it was.

He didn't adopt a cold expression. His green eyes seemed almost amused. This time, he extended his arm to indicate where he wanted me to stand.

It was much better than that snapping bullshit.

I stripped away my clothes because I knew he wanted me to try it on. I folded my clothes and set them in a pile on the chair but kept my underwear on.

"Lose the undergarments."

"Then turn around."

The corner of his mouth rose in a smile. "I see women naked on a daily

basis.”

“Well, you won’t see me naked on a daily basis.”

He chuckled even though I was being dead serious. Or maybe that was why he thought it was funny. He stepped away and turned his back to me.

His ass looked so tight in those jeans.

I peeled my undergarments away and then slipped the baby doll dress over my head. The halter top was a single band, so I didn’t need to tie it into place. It fell over my body, the material so light it didn’t seem like I was wearing anything at all.

I pulled the thong on next, suddenly covered in nothing but diamonds. I was wearing a fortune. Anyone would rip it off my back because it was so valuable.

“Finished?” He stood with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his posture perfect even when he was dressed casually. The definition of his physique was noticeable through his clothes, the tightness of his muscles, and the way his body fell into place.

I adjusted my hair around my shoulders, fixing myself up before he finally saw me. “Yeah.”

He turned around, and his eyes lightened with obvious approval. He slowly walked toward me as he examined me from head to toe, seeing the way the fabric contrasted against my tanned skin. His hand covered his chin, his thoughts lost in the lingerie. His shirt hugged his chest the way it hugged his back, hinting at the beauty underneath his cotton fabric. Black was a perfect color on him, matching his rough exterior and complimenting his skin tone.

He stepped closer to me, his hands close enough to touch me. He stared at my chest and studied the way the garment fell over my body. Then he reached

out and touched the strap on my left shoulder. He rubbed his thumb against the soft material then felt my bare skin.

I immediately stopped breathing, immobile the second he touched me. The smell of his soap entered my nose, and I wondered how he smelled when he was slick with sweat after an intense workout. I felt the calluses on his fingertips when he touched me, but I liked the roughness. It reminded me of a sheet of sandpaper, rigid and hard, but enjoyable at the same time.

His hands started at both shoulders and then slowly slid down, moving over my slender arms and all the way down to my elbows. He wasn't touching the lingerie at all, but studying my body with his hands as a measurement. He didn't look into my eyes because he was concentrating on my body, seeing the way the lingerie moved against me as he touched me. "Take a deep breath for me."

I obeyed, sucking the air into my lungs. My chest expanded.

He watched it rise as he held my hands in his. He massaged my forearms then the palms of my hands.

A man's touch had never felt so good.

His hands moved to my chest next. He didn't ask permission before he placed both palms above my tits, feeling my body in a way that was so intimate I forgot to breathe again. "Breathe."

I knew he noticed my reactions to him. I just hoped he didn't understand what they meant. I took another deep breath, feeling the weight of his hands press against me. His fingertips dug into me slightly when my chest rose.

His palms migrated down, skipping over my tits and reaching my stomach. His fingertips hugged my waist, feeling the way it curved inward after my rib cage. His thumbs dug into me a little harder as they slid to my hips.

Then Conway moved to his knees in front of me and explored me from the waist down.

Now I couldn't breathe at all.

He gripped my thighs then slowly dragged his fingers down, touching me like a man caressed his lover. His fingertips grazed my knees and moved all the way down to my ankles. His eyes worshiped me with the same intensity.

My lungs ached when they couldn't hold in the air any longer. I released my breath and breathed harder, unable to hide my reaction anymore.

Conway rose to his feet again, moving slowly as his fingertips trailed over my skin. He moved over the fabric of my thong and lifted my dress slightly on the way up. When he was at his full height, he was much closer to me than he had been a second ago. Now his face was practically pressed against mine. His warm breaths gently blanketed my face. His hands moved to my hips, his fingertips digging into me again. "Turn around." The deep baritone of his voice washed over me, enticing my nerves and making me shudder in weakness. The room was so silent that his quiet words felt explosive in my ears.

I didn't think twice before I obeyed him. I faced the other way, seeing him stand behind me in the reflection in the mirror. His hand snaked up the back of my neck until he dug under the fall of my hair. Then he moved it to the side, exposing my neck. His eyes drank in my flesh as he gripped my hips. He pulled me into him slightly, pressing his chest into my back.

That's when I felt it. The distinct outline of his enormous cock through his jeans. He was long, thick, and nearly throbbing.

I didn't want my cheeks to flush with color, but I knew there was no stopping it.

Conway didn't look at my expression in the mirror. His eyes were focused on me right in front of him. He craned his neck down and pressed a kiss to the back of my neck.

His lips were so hot, I felt myself melt.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, feeling my body tense in a sensual reaction. Without my even realizing it, a quiet moan escaped my lips. I liked his touch, loved the way his soft lips caught against my skin slightly. Some of his breath washed over me at the same time, the heat making me burn from the inside out.

He pressed his forehead against the back of my head. "So fucking beautiful." His words rolled over me like a physical touch. His hands gripped my hips again, and he pressed a kiss to my shoulder.

I didn't stop him. I just let it happen. I closed my eyes and leaned back into him, letting him kiss me with his pretty mouth and touch me with his manly hands. I wasn't here to be one of the models he took to the bed in the corner. I just needed money until something more appropriate came along. I didn't need to know Conway better to understand he was a playboy. He told me he'd never had a girlfriend, so he fucked women then moved on to the next one. I didn't want to be just some random woman.

He kissed my neck next, his hands pulling me harder into him.

It would be so easy to let this happen. I wanted to turn around and get that mouth on mine. I wanted to explore his hard body that I'd been staring at all day. A part of me wanted to be another meaningless fling.

But then the door opened.

Lacey Lockwood stepped inside, furious before she even laid eyes on us. Her hair was styled for the runway, and smoky eye makeup was painted across

her lids. In sparkling heels and a skintight black dress, she looked every bit of the model that she was.

Conway stopped kissing me, but he kept his hands on my hips.

It took Lacey less than two seconds to deduce what was going on. “She’s wearing the Queen of Diamonds?”

Conway dropped his hands from my waist and walked around me. “Yes.”

If she stomped her foot, she would look like a child on the playground. She had such a beautiful face that it looked wrong to see her so angry. She set one hand on her hip as her nostrils flared. “I thought I was the one doing the finale for the show on Saturday.”

Conway didn’t rise to her anger. “I never said you were.”

Her eyes doubled in size. “She has no idea what she’s doing.”

“And you have no idea what you’re doing,” he said coldly. “You just marched into your boss’s office to tell him how to do his job.”

I stood directly next to the confrontation, and I wished I could slip away and disappear. The angrier Lacey became, the worse it would be for me. Once Conway wasn’t around, she would trash me to all the other girls, and they would make me pay for what I did.

“I tell *you* how to do your job.” Conway was an irritable man, but he managed to keep the conversation somewhat civil by not raising his voice. With his kind of power, he didn’t have to. “You’re in the second act. Now get out of my office.”

Instead of leaving, Lacey looked at me like I was a disgusting bug she found in the basement. “Why are you so fascinated with her? She auditioned in jeans and a t-shirt. Jeans!”

“And she was still the best model there,” Conway countered. “What does that say about you? She can be beautiful without taking her clothes off. That’s what modeling is about. Get out. I won’t ask you again.”

Lacey’s jaw fell open, shocked that Conway would tell her off like that.

I was shocked too. Lacey was one of the biggest faces of his company. Whenever they interviewed her, she gushed about how wonderful Conway was. She was the biggest ass-kisser on the planet.

She stormed out again, her thick hair shaking from left to right as she made her exit. She slammed the door behind her, but she was too weak to cause any real damage. Her heels echoed on the hardwood floor, and the sound disappeared when she was finally at the end of the hallway.

I was relieved the confrontation was over, but I suspected it was only the beginning of much worse things. “Maybe you should use her. She has a lot more experience than I do.”

“Don’t want her.” He opened a black box on his desk and pulled out a diamond necklace. “I want you.” He placed it around my neck, his fingers grazing against my collarbone as he hooked the necklace around my throat. “She’ll get over it. Just ignore her.”

“It’s hard to ignore someone when they hate you.”

“I do it all the time.” He stepped back to admire me, and he acted like he hadn’t just kissed my body in vulnerable places. Maybe that was something he did with everyone, so it wasn’t meaningful at all.

“No one hates you. They all love you.”

“But they don’t really know me. They just know about my money. Lacey has been kissing my ass since the first day she got here. She doesn’t want me for me. She only wants me for the things I can do for her—and I don’t owe her a

damn thing.”

“I still don’t want to cause trouble...put me in the second act. For a woman like Lacey, this is a career. For me, I just need the money. It means a lot more to her, and we both know she’s gorgeous.”

His fingertips moved up my neck until he gently gripped my chin. He forced my gaze directly on his. “She’s nothing compared to you, Ten. You have something she doesn’t. All the models here know it—and they’re threatened by you. As they should be. I’m putting you in my grand finale because it’s where you belong.” His fingers slowly slid down my neck and to my collarbone. “I won’t change my mind.”

Conway

MY SISTER NEVER CALLED ME THAT WEEK, SO I CALLED HER.

“Hey, Con.” She sounded rushed, like she was walking out the front door.
“What’s up?”

“What are you doing tonight?” Anastasia was staying at my house for the next few weeks, so I wasn’t eager to be at my place in Milan. She was a nice girl, but I didn’t want to make small talk with her. I couldn’t put her up in an apartment or let her occupy my place while I stayed at my villa in Verona because she shouldn’t be alone, not after what she’d been through.

But I didn’t want to see her either.

“Why does every conversation we have feel like an interrogation?”

“I’m just making conversation.” I walked from my studio toward my place a few blocks away, but I was moving as slowly as possible.

“No, you aren’t.”

“Why won’t you just answer the question?”

“Because I don’t have to.”

“Maybe I want to hang out with you,” I teased.

“Yeah right,” she said. “Never in a million years.”

“I don’t know about that...” I actually liked my sister a lot. She was a bit sassy, but I’d rather have a sister with an attitude than one who was just stupid. “So, what are you doing?”

“You’re the richest man in Italy, and you wonder what I’m doing?”

“The more you don’t answer the question, the more concerned I am.”

She sighed into the phone. “Fine. I have a date.”

I stopped in my tracks on the sidewalk, turning into a protective psychopath quicker than the snap of a finger. “He’s not picking you up, right?”

“No. You and Dad taught me well.”

“How do you know him?”

“School.”

“Is he a student?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?” I demanded. “Full name.”

“Get over yourself, Conway. I’m hanging up now.”

I’d seen enough terrifying shit to know that any guy was a threat. It could all be staged so they could take her when her guard was down. I’d seen naked women stand on a stage while a bunch of bastards bid on their freedom. They took them back to their mansions and did unspeakable things. I would never let that happen to my only sister. “Where are you going?”

“Goodbye, Conway.” She hung up.

I growled and then called one of my guys. I had her phone traced, and the GPS coordinates were sent directly to my phone. It was a huge breach of privacy, but I didn't give a damn. She was twenty-one years old and smart, but just a single mistake could change her life forever.

I followed the signal to a small café next to the road. It had a patio outside, tables with umbrellas to block out the summer heat. A fountain was in the center, falling water mixing with the Italian music that played in the background.

A man rose from his chair to greet her. He kissed her on the cheek.

Alright, I was liking this guy a little more.

He pulled out the chair for her next and then sat across from her.

I stood across the street and watched their date from an alleyway. There was lots of smiling and lots of talking, so it seemed to be going well. He didn't try to show affection during the date by touching her hand or leg under the table. He wore a collared shirt with jeans. He looked young, like a young man in his university years.

When the bill arrived, he paid for it.

Good.

They left the restaurant together and walked up the street, probably heading back to her place.

I lingered behind, staying a good distance away.

Halfway there, he grabbed her hand and held it.

He walked her to her door, and they exchanged a few words before he kissed her goodnight.

I looked away so I wouldn't have to see it.

And then he left.

She went inside, and he headed back toward the restaurant.

Maybe I overreacted a little bit.

I headed back toward my place, walking a few blocks toward the western part of town.

My phone rang, and her name appeared on the screen.

I answered. "Changed your mind about hanging out?"

"Conway, watch me again, and see what happens."

Click.

ANASTASIA SPENT her time watching TV and eating whatever was in the kitchen. She didn't try to make conversation with me after I'd become unresponsive to most things she said. I spent the majority of my time in my office, sketching out all the ideas that were coming to mind.

Ever since Ten walked into my life, I'd been nothing but inspired.

When I felt her body in my hands, my lips ached to worship her. I wanted to taste her, to taste her perfume instead of just smelling it. I wanted to press my hard dick against her ass so she would know how much she turned me on.

So she would know how perfect she looked in my lingerie.

Her tits were perky and beautiful in the push-up bra. Her ass was tight and bubbly in the thong. When she held the right posture, she was more dazzling

than any queen that ever lived. Unlike the other women in my world, she was completely real. She didn't care about my money or my lingerie.

It made her more hypnotic.

And it made me love my job even more.

I left the building in jeans and a t-shirt and headed down the street to Club Lingerie. Carter was there, and that was the usual place we discussed business because I had eyes and ears all over the place. It was full of beautiful women, and little did they know they acted as a distraction. No man got inside without being thoroughly vetted by security.

I turned the corner and walked under the street lamps. Groups of girls passed in their finest, ready to go out on the town. Milan was a city that never slept. Cafés were open late, and bars never seemed to close. Sometimes people recognized me, but most of the time, they didn't.

I preferred it when they didn't.

My brain returned to thinking about the newest model who had completely changed my show. She changed the lineup, the outfits, and even me. Just a month ago, my life was predictable and boring. But then I was told some woman auditioned in jeans and a t-shirt—and requested to do anything besides model.

It was the strangest thing I'd ever heard.

I was thinking about her so much that I imagined the woman coming toward me was her. Her brown hair was pulled over one shoulder, and she was in a blue sundress with her purse over the other shoulder. When I came closer, her head lifted and she looked right at me.

Her eyes were the same color blue.

I started to wonder if this wasn't my lustful imagination. I'd been thinking about her constantly since I tasted her skin, so I imagined her everywhere—including my bed. But now that I was close to this woman, I was certain it was her.

She stopped in front of me, carrying a plastic bag that contained her laundry. Her bright blue eyes met mine with their usual confidence, and she showed her sweet smile. But the slight tint to her cheeks told me that my kisses were still on her mind. "Conway."

I liked the way my name rolled off her tongue. "Ten." I stopped in front of her, but I invaded her space far more than a stranger would. It was impossible for me to stay even three feet away from her. I had to be up close and personal. I felt like I owned her—not just because she was on my payroll and modeled my lingerie. "What are you doing this evening?"

"The washing service at the hotel is steep, so I take my clothes to this place."

I couldn't stop pitying her circumstances. I wanted to write her a fat check and make all of her problems go away. With anyone else, I wouldn't give a damn. I wasn't sure why I gave a damn about her. In my culture, beautiful women should always be taken care of. There should be a man to provide for her, to take care of her.

But she was all alone.

In reality, I was all she had.

"Have dinner with me."

"Right now?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes." The plans I had for the night seemed irrelevant now. I couldn't care less about Carter and Club Lingerie.

“It seemed like you were going somewhere.”

“Doesn’t matter anymore. Let’s go.” My hand went to the small of her back, my favorite place to touch, and I guided her forward. My fingers automatically squeezed the fabric of her dress as I pictured her bare skin. I’d seen that gorgeous ass in many thongs, and now I wanted nothing more than to pull that thong down her beautiful legs.

And bury my cock in that gorgeous pussy.

“You never asked if I wanted to go.”

“You’re right.” I kept moving forward. “And I’m not going to.”

We arrived at a small café, a place I’d been to a few times for lunch. We were given a table on the patio where no one else was seated. The staff must have recognized me and wanted to give me my space.

Ten sat across from me with perfect posture. She must have taken my words to heart and held herself like people were constantly watching and judging. She didn’t wear makeup that evening, and her hair didn’t have the same volume as it did at the studio.

But I liked it.

It was just her and me. We weren’t working, just having dinner together. And I wanted to have dinner with the woman, not the model.

But I still wanted her as much as I had yesterday.

She looked at the menu then ran her fingers through her hair. She didn’t realize it, but she was naturally sexy without even trying. She bit her bottom lip when she was thinking, and the angles of her face looked perfect as the sun set in the distance. The blue dress she’d chosen was a perfect complement to her skin tone. When I photographed her for my lingerie line,

maybe I would photograph her just like this—natural.

I didn't look at my menu because I was more interested in looking at her.

When she felt my ongoing stare, she finally lifted her gaze to meet mine. Fearless and confident, she held my gaze. Not too many women could withstand my attention so securely. When she stood on that stage with the nine other models, she knew I was staring at her. Her gaze stayed on mine, but in response, she straightened and tightened, as if preparing for war. She wasn't the kind of woman that backed down. But since she was so strong, why was she running?

Or did that mean she had a serious enemy?

She continued to stare at me. "I can do this as long as you can."

"Good. I enjoy looking at you." I rested my elbows on the table and leaned forward, getting a better look at her. "Your blue eyes...phenomenal. The way your cheeks curve...unique. Your plump lips look amazing with that smile. You have the kind of face a painter dreams of." Everything from her eyebrows to her chin was beautiful. Every woman had beautiful characteristics that made them wonderful. But Ten had all of them. "And I haven't even mentioned your body yet."

"Are you saying this as an artist? Or a man?"

Art and sexuality were one and the same for me. "Both."

The waiter approached our table, slicing through the intensity. Ten ordered, and I picked something at random off the menu. He brought two glasses of water along with a bottle of wine. Once the bottle was poured, we were alone again.

She sipped her wine then licked her lips. "That's good."

“I’m glad you like it.”

She swirled her glass before she looked at the label on the bottle. “Barsetti Vineyards...” Her eyes turned back to me, narrowing in interest. “You own a winery too?”

“No. My family does.”

“Your family?” she asked. “They live in Italy?”

“My parents are just outside of Florence. So are my aunt and uncle.”

“Oh...that’s nice. How far away is that?”

“A five-hour drive.”

“The wine is incredible. They must know what they’re doing.”

“My father started making wine almost forty years ago. It’s become a family business. We have wineries all over Tuscany now.”

“I probably would know that if I drank more wine. I’m more of a hard liquor kinda girl.”

And I liked that about her. “We acquire new tastes as we age...and travel.”

“Are you close with your family?”

I had no problem answering her questions, but I wanted something in return. “I’ll share my life with you. But I want you to share yours with me.”

She looked at her wine and chuckled. “So much for having a normal conversation...”

“We could have a normal conversation—if you allowed us to. There’s no reason to hide anything from me. If I were going to turn you in, I would have done it already. The more I look at you, the more I want to keep you. Because

of you, my sales will skyrocket. I can make something beautiful, but I need a beautiful woman to make it extraordinary.”

She swirled her wine and took another drink. “Are you close with your family?”

“Very. Family is everything in my culture.”

“They must be proud of you.”

My father always taught me to be a man who could stand on my own two feet. He said I could inherit his wineries when he passed away, but he didn’t want me to rely on it. So I pursued a dream. “They are. They are both open-minded about it, but it’s also a little awkward.”

“Because you design sex clothes?”

“Because I design the right clothes that make women feel sexy...which gives men the best sex of their lives. I wouldn’t be good at what I do if I didn’t understand my work on a very personal level. That’s what makes it awkward...so we don’t go into detail about what I do.”

“Understandable.”

“What were you going to school for?”

“Business.”

“And what did you want to do with that?”

“Human resources or marketing.”

I could see her in that role. She had the right confidence for it. She could run an office without breaking her stride. “Did you finish your education?”

“No. I completed two years before I dropped out.”

“Do you plan to finish?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’ll never go back to America.”

I stared at her harder, hoping she would tell me the reason she was on the run.

When she looked away, I knew she wasn’t going to give anything up.

I was annoyed she refused to confide in me, even though she didn’t owe me anything. “Do you have a cell phone?”

She obviously hadn’t expected me to ask that because her eyes widened in surprise. “No, I don’t.”

“Why?”

“I have to give up personal information to get a phone. I can’t do that.”

This beautiful woman was all alone in another country, and she didn’t have a phone...it was ludicrous. “I’ll get one for you. It’ll be a company phone.”

“You’ve done enough for me, Conway. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not safe not having a phone. I’m getting you one, and that’s the end of the discussion.”

“You can take the cost out of my paycheck.”

I wasn’t taking anything from her.

“Has Lacey said anything to you?”

“No. She’s avoiding me right now.”

“I hope she comes around...”

“Couldn’t care less if she does. I’ll replace her with someone else in a heartbeat.”

“She’s a face of your brand. If she went to some other company—”

“It would be a step down, and she wouldn’t get paid as much. She’s a very prideful woman, so she won’t take that route.”

She leaned against the back of the chair but still kept her back perfectly straight. Her shoulders looked nice under the hot sun. She didn’t even need a spray-on tan because her skin was so beautiful. She glowed with her own light.

The only thing I would change was her outfit.

I’d have her wear my diamond lingerie. “Tell me your first name.”

She took a quick breath at the question but kept the confidence in her eyes.

“It doesn’t feel right calling you Ten, especially when you’re my number one. So let me call you something else.”

“Call me whatever you want.”

If we were alone together, I’d grab her by the neck and press her against the wall. My jaw clenched in response, and I narrowed my eyes in displeasure.

“Then call me One.”

“You deserve a better name than that. I don’t understand why you won’t tell me.”

“I don’t understand why you care.”

“You’ve inspired me more than any other woman. We have a connection—you feel it too.”

She kept up her rigidity.

“I want to know who you really are.”

“You’ve done a lot for me, and I appreciate it. You even seem like a good man. But I have too much at stake...I can’t afford to give my name. I can’t leave a trail. When you hired me, I was up front about it. You said you were okay with this. And now you’re going back on your word.”

“I’m not going back on my word. I just want to know you.”

“You do know me, Conway. You know me now, and you know my future. But you don’t know my past—and I want it to stay that way. It’s the only way I’ll live to see another day.”

Live to see another day? Who the fuck was she running from? “I can help you. I’m the most powerful man in the world—”

“*One* of the most powerful,” she corrected. “There are stronger and crueler men out there.”

Now my heart was racing in my chest. I feared for this woman’s life when I hardly knew her. She’d become the key to my recent inspiration. She lit me on fire in a way no other woman had. Now my fingers ached to sketch, my mind burned to produce even more. None of that would have been possible without her. I couldn’t afford to lose her. “I can’t help you if you don’t trust me.”

“And I don’t trust you—no offense.”

I held her gaze and felt my anger burn in my veins. I recognized a woman in trouble, but if she refused to share even her first name with me, how would I be able to protect her? Maybe she thought I was just a lingerie designer, but I had more ties to the underworld than she realized. I knew more people than she realized. I had the money and resources to make anything happen.

