



DROP
DEAD
QUEEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

C. HALLMAN
& J. L. BECK

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TRIGGER WARNING

*This is a Dark Bully Romance including
many TRIGGERS*

For a complete list of triggers please click here

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ASPEN

*M*y eyes drift open and closed as mayhem surrounds me. I can't tell if this is reality or a bad dream. Disorientation leaves me confused. I'm not sure what is up or down. I force my eyes open once more, even though I'm tempted to keep them shut.

Everything is spinning, and an insistent ringing fills my ears.

I look down and see that I'm still strapped to the seat. Rubble from the crash surrounds me, and I realize the entire side of the helicopter is blown out.

I lift my arm and reach out to touch the tree we crashed into. My fingertips run over the rough surface of the bark, scratching my already tender skin.

Oh, god! It's not a dream. Panicked, I survey what's left of the helicopter or at least what I can see from where I'm sitting. The pilot is slouched forward in his seat, but I don't have to ask if he's alive or not. Not with the tree branch poking through his chest.

"Remain calm. We're experiencing what seems to be some type of engine failure," the pilot yells as the drop of altitude causes my stomach to flip.

I grip the seatbelt straps a little tighter and squeeze my eyes shut. Oh, god. I knew this was a mistake. That something bad was going to happen. Engine failure? How? We just took off.

"Oh, shit! We're going to need to prepare for an emergency landing."

My eyes pop open at the pilot's words, and I look out the window at the rugged landscape lined with trees.

"We won't make it. There is nowhere to land," I yell over the roar of the engines.

"There are no other options," he shouts.

The smell of fuel tickles my nostrils, dragging me out of the memory. I let out a groan, my eyes catching on flames as they flicker, burning parts of the aircraft.

I try to lift my arms once more, but my limbs feel like they weigh ten thousand pounds, and while my heart is beating hard in my chest, I feel nothing. My body is numb, but I already know I'm simply in shock. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, keeping the pain at bay, but that's not going to last forever.

Looking around one more time, my body tells me to stay put, but my brain tells me to get up and find shelter. Forcing my limbs to work, I unstrap and push out of my seat. My arms are like Jell-O, but somehow, manage to hold me.

However, it's not my arms that seem to be the problem after all. As soon as I move to take a step forward, an unexpected pain shoots up my leg. Groaning in agony, I lose my footing and fall backward into the seat.

I grit my teeth, fighting off tears, waiting for the lightning bolts of pain to subside. My thoughts spiral as I try to devise a plan to get out of the plane. I have to start moving soon. The smell of fuel becomes more pungent every second I remain here.

Looking down at my leg, I'm positive it is broken. Not only can't I put any weight on it, but my foot is slightly bent to the right. There is no way I can walk with this injury. The only option I have is to crawl out of here.

While I build up the strength to move once more, I survey the rest of my body for any other injuries. My head is pounding, making it hard to think. Every breath I take causes my lungs to burn, and I know I'm going to have some type of bruising from the seatbelt.

I can't put into words how thankful I am to be alive. My eyes drift to the pilot, I didn't know the man, but I'm sure he had a family, at least a wife, and maybe kids. They'll never get to see him alive again. No one will see me alive either if I don't get out of this helicopter.

That thought ignites a fire in my belly, giving me a boost of adrenaline. Yes, my leg fucking hurts, but I'll be dead if I don't start moving, and I can't die out here. *I won't.* I haven't endured all I have to die in this stupid fucking forest outside Corium.

With my teeth gritted together, I slowly lift myself out of the chair. My chest heaves with the effort it takes not to put any weight on my broken leg, but with slow, precise movements, I make it to the edge of the opening. Looking down, I notice there is more than a foot of air between me and the ground.

Which means getting off this piece of crap is going to hurt.

This part is going to be the most grueling, as there is no way for me to get off the helicopter without dropping to the ground. I stare out the opening, my muscles quaking, exhaustion tightening its hold on me. *Keep going!* a voice yells inside my mind.

Tears blur my vision, and a scream of anguish escapes my lips as I force myself out of the helicopter and onto the ground.

I land on my side with a thud that knocks the air out of me. I suck in a shuddering breath before the pain becomes all-consuming. Slowly, I roll over onto my stomach and press my cheek to the cold ground. The pain slowly recedes but doesn't disappear fully, and regardless of it still being there, I know I have to keep moving.

I let out another ragged breath, press forward, and start crawling, using my good leg to push off while dragging my bad behind me.