And I would make something happen.

"WHERE WERE YOU?" Carter asked over the phone.

"Got held up."

"Fell into some pussy, then."

"You could say that." I vowed never to fuck my models, but One was making it difficult to keep my promise.

"What do you want?"

"One of my models won't give me her real name. She's got a dark past, and she's running from something. I've given her plenty of opportunities to confide in me, but she's more stubborn than I am."

"Annoying, isn't it?"

I ignored the comment. "I need you to figure out who she is."

"What do you know about her?"

"What she looks like. And that she's from America." I sat on the edge of my bed, pissed off One refused to cooperate with me and hot and bothered that she was so stubborn. I liked the fight inside her. I couldn't explain why.

"Got a picture?"

"No. Come by my studio tomorrow. She'll be there preparing for the show. You can get a picture then."

"Alright. You think she's running from the feds?"

"I'm not sure. The way she describes it makes it sound like she's running for her life."

"Hmm...there're a lot of crazy people out there."

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Alright. Bye.”

“Con.”

“What?”

“Vanessa wanted me to tell you she’s pissed at you.”

I spied on her dinner and even followed her home. It was the wrong thing to do, but I’d done it so many times now that I thought I could keep getting away with—unless she caught me. “I know.”

THE GIRLS WEREN’T happy about my decision to put One in the lead.

And they didn’t hide their distaste.

We were done with the full show run-through already, going through the first nine acts with the music. The girls knew the ropes, so they always hit their marks perfectly. I incorporated Anastasia in the first act, and I put her in the back. No one would even notice her, but she had enough presence to fulfill my backstory.

When we reached the last act, One emerged on her own. The entire stage was hers, and she held herself exactly the way I taught her. That fire I adored wasn’t quite there because she seemed nervous. The other girls probably intimidated her, talking shit about her once they were backstage.

One didn’t seem like a woman who would care, but a person could only take so much.

She did her walk, her pose, and then walked the rest of the runway. She wore shoes that were worth a hundred grand, and her lingerie was worth twice that much. It was my final piece, the one that only the wealthiest men in the world would buy for their mistresses. The acts increased in price, the beginning being the cheapest ensembles and the end being the most expensive. Usually, the best model ended the show.

And One was the best model.

She posed at the end, doing her very best to incorporate everything I asked.

But it wasn't quite perfect.

Carter came to my side and whistled under his breath. "Jesus Fucking Christ." He held up his phone and snapped a few photos of her. "With legs like that, she could run forever."

"I'll dump your body in the river if you keep talking like that."

He snapped another picture then chuckled. "Hit a nerve?"

I ignored him, watching One turn around and walk back.

Her ass was exposed, and it was the nicest ass in the world.

Carter held up his phone again.

I snatched it away. "Don't fuck with me today."

He rolled his eyes and extended his hand. "If you can't handle me looking at this woman, how are you going to handle the entire world looking at her?"

It was a thought I'd never considered because I'd never had an attachment to one of my models. Men talked about fucking Lacey Lockwood right in front of me, and I never gave a damn. I'd had men jerk off to the women in my lineup. Didn't think twice about it. But the second Carter tried to take a

picture of her ass, I wasn't having it. "Just get me that information as soon as possible."

Conway

THE NIGHT OF THE SHOW WAS CHAOTIC.

There were cameras everywhere, magazine editors networking with other editors in the business. Distributors tried to get my attention, but I walked off to another person I needed to greet. Lights flashed in my face as reporters kept snapping my picture.

I took the attention with grace, hiding my true irritation. I was passionate about my work but not about my popularity. People asked me the dumbest questions, like where I derived my inspiration from.

Fucking, obviously.

My crew escorted me through the crowd along the entryway and finally inside the old opera theater. Wealthy men and women stood on top of the meeting ground of the biggest human trafficking organization in the world.

And they had no idea.

If I ever got caught, my reputation would be destroyed. People would question how I treated my models and how I ran my business. Every time I told myself I was going to walk away from the situation, I got sucked right back in.

I moved to the row that was reserved for me. My trusted advisers were already waiting for me, ready to flank me on both sides so people would have a difficult time reaching me. But instead of taking a seat, I showed myself backstage.

Nearly naked women were everywhere, putting the final touches on their hair and makeup and slipping tall heels onto their feet. Some grabbed my arm as they passed and hugged me to calm their nerves.

I returned the affection, but only so I wouldn't be an asshole.

I made my way back until I found One.

Her hair and makeup were done, and now she stood in front of the mirror in the gorgeous piece of lingerie that had been customized just for her. The diamonds sparkled, and only a woman as beautiful as she could rock such an expensive piece of clothing. I adjusted the fabric so it fit her measurements perfectly, and it looked so good it was difficult not to stare.

I came up behind her, entranced by the queen right before me. My hands slid into my pockets to make sure I wouldn't grab her.

Her eyes met mine in the mirror. Blue and brilliant, they added a splash of color to her outfit. Her brown hair was in lustrous waves, and her eye shadow had a small sparkle that matched the diamonds she wore.

Fucking perfect.

I stood behind her, my head nearly a foot higher than hers, even when she wore those sky-high heels. "You seem nervous."

"I'm about to model in front of a theater full of people. Yeah...I'm a little nervous."

"Don't be."

“Easier said than done,” she said with a faint chuckle.

My hands gripped her shoulders, and I pressed my mouth to her ear. “From the moment I saw you...I knew. You’re the most beautiful, most fascinating woman to walk across this stage. I wouldn’t put you out there if I didn’t think you could do it. I’m risking my neck by putting you in the finale. I wouldn’t do that unless I was absolutely sure.” I felt her pulse quicken underneath my fingertips, felt her breathing increase at my touch. Her body lit on fire the same way mine did. I could feel the connection strengthen between us, feel the attraction spark in the air.

I kissed her shoulder, directly beside the strap that held the baby doll over her body. I didn’t give a damn if anyone saw me adore this woman with sexy caresses. Instantly, she breathed deeply, just as affected by my touch as I was by hers. My lips returned to her ear. “Trust me.”

ONCE THE SHOW BEGAN, the attention was finally off of me. I was tired of shaking hands, of listening to people make conversation with me about their opinions of my work. People wanted to take photos with me, to post them on social media to make their lives seem more exciting than they really were.

The lights went down, the music started, and then the girls came out.

Right on cue, beautiful women paraded around the stage without faltering on their ridiculous heels. Some were so tall, they looked more like ballerina shoes. They each sported something different I had created. Some of the girls practiced wearing a different piece of lingerie, and I’d had to switch it out for my new creations. I could have waited until the next show before I premiered them.

But I was a very impatient man.

The energy from the crowd soaked directly into my skin. I could hear their whispered excitement, see the way people took photos with their phones. Every woman on that stage was breathtaking, and they made my lingerie even more beautiful.

Anastasia did a decent job. She had a very small part in the show, lingering in the back and away from the focal point. But she was still a pretty girl. I gave her something more conservative to wear, but it was the only one-piece in the show.

The next acts emerged, all highlighting a different theme for the show. Lingerie had many distinct purposes, and they were rolled out in unique scenes. Different colors were used, sometimes blood red and orange. Others were more neutral, like black and white. Then we got into the brilliant colors, like blue, green, and teal.

There was a loud round of applause for every act.

Nicole made notes beside me. “I can tell everyone is impressed.”

I heard what she said, but I cared more about what was coming next.

The props on the stage changed, and an ethereal glow was cast by the lighting. The music became slower, more royal. The other models disappeared, leaving the entire stage to a single woman—to a single queen.

Smoke billowed across the stage, the music increased in pace, and out of the fog emerged the sexiest woman on the planet. Strutting like she owned the opera theater and everyone inside it, her heels hit the floor with purposeful strides. Her hips shook perfectly, her posture was elegant, and she eyed the audience like she had every right to be there.

I couldn't stop the grin from spreading across my face.

She stopped at the first mark and posed. She flipped her hair and extended her leg. Then she pivoted the other direction, showing off her endless curves in the sparkling material. Her eyes were blue, but they burned as if they were on fire. That sass I first met in the audience was unleashed.

She walked forward again.

A sea of cameras bathed her in their light, photographers fighting to capture the better picture. People would argue that they only cared about the luxurious piece of lingerie she was showcasing, but I knew that wasn't the case.

They only cared about her.

She posed again, flipping her hair once more and regarding the audience with her cool demeanor. Then she turned around and strutted back toward the back of the stage as the music played. The rest of the girls came out to end the show.

My eyes went to her ass.

Instead of wearing a thong like I had planned, she wore bikini panties that covered most of her ass. But it didn't take away the gorgeous appearance, the perkiness of her cheeks. It was the most beautiful ass to grace the stage that night.

Possibly the most beautiful ass in the world.

The rest of the girls came forward and made their final poses for the cameras. Silver confetti fell from the sky as they wrapped their arms around each other and smiled and giggled. The music changed again, and One returned, the girls parting the way to give her a special place.

That's when everyone stood and applauded.

A standing ovation.

I stayed in my seat, my fingertips partially covering the smile I couldn't wipe away. Pride overcame me, pride for the woman that owned that stage without an ounce of experience. She was a natural, the most fascinating woman ever to be in my lineup.

And she was all mine.

THE AFTER PARTY was held at my villa in Verona. I had acres of land, a three-story villa with a fountain out front, and walls covered with deep ivy. The valet took care of the cars, and people streamed inside my mansion and explored the grounds in the rear. I had an enormous patio that overlooked the hillsides. It was flooded with olive trees, flowers, and a perfectly manicured lawn.

The girls attended in the same lingerie they wore during the show. They were queens at my party, advertising that extended long after the curtain was dropped. They mingled with my guests, executives from fashion magazines.

But there was one queen everyone was particularly interested in.

One captured the hearts of everyone at the fashion show. She was the center of their focus, surrounded by a group at nearly all times. Whenever she moved across the property, she was immediately followed.

I hadn't prepared her for this.

I moved through the crowd that surrounded her and wrapped my arm around her waist. The second I touched her, she moved closer into my side, sticking to me like she didn't want us to get separated again. "Excuse me, we need a moment." My hand stayed at her backside as I guided her away. She did a

great job plastering a smile on her face and being the center of attention for the last few hours, but she couldn't keep up the act indefinitely. I took her into my office on the second floor, a place no one went unless they were one of the maids.

The second the door was shut, she rolled her head back and sighed. "Damn..."

Her movements were incredibly erotic. She rolled her head like she had a kink in her neck. There was nothing I wanted more than to press my big hands against her shoulders and caress her.

I moved into her and gripped her hips underneath the shimmering top. My forehead immediately went to hers, and I held the star of my show like she was all mine. I looked down into her face and watched her breathing slowly return to normal. She felt the same comfort I did, felt the same ease wash over her. When I kissed her, it made her heart pound erratically. When I held her softly, all the stress in her life seemed to fade away.

So I kept holding her that way, kept adoring her that way. "You were amazing."

"Thank you...your pep talk helped me out."

My hand brushed through her hair, and I pulled the strands away from her face gently. "You're a queen. You just needed to be reminded by your king." My fingers touched her cheek, feeling the softness. She was soft like a rose petal, but not fragile like a flower. I grazed my fingers down her neck, feeling her gentle heartbeat. "And as your king, it's my job to remind you just how flawless you are—like the diamonds you're wearing now."

She tilted her head up to look at me, her red lipstick contrasting against her fair face. Her eyes lit up on their own, reflecting the light in the room. Her eyes sparkled just like the diamonds that adorned her body.

My mouth ached to explore hers. I wondered how her kiss would feel, how her breath would flow all the way down into my lungs. I wanted to feel her plump lips quiver against me as I thrust into her. I wanted her body to sink deep into the mattress as I overpowered her with my size. I wanted that tongue against mine. I wanted her moans to erupt directly into my throat.

But I reminded myself that was something I never did.

I never kissed anyone.

I slid one hand across her lower back and dug the other into her hair. I pulled her tighter against me, sensing the chemistry pop in the air between us. My mouth wasn't on hers, but I felt the same adrenaline I experienced from a lover's kiss. It seemed like I was fucking her now, fully clothed.

She must have felt the same way because her pulse quickened more with every passing second. "All the attention...I wasn't expecting it."

"I'm not surprised." The only model who had been bombarded like this was Lacey, but no one seemed to care about her anymore. Now they were obsessed with this woman, the woman who had become my muse.

"Can I take a break for thirty minutes? Just sit here in silence for a little bit?"

I wanted to take her to my bedroom and give her all the silence she wanted—while being naked and sweaty. My thoughts kept turning to erotic scenes where I was buried deep inside her. I never mixed business with pleasure because it complicated the situation. But now business and pleasure were one and the same.

Because no one turned me on the way she did.

"Yes. I'll have someone bring you some water and something to eat."

"Thank you. I'm starving."

I cupped her face and stared at her mouth, seeing the small teeth behind those plump lips. I wanted to smear her lipstick across her mouth with my passionate kiss. My restraint wasn't as strong as I wanted it to be. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

But I kissed her on the forehead instead.

Then I finally walked out, not turning back to look at her again. I was afraid if I looked at her for a second longer, I might fuck her right on that desk—a place I'd never taken a woman before.

CARTER WAITED for me to finish speaking with Demetri Opal before he moved in with a glass of scotch in his hand. “You killed it tonight.”

Beside him was Vanessa, dressed in a black ball gown that matched her dark hair. Her moss-colored eyes complemented her olive skin. A diamond necklace hung around her neck, and she carried herself with class. She stared at me with a mixture of anger and pride. “I'm still pissed at you...but I wouldn't miss this for anything.” She leaned into me and kissed me on the cheek. “Congratulations.”

Vanessa had looked up to me since we were young. Her approval meant a lot to me—even though I never told her. My sister possessed the same natural beauty as my mother, but she possessed my father's hardness at the same time. She wasn't like the average woman. She was so much stronger than most women I met. That made me admire her, which made me even more protective. The only man I would ever approve of for her would have to be a king or president, something worthy of her.

Now would be the right time to apologize to her, but I couldn't do it.

I would never apologize for protecting her.

“I’m glad you’re here.” My eyes noticed One in the background, being adored by a group of men that insisted on taking pictures with her. Every time a man placed his arm around her waist or flattered her figure, it set my teeth on edge. Now that group was gawking all over her.

Carter followed my gaze. “Your girl is making headlines. People are obsessing over her.”

That should have made me feel proud, but it didn’t. The woman I valued as my complete inspiration was being enjoyed by everyone who had eyes. Men were snapping pictures of her to enjoy later, and they were fantasizing about the woman who fueled all my fantasies.

I didn’t like it.

“She’s gorgeous,” Vanessa said. “Where did you find her?”

My eyes remained on One, staring at her backside as she continued to uphold perfect posture and carry on a conversation at the same time. “She auditioned last month.”

“Where has she modeled before?” my sister asked.

“She’s a rookie,” I said. “Never set foot on a runway.”

“For having no experience, she’s pretty damn perfect.” Carter followed my gaze and stared at her too.

That pissed me off. I’d expected her to be the highlight of the show, but now that everyone was falling all over her, I felt my rage swell. I didn’t want a single pair of eyes on her. I wanted her all to myself.

My muse.

Vanessa spotted Nicole and walked over to her to have a few words.

I felt bad for ignoring my sister, but I wasn't thinking clearly. Right now, a jealous bear had taken root inside my chest.

“Conway.”

I turned my eyes back to Carter. “What?”

“I got that information you asked for.” He held up a white envelope.

All the answers to my questions would finally be revealed. I wanted to know what this woman was running from. I wanted to know her name. I wanted to know everything about her—for better or worse.

Instead of waiting until I had some privacy, I snatched the envelope and ripped it open.

Then I read every single word.

Sapphire

I DIDN'T REALIZE THIS WAS GOING TO BE SUCH A HIGHLY PUBLICIZED EVENT.

And I didn't anticipate I would be the focus of it all.

People were fascinated with me, talking to me and constantly snapping my picture. The lingerie I was wearing that night had sold out in the first hour after the show. My image was plastered all over social media.

I went from being a nobody to a somebody overnight.

This was bad.

In my attempt to survive, I had made the worst mistake of my life.

Now I was terrified Knuckles would find me.

I might get lucky because Knuckles didn't seem like the kind of man who paid attention to the fashion sphere of the world. And I might also get lucky because I looked vastly different when my hair and makeup were done. Since it didn't make sense for me to live such a public life, he might assume it was just a doppelganger. And it wasn't like my name had been released.

But that didn't stop me from being paranoid.

And terrified.

Maybe I should run while I still had the chance.

I WENT to the studio on Monday with my heart filled with dread.

I'd become an important component of Barsetti Lingerie. My appearance had caused a serious boon to his line of products. Because of me, his brand was reaching new heights. Conway handled me in a different way from how he handled the other models. He seemed to be gentle with me, even sweet.

Maybe he was like that with everyone.

But I felt terrible for what I was about to do to him.

He was an asshole sometimes, but he had a heart underneath that hard shell. He gave me money when he didn't have to, and he even offered to get me a phone. He told me I was beautiful when I felt most hideous.

And he'd offered to help me several times.

I wasn't sure if I could trust him, especially since my entire body went haywire anytime I was near him. When his lips brushed against my skin, I melted into a puddle right at his feet. No man had ever made me feel so many things with such a simple touch.

I knew he would be livid with me, especially since I couldn't offer him a real explanation.

I walked into his studio, but I wasn't sure if he would be there. He'd had a successful show, and orders for his new designs were piling up. If I could speak Italian, I could understand what they were saying about him in the news. So it didn't make sense for him to be back in the studio.

But he was there.

And he wasn't himself.

He was more irritable than usual, giving me a gaze full of contempt. He seemed angry before I even opened the door—but his anger appeared to be directed at me. He stood at the table with his hands resting on the surface. Normally, he would stare down at his work until he completed his sketch. But this time, he wasn't working at all. It seemed like he'd been waiting for me to walk through that door all morning.

Did he know I was quitting?

I stepped inside and purposely stayed on the opposite side of the table, out of arm's reach. This man made me melt, but he terrified me at the same time. He could turn into a monster once you became his enemy.

His eyes remained glued to my face, waiting for me to speak.

What was going on here?

Another minute passed, the silence rigid and tension growing.

I finally caved. "What is it, Conway?"

"What is it?" His voice came out as a quiet whisper. It was far more terrifying than if he'd screamed at the top of his lungs. "It's a lot of things, Sapphire."

I couldn't prevent myself from reacting, from jerking slightly at the use of my name. My heart slammed into my chest when my secret was thrown across the table. He knew I was up to my eyeballs in debt. He knew I was wanted for tax evasion. He knew my entire life had been destroyed, and now I had nothing left.

I was weak.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered. “I could have helped you.”

“You couldn’t have helped me, Conway...”

“I’m a billionaire. And all problems are solved with money.” He snapped his fingers. “Problem solved.”

He must not know everything. If he did, he would understand I was over a million dollars in debt because I owed Knuckles seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars alone. That wasn’t on the books. That was a blood debt. “I could never take your money. You don’t owe me anything.”

“You could have worked for it.”

Even if I could model for him for another five years, I would never make that money back. And if I managed to pay it off, Knuckles would still get to me eventually. It would all be for nothing.

He gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles turning white.

“Why are you so angry? It’s my business, Conway. I’m not obligated to share anything with you.”

“Why am I angry?” His chiseled face was still beautiful when he was angry, but it was all full of lethal threat. “Your own brother did this to you? He got wrapped up in stupid shit and left you to deal with it?”

I lowered my gaze because thinking about Nathan was always hard. I hated him for what he’d done, but I still ached from the loss. Both of my parents were gone, and my brother was nothing but ash. I was the only person I had left in the world.

“It’s fucking bullshit.”

I lifted my gaze again.

“Family doesn’t do that shit to each other.”

I told myself there was a reason for Nathan’s actions. It hadn’t been intentional, and it hadn’t been careless. But I would never know because I couldn’t talk to the dead. “It is what it is...”

With a clenched jaw, he shook his head.

“I decided to leave America once I felt overwhelmed. With so much debt and no way to pay it back, I didn’t see any other way out. I can’t finish my education because no bank will give me a loan, so I’ll never make a salary that would even give me the privilege of paying it back. There was no way out...so I took off.”

Slowly, the anger softened on his face.

“I saw you on TV and knew you were holding auditions, so I went for it. I was desperate for money, and I thought I could start over here. I didn’t give a name so I couldn’t be traced here. But after what happened this weekend...I can’t stay. It’ll only be a matter of time before they figure out where I am.”

He dropped his hands and slowly circled around the table toward me.

I held my breath when he drew near, feeling my heart thud inside my chest. Even though my soul had been poured out on the table, I still felt the tightness in my chest when he drew near. I felt the pull, the attraction.

He stopped in front of me. “I have a new offer for you.”

There was nothing he could offer me to entice me. Being a public figure was only putting my life on the line.

“Ever since you walked in here, you’ve changed my life. My output is ludicrous. My designs are beautiful. You’re inspiring me in a way no other woman ever has. Everything I created for the show is being critically

acclaimed—that's because of you. So I need you, Sapphire. I can't let you go."

I wanted to step back because the proximity was too much. But I didn't dare move, didn't step away from the heat that radiated from his body.

"I've realized I don't want to share you. I don't want other men to stare at the woman who inspires me this way...I want her all to myself. So I'm asking you to be my muse—my private muse."

That meant I would be alone with him all the time, half naked and objectified. He would sprinkle more kisses on my body, and eventually, those kisses would escalate into something else. It seemed like I was selling my body for money—no better than a prostitute.

"In return, I'd pay off your debt."

My eyes shifted back up to his, seeing the green emeralds that possessed unshakable confidence. I heard what he said, but I needed the reassurance in his eyes. He just offered me a generous gift, the most generous offer I'd ever find. "And what exactly would you expect?"

He moved his hand to my arm and slowly trailed it down. "Everything."

"Then you expect me to sleep with you?"

His fingertips stopped at my elbow. "Yes."

The money had been placed on the table, but now it didn't seem appealing. "I'm not interested in providing sex for money. I may wear nearly nothing on stage, but I'm not a whore, Conway." I was desperate for money, but I wasn't that desperate yet. Anyone else would have taken the offer because it was a great one. It solved my problem with the American authorities. But something about the offer rubbed me the wrong way. Conway touched me like I mattered. He kissed me so gently, held me when I felt most afraid. He

praised me when I felt insecure. Perhaps I'd developed feelings for him along the way. The fact that he only saw me as a sexual object was insulting. I probably would have slept with him anyway...but I wanted it to mean something. "Maybe I misjudged you. I thought we had a connection...but I guess I was wrong."

"We do have a connection, Sapphire. But sex is just sex to me. I like it hard and meaningless. I like it purely physical. I only want to fuck you, only want to use you—I'm sorry if that was unclear."

I had no reason to expect anything else, but I was still disappointed in him. When he was surrounded by gorgeous women all the time, there was no incentive for him to have a relationship. They were just toys in his eyes. But I didn't want to be a toy...at least not for my first time.

"Take my offer." He moved his hand to my waist, and he squeezed me gently. "I want you to be my fantasy. I want you to fulfill my desires. I want you to inspire the sexiest line of lingerie I'll ever create. And in return, I'll make your problems go away."

Even if I stayed, I still had a bigger problem on my hands. Knuckles would find me, and he would cut me into pieces before he dumped me in the river to be fish food. It was too risky for me to stay behind. I owed nearly another million to that man, and there was no way Conway would offer to pay for that. "No."

Conway stared at me in disbelief, his right eyebrow cocked. He could have any woman he wanted without paying a dime. He knew I was attracted to him, must have realized the way I reacted to him. For me to turn down both him and the money must have been a surprise.

"I may have nothing...but I won't settle for less than nothing."

WALKING AWAY from Conway was more difficult than I let on. I'd become attached to him in the last month, enjoying the way he put me on a pedestal and called me a queen. I liked being his fascination, the inspiration for such beautiful lingerie. He was one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen, and the fact that he thought I was worth anything was incredibly flattering.

I felt a connection with him.

He made me feel safe, made me feel treasured. I called him an asshole to his face, but he never got upset about it. He seemed amused by my attitude more than annoyed by it. And once he knew my secret, he'd offered me a way out.

He basically wanted to pay his way between my legs so he could fuck me on his terms, but since a beautiful man like him didn't need to pay for anything, that made me feel special too—in a twisted way.

But now I would never see him again.

That chapter of my life was over.

I wasn't sure how many chapters I had left.

I returned to my hotel room to sleep for the night. First thing in the morning, I'd be out of the city. I hadn't decided where I would go yet. Staying in Italy seemed too risky. France and Switzerland were close, both countries I could reach via train. Each with hostels I could crash in. Having a phone would make my travels easier, but I refused to ask Conway for anything else.

That implied I needed him.

I could figure this out on my own.

When I stepped inside my room, I noticed the paper sitting on the bed the maids had already made. I tensed in the entryway because that piece of paper

looked familiar—too familiar. Silent threats had been unleashed exactly like that before, finding their way into my bag or on the couches where I slept.

I inched closer, aware of the blood pounding in my ears. It was like a current rushing in my canal. I could feel my heartbeat quicken as I prepared to read the words that still haunted my dreams.

One step closer and I could read it. In masculine handwriting I'd recognize anywhere was the message I most feared.

RUN.

I SHOVED all my belongings into my bag and then hopped out the window. There was a fire escape that led directly to the street, and I'd take my chances going that way instead of through the front doors.

He was probably watching.

I dropped down in the alleyway then turned to the main road. A black car was against the curb, with two scary men standing beside it. They both had tattoos that disappeared down their necks and into their t-shirts. They both wore sunglasses even though it was dark. I didn't need to recognize their faces to know who they were.

I turned the other way and headed to the next street. Knuckles was the kind of bastard that liked to play with his food before he finally feasted. He wanted to watch me squirm and run until he decided to capture me.

Maybe this was all just a game.

Maybe he was letting me go—for now.

I crossed the street and entered another alleyway, moving as quickly as I could without running. Running would only draw more attention to myself.

I doubled back on my path and cut through different businesses just to make it more difficult to be followed. I found abandoned clothes in a dumpster, so I quickly changed my outfit and pulled a baseball cap over my head. The clothes were baggy, and my hair was tucked underneath the cap. Hopefully, no one would recognize me.

I kept moving, trying to get lost in a city I didn't know so well. If I found a nice hiding spot and stayed there long enough, they would assume I'd fled the city. Perhaps staying lost within a ten-mile radius might be the smart move.

Now that danger was imminent and my life was at risk, I wanted to run to Conway. I'd never felt safer than when he was watching me. Anytime a man made me uncomfortable, Conway always came across the room and rescued me. He commanded respect from everyone around him, and no one even considered disrespecting me in his presence. The idea of being his muse felt like a missed opportunity.

Maybe I should have said yes.

But if I told him what I was running from, he might not have wanted me anyway. Why would a respectable man such as himself want to get involved in the underworld? He wanted me, but not that much. I wasn't worth going to war over.

So I kept running.

Conway

I'D NEVER MET A WOMAN WITH THAT MUCH PRIDE.

She took the hard way out rather than compromising her morals.

It annoyed the fuck out of me, but damn, I respected it at the same time.

Made the loss hurt even more.

But I couldn't let this stubborn woman go out into the cruel world without a single resource. She was too innocent for the shit out there. If I hadn't been so ticked by her answer, I would have given it to her when I saw her in my office.

I walked in the lobby of the hotel where she was staying and checked with the front desk. "I'm looking for a woman named Sapphire. I'm not sure what name her reservation is under. She's American. Really quiet."

The woman wouldn't have provided that information to me under normal circumstances, but since she recognized me, she was cooperative. "She didn't check out, and her room is empty. So she took off."

She already left? Leaving me behind obviously hadn't hurt her as much as it hurt me. "Any idea where she might be going?"

“No.”

I walked back outside and stopped at the sidewalk. A black car was parked at the curb, and two sketchy men were watching me. They weren't part of the Skull Kings, but I could tell they were part of something sinister.

Maybe it was a good thing Sapphire had left.

I had twenty thousand Euros in my pocket and a phone for her to use.

If only I'd given it to her.

Now I would never see her again.

Sapphire

I SAT ON THE GROUND WITH MY BACK AGAINST THE WALL. THE OVERFLOWING dumpster beside me was the only comfort I had that night. Dressed in these clothes with my face hidden under my cap should keep people away since I looked like a bum.

Actually, I was a bum.

My knees were against my chest, and I closed my eyes as I drifted off. Without a watch or a phone, I had no idea what time it was. But I knew it was sometime after midnight.

If Knuckles knew where I was, he would have found me by now.

I must have thrown him off the scent by changing my clothes and turning back the opposite way.

But I didn't feel victorious. Just this last weekend, I was the headliner in the Barsetti Lingerie fashion show. Now I was dirt-poor and sleeping beside a garbage can. I had some of the money Conway gave me, but I'd spent most of it on my hotel accommodations and food. I had to make the rest of it last if I was going to afford a train ticket.

I was completely asleep when I felt my cap move on my head. Someone was

turning it, pulling it away from my forehead to reveal my face.

My brain immediately snapped out of its unconscious state. I couldn't afford to be robbed when I barely had anything to get by. My eyes snapped open, and I saw a man a few years older than me grinning into my face. He wasn't a bum, judging by his nice clothes and expensive watch. But his smile was deceptive because there was nothing pleasant about him.

I kicked him in the knee and pushed him back. "Get off me."

His heavy body fell back to the ground, and he brought his knee to his chest. "It's her. It's the bitch from the lingerie show."

They recognized me.

The man behind him lurched at me. "Talk about an easy million."

Now keeping my stuff wasn't important. My bag would just slow me down, and my life was more important than the clothes off my back and the pictures I brought along. I dashed to the right of him, determined to get out of there no matter what.

He grabbed me by the elbow and yanked me back. "I don't think so, Lingerie Bitch."

I twisted my wrist out of his grasp then threw the butt of my palm into his nose. I struck with as much force as I could muster, the adrenaline giving me an extra push. I heard the crack and felt it at the same time.

"Fuck!" He stumbled back, covering his nose as the blood squirted everywhere.

I sprinted again, running for my life. The second they called me, "An easy million," I knew exactly what they were and what they intended to do with me.

Ain't gonna happen.

I sprinted down the alleyway then turned right to the street. The second I reached witnesses on the sidewalk, I would have more protection. At one in the morning, there wouldn't be many people out, but it was better than staying in that alleyway.

Knuckles crossed my path then glanced down the alley in my direction. His shoulders were relaxed and he was on the phone, so he obviously hadn't been expecting me to emerge right under his nose.

His six-foot-three frame was chilling, even at this distance. He was all muscle and flesh. Built like a monster because he had the soul of the devil, he was a bull that had been provoked. "Call you back." He hung up and shoved his phone into his pocket. "Hey, sweetheart. How was your run?"

I turned back the way I came but saw my earlier assailants coming my way. This time, their guns were drawn. I suspected these two groups had no connection. I was just the unlucky woman stuck between the two.

I knew exactly what would happen if I turned to Knuckles. He would rape me in brutal ways until I begged for death. He would torture me every day, getting the most mileage out of me before he finally crushed my skull the same way he did to Nathan.

With the other guys, I would be sold to someone.

Chances were, he would be better than Knuckles.

So I made my choice.

I WAS TIED to a dirty cot in the corner. My hands were secured behind my

back, and my clothes were stripped away. Even my panties were removed. The men hadn't tried to force themselves on me yet—thankfully.

Fuck, this was a nightmare.

I ran away from home in the hope of starting over in a new place. But I got stuck in the same position I was in before. I would never be free again because I would always be a slave to whatever man had the most power.

Lying there naked only infuriated me. My rights had been stripped away just like my clothes, and my only crime was being attractive. Men preyed upon me so they could sell what was between my legs—even though they didn't own me.

It was disgusting.

I'd been on this cot through the night, not allowed to drink or eat. They didn't even let me use the bathroom. I was treated like a dog at the mercy of her master. I didn't sleep because I refused to close my eyes. The last time I slept, I'd let my guard down. That was how I ended up there.

The door opened, and a man walked inside. With dark brown hair with crystal-blue eyes, he had features that almost made him handsome. But that disgusting grin on his face wiped away any attractiveness he had. "The woman everyone has been talking about..." He moved to the edge of the bed, far too close to my legs. "I would ask why you were sleeping by a dumpster, but I don't care enough to hear your answer." His hands moved to the top of his jeans, and he started to unbutton them.

This was not happening. I wasn't going to lie there while some asshole raped me before he sold me like a cow to the butcher. "Keep your pants on, and get out of my room."

He let his jeans fall to his ankles before he chuckled. "Your hands are behind

your back, but you're telling me what to do?"

When he smiled again, I slammed my feet right into his dick through his boxers.

His reflexes were lightning fast, and he blocked my kick with his knee. "You're fast, but not fast enough." He pulled down his boxers next, revealing his rock-hard cock.

I didn't look at it.

"It's a tradition the Skull Kings have with every new batch. We fuck every one of them, fill their pussies with come, and then expect men to pay for our leftovers."

This was really happening. Not only was he going to fuck me, but he was actually going to push his seed inside me. I wasn't sure what was more disgusting. I could fight him off as much as I could, but that would only last for so long. He could call in one of his men to pull my legs apart. And then that guy would probably fuck me too. "You would really fuck a virgin before you sold her?" It wasn't a lie, but even if it weren't true, I would have said it anyway. I would do anything to get myself out of this.

"Virgin, huh?" He grabbed my ankles and yanked me to the edge of the bed. "A beautiful woman who takes her clothes off in front of millions of people is not a virgin."

I kicked him as hard as I could.

He took the hit with a grimace but kept going. He grabbed my knees and yanked them apart as his cock bobbed left and right.

I couldn't let this happen.

I kicked him again and again, using all my energy to fight him off. I wouldn't

stop fighting until I was dead, so if he really wanted me, he'd better put a bullet in my brain.

He slugged me so hard in the face I actually blacked out just a little bit. My face instantly bruised, and I felt the migraine start on impact. My neck snapped as I flew backward on the bed. Immobilized, I couldn't stop him from shoving a finger inside me. "Fuck, you're tight."

I needed a few more seconds to regain my bearings. I'd never been hit that hard in my life. My body barely remembered to keep breathing after the impact. My entire being shut down temporarily.

"Looks like the little cunt tells the truth." He pulled his finger out of me then stepped back.

Thank god.

I'd always been disappointed I hadn't found the right guy to give myself to. I wanted love and passion, everything that a deep connection could bring. I didn't want a meaningless hookup just to get it over with. But the more I waited for the perfect moment, the more my expectations built up. Now I knew the real thing would never compete with my fantasy.

Now the wait had been worth it. It would spare me a little longer.

LIKE ANIMALS, we were pushed into a line with our hands tied behind our backs.

And we were completely naked—so the men could see our quality.

We weren't allowed to speak to each other. The women seemed to be from various backgrounds, all exotic and beautiful. They weren't homeless women

with nothing else to live for. They were all clean and pretty.

It made me wonder where the Skull Kings found them.

We were marched through the door and onto a stage. The room was dark with the exception of a few candles and low lights. We must have been underground because there were no windows. I wasn't sure where we were exactly because we were drugged during transport.

In a single-file line, we stood on the stage. There was no position we could stand in to cover ourselves because our hands were tied behind our backs. Every inch of our skin was on display. They could see my shaved skin between my legs and the hardness of my nipples. I was freezing cold, and as much as I hated to admit, I was terrified.

I was terrified of the man who would buy me.

Would he be just as cruel as these men? Was it possible that he could be worse?

I stared into the sea of faces, but their visages were difficult to make out in the darkness. Each table held a single man, and no two men sat together. They were spread out across the room, red tablecloths covering their tables. Topless waitresses moved around and brought them drinks.

The auction began.

The man who tried to rape me stood at the podium on the stage, tattoos covering his arm from his wrist to his bicep. He was dressed in all black, and his disgusting smile was his worst feature. Heartless and cold, he did this on a regular basis. We were just a new batch to be sold. He used that money to buy whores, get expensive homes and cars...it was appalling.

We were fucking people.

“Here we go. You’ve all done this before.” He pointed to the woman standing closest to him. There were five of us in a row, and I was the last one. “We’ve got Marissa Yaris, the daughter of a French diplomat, Charles Yaris. After finishing her education at university, she traveled to London for her first internship. She was out with some friends on the town. After a quick needle to her neck, we got her back here. Young and innocent, she’ll be the perfect obedient slave.”

That was how we would be described? After a short biography, our level of obedience was important? This beautiful girl had barely lived her life, and she’d already accomplished so much. And her parents must be worried sick.

“When I get out of here, I’m cutting your dick off.” It was a stupid thing to blurt out, but I didn’t care. He’d reduced this woman’s value to nothing.

He turned to me, the same smile on his lips. “We save the best for last. We’ll get to her later.” He turned back to the audience of faceless men. “We’ll start at a hundred grand.”

A hundred grand?

A few men bid on her and raised it to five hundred grand.

Then I heard a familiar voice. “Six hundred.”

I recognized that voice because I’d heard it nearly every day. I knew when he was irritated and when he was pleased. He told me off the second I stepped out of line, but when I cooperated, he was the gentlest man on the planet.

But it couldn’t be him.

Just as I looked into the rows of seats when I’d first met him, I narrowed my eyes on the face that was looking up at me. I concentrated harder until my eyes adjusted to the darkness. And then I saw his hard jaw, green eyes, and corded neck.

Conway.

He was bidding in the auction.

Would he really do something like that? Was he a sick asshole? Or was he there to save me? The idea was thrilling, but I didn't see how that would be possible. How would he have figured out I was captured so easily? And why was he bidding on another woman?

The price kept increasing until they hit one and a half million.

Conway Barsetti just bought a woman.

“Sold.” The man on the stage with us clapped then moved on to the next girl.

Conway didn't make another bid.

There was no way he didn't recognize me. He'd never seen me naked or with a bruise on my face, but he knew my body well enough to know I was the one standing at the very end.

His face was emotionless, so I had no idea what he was thinking.

Was he thinking at all?

After the other women had been sold, it was my turn.

Conway, please buy me.

I should have taken his offer when he extended it. I would much rather belong to a man like him than Knuckles or the leader of the Skull Kings. Conway would never hurt me, never punch me in the ass the way that man did.

“We've got a special treat tonight, boys. We have the famous lingerie model. She took a wrong turn down a dark corridor and ended up in our lair. Stupid women always think they know directions...” He shook his head. “Will

Conway Barsetti bid on her tonight? Or will some other lucky man get to take her home? She's a virgin—it's been confirmed."

My natural instinct was to close my eyes in shame. He had just shared my private life with a room full of strangers. Now they knew my naked body, knew my sexual past. They'd stripped me of my dignity.

But I wouldn't bow.

"We start the bidding at three million."

I was disgusted to see every single paddleboard fly into the air. Every man in that room wanted me.

"Sweetheart, I'll be happy to take your innocence." Knuckles smoked his cigar as he kept his paddleboard in the air.

Was this really happening right now? Knuckles was there to take me back. I'd run away from him, but if he outbid Conway, I would be stuck with him. All my nightmares would become reality. He'd rape me and drown me at the same time. He'd said that was how he wanted to end my life, watching me struggle to breathe while his dick came in my ass.

Please, Conway.

I told him I wouldn't give up sex in exchange for money. But now I would do anything to belong to him. He was the only decent man I'd met since I left America. He made sure I had what I needed and treated me well. If I had to be a slave to someone—I'd prefer him.

The bidding moved to ten million.

Five men were still in the bidding war—including Knuckles and Conway.

Knuckles held his paddleboard high. "Twenty million."

He wasn't going to let me go.

The other three men dropped out of the auction. They set their boards on their tables, dismissing themselves.

Conway raised his again. "Twenty-five."

Knuckles turned his way, wearing a threatening glare that would make any man shake. He raised his board again. "Fifty."

My eyes shifted back to Conway, who maintained the same indifferent composure. Fifty million dollars was a lot of cash. It didn't make sense for Conway to spend that much money on me, not when he could find another model to replace me. But Knuckles would spend whatever it took. This was personal now.

Conway raised his paddleboard. "A hundred."

One hundred million dollars.

Oh my fucking god.

Now Knuckles looked furious. His jaw clenched, and he ignored his cigar even though it started to burn his fingers. He visibly marked Conway as his enemy, pissed that someone wanted me more than he did.

"Going once."

Knuckles stared at Conway.

Conway stared back.

"Going twice."

I couldn't take the anticipation. Would Knuckles go for it?

The Skull King slammed his mallet on the podium. "Sold to Conway Barsetti

for one hundred million dollars. The bitch is yours.”

The men walked up to claim their prizes.

Knuckles stayed in his seat, eyeing me with that smoldering gaze that promised vengeance.

Conway appeared at the foot of the stage instantly, wearing that same indifference. He had just spent a hundred million dollars on me so he couldn't care that little, but it definitely appeared that way. He grabbed me by the legs and lowered me onto the floor with him, touching my body with no sensitivity as he got me to the ground. Then he stripped off his jacket and wrapped it around my body.

I was finally covered. I finally had some dignity.

He moved behind me and broke the rope with his bare hands. His lips were near my ear when he spoke. “Don't speak until I say so.”

He'd saved me from a fate of endless torture; I obeyed—happily.

Now that my hands were free, I tightened the jacket over my body, covering as much skin as I could. It reached past my thighs and covered my ass. My feet were bare and most of my legs were visible, but it was better than letting my tits hang out.

Conway pulled me by my arm, not handling me gently like I'd been hoping. He reached the other woman he'd bought, and this time, he unbuttoned his collared shirt then helped her get it on.

He gave her the shirt off his back.

My eyes immediately went to his body, finally seeing the physique I'd imagined under his clothes. The side of his torso was cut with muscle, prominent lines that attached the various muscles of his body into a single

working piece of art. His stomach was tight with rock-hard abdominals, and his back had a steep curve the way mine did, but his was caused by the tightness of his muscles. His arms were sculpted and strong, and his shoulders were so wide he didn't need padding in his jackets. His chest was the best part. Strong, wide, and solid. His tanned skin only made him more beautiful.

I'd nearly been raped a few hours ago, so I wasn't as aroused as I might have normally been. Right now, I just wanted to get out of there and far away from these disgusting men—especially Knuckles.

Conway brought both of us close to his body and escorted us to the exit of the building. As we walked up the stairs, I realized we were underground like I suspected. We passed the lobby, and I instantly recognized the place.

The Opera Theater.

We reached a black SUV. I didn't know what the make of the vehicle was. All the windows were tinted pitch-black. He opened the back door and helped Marisa inside. Then he opened the passenger door for me.

I got in and didn't ask any questions.

When I looked out the window, I saw Knuckles standing there. He'd lit up a new cigar and was now puffing on it like oxygen. I never thought I would be this close to the man but feel so safe.

That was only possible because of Conway.

Conway pulled onto the road and started to drive. Then he made a phone call.

"How'd it go?" A masculine voice came over the line.

"There was an unforeseen circumstance," Conway said with a clenched jaw. "I need you to take care of the girl for the next few weeks until we return her

to her family.”

He was returning Marisa to her family?

“What happened?” the man asked.

“I can’t say right now. Put Anastasia on a plane tomorrow morning.”

The man didn’t ask any more questions. “Alright, Con. But I need a better explanation later.”

“You’ll get one.”

WE STOPPED at a villa in the countryside, a palace surrounded by stone walls. Ivy grew over the sides just the way it did at Conway’s home. Conway escorted Marisa inside and left me in the car. He was gone for fifteen minutes before he came back out.

Then he pulled back onto the road and drove farther into the countryside, with only the light of his headlights to guide him. Out here in the middle of nowhere, there was only the light of the stars and the moon.

I didn’t know where Conway and I stood, but I couldn’t help but feel safe. After sleeping next to a dumpster and being hunted down by two groups of psychopaths, I was grateful to take advantage of the power that constantly hummed around Conway.

He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. But he didn’t say anything.

I’d never hated his silence so much before.

I wanted to talk, but I knew speaking was prohibited. He’d just dropped a

fortune on me, so I didn't dare disobey him—not this time.

The radio was off, and he kept his eyes on the road, driving shirtless. Even when he was sitting, his stomach was straight as a board. He'd constantly complimented my body, but he was the one with the perfect physique. "How stupid are you?"

I thought he would ask if I was okay first. I thought he would hold my hand and kiss my knuckles. But he didn't do any of that.

"You know what would have happened if I hadn't bought you, right?"

Just the thought made my breath come out shaky.

"When I went by your hotel, the staff said you were gone. I came to bring you money and a phone, but you'd already taken off. You turned down an unbeatable offer and chose to get kidnapped by the Skull Kings."

Knowing he tried to help me again made me feel worse.

"After all the shit you've been through, I thought you would understand how horrible this world is. I thought you would understand how cruel men can really be. But you have a false sense of reality and think you're invincible. If I hadn't bought you, you would be getting raped right this very—"

"Stop."

"Did I say you could talk?" He turned his head my way, watching me in the passenger seat. "I hate women like you. You think you can take down any man who comes your way. And then when shit gets tough, you realize how weak you are. I've seen it time and time again...I tried to help you."

"By asking for sex in return."

"Like you don't want to fuck me," he snapped. "None of this makes any goddamn sense. Why did you take off, Sapphire? What did you think you

were going to find out there? I'm not the best guy in the world, but I've proven that I'm decent."

Now that he'd spent a fortune on me, he deserved my complete honesty. "Here's the truth..."

He turned to me again, listening attentively.