It takes forever to even make it a few feet, and the sweat beading on my brow forces me to stop. I wipe it away with my sleeve so it won't run into my eyes. The ground is cold, but the heat from the burning helicopter behind me is overwhelming.

It's a reminder that I must get away from it. There's a possibility it could blow up. And while that might help a rescue team find the crash site, it

doesn't help me if I'm too close.

The thought of a rescue team makes me wonder if they would even send one. Am I even worth it to someone like Lucas? God, I hope so.

All my worries and fears compile. I'm going to die out here. I'm going to die, and no one is going to know or care. My thoughts warp and twist. Will they even tell my parents? I can't help but think how right they were. I should've stayed at Corium, but how could I have known this accident would happen?

I tremble and have to force myself to calm down so I can keep going. Sucking deep breaths into my lungs, I focus on pushing myself one crawl at a time. My muscles burn with exhaustion, but I continue forward even as the pain in my leg intensifies.

My eyes scan the ground, and when they land on a white box with the word 'emergency' on it, I almost scream with joy. I try not to get my hopes up that there might be something in the box I can use, but I can't help it. This is a beacon of light in my eyes.

The box is about fifteen feet away, with sharp metal pieces from the aircraft surrounding it. I'll have to drag myself over the metal, but if that box contains anything important that might help get me rescued, I'd be stupid to pass it up.

Before I can think any longer, I'm crawling toward the box, focusing all my attention on it. Pieces of metal slide across my injured leg, and blood smears my hands as metal and glass slide over my palms. I'm not sure how I do it, but I shut down any feelings. The pain is nothing more than a dull ache in the back of my mind.

It takes me a little while to reach the box, but once I do, I sigh with profound relief. A loud pop meets my ears, and then I see flames.

I press my face to the cold ground as something on the side of the helicopter explodes. The burning smell of plastic makes my nose wrinkle, and I move toward a set of trees, my grip on the emergency box tight while I struggle to get away from the fire.

I'm not really sure how much time passes. At this point, it could be minutes or hours, but I finally make it to the tree line, far enough away from the crash

site but close enough in case there was anyone who saw us go down. I rest my back against the tree, the bark digging into my back. The tree might be uncomfortable, but nothing hurts more than my leg, which I straighten out slowly, the pain only receding once I stop moving.

Now that I'm somewhat safe, I have a moment to think, to breathe, but how I'm going to get back to Corium consumes my thoughts. Silence surrounds me, minus the crackling fire from the plane. Strange enough, the sound is almost comforting.

It's a peaceful silence, but also a silence that tells me how alone I really am. Dread festers in my gut, and my thoughts become my own worst enemy.

What if no one comes for me?

What if this was the plan all along?

No! I can't think that way. There is always hope. My eyes drift to my hands, where I still hold a death grip on the metal emergency box.

The chilly breeze whips through my hair, and I shiver. The night is only going to get worse when the temperature drops further, and the animals come out to play. I shake away the subconscious thoughts and focus my attention back on the box. My fingers tremble as I undo the metal tabs and flip the top of the box open. I stare at the contents for a whole second, wondering if I'm seeing the two flares sitting inside or if I'm imagining them being there.

There's hope. There's still a chance someone could save me.

I grab the orange flare gun and hold it to my chest. My heart thunders against my ribcage, the beat filling my ears.

I'll have to wait until it gets closer to dark to use it if I want the best chance of someone seeing it and coming to my rescue. That's if anyone cares enough to. *No.* I have to stop thinking like that. I'm still a student at Corium; surely, they'll send a search party out. Except no one knows I'm gone, only Ren.

Leaning back against the tree, I stare up at the blue sky and try not to think about the way he smiled at me right before we took off.

Did he do something to the helicopter?

My stomach churns at the thought. He wouldn't, would he? The doubt grows in my mind like ivy, snaking through each thought. I don't know the answer to that question, but I can only hope he wouldn't set me up like that.

The minutes tick by so slowly it's almost paralyzing. The throbbing in my leg turns to numbness after sitting for a while. I shiver, the cold breeze seeping into my bones. As the day passes, my fear of being left out here alone mounts.

I stare at the flare, wanting to fire it off. I contemplate doing so but decide to wait a little longer. I only have two, so I have to make the use of them count.

The sky grows darker, and I swallow thickly. I'm thirsty, hungry, and while my leg isn't hurting now, it needs medical attention. I look down at my bloody hands and pick some of the small metal pieces out of my skin.