"My brother took out seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars in loans so he could gamble with this crew in New York City. When he lost it all and couldn't pay it back, their leader killed him. His name is Knuckles."

Conway's eyes narrowed, as if he recognized the name.

"Once my brother was dead, Knuckles said he would take me as compensation. He said I would be his sex slave...and he counted down the days until he finally took me. He'd slip me notes in my bags on the subway or on the couch I slept. He was toying with me, building up to a climax and slowly torturing me. He threatened to hurt me even more if I ran for it, but I couldn't just let it happen. I couldn't wait around for him to grab me by the hair and drag me back to his prison...so I ran."

Conway kept driving, but his speed decreased noticeably. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was too afraid. That's why I didn't want to give you my name either. But I became so famous from that fashion show, it led him right to me."

"Why didn't you tell me this when I offered you my deal the other day?"

"Because you wouldn't have paid the kind of money Knuckles wanted, and I wouldn't have wanted you to."

"But a hundred million is okay?" he asked incredulously.

"I didn't ask you to do that..."

“You were begging me with your eyes, Sapphire. Or am I wrong?”

No, he wasn't wrong.

“If you had just told me what was going on, I could have helped you. But you didn't. You didn't trust me, despite everything I've done for you. I offered you the deal of a lifetime to pay back your debts—and you turned me down.”

“And I should be grateful for that?” I snapped. “You offered to clear my debt if I fucked you.”

“Five hundred and thirty thousand dollars of debt,” he snapped. “That's not pocket change, even to someone like me. You don't have a penny to your name, and you're struggling to survive. Beggars can't be choosers, and you chose wrong. That was a great deal, and you pissed it away.”

It wasn't a bad offer. “That's not how I wanted to lose my virginity...”

He shook his head slightly. “Well, now I bought it for a hundred million—and you're giving it to me. I own all of you, from head to toe. I will fuck you when I want, dress you how I want, and do whatever I damn well please.” He gripped the steering wheel tighter and stared straight ahead, his jaw tense.

I was still covered in his jacket, and his smell enveloped me. The fabric was soft against my skin, and despite what he'd just said to me, I felt safe. “That's fair...” If Conway hadn't saved me, I'd be facing a much worse fate. He saved my life as well as my dignity. Even if I worked for him for the rest of my life, I'd never be able to repay the money he spent to save me. Knuckles could have bought me instead, and my face would be black and blue at this very moment.

Conway wasn't a saint.

But he wasn't the devil either.

I had no other opportunities or resources. There was no hope for me to go back to America. The second I left Conway's side, I would be vulnerable to the world all over again. Knuckles would take me the second he got the chance.

Conway would never give me the money to pay back my debts now, and even if he did, I would never take it. He'd already done enough for me.

This was my life now.

I was the property of Conway Barsetti.

His willing prisoner.

"Thank you for buying me..." I had never said the words out loud. The entire situation was fucked up. I was thanking a man who bought me to fuck me, but since he was the only decent guy in the situation, I was grateful. I would much rather be stuck with Conway than anyone else. Once you truly suffered, your perception of life changed.

Conway didn't acknowledge my words. He kept driving with one hand on the wheel. "This is how it's going to be. I will use you for my concepts, and you will do exactly as I say. You will not have other men—only me. I will provide for you and protect you for the rest of my life. In return, you will be my muse. Understood?"

I was the one woman he would live out his fantasies with. I would follow his orders and be exactly what he wanted me to be. My job was to please him, to inspire him. Obeying was something I would always struggle with, but I would do the best I could. After what he did for me, I owed him my life. I would give him whatever he wanted. "Yes."

Sapphire

I'D BEEN TO THE HOUSE BEFORE, BUT IT WAS FOR THE AFTER PARTY AT THE end of the fashion show. There had been people taking up every single inch of space, making the house and the grounds congested because there were thousands of people on the property.

Now it was empty.

A stone wall wrapped around the entrance to the property, and we had to drive at least a mile before we reached the three-story villa with the fountain in the front. Some of his land was full of vineyards, and the other part was full of perfectly manicured bushes and rose gardens. Something I hadn't noticed the other night was the pasture where a few horses grazed. A barn sat in the distance, and a white fence kept the large beasts contained. It was dark so it was difficult to make out, but the distant light from the barn illuminated their outline.

"You have horses?"

Conway pulled into the roundabout and killed the engine.

I knew I wasn't getting an answer.

When I got out of the car, I wrapped the jacket tighter around my body and

felt the nighttime breeze move through my hair. All of my belongings had been left behind, so all I had was this jacket—and it wasn't even mine.

A man stepped out in a purple collared shirt and navy blue slacks. He had a thick gray mustache and tanned skin. He must have been in his fifties or sixties, and judging by his fitness and sun-kissed skin, he worked hard around the property. “Good evening, Conway. I'll take the car.”

Conway tossed him the keys.

The man caught them even though the lights from the front of the house were dim. “What are your instructions?” He didn't make a comment about the way Conway was dressed, the fact that his shirt was missing or that I was wrapped up in his jacket. He must have seen Conway in these kind of situations before—half naked with a woman to bring inside.

“Sapphire will be staying in the Grand Guestroom. She needs a meal and something to drink.”

His servant didn't blink at the request. “Of course, sir. Right away.”

Conway only gave him a nod in acknowledgment before he walked up the stone steps to the front door.

I trailed behind him, and when I didn't walk fast enough, he turned back to look at me.

I came to his side, pulling the jacket tighter around my body.

We stepped inside the entryway, where the ceiling extended all the way to the third floor and revealed the double staircase. It was a grand entryway fitted with two enormous stone statues near the staircases. Both were Roman soldiers, decorated from Caesar's era. They held spears at their sides, and their bodies were rigid and hard like Conway's.

He headed up the stairs to the right, the muscles in his back rippling and shifting underneath his skin. His narrow hips stretched out into his wide shoulders, looking just like the statues he had erected in his home.

We went up to the third floor, and I took the opportunity to admire the artwork on the walls. The oil paintings were all unique and beautiful, adding color to the Tuscan style home. The windows all had square wooden panels in the center, and they opened outward to let the fresh air into the house.

Conway stopped at a double doorway on the third floor and stepped inside. “This is your space. It has a private bathroom, a living room, and a balcony. You should have more than enough room.”

I spotted the large king bed with a bright red and orange bedspread. The Mediterranean colors matched the panels on the windows. It was dark outside so I couldn’t see the scenery, but I imagined the view was spectacular. All of the furniture was perfectly designed to complement the room. Paintings adorned the walls, and the individual art lights in the ceiling illuminated the works at the perfect brightness. The second room contained the large living room along with the balcony. The bookshelves were full of books, and the couch was positioned in front of a large TV on the wall.

It looked like I was staying in the presidential suite of a resort. “It’s... gorgeous.” Even if I hadn’t slept next to a dumpster, I would still think it was the most beautiful room I’d ever seen. It didn’t seem fair that he’d spent so much money on me, and I got to enjoy such luxuries.

“Dante can get you anything you need. You’re free to use the gym or the pool. Just stay out of my way for the next few days.” Cold as frost, he turned away from me and walked back to the door.

“Why?”

His hand gripped the knob, and he didn’t bother turning around. “Because I

don't want to look at you.”

HIS HOME WAS EXTRAORDINARY.

I'd never seen it in the light of the sun before. It was a cloudless day, and the sky was so blue that it seemed like an ocean was stretching over my head. My patio had a great view of the stables and the vineyards. When the sun hit my spot on the balcony, it was the most comfortable place on earth.

My bathroom was nearly the size of my bedroom, with a large tub under a window that overlooked the front of the house. There was a huge shower and double sinks. If this was just a guest bedroom, I wondered what Conway's master bedroom looked like.

I explored the grounds on foot, walking along one of the paths that went by the stables. I stopped and stared at the horses for a long time, admiring their beautiful coats before I passed the swimming pool and the large terrace where the party had been last weekend.

It was a palace.

I didn't cross paths with Conway, even though I hoped I would. He said he wanted nothing to do with me for a while, and I knew that was because he was pissed at me—pissed I'd been so stupid.

I'd cost him a fortune.

Dante appeared from behind me, “Sapphire, can I get you anything?”

I was standing in the largest living room in the house, the place big enough for a ballroom. There were three stories to this place, and I still hadn't explored them all. “No, I was just looking around.”

“I noticed you didn’t take your breakfast tray.” Dante stood in a collared shirt with his hands behind his back. He was noticeably cold toward me, disliking me even though he’d never spoken to me before.

“My breakfast tray?”

“I set it in your living room.”

He’d been in my room?

Dante must have noticed the surprise on my face because he said. “There’s a separate doorway in there. I’ve been instructed to bring you breakfast every morning for the next few days.”

“I’m sorry...I didn’t see it.”

He didn’t bother covering his sigh. “Then let me make you some lunch. Come.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can do it myself—”

“You don’t like my cooking?”

“Uh...I never said that.”

“You didn’t eat your breakfast tray, and now you don’t want lunch?” he asked incredulously. “I’ve studied the culinary arts my entire life. My cuisine is the finest in this great country. If you don’t like it, then the issue isn’t with the food—but you.”

Man, we’d gotten off on the wrong foot.

He stared at me with venom in his eyes. If he showed his teeth, he would probably have fangs.

“I really didn’t see the breakfast tray. I would love some lunch because I’m starving. I just didn’t want to bother you...”

“Bother me?” he asked in surprise. “This is what I live for, Sapphire. Taking it away is like taking away a piece of my soul. My purpose is to serve, to make this palace into a home. I treat all of my master’s guests just as I treat him—like royalty.”

I certainly didn’t feel like royalty in that moment—just a pain in the ass.

Now he stared at me with a furious expression, as if he expected me to say something else.

What was I supposed to do? “Uh...I’m sorry I misunderstood.”

“I accept your apology.” He walked past me, his body rigid with pride. “Where will you take your lunch, Sapphire?”

“I have options?”

He stopped and turned around again, his eyes narrowed.

Did I say something stupid again?

“Anywhere you want. Just tell me, and I’ll make it happen.”

“What do you recommend?”

“It’s a beautiful day.” He extended his hand to the window. “Sunny and warm. The terrace is always a great spot.”

“Then I’ll take my lunch there.”

He clapped his hands once. “Excellent. Lunch will be served in just a few minutes.”

I sat on the balcony under the white umbrella, admiring the acres of land Conway owned. The horses grazed in the pasture, and the sun cast the land in a beautiful hue. The gentle breeze brought warm air directly against my cheeks. The water in the pool sparkled under the brilliant sunlight.

Dante served me like a patron at a restaurant. He brought me iced tea first, a basket of bread, and then served a green salad with vinaigrette and grilled chicken with roasted tomatoes.

It was almost three o' clock, and there was still no sign of Conway.

Dante returned to the terrace and collected my plates. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes, it was amazing. Thank you."

"Dessert?"

There was more? "I'm full, but thank you."

His eyes narrowed in offense.

"I mean...of course."

"Alright. I'll return with a cup of coffee and biscotti. I just made a fresh batch."

"Great." I wasn't sure what Conway's plans were for me, but I couldn't sit around and gain weight. He probably wanted me to keep my measurements exactly as they were.

Dante returned with the coffee and biscotti, placing everything on the white tablecloth along with a small vase with a single red rose. "Anything else I can get you? I have tiramisu and lemon cake as well."

I assumed he had everything in his kitchen. "Is Conway home right now?"

His face immediately hardened at the question.

"I'm just curious."

"He's working right now."

It was clear Conway had instructed Dante to keep me away from him. I was

to entertain myself until he was in the mood to have a conversation with me.
“Can you tell him something for me?”

“I can pass on a message. But I can’t make him listen to it.”

“Tell him...” I didn’t know what I wanted to say. I wanted to apologize to him since it was my fault that he had to bail me out...and spend one hundred million dollars. But an apology through another person would make it empty.
“I’m enjoying his beautiful home.”

DAYS PASSED, and I didn’t even catch a glimpse of him. I wasn’t even sure if he was staying at the house. I knew he had a place in Milan, so maybe he was sleeping there to swallow his rage.

I was enjoying my time in paradise. In America, I’d been a broke college student eating Top Ramen and hard-boiled eggs every day. Now I had a professional chef prepare all my meals—and ask if I wanted coffee and dessert afterward. I got to enjoy the pool as it overlooked the Italian landscape, and I was able to use a private gym that was big enough for dozens of people to use.

This was what it was like to be rich, I guessed.

I sat on the terrace with a glass of wine beside me. My feet dangled in the pool, and I wore a sundress I’d found in my closet. Conway must have sent someone to buy me clothes, giving my measurements so they would know exactly what would fit me. And everything was more beautiful than anything I’d ever worn. As if I had a kingdom to rule, every day I was dressed like a queen.

Footsteps sounded beside me, heavy footfalls that could only be caused by a

heavy man. It wasn't Dante, who was thin and limber. It was someone who carried the weight of the world.

It was Conway.

He sat beside me on the ledge and rolled up the bottom of his jeans so he could place his feet in the pool. Then he grabbed my glass and took a drink of the red wine, swirling it before he let it touch his lips. He set it down again between us, licking his lips when he was finished.

The silent treatment was finally over.

The sun set over the horizon, and the brilliant splashes of orange, pink, and blue sprinkled the sky. His terrace had the best view of the most spectacular sunset I'd ever witnessed—and he got to enjoy it every day.

He watched the sunset until the sun finally dipped below the horizon. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

It took me a moment to understand it was a direct response to the message I'd given to Dante a few days ago. "I've never seen anything so beautiful. When I passed through the small villages around Milan, I saw lots of beautiful things...but nothing like this place. It's like a scene from a movie or something."

"Real life is always more beautiful than the movies."

"Maybe for you..." A rich man like him was only exposed to the luxurious things in life. Constantly surrounded by flowers, expensive cars, and gorgeous women, life was a dream. But for someone like me, life was an ongoing battle. There was one fight after another.

"Life is what you make it, sweetheart."

I sucked in my breath through my front teeth, immediately hating the way

that word sounded on my ears. It made my stomach clench tightly. I suddenly felt powerless, like Knuckles could grab me by the neck all over again.

Conway's eyes shifted to me. "What did I say?"

I stared at the skyline, watching the light slowly fade. The stars were starting to shine bright overhead. "I just hate that name..."

"Why?" His voice was deep and masculine, and he always spoke in a baritone. He emitted so much confidence with such few words.

"That's what Knuckles calls me..." I didn't need to give a deeper explanation than that. I didn't need to get into the details of how he would torture me. I'd crash on a friend's couch, but still wake up to a note from him left on my chest. He liked to watch me run—because he got off on it.

He grabbed the wine and took another drink.

"How's work?"

"Sales have never been so high. Reviews have never been so generous. People are saying those designs are my best work...and that's saying something."

"I'm glad to hear that." I felt the warmth spread into my cheeks because I knew I'd inspired all those pieces. He examined my body with a lustful eye and produced the finest pieces of lingerie the world had ever seen.

"And it's all because of you."

"I don't deserve all the credit, Conway." I grabbed the glass and took a drink.

"You deserve more credit than you're taking."

I pulled my feet out of the water once my toes started to prune. "Dante doesn't like me."

“You’re right. He doesn’t.”

I shouldn’t care what Dante thought, but I was disappointed anyway. “I didn’t mean to offend him.”

“He puts a lot of pride into his work. If you make him feel needed, he’ll turn around.”

“Needed how?”

“In all things.”

“Well, I don’t need someone to wait on me hand and foot. I’m perfectly capable of making my bed, doing my laundry, and making myself a sandwich.”

“That’s not how it works here. To Dante, that’s insulting. It implies that you don’t need him. He loves working here, and if he isn’t needed, then he doesn’t have a job. Let the man feel important.”

I hadn’t considered it that way. “Does he live here?”

“He has a bedroom next to the kitchen.”

“He doesn’t have a family?”

“He has a girlfriend a few miles away. And he has two kids, but they’re out of the house.”

“When does he have time off?”

“After dinner, he’s free to do whatever he wants. And most of the time, I stay in Milan, so he doesn’t work too hard. He has a lot of time off.”

“That’s nice. He must love living here...a beautiful place like this.”

He shrugged. “He doesn’t complain.”

I'd love to be a maid if I got to live in such a beautiful place. "If there's anything you want me to do, I'm more than happy to help. I can clean or help you at the office. Do bookkeeping or something..." I owed him my life as well as a fortune. I'd spend the next ten lifetimes trying to pay him back.

"You will be doing things for me—just none of those things." He pulled his feet out of the water then stood up. He stood in a fitted t-shirt and jeans that hung low on his hips. "I left something on your bed. Put it on, get on your knees, and wait for me."

I RECOGNIZED the black corset placed on the edge of my bed. The material over the hips was stretchy lace, allowing my fair skin to be visible through the material. The padding in the bra was substantial, pressing my tits together significantly. The black thong had diamonds along the waistband.

I felt it with my fingertips before I pulled it on.

My heart was beating so hard it actually hurt. Every beat was like a drum. No matter how I willed myself to remain calm, nothing worked. My heart knew what was coming, and the adrenaline was overflowing.

I did my hair with a curling iron and painted my face with the makeup he liked. Smoky eyes brought out the blue color of my eyes. My lips were covered with bright red lipstick. His directions had been brief, but I assumed he wanted me on my knees at the foot of the bed.

So I obeyed.

A part of me burned in self-loathing. I was about to sleep with a man because he bought me from a crueler man. I had no rights to choose my destiny. I was at the mercy of the powerful men operating around me. Ever since that

horrific day, I'd felt completely helpless. When I was in college and had a roof over my head, I felt like anything was possible. If I worked hard enough, I would be the American Dream.

That was all bullshit.

I was nothing but a pawn in a game. I was nothing but a toy men fought over. There was nothing better for me outside these walls, and I actually felt relieved to be there. But this wasn't where I wanted to be.

Though, what other option did I have?

So I stayed on my knees.

I found Conway attractive, had felt a connection with him shortly after I met him. He had some good qualities, and he wasn't an abuser like the others. My first time could have been much worse.

So I should just be grateful.

And try to enjoy it.

The door to my bedroom opened, and Conway walked inside. Barefoot and bare-chested, he was in only the jeans he'd been wearing earlier. He shut the door behind him then stared at me on the floor.

His look was so dark it was difficult to tell if he was pleased. He stared at me with his arms by his sides, both of his hands balled into fists. His feet pressed against the carpet as he inched closer to me. He'd treated me like a queen, but once he was in charge, he stole the crown. He took his time, drawing out the moment as long as possible.

I reminded myself to breathe.

Conway had always touched me gently, giving me soft caresses along the neck and shoulders. He would probably be the same kind of lover, gentle and

passionate. He would excite me with his touch before he went straight for what he wanted.

My chin tilted up as I watched him come closer to me. My feet were folded underneath me, and my tits were displayed like they were on a platter. My breath shuddered more and more. The corset was so tight my lungs couldn't expand all the way. My hair fell around my shoulder, the soft curls ready for his fingers to touch.

He stared, absolutely still, like he didn't need to breathe to live. "Jesus Christ..."

I saw the consternation on his face, the focused look he wore when he worked. But this expression was sexier, more ambitious. His eyes burned into my skin, and I felt naked before he'd even removed my lingerie.

"Muse."

My eyes shifted to his, instinctively knowing that was his new name for me.

"On the bed."

I was so nervous I could barely move to my feet. Like a deer trying to learn to walk, I wobbled slightly before my hand touched the bed. The sheets were Egyptian cotton, and the mattress was the most comfortable thing I'd ever slept on. Now my hands touched the soft duvet, sliding over it as I crawled onto the bed. I didn't know how he wanted me, but I assumed he would want to fuck me from behind.

He grabbed my hips and turned me over onto my back. Then he dragged me to the edge of the bed until my ass hung over the floor. His hands squeezed my hips before he played with the fabric of my thong. His eyes were on me, devouring me with just an expression. He picked at the lace before he pulled my panties down my legs. He moved them over my ankles then dropped

them on the floor. “When I walked in here, I had something very different in mind. But now that I’m looking at you...” He grabbed my knees and spread them apart, revealing my most private area. He stared at me without shame, like my body was his to do whatever he wanted.

Which was true.

He lowered himself to his knees then cradled my legs in his arms. He pressed his face close to my entrance then slightly blew across my clit.

I tensed when I felt his warm breath. No man had ever been in this position, had his face pressed between my legs. I lay back and turned to the ceiling right when I felt his tongue. My hips bucked immediately at the sensual touch, and I released a noise that was both a yelp and a moan.

Then he kissed me.

Kissed me all over. His tongue circled the nub between my legs gently, his heated breath stimulating me at the same time. Then he moved to my entrance and slipped his tongue inside, tasting me in a way no one else ever had.

I lay there and let him do what he wanted, knowing he owned me completely. I couldn’t say no. I couldn’t stop this even if I wanted to.

And I wasn’t sure if I wanted this to end.

He hooked his arms under my thighs, and he pressed his face into me. He kissed me harder, deeper. This tongue turned more aggressive. His fingertips kneaded my thighs. “This pussy...worth every penny.”

I felt the heat creep up my body, starting in my gut and slowly migrating down. I’d made myself come before, so I knew what was coming. I just couldn’t believe it was happening now. I hadn’t even kissed Conway, and I felt my body betraying me. There were so many things wrong with this

situation. I'd been bought and sold like livestock.

But I was still going to come.

The only stand I could make was to control my body, to make sure I didn't enjoy this. It was one thing to be his muse because I had to be. But it was another if I enjoyed it. So I fought it hard, doing my best to keep my mind elsewhere while he continued to make love to my pussy with his mouth.

I breathed through the pleasure and focused on the ceiling above me, making sure my hips didn't buck instinctively. If I just remained focused until he was finished, I could keep some of my dignity.

He pulled his mouth away.

The instant he took away the pleasure, I suddenly felt cold. I'd been fighting the good sensation between my legs, but now that it was missing, I had nothing left to fight for. My hands gripped the sheets as I waited for what would happen next.

"Stop." His command sliced through the room like a sword.

"Stop what...?"

He moved over my body and held himself on top of me. With a tight physique that had been chiseled from stone, he was a living statue. His lips were smeared with my body, the coating shiny like lip gloss. "Stop fighting it. You aren't proving anything."

Perhaps I wasn't as secretive as I thought.

He slid back between my legs and moved his mouth to my aching clitoris. His lips were aggressive like they were before, sucking and nibbling slightly.

My hips rocked on their own, and I sank into the mattress as he controlled my body's reaction. I wanted to have some control over my life, but when this

man kissed me like this, I realized I had no control at all.

I writhed on the bed, my back arching and my hips grinding.

The heat built in my veins, and the breath was stolen from my lungs. My pants turned to moans, and then my moans grew into something else. I gripped the sheets underneath me and felt the explosion between my legs. A climax unlike any other passed through me, breaking my chains of disobedience and making me whimper in pleasure. I tugged on the sheets harder and felt myself be swept away in the most pleasurable way.

He kept kissing me until the moment was completely over, stimulating my sensitive clit with his tongue. He gave me a final kiss before he pulled away. “Damn good pussy...” He rose to his feet and undid his jeans.

I stared at the ceiling as I caught my breath, feeling the wetness between my legs—and not just from his saliva. I ran my fingers through my hair, so satisfied that I couldn’t comprehend this wonderful feeling. The corset was still tight around my body, restricting my stomach and pressing my tits toward my chin.

He snapped his fingers. “Knees. Now.”

I didn’t appreciate the snap of his fingers, but I kept my attitude in check. Now that he had made me feel good, obeying didn’t seem so difficult. He kissed me in a place I’d never been kissed before—and it was heaven.

I judged myself for enjoying it.

I moved to my knees on the floor, folding my feet underneath me like last time. My hands rested on my thighs, and I watched him drop his jeans and kick them to the side. When he was just in black boxers, his thighs looked toned in the cotton fabric. He was masculine everywhere, from the trail of hair down his stomach to the thickness of his legs. He was all muscle and

skin—no fat. When I was in his office, I hardly ever saw him eat. Now it made sense.

He dropped his boxers, revealing the enormous dick that was proudly erect. Large veins moved up the shaft, and the crown was already oozing with precum. The hair around his balls had been trimmed down until it was mostly skin. But his girth and length were both unbelievable, even to my limited standards. It was the kind of dick I'd seen in a porn video, not on a real man.

But his dick was just as impressive as the rest of him.

Now that I was on my knees and at eye level with his waist, I knew exactly what he wanted me to do.

His fingers wrapped around his length, and he gently pumped himself as he stepped toward me. "Kiss me." He pulled himself down by the shaft and pointed his crown right at my mouth.

I craned my neck and pressed my lips to his head, kissing the smooth skin and feeling the stickiness from his arousal. It smeared across my lips like lipstick, forming a thick coating that made my mouth slippery.

"Eyes on me."

My head tilted up to look at him, to see that same concentrated expression I'd seen before. But there was a flush of redness to his face, a deep look of excitement. His hand moved into my hair, his fingers securing themselves in the soft strands.

He grabbed his shaft and pointed his crown to the ceiling. "Start here."

I pressed my mouth to his textured sac and kissed it the way I'd kissed his crown. I started off slow, keeping my eyes on him while trying to focus on what I was doing. After the way he made me feel, I wanted to make him feel good too. I didn't want him to regret buying me, not when he could sell me

back to Knuckles if I wasn't worth the price he paid.

“More tongue.”

I kissed his balls the way I would kiss a man, giving my tongue as well as my lips. My saliva coated his rough skin, so my tongue glided over him even easier than before.

“Suck.”

I sucked one ball into my mouth and opened my mouth wider so I could accommodate him. I kissed him the way he just kissed me, sucking and then kissing. I tugged on his balls gently before my tongue swiped over again.

His hand secured my hair out of my face, and he gripped the back of my neck. He wrapped his fingers around his shaft and jerked himself. “Jerk me.” He moved his hand away and allowed me to take over. Then he stared down at me and watched.

I jerked my hand up and down and licked his balls at the same time, doing two things at once. My eyes followed my movements, knowing he was teaching me the way he liked to be pleased by a woman.

“Eyes on me.”

I moved my eyes up again.

His hand went to the base of his length, and he pointed his dick at my mouth.

I knew what he wanted. I opened my mouth wide and placed him in my throat, pushing across my tongue all the way back. My saliva surrounded him, and I felt the ache in my chest when I couldn't breathe.

He pulled on the back of my neck, forcing me to take more of his length. He pushed inside until only a few inches existed outside my mouth. His fingers dug into me, tugging on my hair slightly.

Then he pulled out and shoved himself back inside me. His gentleness was long gone, and he fucked my mouth like he owned it.

Because he did own it.

He thrust and tugged on my neck at the same time, pushing into my throat and forcing the spit to drip from the side of my mouth. Tears pooled in the corners of my eyes as his cock blocked the air from entering my lungs. I wanted to gag because he was hitting me so hard and so deep.

“Don’t gag.”

I stared up into his eyes and held on to his muscular thighs for balance. My fingers dug into him, and I continued to fight for breath. If he hadn’t just made me feel so great, this would be so much more difficult. He was fucking my throat with no regard. He used me just as he promised he would. He watched the tears stream from my eyes without care. If anything, it just turned him on even more.

His dick was enormous.

He sped up his thrusts, fucking me deeper and harder.

I didn’t let myself gag, knowing he’d prohibited it.

His eyes darkened as he watched me. “My muse...” His hand balled my hair into a fist, and he increased his pace, showing no mercy for my throat. When he was finished with me, my throat would be raw.

When he closed his eyes for a moment and his cock twitched inside his mouth, I knew what was coming. His big dick was about to release inside my mouth. With a cock this large, I could only imagine how much come he would shoot my way.

“Show me first.” He gripped my head with both hands and fucked me deep,

forcing my jaw to drop even farther to accommodate all of him. I struggled to breathe, struggled to remain upright because he was hitting me with so much force. Saliva spilled everywhere, my tears ruining my mascara.

Now I felt like his possession, his object he could do with whatever he wanted. He'd just made me feel good, and now I wanted to make him feel even better. I wanted to be worth the money he'd paid. But his dick was so big and my mouth was so small. Despite my inexperience, he didn't take it easy on me.

He would never take it easy on me.

He stopped thrusting and shoved his dick completely inside me, releasing with a loud moan. His dick twitched in response, throbbing in pleasure. The come dumped into my mouth, piles of it dropping onto the back of my tongue and my throat.

I forced myself not to gag.

He gave a few more pumps as he finished, his moans decreasing in volume until he was completely finished. Then he released my hair and stopped digging his fingers into the back of my neck. He slowly pulled his soaked dick out of my mouth, his white come stilled pooled at his tip. Saliva stretched between the head of his dick and my mouth. That same concentrated expression was on his face, but now it was deeper—darker. "Show me."

I finally caught my breath, felt more air in my throat than I did before. I opened my mouth and pushed my tongue out, showing the white come that had webbed all over my mouth. It stuck to my teeth and formed a mesh everywhere.

He grabbed my neck and examined his seed. He eventually gave a slight nod in approval. "Swallow."

I closed my mouth and swallowed the pile of come. I couldn't get it all, so I swallowed a few times.

Conway watched me, observing my throat shift with the effort. "Open."

I opened my mouth and showed him again.

"Good." He released my neck and pulled his boxers back to his hips. He grabbed his jeans off the floor and pulled those over his legs.

I stayed on my knees, waiting for his next orders.

But none were forthcoming. He walked out of my bedroom and shut the door behind him, not looking at me before he left. The only noise I heard was the click of the doorknob. Then there was just silence.

I sat on the floor with the saliva pooled around my mouth. My eyes were still wet from the tears I'd shed. I'd expected him to fuck me, but he never did. I wondered if that was intentional, or if he just preferred the blow job.

I knew this was how the rest of my life would be. I would be expected to perform at a moment's notice.

But at least I would enjoy it too.

Conway

I WALKED THROUGH THE HOUSE IN MY SWIM TRUNKS WITH THE TOWEL OVER my shoulder. “Dante?”

“Yes, sir?” He appeared at my side, stepping out of the corner from nowhere.

“I’ll take my breakfast in forty-five minutes. Tell Sapphire she is to join me.”

“Of course. Enjoy your swim, sir.”

“Thank you, Dante.” I arrived at the pool and pulled the goggles off my head. I dived into the water and immediately began my laps, swimming back and forth to finish a thousand meters before I started my day. It was a beautiful summer day, and the land was always warm even though it wasn’t even eight yet.

I did my underwater turns and then swam back, stretching myself to exercise every muscle in my body. I kicked hard and picked up the pace, racing against myself. The cool water moved past me, gently soothing the warm muscles as they burned under the skin.

When I finished my session, I climbed out of the water and let the drops roll off my body and hit the deck. I ripped off my goggles and tossed them aside, knowing Dante would correctly care for them.

Dante already had the table on the terrace prepared for breakfast. A white tablecloth covered the surface, and the white umbrella shielded the chairs from the hot sun. A small vase held a single red rose, picked from the property.

I used the towel to dry myself, starting with my arms and legs and then my hair. When I was dry enough, I took a seat at the table and saw the collection of Italian newspapers and my cell phone. I looked through my emails as I waited for my guest to join me.

Sapphire arrived on the terrace in a long white dress with her hair extending over her chest. Her makeup was done, and she looked ready to embrace the summer sun in the large sun hat she wore. She sat across from me and scooted her chair in, her blue eyes hardly moving to my face.

I kept reading my emails even when Dante served our egg whites, sautéed vegetables, and the single piece of Italian bread.

Sapphire didn't wait and started to eat.

Nicole sent me a lot of emails last night, updating me on orders and scheduled appearances. Apparently, the fabric makers in Turkey were asking for more money since we'd increased our orders so significantly. I didn't care about the money, but I refused to be a pushover. I responded to her emails and didn't touch my food.

“Why did you want me to join you if you're going to ignore me?”

My eyes slowly lifted to her face, shocked that she would speak to me that way. “That's my business, not yours.” I looked at her fierce blue eyes and remembered the way they looked when they were locked on to my gaze. I loved their brightness as well as their darkness. She'd never looked so beautiful as when her mouth was stuffed with my come. Now she sat under the bright sun, looking like an Italian woman every man would want to keep

at their villa. Even if I didn't pick out her clothes or buy her makeup, she would still be beautiful. That innate perfection enhanced the clothes I gave her.

"It is my business when I could have kept sleeping..."

"It's eight. You shouldn't be sleeping."

"Not everyone wakes up at the crack of dawn."

"No. But no one should sleep in past eight." I set my phone aside since she wasn't going to let me do any work while I sat across from her. Besides, looking at her was a lot more entertaining than staring at my phone. I grabbed my mug of hot coffee and took a drink, letting the warm caffeine make its way into my stomach.

"Do you swim every morning?"

"When it's warm."

"What do you do in the winter?"

"The gym. But I prefer to be outside." I drank my coffee again and then took a bite of my omelet. "I expect you to exercise every day."

"Every day?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"That's a little ridiculous."

"It's good for you."

She added a little cream to her coffee and stirred it with her spoon. "I'll do it five days a week, but not on weekends. That's the best you're going to get from me, so don't push it."

Five days was acceptable. “You’re forgetting that I’m in charge here. And that’s something you shouldn’t forget.” I’d walked into her bedroom last night and fucked her throat so hard that I knew she was sore today. I did it because I could. I could do anything I wanted. She, on the other hand, had nothing.

“You’re in charge of most things. But not everything.”

If she cooperated with me most of the time, I supposed that was enough. What I wanted most out of her was sexual satisfaction. As long as she delivered, I could put up with the rest of her attitude. “You don’t want me to push you, but don’t make the mistake of pushing me.” I picked up the newspaper and looked at the headlines, knowing she was staring hard at my face.

“Are you going to Milan today?”

“Yes.”

“Can I come along?”

I was keeping her under the radar for the time being. “No.”

“You want me to stay here all day?”

“Yes.”

She looked over the hillside, her hair moving slightly with the breeze.

“When I get home tonight, you’ll have dinner with me—and you’ll be wearing the lingerie that Dante will set on your bed.” I looked up and waited for an argument, wondering if she would defy me. Last night, she took all of my cock inside her small mouth, saliva dripping everywhere as she fought the urge to gag. I’d never forget the erotic scene, the way she looked into my eyes as she took the skull-pounding.

She didn't make an argument. "I hope you will make better use of me as time goes on. If I sit around all day, I'll get fat."

"Which is why you need to exercise every day."

"Working out every day is unnatural. I won't do it." She drank her coffee then cut into her omelet. "I'd rather be on my feet all day doing something. I could always help you at the studio, even when you aren't using my body for a new design. I'm a smart girl with a lot of potential."

"Do smart girls get mixed up in the mess you made?" I said coldly.

Her eyes narrowed. "My brother's actions were out of my control."

"But everything that came after that was in your control." My biggest fear was something happening to my sister. Vanessa was so beautiful that even I couldn't deny it. She had the elegance of a queen and the smile of a supermodel. Anytime I made a friend growing up, they were always smitten with her.

It was fucking annoying.

My life would be so much easier if she were ugly.

What if a man wanted her the way I wanted Sapphire—and he was just as evil and controlling?

She shook her head slightly, her gaze cold. "I refuse to apologize for the things that happened to me. I refuse to be blamed as a victim. Outnumbered with no resources, there was very little I could have done. I don't judge myself, and neither should you."

"I never said I judge you. But you had another choice...you just didn't see it." I could make any problem go away with the snap of my fingers. If she'd confided in me, perhaps my wallet would be a little heavier right now.

“My offer still stands. I want to be useful in other ways.”

If Dante hadn't served me for the past decade, I would replace him with her. But I wouldn't take anything away from him. He not only took care of my home, but he kept my secrets. This strange woman was living with me now, and he never once asked about her. It was none of his business, and he knew it. “If I think of anything, I'll let you know.”

“I can still do modeling...”

“No.” I turned back to the newspaper and found a new article. The last time she hit the stage, she ignited the world's obsession. Men couldn't stop gawking at her, eyeing her like a piece of meat. My muse was special to me, essential to my work. I didn't want to share her with anyone.

She didn't ask again. “Are you a rider?”

“In what context?” The corner of my mouth rose in a smile.

“Of horses.”

I looked up to see her eyeing the stables and the beautiful mares that stood in the sectioned-off pasture. They were magnificent beasts, collections rather than resources. “Rarely.”

“Then what do you keep them for?”

“Because I can do whatever I want with my money.” I took another bite of my food.

Her eyes narrowed. “You may own me, but I won't put up with an asshole.”

“And I won't put up with someone who questions me.”

“I'm not questioning you. I'm simply asking you a question. It's how conversations work...unless you've never had one before.” She brought the

mug to her mouth but didn't take a drink. "Which wouldn't surprise me."

I hid my grin as best I could, making sure my face remained hard and stoic. I admired her no-bullshit attitude and wit. She got herself stuck in shitty situations, but she certainly had the spunk to get out of them. She never gave up, and she retained as much dignity as she could in the process. Even when she was on her knees in front of me, obeying me because she was my property, I couldn't help but respect her.

There was something about her.

"Why do you have horses?" she repeated.

"I enjoy looking at them. That's it."

She stared at the stables and the horses in the grass. "Can I go into the stables and ride them?"

"You can do whatever you want on the property."

"Really?" she asked in surprise.

"I already said that. Marco is the stables master. Tell him what you want, and he'll make it happen."

She finished half her food then occupied her time by staring at the horses. I had a wide variety, from a jet-black mare to an Appaloosa. All of them were unique and beautiful. I didn't show them at contests or ride them often. But they were nice trophies. They had considerable land to roam, and they were taken care of on a daily basis. "I've always loved horses but never had a chance to spend time with them."

I watched her stare over the land at the wild beasts. There was excitement and vigor in her expression, a kind that made her soft features even more beautiful. The sun hit her face at the right angle, making her eyes shine bright

like two jewels.

Instead of reading my paper, I decided to look at her.

ANASTASIA WAS GONE, and now I had the place all to myself. There were four different units inside the building, but I'd bought them all just so I wouldn't have to deal with the hassle of having neighbors. I didn't want anyone to see me in the hallway or in the stairway. I wanted this building to be completely mine, covered in the tightest security. I didn't have a lot of enemies, but if I ever did get one, I wanted to be ready.

Nicole had sent me all the paperwork for the sales the past week. We'd managed to get distribution to the European nations, but for America, all the pieces they saw in the show were on preorder.

But those numbers had spiked.

It was the highest sales week of my career.

And I'd been doing this for a long time.

I was the one who created the designs my customers fell in love with, but Muse was the one who sparked my creativity. From her beautiful hips to her tiny waist, she was more perfect than any woman ever painted across a canvas. She elicited desires from deep inside me, brought a new wave of sensuality over my body. I was already a sexual man with a large appetite, but she made me hungrier than I'd ever been.

The only reason why I didn't fuck her was because my dick ached to be in her mouth. I saw her sitting on the floor in her lingerie, and my cock was desperate to pierce those luscious lips. My tongue was anxious to see how she tasted, to know if she was as sweet as she looked.

But tonight, I wouldn't wait.

I would take her virginity—because I paid for it.

The doorbell rang, and I knew exactly who was paying me a visit. I walked into the main room and opened the solid black door.

Carter stepped inside. “You got time to talk?”

“You know I never have time.” I shut the door behind him and walked to the bar. “What do you want?”

“I'm your cousin. I don't need a reason to stop by.”

I poured two glasses of scotch then handed him one. “Keep telling yourself that until you believe it.”

He took a long drink before he set the glass on the table. “So are you going to tell me the whole story, or am I going to have to drag it out of you?”

“The second one.” I sat on the black leather couch and held my glass by the rim.

“I was hoping you would say that.” He fell back onto the other couch, wearing a black leather jacket with dark jeans. “So, what the fuck happened? I sent Anastasia home, and now I have Marisa staying at my place. I wouldn't mind, but since I can't fuck her, I'm not sure what to do with her.”

“You can do other things with a woman besides fuck her.”

“Not things that are fun.”

I didn't fuck Muse last night, and it was certainly fun.

“So what the fuck, Conway? What's going on?”

“My muse had been captured and was being sold at the Underground. One of

the guys from the Chainsaw Yankees was there, and he had his eyes set on her. He's a sick asshole, so I did what I had to do—I bought her."

"So you bought two women?"

"Yep." I took a drink, letting the liquid fill my belly.

"How much did you pay for her?"

"Doesn't matter." I brushed it off, knowing he would flip out if I told him the truth. "Now she's mine. She's no longer my model or my employee—she's just mine. I'll keep her at my place and use her for designs...among other things."

"Like a slave?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"She's willing."

"Really?" he asked. "Because you're rich?"

"Because she has nowhere else to go. If she runs, Knuckles will get her. She's in so much debt that she can't return to America. Her only other option is living on the street and hoping Knuckles doesn't find her. Being my slave is a much better option."

"How much did you pay for her?"

I ignored the question altogether.

His eyes narrowed. "The more you don't answer, the more I want to know."

"Because you're a child."

"Fine." When he set his glass on the table, it made a deep thud. "You know I can get that information elsewhere—and I will."

Now that he wouldn't let it go, I decided to rip the bandage off. "A hundred."

“A hundred thousand?” he asked in surprise. “Seems like she’d sell for a couple million, at least.”

“No...hundred million.”

His earlier surprise didn’t compare to his look now. His jaw dropped, and his brown eyes deepened in color. With disbelief in his eyes, he stared at me like he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. For the first time, Carter Barsetti was speechless. “Are you fucking insane?”

“Knuckles pushed me.”

“And why didn’t you just let him win?”

I knew what would happen to her if I didn’t step up. A short life of brutal rape and torture would be all she ever knew. A woman like that had so much potential to be something more. My muse didn’t deserve to die like that. She was too valuable. I couldn’t let something so beautiful just die. “I need her.”

“There’s a thousand other women that can take her place. She’s hot, but there are other fish in the sea.”

“She helps me with my designs. That fashion show was the biggest one I’d ever done. Those designs grossed over twenty million dollars...in just the first week. There are other fish in the sea, but nothing compared to her.”

He ran his fingers through his hair, still processing my announcement. “Conway, no woman is worth that much money. This is about more than just work.”

“It’s not.”

“Yes, it is,” he snapped. “Does this woman mean something to you?”

“She only means something to my work and my dick.”

He shook his head. “Now what? She just lives with you forever?”

“I keep her until I get all my use out of her. After that, I don’t know. When she begins to age, Knuckles won’t want her anymore. So she can walk away then.”

“So she’s your private slave?” he said. “Even though our entire family opposes it.”

“I did her a favor, alright? If I didn’t buy her, she would have ended up somewhere worse. She agrees with me. She even thanked me for it.”

“Conway, you know I’m not a saint. I do things I’m not proud of every single night. I’ve paid for whores, and I’ve smuggled drugs out of the country with my cars. But this is something our parents will never accept.”

“I know.” Both of my parents would be livid with me. My mother would slap me so hard, I’d see stars. My father would kill me with just his disappointment. He didn’t have to say anything at all to make me feel like shit. “Which is why they aren’t going to know about it.”

“You’re going to hide it from them? For ten years?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“How will you explain her?”

I shrugged. “I’ll tell them she’s my girlfriend or something.”

“So you’re going to make your parents excited that you’ve settled down even though it’s bullshit.”

I took another drink. “My personal life is none of their business anyway.”

“Vanessa?” he asked. “What about her?”

She was so honest and innocent that lying to her made me feel shitty. “My

personal life is none of her concern either.”

Carter finally dropped the argument and drank from his glass.

“The truth stays between us. Alright?”

He downed the contents before he set the empty glass on the table. “Fine. But I get a go every now and then.”

I unleashed a silent threat with just my eyes. No other man would have my muse. No other man would even get to look at her. She was all mine, my private fantasy. “No.”

“If she doesn’t mean anything to you, why not?”

“Because her pussy is worth a hundred million dollars—and I’m the only one that gets to fuck it.”

I RETURNED to the villa that evening and left my car in the roundabout so one of the staff could take care of it. My secure garage was around the backside of the property, directly underneath the house and with an assortment of different vehicles. I had SUVs, sports cars—a wide collection.

I stepped inside the house and handed my jacket to the maid, Beatrice.

“Good evening, sir.” She placed my jacket over her arm, about to take it to be dry cleaned once she left my sight. “Dante is serving dinner in the dining room. Your guest is already there.”

She’d better be in the lingerie that was left on the bedspread.

I moved across the house to the large dining room that I had for dozens of guests. A grand table sat in the center, surrounded by windows that

overlooked the grounds. Paintings hung on the wall, and the crystal chandelier reflected the light from the candles.

My muse was there, sitting in the diamond dress she'd worn in the fashion show. She hit the runway and sparkled just like the dozens of one-carat diamonds sewn into her clothing. A diamond necklace hung around her throat, and her hair and makeup were done like she was about to make another appearance on the catwalk.

Good, she listened.

I sat across from her and placed my napkin over my lap.

She looked like a beauty queen sitting perfectly upright. She held the right posture, her hands by her sides. Her blue eyes were narrowed in discomfort.

Dante filled our wineglasses and removed the silver lids over our plates. The sizzling salmon grilled with rosemary and herbs sat on the plate along with a side salad and a thin slice of French bread. He excused himself from the room and left us alone.

I started to eat.

She paused before she grabbed her fork and knife. "I don't want to dress like this for dinner. It makes me uncomfortable."

I cut into my fish, my eyes on my plate. "I don't care how it makes you feel."

"I don't want Dante to see me in something that barely covers me up."

"He would never touch you." Like always, Dante's cooking didn't disappoint. The fish was thoroughly cooked, and the juices were delicious. He knew I had a strict diet, and he managed to incorporate delicious selections for me.

"That doesn't matter."

I finally looked up when I realized she wasn't eating. I stared at the most gorgeous woman in the world, her cleavage on display for me to enjoy. Her rosy skin was perfect against the silver color, and the diamonds matched her value. Only a perfect woman like her deserved to wear the most expensive piece of lingerie ever made. "You can wear that in front of millions of people, but not Dante?"

"It's different, and you know it."

"Eat." I pointed at her plate with my fork. "It's delicious."

She finally picked up her fork and stared at her food. She took a pause, deliberating before she finally took her first bite. She chewed quietly with her small mouth, having the manners of someone with high class.

I watched her eat, fascinated by the way her mouth moved. She didn't smear her bright red lipstick or make a single smacking sound with her mouth. When her mouth was full of my come, she'd had to swallow a few times before she could get it all down. It was impossible for me not to think about that moment whenever I looked at that tiny mouth. "You're right. It is."

Utensils tapped against the plate as we ate in mutual silence. I'd never had a woman over here for dinner before. I'd never had a woman over here at all, actually. When I picked up women on the town, I always used my place in Milan. Out here in the countryside, it was my time to be alone. But I didn't want to keep Muse in the city, not when there was nothing for her to do. She would just stare out the window like a lonely cat. Here, she had the entire world at her feet.

Her pretty voice broke the silence. "How was work?"

I spent most of my day crunching numbers and going over the schedule for the next few months. The most daunting task was finding a replacement for my most famous model. I hadn't even begun to deal with that nightmare.

“That line of lingerie I debuted is selling all over the world. We didn’t meet the distribution deadline for America, so people are only getting the option to preorder. But I’ve never seen so many people preorder my fashion before. My brand has been propelled to a new level. It’s exciting...but a bit terrifying at the same time.”

“Terrifying how?” She cut into her fish and kept eating. She usually paired her bites with a bit of her salad. She didn’t touch her bread.

I dazzled the world with my creations, showed the world a line of fashion that women would die for. Men wanted to cover their mistresses with only the finest lingerie, and women wanted to be adored in the fabric. People weren’t just obsessed with my new model—but everything that she inspired. Now they would wait anxiously for my next collection. “How will I top that?”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Nearly a decade.” I sipped the white wine, the bottle that Dante had recommended to me. He was knowledgeable about everything when it came to food. He was also a great manager, making sure the rest of the staff fulfilled their responsibilities on a daily basis. He was rewarded handsomely with a salary people would kill for.

“Then you’ve done it before.”

“But I’ve never made this kind of a splash. Barsetti Lingerie has always been known for its premium luxury. It’s always been a recognized brand. If my name is on it, you know it’s quality. But now my name is famous in a different stratosphere. It’s attracting attention in a whole new way. My sales have suggested I’m more than just popular. Now that I’ve raised the expectations, anything less than absolutely perfect won’t be enough. I can’t disappoint my critics, my customers.”

She finished her fish and then rested her fingers around the stem of her glass.

“You won’t.”

I didn’t deserve her confidence. She didn’t know me well enough.

“You won’t because you care too much. You won’t release your next designs until you’re absolutely certain they will kill. And I can help you with that. Like I said, I want to be of use to you...since you saved my life.”

I loved hearing her gratitude. She hated this situation because all of her freedom had been stripped away, but she was grateful for it at the exact same time. Without me, her fate would have been terrible. Now I had an obedient woman that I didn’t even need to chain. I didn’t see her a slave—not when she was indebted to me. “You will be of use to me, Muse. You can count on it.”

I SHUT the door behind me then pressed my chest into her back. The halter top dress she wore revealed the gorgeous skin of her back. I pulled her hair over one shoulder and kissed her bare skin, tasting her sweetness. It was nothing compared to the erotic taste between her legs, but I enjoyed it all the same.

I kissed the shell of her ear and slowly moved my hands underneath the short dress she wore. I felt her soft skin, my callused fingertips gently caressing her. I moved across her belly button and then slid farther up, anxious to feel those perky tits. I’d seen her completely naked only once. That was when she’d stood on the stage at the Underground. I didn’t feel an ounce of arousal then because I was too pissed she was up there in the first place.

She was mine.

But now it was just the two of us.

She was my muse.

My fantasy.

I untied the string around her neck and let the dress come loose. It slowly fell forward, slipping down her body until her tits were revealed. My hands slid over her dress until I felt the curve of her tits. I pressed my mouth to her ear and breaths as I cupped each one, feeling their firmness. My fingers squeezed hard, her tits filling out my large hands perfectly. I felt her nipples harden in response, gentle bumps forming on her creamy white skin. I squeezed them again as I stared down at her body, my cock harder than it'd ever been before. "My muse..." My thumbs flicked over her nipples, and then I kissed her neck.

She was fucking perfect.

I had stared at her gorgeous figure under the bright lights of the stage. I'd studied the way her body moved, the way her hips shook as she paraded across the room like a queen. But now she was physically in my hands—and she was my property.

I pulled the dress back over her head, and she lifted her arms in cooperation. Her breathing had picked up. I could see it in the way her chest rose and fell. The muscles of her back were all tight in anticipation. Her lips were slightly parted so she could draw in more breath.

I dropped the dress on the ground.

Now she stood in her heels and the thong, her round ass perfect for a slap. My hands trailed down her back, my finger feeling the ridges over her spine. I followed the steep curve and reached her luscious behind. My finger hooked into her panties.

I didn't know how I would take her. I wanted to fuck her in every way

imaginable, but for the first time, I wanted it to be good. I wanted her legs spread underneath me, every inch of my dick buried inside her. I wanted to give her every drop of come, to take away her innocence and make her feel like a real woman.

My hands shook just thinking about it.

Paying that kind of dough for her was a hit, even for me. But now that I felt her tremble at my touch, I knew she was worth every penny. Not only would I have her now, but I would have her all I wanted—as long as I wanted. She was a treasure I wouldn't share with anyone else. She was exclusively mine.

I pulled her panties down, tugging them down her tanned skin and over the huge curve of her ass. Slowly, I removed them, dragging them down her thighs. I lowered to my knees at the same time, undressing her slowly. My lips kissed each of her cheeks and the backside of her thighs until I helped her step out of the thong.

That's when I spotted the pussy juice in her panties.

She was wet for me.

I rose back to my feet, a maniacal smile on my face. She could pretend she was only here because she had to be, but she couldn't pretend not to be attracted to me. She fought the urge to come as some kind of silent protest, but that hadn't worked. Her body wanted me as much as mine wanted hers. I felt the connection anytime I touched her. And now that I'd rescued her, dropped a bunch of change to own her, she respected my power.

Now my dick was a little thicker.

I slowly turned her around so we were face-to-face, spotting the redness in her cheeks. Her slender shoulders led to an even more slender neck. Her body was endless curves, soft skin, and pure beauty.

I could stare at her all day.

I slowly backed her up to the bed, my dick eager to be inside that slick pussy for the first time. I was already possessive of her, but I knew my attachment would only intensify once I'd fucked her.

She moved with me, her hands gliding to my chest. Once the back of her knees hit the bed, she was supposed to scoot up onto the mattress. But instead, she leaned in to kiss me.

I pulled my face away, never allowing her lips to touch mine.

She stilled at the cold rejection, her eyes shifting back and forth in alarm. Her hands slowly slid down my body and stopped at my stomach.

"I don't kiss." My hand moved up her back, directly over her spine.

"Why?"

I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it on the floor without taking my eyes off her. Her bust was large in comparison to her petite rib cage. Every time she breathed, her tits seemed to swell. When she held herself with perfect posture, it made her body that much more hypnotic. Her waist curved in before it lengthened into the wide hips I loved to grab. I wanted to drag my lips all over her body. "I just don't." I grabbed her plump ass and set her on the bed.

Now the sexy expression was gone from her eyes. She didn't look at me with desire, the way she did when my dick was in her mouth. The look she gave me was completely different, like I'd just sucked all her spirit away. "Why?" She repeated the same question a second time, demanding an answer even though she couldn't demand anything from me.

"Doesn't matter." I dropped my jeans and my boxers then moved on top of her on the bed. I scooted her toward the pillows so I would have plenty of

room to fold her underneath me.

“It matters to me.” She pressed her hand against my chest, like the action could somehow steady me.

“When you kiss and fuck, it’s lovemaking. When you just fuck, it’s fucking. I don’t do lovemaking.”

“So you never kiss anyone?”

“Never.” I liked the way her hair was spread out around her, stretching outward across the bedspread. Her blue eyes were bright like the diamonds that had just covered her body. She was tense with fear, and I liked that she was afraid.

“Do you not like it?”

“I love it. But I never want to feel anything. I like not feeling anything at all.”

“Why don’t you want to feel anything?”

I came in here to fuck her, to claim my reward for saving her life. I wasn’t in the mood for chitchat. “Enough with the talking.” I spread her legs with my thighs and tilted her hips until she was angled perfectly underneath me. I could barely keep my breathing even because I finally had this woman spread underneath me, ready to be fucked good and hard. I wanted to stretch her and make her bleed for the first time.

She tensed underneath me, consternation spreading over her face. She didn’t move with me the way she did the other night. She gripped my arms hard to steady herself. She wasn’t fluid and free. She wouldn’t even look at me.

I pressed my crown to her entrance and pushed gently.

“Conway...”

I ignored her and kept pressing, trying to push into her tight entrance. But she was so tight I couldn't break through. It would take work for me to sink inside. But the wait would be worth it. Feeling her resistance was only a turn-on. Untouched and innocent, her body wasn't used to taking a man.

"I...I don't want this."

I looked into her eyes, watching the fear grow inside.

"I want it to be different. I want it to be mean something."

I kept my dick pressed against her, but I didn't try to push farther inside. "I don't care what you want. I bought you—and I can do whatever I want."

"Conway, please. I've been waiting my whole life for the right guy. I know he isn't you...but I don't want it to be like this. I want you to touch me, to kiss me, for it to be gentle and slow. I know it's stupid—"

"It is stupid. People think losing their virginity is supposed to be a magical experience. It's usually not. It's awkward, bumpy, and painful. There was never going to be a Prince Charming to make your first time any different. Why should I?" I saw her as a physical possession, something I'd spent a fortune on. She was the key to my success, to making me the greatest designer the world would ever see. My lingerie would still thrive even long after I was gone.

She kept her legs open, but her eyes showed her disappointment. "I know you saved my life. I know you paid a fortune for me. I know I should just shut up and take it...but you're keeping me for the rest of your life. I guess it's just one favor I want to ask."

"You think you're in any position to ask for favors?" My dick was hard, and I was horny as fuck. I should have sunk inside her by now. I should be surrounded by her warm tightness. I should be ramming her right this second,

getting off to the incredible pussy that tasted amazing.

Defeat finally entered her eyes. “Fine...” She widened her legs farther, surrendering to me completely. The argument was finally over, and she was ready for me to take her exactly how I wanted.

As hard as I was, I hated that look in her eyes. I hated her disappointment. It hurt me in ways I couldn't explain. I should just use her the way I promised I would, but something held me back. I wasn't a good guy and never claimed to be one, so there was no guilty conscience stopping me.

But I couldn't do it.

I wanted to fuck her so goddamn bad.

But I didn't.

I growled under my breath then got off her, all the muscles in my body flexed with fury. My arousal had given away to rage, and I wanted to punch a hole in the wall since I wasn't getting what I wanted.

I grabbed my boxers from the floor and pulled them on. I didn't bother putting on my jeans. Instead, I snatched them off the floor and threw them over my shoulder. I marched out of her room and headed to my bedroom at the very end of the hallway.

I slammed the door harder than I meant to.

My master bedroom had a living room with a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the rest of my land. There was a large fireplace in the corner, perfect for the nights when the fog settled over the grass. Sometimes I read by the fire, but most of the time, I just drank. I tossed my pants on the couch and headed into the bedroom where my king-size bed lay. There was a fireplace in there too, along with a walk-in closet and an enormous bathroom.

My dick was so hard I thought it might explode.

Unless I jerked off, it wasn't going anywhere.

I was disappointed in myself for listening to my slave, treating her like she had rights or something. But I was also turned on as fuck that she had this invisible power over me. She had the ability to make requests when no one else did. No one else could get away with that shit. If anyone else had been bought for a hundred million dollars to save their life, they wouldn't *dare* pull a stunt like that.

But she did.

I pulled my boxers down again, ready to jerk off so I could release the buildup of anger, frustration, and immense arousal.

But Muse stepped into my room.

The diamond lingerie was back on her body. Her hair was pulled over one shoulder, and she was in the five-inch heels that made her ass even perkier. Her blue eyes were on me, deeply apologetic.

Then she lowered herself to her knees.

Right in front of me.

She rested her hands on her thighs and tilted her chin up to look at me. "Let me make it up to you...sir."

I WORKED from my office at home the following day, and the view from my window showed the stables. It was a beautiful day outside, and the sun was so bright that looking over the grounds was a slight strain on the eyes.

After several hours at my desk, I went downstairs to grab a banana from the kitchen. I took breakfast in my office to avoid Sapphire. She made up for her abstinence by giving me a great blow job, but I was still pissed I'd come in her mouth instead of her pussy or ass.

"Anything else, sir?" Dante asked.

I peeled the banana and took a few bites. "Yes. I want a gynecologist to come by the house and see Sapphire. Make it happen."

Like always, Dante didn't ask any questions. "Of course, sir."

"Where is she, anyway?"

"Last time I checked, she was at the stables."

"Really?" I finished my banana and tossed the peel in the garbage. When we had breakfast together the other morning, she'd seemed particularly interested in the horses. Now I wondered if she was riding them.

"Would you like a ride there, sir?" Dante asked. "I can bring the golf cart around."

"That won't be necessary." A walk across the field in the sunshine would do me some good anyway. There was no better feeling than experiencing the hot sun right on my skin on a beautiful day like this. My art took place indoors, and it didn't matter how big my windows were, being inside didn't compare to direct sunlight.

I walked across the terrace then took the path that guided me to the stables along the outside. The horses perked up when they noticed me, their ears pointing to the sky and their eyes on me. They turned their heads slightly to look at me.

My black stallion trotted toward me across the grass, his beautiful mane

flowing back in the wind. He started walking with me along the fence, his black eyes the same color as his deep-colored hair.

I leaned over the fence and rested my elbows against the wood. “Hey, boy.”

A quiet snort came from his nose as he approached me.

“I don’t have any apples, Carbine.”

He smelled my hands as he searched for food, his hot breath flowing over me in powerful waves.

“Let me check in the stables.” I rubbed the front of his muzzle and then scratched him behind both ears. “But your belly is getting a little big. Not sure if you need it.”

He neighed like he understood me.

I gave his flank a playful pat before I walked away.

Carbine continued to follow me along the fence, his hooves hitting the soil with gentle thuds. His tail shifted from left to right, and a small snort escaped his nose every few seconds.

Marco stepped out of the stables in boots and a Stetson. “Carbine misses you.”

I glanced at him one more time before I turned away from the fence and approached the tables. “He’s a good horse.”

“He is when he’s separated from the mares,” Marco said with a laugh. “What brings you down here, sir?”

“I was told my guest was down here.”

“Sapphire?”

I didn't even like hearing another man call her by name, but I swallowed my annoyance. "Yes."

"She's been grooming the horses and feeding them all morning. She's really taken a liking to the horses. And the horses seemed just as interested in her as she is in them." He gripped the brim of his hat and adjusted it as he walked beside me. His brown boots were covered with dust, and his skintight jeans made him look like the perfect rancher. He took me into the shade of the stables and away from the summer heat. "How about a ride?"

"Not today." I looked around the stalls and saw Sapphire standing at the very end with an Appaloosa tied up to the stall. She was brushing his flank with a thick brush, cleaning the outer coat to keep the beast cooler in the warm sun. Dante must have given her clothes to wear, because she was in skintight denim jeans, boots, and a collared shirt.

She was a hot cowgirl.

I held up my hand and silently dismissed Marco.

He read the signal correctly and walked to the other side of the tables. Like Dante, he didn't ask any questions about my guest. Whether she was a prisoner or not, it wasn't his concern.

I approached Sapphire from behind. "You're pretty good at that."

She looked over her shoulder at the sound of my voice, slightly startled because she hadn't expected me to be standing there. "Thanks...Marco has shown me a few things."

I moved to the head of the horse and rubbed her along her snout. "Dante told me you've been out here all morning."

She turned her gaze back to her work, running the brush along the horse. She took long strokes, digging up the loose hair and removing it from the horse's

flank. The horse was surprisingly docile for the fact that Sapphire wasn't Marco, the person she was used to. Sapphire was a complete stranger, but she didn't seem to mind. "Yeah. I asked if I could help out, and he's teaching me a few things. It's better than sitting around all day. Besides, I like the horses." She kept her eyes on her work, probably to avoid contact after the tense night we had. She'd gotten on her knees and sucked my dick in apology, and I allowed it to happen because she was too damn sexy to turn down. She didn't gag and swallowed all of my come like last time—then she let herself out.

I watched her hand go across the animal's back. Because of her height, she struggled to reach the very top, where the horse's spine curved inward. I grabbed the wooden step from the closet then set it on the ground in front of here. "Here."

She stepped up and was instantly a foot taller. "Wow, so this is what it's like to be you..."

I was still a few inches taller than her. "Almost."

She reached forward, using the horse for balance as she stretched across to get the untouched patches. "Marco said I need to get to know the horses before I ride them. They'll get used to me, and I'll get used to them. Then there shouldn't be as many problems."

"It's a good idea."

She finished brushing the beast before she stepped back down the ladder. Her collared shirt was tucked in, showing off her sexy waistline. The skintight jeans showed the outline of her long and toned legs. Whether she was naked or fully clothed, she looked stunning. "Anything I can help you with?"

"You're having lunch with me."

"When?" She carried the brush to the sink and rinsed it of the horsehair that

had been collected during grooming. Even when she had to lean over the sink, she kept her shoulders back and her posture perfect. Now the action was programmed into her spine.

“Thirty minutes.”

“You aren’t working today?”

“It’s Saturday.”

“Then where were you this morning?”

My eyes narrowed at the question. Since she was my slave, she wasn’t entitled to ask any questions. No matter how many times I laid down the law, she never seemed to get it. So I refused to answer the question, my silence clear enough.

She rolled her eyes and looked at the sink again.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

“Yes. It was pretty clear.”

After the bullshit stunt she’d pulled last night, I couldn’t believe she had the audacity to test the limits. Maybe I shouldn’t have shown an ounce of compassion. Maybe I should have just fucked her without thinking twice about it. “I can get you on your back any second, Muse. Don’t push me.”

She turned off the water then turned her blue gaze on me. “I don’t think you have it in you—and that’s something you should be proud of.”

SHE CHANGED into a sundress before she joined me for lunch on the terrace. Dante positioned the umbrella so we were completely in the shade.

Not only was the sun hot that afternoon, but the humidity was high. The summers in the countryside were breathtaking, something I would never get used to. But I would never be a fan of the wet heat.

My villa reminded me of my childhood home. That was why I'd bought it. It wasn't situated in western Tuscany, though. I was much farther north and closer to the east. Sometimes in the winter, I received a bit of snow. But in Florence and Tuscany, snow didn't exist.

Muse sipped her iced tea then broke off a piece of bread from the basket. She was hungrier than usual, probably because she'd been on her feet in the stables all morning. She wasn't leisurely riding the horses around, but being active in their grooming and feeding. If she did that every day, I guess I wouldn't care if she didn't use the gym.

She took a few bites then drank her iced tea again, pretending everything was perfectly alright between the two of us.

I stared at her with my intense expression, watching every little movement she made as I waited for her to look at me. My gaze was piercing, hot like a bullet just fired from the barrel. There was no mistaking that she felt it. Anyone this close to me would feel it.

She finally lifted her gaze. "It's hard to enjoy my lunch when you stare at me like that."

"Good." That was the point.

"How would you feel if I stared at you like that?"

"I'd encourage it." Despite her confidence and elegance, she would never hold my gaze with the same unflinching focus.

She popped another piece of bread into her mouth and chewed as she lifted her eyes and looked at me. She held my gaze with the same cool confidence,

not blinking and not challenged.

But that wouldn't last long.

It was easy for me to stare at her because I found her to be the most sexually alluring thing on the planet. Everything about her, from her thick eyelashes to the fullness of her lips, got me off. If I were to paint a picture of the perfect woman, she was what I would paint. And her false attempts to meet my intimidation was simply laughable.

Time stretched on. Neither one of us backed down.

“I'm going to fuck you sometime this week. That's all the time I'm giving you.” I couldn't give her all the time in the world. If I gave her too much power, then she would know she could push me. I didn't give anyone any leverage over me, and I shouldn't have given her a voice at all. But I had—and now we were here. I was negotiating with a woman I'd spent a hundred million dollars on.

It was ridiculous.

She finally broke eye contact, the subject of the conversation obviously striking a nerve.

I knew she would cave.

“If you think you can keep postponing it indefinitely, that's not going to happen. Maybe I'm not evil, but I'm not good either. My patience is very thin, and I'm already frustrated by your lack of cooperation. It seems like you've forgotten what I've done for you...”

“I never will.” Her voice escaped as a whisper, nearly as quiet as the breeze. “I am grateful...even if I don't show it in the way you want.”

“I want to start collecting on your debt—now.”

She grabbed another piece of bread and tore it into two pieces. Then she ripped the pieces into more pieces, playing with the freshly baked bread rather than enjoying it. “If I were in a different circumstance, it would be easy. But since I’m not...it’s a little more difficult.”

“That’s not my problem.” Her lack of experience had nothing to do with me. It only made me feel a little less angry for spending so much money on her. At least she was untouched. Having a gorgeous virgin wasn’t common.

“Well, I don’t want it to be this cold and robotic thing.”

“Well, I don’t do romance. So, what do you expect?”

“I need something more.” She lifted her gaze to look at me. “When we worked together at the studio, you kissed me on the shoulder and the neck...”

“I can do that again.” And I intended to. I knew she liked it. I could feel her tighten underneath me at my touch.

“You were gentle and it felt good. That’s what I want.”

I could do that—one time. “Done.”

“But...I want you to kiss me.”

Not this bullshit again. “I made my position on that very clear.”

“And I want you to change it.”

My hand closed into a fist, pissed that she would make any kind of demand from me. “Too bad.”

“I don’t understand, Conway. You can fuck me but not kiss me?”

“Kissing is innately romantic. It’s definitely a lot more romantic than two people fucking and getting off. That’s all I want from you, to fuck you whenever I want, come inside you, and then go on with my life. I don’t want

to pause and take the time to kiss you.”

Her expression slowly hardened into annoyance. “Well, that’s not what I want for my first time. I can’t screw a man without at least kissing him. It makes me feel like I don’t know you. I feel something when you hold me and kiss my neck...but I need more than that. You’re acting like I’m asking you for money or something. I’m not asking for much.”

“Yes, you are,” I snapped. “You’re asking for a lot more than you realize.”

“How long do you intend to keep me?”

My body tensed at the mere suggestion of letting her go. “Until you die.”

She smirked slightly, trying not to laugh. “I’m not going to look the same in fifteen years.”

“I have to squeeze every penny out of you.” No matter how many new designs I released, it would take forever to make back that money I spent.

“And if that’s the case, then we should make this relationship as positive as possible.”

“It’s not a relationship. You’re my property.”

“And what about friendship? Trust? You don’t want those things?”

I clenched my jaw slightly, refusing to answer.

“I’m telling you what I need to make this work.” She leaned forward, her long hair falling over one shoulder. “I’m not going to lie, I’m attracted to you, Conway. I’ve looked at you many times and wanted to kiss you. The idea of spending the rest of my life in a mansion in Italy with a gorgeous man to protect me is a dream come true in many ways...since I don’t have any other options. It’s sad for me to think about it that way, but it’s true. Out there in the real world, I have nothing. I can never go back to America because I’ll

never make enough money to live. Even if I get a job, the government will take my checks to pay back the loan I'll never repay...plus interest. I have a psychopath that will make good on his word the second he has a chance. This is all I have. So I'd rather make it as good as possible. For that to happen, I need to be connected to you. I'm not talking about falling in love or even romance...just human affection. I'm basically your mistress...treat me like your mistress."

I considered what she said and had a difficult time arguing against it. She was my willing prisoner, so I never had to worry about her running off. She wanted me the way I wanted her, but she needed different terms. I didn't need to treat her like a slave because she wasn't one. She was my fantasy, a fantasy I would never have to lose. So I might as well give her what she wanted to make it as enjoyable as possible. Because she was right—this was a lifetime commitment. She wouldn't just be one of the women in my bed, but the key to my artistic success. The more I enjoyed her, the better designer I would become. "I'll consider it."

She tilted her head slightly. "What's the big deal, Conway?"

"I can't afford to let the sex turn into something more."

"Because...?"

"My designs are fueled by masculine sexuality. Men just want to fuck, to feel kingly by being in between a woman's legs. They aren't interested in lovemaking or romance. That's why my lingerie is so prized. It speaks of that innate and carnal desire. So I keep my sexual encounters exactly the same—as nothing but fucking."

She listened to me in silence, her head still slightly tilted. "And you don't think it would be smart to broaden your audience more? Not all men are only interested in fucking a woman and walking away. There are some men out

there stupidly in love with the person they're with."

A few. Not many. "Trust me, that's not what most men want."

"So you've never made love to a woman?"

I'd known what I wanted in life at a very young age. Romance had never interested in me. There was so much beauty between a man and a woman having a purely physical encounter. It allowed more passion, knowing they would only have one night together. They wanted to make it last before the sun rose the following morning. "No."

"You've never been in love?" she asked incredulously.

"No." Nor would I ever.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"And you've never met anyone that's meant something to you?"

The only person who stole my complete focus was sitting across from me at that very moment. "No."

She finally turned her gaze away, looking at her food. "That's sad..."

"You haven't met anyone that's meant something to you either."

"But I want to."

The idea of her falling for some guy immediately ticked me off. "Now you never will—as long as you're mine."

Her eyes moved up again, this time with disappointment.

I didn't feel bad for what I said. For one hundred million dollars and her life, she would give up her romantic freedom.

She suddenly set her napkin on the table, her food only half eaten. Then she stood up and walked away, leaving me to enjoy my lunch alone.

“Sit.”

She halted in her tracks but didn't move back to the chair. She slowly turned to me, her blue eyes bright like the ocean. “If you want me to feel connected to you, you need to stop bossing me around—and treat me with respect.”

She was asking for too much. “I've already given you respect. You said no—and I listened. Choose your battles wisely, Muse. You can't win them all.” She might be able to get bits and pieces from me, but not everything. I wasn't a pushover.

She rested her hand on the back of the chair and then changed her mind. She sat down again, lowering herself with perfect grace as well as a slight purse of her lips. She obeyed when she didn't want to, but it was a wise decision.

She couldn't have everything.

Sapphire

I WAS BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND CONWAY A LOT MORE.

He really wasn't that complicated—but layered.

He possessed a dark shadow that followed him everywhere he went, even in the pitch darkness. For someone so wealthy and successful, he seemed perpetually somber. Nothing made him happy—even a kiss from a woman.

He spoke of his family fondly, so he had people that cared for him.

Then why was he like this?

Was this all because of work?

Money was important—but not that important.

Or maybe I just thought that because I didn't have any.

I spent my day in the stables, grooming the horses, feeding them, and even learning to saddle them. Marco was a nice man, and he never asked about my relationship with Conway. He didn't even ask where I was from. The only thing we talked about was the weather and the horses.

Which was fine by me.

There were six horses altogether, and each one had a very different personality.

The only one I couldn't get along with was Carbine, the black stallion that had his own section of land. Completely black with a matching mane, he was majestic and terrifying. Sometimes his neighs would erupt out of nowhere, and he possessed a sinister presence that I could sense—even as a human.

Marco was the only one that handled him, and even then, it was difficult.

“If Carbine is so difficult, why does Conway keep him?”

“He's his horse.”

“Aren't they all his horses?” I stood at the fence and propped one foot on the bottom strip of wood. Out here in the countryside, I really felt like I was in a different world. I hadn't even seen a car in a few weeks. It was nothing like New York, which was full of smog, people, and traffic. Out here, it was nothing but fresh air and beauty.

“Yes. But this horse is special to him. It's the only one he'll ride.”

“Carbine?” I asked in surprise. “He won't even come to the fence when I have a carrot.”

“He's picky. Has a bit of an ego as the only male on the land.”

No wonder why Conway preferred him—they had the same personality.

“Makes sense...”

“And his father gave him that horse.”

“Does his father ride?”

“I don't know much about Mr. Barsetti.” Marco rested his elbows on the fence. “I just know he's rich, powerful...and a bit intimidating. Doesn't say

much. The times he's been here, all I've gotten is a nod from him."

"Like father, like son..."

Marco chuckled. "I think you're right."

"Thanks for showing me the ropes around here. It's nice to be outside in the fresh air. And the horses are beautiful..."

"No problem. I get a bit lonely out here with all this peace and quiet." He stared at Carbine, who nibbled on the grass clear on the other side. The second we approached, he moved away like we were pestering him. "It's nice to have someone to talk to."

"Do you live around here?"

"I have a little villa in Verona with my wife. My two sons are out of the house."

"That's nice."

"I worked at the tomato plant outside of Verona my whole life. They got a new owner and let go all the people who were close to retiring as a way of avoiding the pension my previous employer promised. When I tried to fight it, they let me go. I didn't know what else to do because work is hard to find around here. That's when Conway offered me the job. And I like it a lot more than working in a plant all day. I get to take care of these beautiful steeds with a gorgeous view. I'm pretty lucky."

I stared at Carbine as the surprise erupted inside my body. I didn't expect such generosity from a man who claimed to be evil. He danced on the very edge, swaying between good and evil. He was both and neither at the same time. On the one hand, he saved my life by paying a fortune to keep me away from Knuckles. But on the other hand, he took my freedom in compensation.

Didn't make much sense. "I don't understand Conway."

"He's complicated, to say the least," Marco said with a chuckle. "He cares about money too much. I think if he walked away from it, he would be a lot happier."

"But it seems to be the only thing that does make him happy."

"No. Success is what makes him happy. He wants to leave a mark on the world. But since he's always in competition with himself, he always wants to improve. He'll work himself to death even though he's already the best at what he does. Work will be his downfall."

Conway wanted to keep me because of the way I inspired him. And he refused to feel any connection with me or any other woman to keep things meaningless. Marco knew Conway well, and he'd made the same observation I did.

Work really was all he cared about.

I HAD a towel wrapped around my body and was just about to hit the pool when Dante appeared. "Conway would like to see you in his studio."

I pulled my hair into a bun to keep it off my neck and kept walking toward the patio. "I'll be there after my swim."

"Uh, miss. He expects to see you now."

I didn't like being treated like a dog. He issued a command, and I was supposed to follow it like a mindless idiot. No matter how much I owed him, I couldn't shake off the irritation. I turned back around, seeing Dante stand in the hallway with his hands held together at his waist.

Then he gave a nod toward the stairs. “If you defy him, we’re both responsible.”

Dante would look incompetent if he failed to follow his master’s orders, and while I didn’t appreciate Dante’s dislike of my character, I didn’t want to cause problems. I headed up the stairs. “Wait, where is his study?”

“Second floor with the double black doors.”

I moved to the second floor, a level I hadn’t even seen before. In one of the sitting rooms was a black piano along with a bar. Another living room featured a large TV. A gaming console was there, and I wondered who it belonged to because Conway didn’t seem like the video game type.

I located the double doors and stepped inside. “You called?” I asked sarcastically.

He stood at a table identical to the one in his studio in Milan. He was examining a white fabric with his fingertips, feeling the softness between his thumb and forefinger. “Yes. And I expected you to answer quicker.”

“I was going for a swim.”

“You can swim some other time.” He snapped his fingers without looking at me. “Undress.”

My eyes snapped wide apart. “Enough with the snapping. If you want me to do something, all you have to do is ask.”

He lifted his gaze to me, his green eyes hostile. He was in black jeans and an olive t-shirt, his chiseled arms looking tight as he worked at the table. He hadn’t shaved that morning, so the stubble was starting to thicken along his jaw. I’d never seen him in lighter colors, only dark. But the dark hue looked perfect on a man like him, a man whose eyes contained the underworld. “I thought we established I don’t have to ask for anything.”

“And I thought we established that our relationship would be much easier if you did.”

He dropped the fabric he was holding and straightened his shoulders. Even with slight movements, he appeared far more menacing. “Undress.” He didn’t snap his fingers this time, but his gaze told me I shouldn’t defy him again. “That was me telling you, not asking you.”

It was better than the snapping, so I dropped my towel and removed my bikini top and bottom. He’d seen me naked before, so now I didn’t feel so shy. But the instant I was naked, I felt the heat around him amplify. His green eyes absorbed my curves like two sponges. I could feel his arousal, feel his cock harden without even being able to see it. I felt his eyes touch me, his piercing gaze powerful enough to press into me.

He maneuvered around the table, his fingertips sliding across the surface. The large windows allowed the sunlight to filter through and give his designs exposure to natural sunlight. He approached me from the side and stopped once his body came into my contact with my shoulder.

I could feel everything from him, feel the way he wanted me.

He pressed two fingertips against the top of my spine and slowly dragged them down, following the intricate curve of my spine. I tried not to breathe more heavily at his touch, but it couldn’t be helped. My lungs ached for air because the adrenaline had spiked in my blood. He moved farther down until he reached the top of my ass. He moved his mouth to my ear and breathed into my canal, letting me listen to his arousal.

His lips brushed against the shell of my ear, and he gripped my left cheek. “Jesus...” He squeezed it again before he moved his fingers down the crack between my cheeks. He moved farther and farther until he brushed against a place I’d never been touched.

I breathed in deeply, my nipples hardening at the foreign experience.

He moved even farther down, following the curve of my ass, and then pressed his fingers over my clit.

“Ooh...” Instinctively, I closed my eyes and felt my nerves begin to throb. I could never touch myself the way he touched me, and he did it with such perfection...like he knew exactly how a woman wanted to be touched. He rubbed it in a circular motion while he continued to breathe into my ear. Then his other hand groped one of my tits, his thumb flicking over my left nipple.

He rubbed me harder than dragged his fingers to my entrance. A single finger pushed inside gently, exploring my tightness. The second he felt how wet I was, he moaned into my ear. “Jesus Christ...”

I shouldn't be wet right now, not when this man was the owner of my soul. I shouldn't want to come, not when he refused to kiss me. My body shouldn't react this way, shouldn't be turned on by just listening to him be turned on by me.

“Fuck...” He released a pant into my mouth then swallowed. “I can't wait to fuck this pussy.”

I secured my hand on his arm for balance because I felt my knees grow weak. I felt the unbridled passion rush through me, the overwhelming desire to be with this man. It wasn't romantic, but my body didn't seem to care.

He leaned down and kissed my shoulder, his tongue moving across my warm skin in a caress. Then he kissed my neck, his hot kisses trailing all the way back to my ear.

I tilted my head so he could have all the access he wanted. I closed my eyes, felt him shift to the other shoulder, and gripped his arm tighter for balance. I shouldn't think about my situation, not when it didn't matter. I wanted to be

with him—and I should only focus on that.

When I felt this connection, I actually wanted him.

I loved it when he kissed me like that.

Made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

I turned my head toward his, my lips aching to kiss the man who had touched me more than anyone else. I leaned in, feeling his finger move in and out of my tight entrance. My lips landed on the corner of his mouth, and I let them linger.

He didn't move. He stared at me with his lidded eyes, his gaze focused on my mouth.

My affection had been rejected again. But I refused to accept defeat. If he wanted me, he had to compromise. If he wanted all of me, he had to give me all of him too. So I leaned in again, and this time, I kissed him right on the mouth.

He didn't pull away. He let the kiss happen, but his lips were immobile. His eyes were closed, and he took a deep breath, his breath coming out shaky. His hand tightened on my tit, and his finger stopped moving inside me.

Since he didn't pull away, I pushed onward. I pivoted my body toward him and kissed him hard, getting his entire mouth with mine. My hands moved to his shoulders, and my fingertips dug into the fabric of his t-shirt. I was naked, and now I wished he was too. This time, I wasn't touching him for him—I was doing it for myself.

After a brief resistance, his mouth finally responded. Like everything else about him, his kiss was exceptional. He smothered my upper lip with both of his, using a slight tongue that was so erotic, I felt the bumps rise across my skin. He separated his mouth before he smothered me again, his stubble

rubbing against the softness of the skin around my mouth.

His hand left my tit then moved to my cheek. Softly, he pulled the hair away from my face, tucked it behind my ear, and then slid his hand down until he reached my neck. His rough fingertips grazed down the artery in my neck, feeling my wild pulse, and then he gripped the back of my neck with his hand entirely.

He kissed me harder.

His breaths filled my lungs, and his kiss electrified me. His large hand still cupped my pussy from around my ass, and he started to finger me again, my juice seeping out of the entrance and dripping onto the floor. “So fucking wet...” He spoke against my mouth, his breathing escalating. “Muse...”

My arms circled his neck, and I silenced his words with my kiss.

It was the most I’d ever experienced of this man. It was the most connected I ever felt. Now I had all of him, had his breath in my lungs and his arousal between my legs. I could feel how much he wanted me, and he could feel how much I wanted him in return. I hardly knew this man, and I was also his property. But my body couldn’t distinguish right from wrong, not when he felt this good.

Not when he kissed like this.

His large hand moved to the back of my head, cupping me gently before he gave me his tongue.

My tongue met his, and they danced erotically like they’d met before. He moved his with mine then pulled away before he sucked my bottom lip. Every kiss was purposeful, making each embrace last. It felt intimate, just the way he warned it would.

I felt my restraint slip away, felt my hands grip his body more tightly.

He pulled his finger out of my pussy and gently rubbed my clitoris, his large fingers working my small nub aggressively. He circled harder and harder, his movements almost violent.

Now I could barely kiss him because all I could do was pant. My fingers dug into his biceps, and I moaned in his mouth, his soft, plump lips making me feel wonderful things. I'd been kissed before—but not like this.

And then I came.

I dug my fingers into his muscles as I moaned, riding the high into oblivion. I clawed at him like a cat on a scratching post, trying to climb an invisible wall to the other side. My hips bucked slightly, and I ground against his fingers harder. “Conway...”

His kiss paused against my mouth, and a quiet moan moved directly into my mouth.

The orgasm slowly faded away, making the tips of my toes tingle. This man had made me come several times now, but this time was the best. With his powerful arms around me and his mouth embracing mine...I really felt something.

I felt like this was more than just a man and a woman.

I felt a connection, some affection.

He pulled his fingers away from my clit then ended our kiss so he could look at me.

I knew what would come next. He fulfilled his end of the bargain. Now he wanted me to fulfill mine. If that's what he wanted, I would give it to him. Now that I'd had him in a more meaningful way, crossing the line didn't seem so scary. When he stared at me with those gorgeous eyes and that hard jaw, I wanted his mouth all over me again.

Instead of throwing me on the table or pushing me back on the sofa, he dropped his hands from my body and grabbed the white fabric he'd been working on when I first arrived. Before touching his forefinger to the material, he popped it into his mouth and sucked my slickness off.

Shivers moved down my spine.

He grabbed the small white material and then hung it up for me to see. It was a white piece of lingerie, the lace over the breasts see-through. The rest was made of a shiny material, and it was so short it would barely cover anything. Real diamonds were in the straps that went over the shoulders, sparkling from the light of the sun. "Put this on."

I took it with a shaky hand, unsure what was going on. We'd just had the most passionate moment I'd ever experienced in my life, and now he was focused on work again. Too stunned from that powerful orgasm to do anything else, I pulled it on.

He grabbed his pins and returned to me, an obvious bulge in the crotch of his jeans.

I'd get on my knees if he asked. Actually...he didn't even need to ask.

He moved around my body and pinned the material in the appropriate places. He made it tight in certain areas and then readjusted the straps. His hand moved down my front, checking the tightness of my belly and the length of the gown.

He hardly looked into my eyes.

"Take it off." He spoke quietly, not with anger, but defeat.

I pulled it off my body carefully, not touching the pins that kept it in place.

He took it from me and placed it on the mannequin. His back was turned to

me, his broad shoulders wide and powerful. He never turned back around. “I don’t want to see you until tomorrow night.”

It was probably a stupid thing to do, but I did it anyway. “Why?”

His fingertips got to work, and his back expanded as he took a deep breath. “Because I said so.”

Conway

DANTE INFORMED ME THAT THE DOCTOR HAD BEEN BY AND HAD successfully administered the shot into Muse's arm. There was usually a delay, but it wasn't her time of the month to get pregnant, so she was ready to go.

I was still finishing up my masterpiece.

The white lingerie felt like a rose petal through my fingertips. I had the finest Turkish material flown in overnight so I could make this special piece of clothing. Nicole had retrieved the diamonds from my favorite jeweler, collecting all the flawless gems that I could sew onto the small straps of the material.

I wanted my muse to look more beautiful than she ever had.

If she wanted a special night, I would give it to her—this one time.

I'd broken the one rule I always held—no kissing. But when she turned into my mouth and gave me such soft lips, my restraint slipped. All I could think about was how good she felt, how much my lips ached for hers. I'd fantasized about kissing her, dreamed of touching her like that, and once it was happening, I couldn't stop it.

I completely lost control.

It'd been over five years since I kissed a woman like that. Every other act of affection was a kiss on the cheek or the shoulder. But the kiss I had with Muse compensated for my long abstinence. It was the best kiss I'd ever had, the deepest and most erotic.

I never wanted it to end.

I'd eaten her pussy, tasted her skin, and felt her warm mouth around my length. But I'd never been as hard as I was when I kissed her. My fingers burned as I touched her soft hair. My breathing turned haywire, rugged and out of control. My finger was in her wet pussy, but that wasn't even the best part.

The kiss was the best part.

I felt her mutual arousal, felt the way she gripped me with her nails. And her pussy...was so fucking wet.

I could have fucked her then, and she wouldn't have stopped me.

But I knew if I did this right, she would be mine forever. She would listen without pause. She would obey blindly. She would be even more indebted to me than she already was. If I gave her this one favor, it could result in a lifetime of convenience.

Once the piece of lingerie was completed, created to her exact measurements, I hung it up on the mannequin. It was a piece of art, simple, elegant, and pure. Muse was my woman now, and I wanted her to wear something spectacular as I took her innocence. I wanted her to be bedded the way all women wanted to be bedded.

I wanted her to feel special.

I WAITED for her on the terrace by the pool. The sun was about to go down, and there was a chilled bottle of my family's wine on the table. Despite the importance of the evening, I was in a black t-shirt and jeans.

Didn't see the point in dressing up if I was just going to take everything off anyway.

Dante led Muse outside to join me for dinner, a single candle on the table along with a red rose.

She was in the black dress Dante left on her bed. It was dropped off by Nicole, who was ordered to pick up something nice but sexy. It was a backless dress that was tight over all the curves of her body. It showed off her petite waist, incredible tits, and her nice hips.

Muse was a smart woman, so she must have connected the dots by now.

She knew what would happen once dinner was over.

This time, she wouldn't say no.

I pulled out the chair for her, being a gentleman for the special occasion. Once she was in her seat, I gently scooted her in before I returned to my seat. I placed the linen napkin over my lap, and I poured the wine.

Her hair was in big curls, and they trailed down her chest. She wore the diamond earrings I gave her as well as the diamond necklace around her throat. She looked like the mistress every man would dream of, gorgeous and perfect.

She was all mine.

I didn't give a damn about dinner or the breathtaking view we got to enjoy.

There was only one view I looked forward to.

She rested her hands in her lap and held my gaze, seeming unaffected by the plans we had for the evening. Maybe she felt like she had some power now that I'd agreed to kiss her. Maybe that gave her the sense of value that she needed to rationalize what she was doing. This situation was anything but rational.

But it was reality.

She was worth a hundred million dollars—and I would get the most use out of her.

“You look beautiful tonight—just like every other night.” I took a drink of my wine, something Dante found in my wine cellar, next to the garage underground.

“Thank you.” She spoke with a steady voice, not nervous like she used to be. She wasn't timid around me at all anymore. “You look nice too.” She drank from her glass, her lipstick leaving a mark.

She'd left a similar mark on my dick the last time she sucked me off.

Dante brought our dinner a moment later, roasted lamb chops, asparagus, and a side of sweet potatoes. He excused himself silently, trying to be as invisible as possible.

I'd told him to stay out of our way tonight.

She held her knife and fork appropriately and cut into her meal with the perfect elegance. If I brought her to a dinner party or some other function, she would do well. Not only would her beauty impress everyone there, but her charms would be enjoyed as well. All the men would look at me and wonder how it felt to fuck a woman like that every single night.

But I would never tell.

I considered making conversation with her, but I didn't know what to say. All I was thinking about right then was sex. My hands shook at the thought of her knees pressed into her waist to accommodate my hips. Adrenaline surged through me as I imagined trying to shove my big dick inside her. Inexperienced and innocent, she would hold on to me until it was over. She might cry from the pain, but she'd definitely moan at the pleasure.

My chest ached because I was so excited.

I finally got to claim my prize.

The second Muse walked into my life, I'd been the only person to take care of her. I gave her money when she didn't have anything else. I gave her a job under the table when no one else would. And when she took off, not only did I let her go, but I had an envelope with twenty thousand euro to help her out. When she was captured, I was the one who saved her from a horrific fate.

If anyone deserved to take her virginity, it was me.

It was the least she could do for me.

Now she would have a comfortable life living in my mansion. She would never worry about money again. Whatever she wanted, she could have. A lifetime of protection from one of the most powerful men in the world, it was every woman's dream. Most women would give anything to be here right this very moment.

To have me in a way no one else ever did—with my kiss.

She didn't make conversation either, her heart probably slamming in her chest. She must be nervous, afraid of the unknown.

But she had no reason to be nervous. I would guide her every step of the way.

All she had to do was let me have her.

And I would make it everything she wanted it to be.

When our glasses were empty, I refilled them. I only finished half my dinner because I didn't want to feel sluggish when we went to my bedroom.

Muse didn't seem to care. She ate everything, either because she was starving or because she was nervous.

Some observers might say it was awkward to have dinner with someone without speaking. But I actually enjoyed it. I liked the fact that our relationship had progressed to a certain level of comfort. She didn't ramble on about stupid shit that I didn't care about, and I didn't fill the empty silence with random comments.

I liked it this way.

Normally, Dante would come out and clear the table and ask us if we'd like coffee and dessert. I told him to skip that part and give us privacy. He could clear the dishes once we went upstairs.

She wiped her small mouth with the linen napkin and set it on the table.

“Did you enjoy your dinner?”

“It was delicious...like always. You?”

“I wouldn't keep Dante as the head of the staff if he wasn't the best.” I left the chair and extended my hand to her.

She eyed it for a moment before she placed her slender hand in mine.

I pulled her up and guided her into the house. My fingers interlocked with hers, and I kept her close to me, treating her like a lady every step of the way. I controlled the shake of my hand to hide my excitement. Now, the boring

part of the evening was over, and we could get to the good stuff.

The night I'd been waiting for.

I took her to the third floor and stopped at the double doors of my bedroom. The pulse in her wrist had picked up as we got closer to my bedroom. Now it was pounding loudly, her heart working in overdrive. Her skin was warm, and there was a distinct color to her cheeks.

I turned to her and circled her waist with my arms. "I left something for you on my bed. Put it on. I'll be there in a few moments." My lips brushed against her hairline, and then I angled my neck down to kiss her. It was supposed to be a quick embrace, but the second my mouth was on hers, I kissed her harder than I should. My hand moved into her hair, and I gently sucked on her bottom lip. My tongue emerged next, greeting hers.

Her pulse slowed as our mouths moved together. She breathed into me slower, calm spreading through her body. She got lost in my kiss the way I got lost in hers. I pulled her tighter against my body, her tits pressed against my chest in the thin dress she wore.

I pulled away before I fucked her right against my door. I turned away harshly, giving her my back because I couldn't even look at her right now. My hands formed fists, and I had to steady my aggression before it couldn't be controlled any longer. If I weren't trying to be a gentleman tonight, she'd be on her hands and knees in the hallway right now. I'd be ramming her from behind, my hands gripping her luscious cheeks.

The door clicked when she shut it behind her.

I leaned against the wall and massaged my knuckles to pass the time. By now, she would have seen the white rose petals on the bed, the hundreds of white candles the staff had set up for me. There was a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries on the table, something we probably wouldn't even get

to.

It was the most romantic night she'd ever get.

Knuckles would have fucked her in the ass by now.

I waited five minutes—and not a second longer. I stepped inside my bedroom with a raging hard-on in my jeans. The living room was lit with white candles, and there was a line of petals acting as a path to my bedroom. I followed it, removing my shirt and undoing my jeans as I went.

My shirt dropped on the floor, and I crossed the threshold.

She stood in the white lingerie, the short dress showing the white lace panties underneath. She'd positioned her hair perfectly, arranging it down her chest. The diamond necklace glowed in the light of the candles. The diamonds along the straps did the same thing. Her lingerie was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and she was the only woman who would ever wear this one-of-a-kind piece.

My eyes roamed over her body, seeing her hard nipples through the fabric. Her petite shoulders were held back, and her long legs stretched out until her bare feet hit the rug next to my bed. She stared at me, partially nervous and partially confident.

I'd seen her in lingerie before, but she'd never looked as beautiful as she did now. I'd seen her walk the stages with dozens of lights shining on her, but she'd never looked so stunning. The white color complemented her tanned skin perfectly. Her dark hair contrasted against the brightness as well. Her eyes were on me, roaming over my chiseled physique.

I couldn't wait to take that lingerie off. She looked exquisite in it, but she would look even more beautiful with nothing on at all. That bronzed skin would look beautiful by candlelight.

I crossed the space between us, my feet feeling heavy against the floor. My heart was unnaturally slow because the climax of this moment was surprisingly calm. It felt like a dream, a fantasy I'd wanted to experience for so long. Ever since I'd laid eyes on her in that auditorium, she'd suffocated my thoughts. The more I looked at her, the more she called me an asshole, the more my obsession began to grow.

Just as my dick had.

My hand moved into her hair first, pinning it back so I had full access to her lips. The second my mouth was on hers, I was a goner. Even if she told me to stop, I wouldn't. At this point, it was all carnal instinct. I wasn't a person anymore, just a man who needed this woman.

My other hand gripped her ass and played with the lace of her panties. My tongue danced with hers and encountered the same enthusiasm I felt. Our mouths clung to each other, broke apart, and then came together again in a heated embrace. I could feel her pulse in her neck with my thumb, feel the energy rushing through her veins. The smell of her perfume tingled my nostrils. I gripped her ass cheek and then hooked my finger into her panties. I slowly tugged them down to her thighs.

Her hands undid my jeans, getting them loose around my narrow hips.

I loved it when she undressed me.

I grabbed the bottom of the lingerie and pulled it over her head, revealing the firmest tits I'd ever seen. Some of the girls in my show, like Lacey, had boob jobs and liposuction in their hips and thighs. But Muse was all natural, perfect just the way she was.

The lingerie was dropped on the ground, and my mouth was all over her neck and shoulders. I gripped her hard and pulled her into me, devouring her like she was prey and I was the predator. Her panties were still at her thighs, so I

pushed them down as I lowered myself to my knees, trailing kisses over her tits and stomach as I moved. I moved down her long legs and her knees, kissing and sucking her skin.

When I rose to my feet, I pushed my jeans and boxers down and kicked them away. I lifted her into my arms, carrying her like she was a feather, and laid her on my bed. Her light body hit the sheets, and her legs immediately opened to me.

I crawled on top of her, my hard dick oozing from the tip. My weight hit the mattress, and it slowly began to sink underneath her, slightly curving around her body. My knees separated her thighs, and I moved closer to her, my spine tight with adrenaline. My cock couldn't wait to feel that wet and tight pussy. I couldn't wait to slide through her slickness, to listen to her cry as she tried to take my enormous dick.

Her hands snaked up my back, and she pulled me closer to her. Her fingertips reached the back of my neck, and she pulled me in for a kiss. When she kissed me, her lips showed all of her arousal. There was tongue, heavy breaths, and heat. She twirled my strands around her fingertips as her thighs squeezed my waist.

My hand dug into the back of her hair, and I got a tight grip as I kissed her harder, pressing her into the mattress. My dick rubbed against her swollen clit, rubbing her stimulated nerves and making her moan involuntarily.

My body got carried away as my mind no longer controlled it. I tilted my hips and pointed my cock at her entrance. It was tight right from the beginning, just like last time, but I slowly pushed.

She didn't stop me this time.

I pinned my arms behind her knees and widened her legs, spreading her wide apart so I could fit inside her a little easier. I could kiss her at the same time,

but I wanted to enjoy her reactions to me. I wanted to savor every second of this moment, to commit it to memory.

I pushed farther inside her, greeted with the wetness of her pussy. I slowly inched deeper inside, feeling her tight channel resist me. It wouldn't stretch, no matter how aroused she was. I kept going, moving farther and farther.

She breathed deeply as she felt me, her nails digging into my biceps. Sometimes she winced when I pushed a little too hard. All of the emotions were written on her face, the pleasure as well as the pain.

I wasn't even halfway in yet.

I pushed again, slowly getting more traction now that her body had acclimated to mine. I hit resistance at that point and knew exactly what was blocking my path. I pressed my mouth over hers and kissed her as I gave a quick thrust, breaking through her virginity and finally getting my dick inside.

Her mouth trembled against mine as she released a whimper of pain.

Fuck, I was so hard.

I sucked her bottom lip and moved inside until I was balls deep. Her entire channel was still tight around me, constricting me like a snake suffocates its prey. My hand cradled her head, and I looked into her eyes. Then I started to move.

I started to thrust.

I rocked her on my bed, moving her back and forth as my hips thrust. My cock slid in and out of her, covered in her arousal as well as a few drops of blood. The explosion of goodness was deep in my gut, the distant beginning of a climax that would make me shake with pleasure. I already wanted to explode because this moment was so damn good.

But I held on.

My eyes locked on to hers as I enjoyed her pussy, sliding in and out at a greater speed.

Her eyes welled with moisture until two tears streaked from the corners of her eyes.

I knew I was the biggest asshole in the world for enjoying it. I liked watching her cry, liked watching her struggle to accept my fat cock. I liked claiming her in a way no other man could. If none of these bad things had happened to her, she would still be in New York. She would have fallen in love with someone and given herself to him.

But I took her instead.

The asshole inside me was as rampant as ever, but a softer part of me still existed beneath the surface. She brought out that gentleness in me, made me care about her pain when I shouldn't. So I slowed down. "Doing okay, Muse?"

"It...it just hurts a little."

My spine tightened again, the arousal pooling in my balls. "You want me to stop?" I shouldn't even give her the option. I should just fuck her as hard as I wanted to. In time, she would stretch, and it would get easier. So she should deal with it. I shouldn't give a damn how she felt.

"No...it feels good." Her arms hooked over my shoulders. Another tear slipped down her cheek. "It just hurts too."

I kissed the tear on her cheek before it could reach the sheets. "It hurts the first time...especially since I'm a big man."

Her tits shook every time I thrust into her, and her fingers dug into my hair.

She breathed through the pain, moaning sometimes and wincing at others.

I didn't expect to make her come, not when it was her first time and she was struggling so much. But I wanted to make her enjoy it, to make her look forward to the next time I would have her. Because I could tell in that moment I would want to fuck her forever. All she did was lie there, and it was still the best sex of my life.

I repositioned myself so my pelvic bone would rub against her clit. I ground against her forcefully, pressing into her clit harder than I would with my fingers. The muscles all over my body were tightening in anticipation, and I couldn't hold back much longer. I wanted to come hard, to get my first return on my investment.

She breathed more heavily, and her tears stopped. Her nails started to claw at my back, and she widened her legs farther, doing what she could to accommodate my girth. Her eyes closed, and she arched her back just as her pussy tightened around me.

Thank god.

She came all around me, her pussy squeezing me as she dragged her nails down my body. Her come sheathed my dick, and her hips bucked automatically. Her mouth trembled against mine, and her moans were a hundred times louder than the other times I made her come. She was in pain, but the pleasure far outweighed the discomfort. "Conway..."

She said my name. I didn't have to ask her to do that.

I gave my final pumps, this time fucking her as hard as I wanted. I pushed through her cream then shoved my entire dick inside her. Like my body was a gun and my dick was the barrel, a bullet erupted out of my body. I filled her with everything I had, dumping her with more come than my body had ever produced. I gripped the back of her neck and deepened the angle, obsessed

with giving it all to her. I wanted her to sleep with my come inside her. I wanted her to feel me even after my dick was gone.

Sweaty and warm, our bodies were satisfied and exhausted. I stayed on top of her because I wasn't ready to leave yet. My dick was still softening, and I treasured how good that orgasm just felt. I moved my mouth to hers and kissed her softly, trying to make up for the cruel way I fucked her at the end.

She kissed me back, her kiss just as enthusiastic.

I slowly pulled out of her, feeling the air against my wet dick. A spot of blood was underneath her, but I liked the stain. I wasn't in a hurry to change my sheets, not when I had a nice memory like that.

She brought her knees together and lay there, relaxing now that it was over.

I pulled her legs apart and stared at her pussy, seeing the white come accumulated at her entrance. I closed her legs again. "My come is staying inside you all night."

She propped herself on her elbows and looked at me. "Okay..."

I moved to the head of the bed where the pillows were, then patted the spot beside me.

She crawled over the sheets then lay next to me.

I didn't sleep with women either, but I thought I could make an exception this one time. I wanted to give this woman what she wanted since she gave me something so incredible. I positioned her against me, her arm draped over my waist and my arm hooked around her shoulders.

I was tired from the anticipation for the night, and I knew she was sore. Otherwise, I'd be fucking her again right now. But I didn't want to push it. I enjoyed seeing her in pain, but I didn't want to hurt her more than necessary.

I wasn't that big of an asshole.

THE ONLY REASON why I woke up so early was because my phone was ringing on the nightstand.

I squinted my eyes to stare at the screen, barely making out the name.

Dante.

I answered and put the phone to my ear. "Hmm?" I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and glanced at the alarm clock. It was nine in the morning, hours after I would normally be awake. I turned over and stared at Muse, who was still sound asleep. Her hair was all over the place, and her hand was still reaching out for my stomach.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. But Carter is here to see you."

I growled into the phone. "Tell him to fuck off, Dante."

"I knew you would say that, so I repeated it. But he said it's important."

If Carter said it was important, then it was the real deal. He didn't say things like that often. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Alright, sir."

I set the phone on the nightstand and made sure she was still asleep. I wanted her to rest as long as she needed—so we could get back to fucking when she was well rested. I had a lot to teach her.

I pulled on sweats and a t-shirt before I made the walk from the third floor to the entryway.

Carter stood in jeans and a t-shirt, his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the

painting of my mother on the way.

I reached the bottom of the stairs. “Everything alright?”

When he looked at me, his visage was guarded. He glanced to the other side of the room in search of Dante.

Not that Dante was a person we needed to be concerned with.

“Let’s talk in the front.”

We moved to the large porch and the roundabout full of trees. The gate had been closed and locked after Carter pulled inside in his Ferrari. Bright red and loud, it was the perfect car to get attention.

“What is it?” I asked, wanting to get this over with quickly. I had someone waiting for me, a white rose that had blossomed for the first time last night.

“I heard some talk last night. Word on the street is Knuckles is pissed.”

Was that supposed to mean something to me? “He looks like a guy that’s already pissed.”

“Well, he’s more pissed than usual.” He slid his hands into his pockets then walked toward his car. “And I hear he’s bad news. He’s claimed the Eastern territory of the States for a long time, and he’s held on to the domain in horrific ways. He’s not a guy you want to cross.”

“Good thing I didn’t cross him, then.”

Carter turned his gaze to me. “You did when you bought Sapphire.”

“He had a fair opportunity to win her—if he put his money where his mouth was. I paid the higher price and claimed her. That’s how the real world works. If he really wanted her, he should have paid more.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think he sees it that way.”

“If he’s invited to the Underground, then that means he adheres to the conduct rules. There can be no violence over the exchange of slaves. The winning bid is respected. He can’t take her or threaten me for her. If he wants to keep his reputation, then he’ll have to let it go.”

Carter stared at my gate and slightly shook his head. “I’ve got a bad feeling about him, Conway. It’s a feeling in my bones, you know.”

“If he wanted to be the one fucking Sapphire every night, he should have paid more for her. He has the money. Not my fault he didn’t think she was worth it. And yes, she’s definitely worth it.”

Carter would normally make a joke at my comment, but this time, he didn’t. “People think he’s up to something.”

“Like what?”

“Something bad. That’s all I know. That’s enough for me.”

“You’ve never been intimidated by anyone, Carter. Why are you scared now?”

“Because you’re my family,” he snapped. “Because I actually give a damn in this case.”

“Carter, I’ll be fine. I’m not afraid of him. I’m one of the most powerful men in the world. I make my money honestly, have a famous face. He’s just some asshole that creeps in the shadows.”

“And pays off all the cops and the detectives...”

“Like we haven’t done the same.”

“But he threatens cops in ways we never do...like threatening to kill their wives and kids. He’s a different breed, Conway. Maybe he’ll respect the code, but maybe he won’t. You should watch your back.”

“I always do.”

“Or even just sell her to him...”

That wasn't an option. “No.”

“Is a woman really worth the—”

“I'm not selling her.”

Carter finally dropped it. “Maybe we should tell our fathers.”

“Why the hell would we do that?”

“I know they don't talk about it, but they've been through shit like this. They might have some advice.”

“There's nothing to ask them about. All you've heard is a rumor. And most of the time, rumors stay rumors. I wouldn't involve my father anyway. He left that life behind decades ago. I'm not dragging him back into that. I'm a grown-ass man, and I don't need my father for anything. He should be coming to me for help—not the other way around.”

“I get what you're saying,” Carter said calmly. “Just don't want to underestimate this guy.”

“I'm not afraid of him, and you shouldn't be either, Carter.”

WHEN I RETURNED to my bedroom, there was a breakfast tray in the living room. One plate had been devoured, and only a few crumbs remained behind. The coffee had been drunk, and she'd used all the cream in her coffee.

“Where were you?” She stepped out of the bedroom in one of my t-shirts,

probably because she didn't want to put the formal dress back on. And her lingerie didn't cover anything anyway.

Seeing her in my t-shirt only made her look sexier. I walked to the bedroom, my hands itching to take off the piece of clothing that reached all the way to her knees. I grabbed the material and pulled it over her head, revealing her naked body and her white panties. "Doesn't matter."

"You left pretty quickly."

My arms wrapped around her waist, and I guided her to the bed. "Carter came to see me."

"Everything alright?"

I backed her up to the bed, the backs of her knees touching the mattress. "Nothing you need to worry about."

"That's not a good answer..."

"He said he's worried about Knuckles. Heard some bad things about him."

All the color immediately drained from her cheeks. "Does that mean he's coming after me...?"

The second I saw the fear in her eyes, I wished I hadn't said anything. "No. And even if he was, you have nothing to worry about." My hand wrapped around her neck, and I squeezed her until I could feel her pulse beat against me. This woman never had anything to worry about as long as she lived. As long as she was mine, no other man would touch her. I was the only man she would ever have between her legs. She could go wherever she wanted—because she was invincible.

That didn't allay her fears. "You don't know him the way I do..."

"And you don't know me the way my enemies do. You're safe with me. I

promise you.”

Her eyes shifted back and forth as she looked into mine, her breathing still escalated.

My hand cupped her cheek, and I pressed my mouth close to hers, close enough for a kiss. “Muse.”

Her fingers wrapped around my wrist.

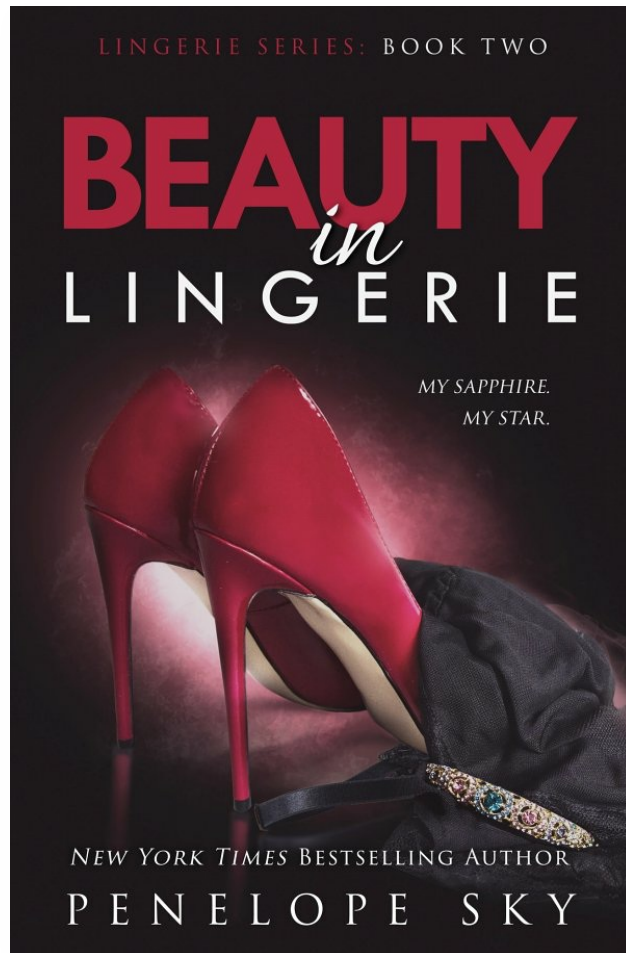
“I don’t make a promise I can’t keep. I can’t promise you happiness, but I can promise you that you will always be safe with me. So don’t think about him again. And don’t ever think about him when you’re with me.”

Her fingertips tightened on my wrist, and her eyes became steady. She looked at me with a new ray of hope, like she finally believed the promise I just made to her. She rose on her tiptoes slightly to kiss me.

I should pull away. I should end the kisses now. I only did it to make last night enjoyable for her, but now that fairy tale was over. It was just fucking and coming from now on. But when she kissed me like that, I felt powerless to stop it. I wanted her to keep kissing me, to keep giving me her tongue as she searched for mine.

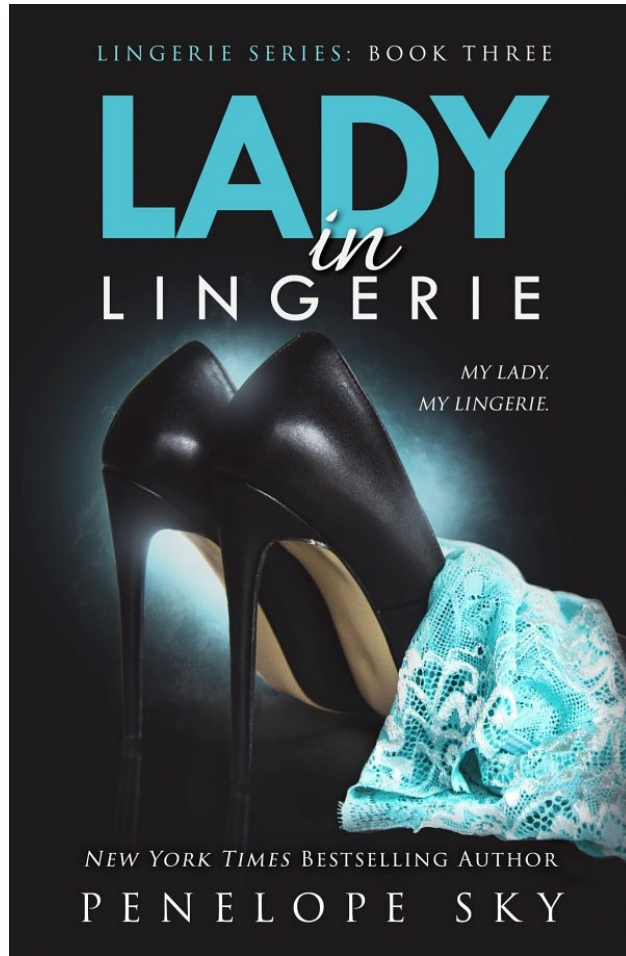
And I wanted to kiss her back just as much.

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