After a while, the shock I'm in subsides. My body aches again, then real pain sets in, accompanied by the cold. As the sun sets, the temperature drops, and I shake. Fuck, if these injuries don't kill me, the cold will.

The weight of it all presses down on me, and I pull the flare gun away, pointing it toward the sky, making sure I'm in the clear and not going to hit any trees. My finger shakes as I wrap it around the trigger. It might be a long shot, but I have to try. At least if I die out here, I'll die knowing I attempted to save myself. Saying a silent prayer, I pull the trigger and watch as the flare goes up, sending a bright orange distress signal into the sky.

The signal lasts as long as a firework before it dissipates, the smoke drifting off in the wind. It's just another drop in the bucket. All I can do is hope someone saw it and that whoever that person is gives half a shit about me because God knows, no one in Corium cares about me.

No one but Brittney... and maybe Quinton, or so I thought.

QUINTON

I watch as the gray leather surface of the sandbag turns red. My blood leaves a strange pattern as I punch it over and over again. My knuckles bleed profusely, but they don't hurt anymore. I hit harder, hoping that the pain will return, but I'm already numb. My body and mind are numb, leaving nothing but a hollow feeling behind.

I would rather feel the pain.

I push myself to the brink of passing out before finally stopping. Hugging the bag, I lean against it, pressing my sweaty forehead to the smooth surface to catch my breath.

Just like before I met Aspen, the world spins out of control, and I can do nothing to stop it. I feel helpless and weak, and I hate it.

Walking into the gym's bathroom, I actively avoid looking into the mirror as I run cold water over my hands until the water turns from pink to clear. My heart is still racing, and my breathing is labored. Each breath I take seems to be shorter, with less air making it into my lungs. I feel like I'm suffocating. The walls are closing in on me, leaving no space for my lungs to inflate all the way.

We've been living underground for months, but this is the first time I feel like I need to get some fresh air to breathe. Without even drying my hands, I leave the gym and head to the surface part of Corium.

My body operates on autopilot, carrying me to the helipad without thinking. As soon as I step out from the tunnel leading to the outside, cold Alaskan air wisps around me. I'm only in gym clothes, my body sweaty, making the cold send icy pricks across my skin.

I am no stranger to grief, but this is different because this one is on me. I made Aspen want to leave this place. It's my fault she's dead, and I don't know how to get over that. I don't know if I can.

For a long time, I stare out into the never-ending forest surrounding us. My whole body is shaking from the cold, but I don't care; I can't go back inside. I don't even know why, but something has my feet cemented to the ground.

It's getting dark now. With the sun setting, the sea of trees turns into one shade of dark green. The sky becomes an ocean of deep blue with specks of white.

I could stay out here all night, but I know that would only make me end up at medical again. Scarlet would be worried, and my parents would be here on the next flight, maybe even demanding for me to come home.

Taking one more deep breath, I'm about to turn around and walk back inside when I see it.

A bright red flare shoots up like a firework. With wide eyes, I watch the bright ball light up the sky before fizzling into nothingness. For a moment, I just stand there, wondering if I really saw it or if my mind is playing tricks on me. That was the spot where I saw the helicopter go down. I'm sure of it.

Someone survived the crash. Which means there is a chance Aspen is still alive. It doesn't take long for that new information to trickle into my mind. Spinning around, I run back into the tunnel, passing several guards on my way back inside. Each of them gives me a bewildered look. I ignore them all.

Taking the elevator down, I make my way to Diavolo's office as fast as I can. His secretary jumps up, trying to stop me, but I drown her voice out and push her body aside. I storm into Lucas' office and close the door behind me.

He looks up from his desk as if he is about to start yelling, but his features soften when he sees me. "Quinton, everyone all right?"

“I saw a flare,” I half yell at him, not wanting to waste any time.

“A flare? What are you talking about?”

“I was up on the helipad catching some fresh air. I saw a flare being shot from the same spot the helicopter went down,” I explain. “We need to send out a search party. Someone survived the crash.”

Lucas leans back in his chair. “Quinton, I don’t have another helicopter here.”

Bullshit. As if he doesn’t have a way to leave this place in an emergency.

“Then get one! Have one come from the airport. Or have the guards search by truck.”

“Why is this so important to you?”

“How is this not important to you? One of your students could be dying right now.”

“Aspen stopped being my student when she decided to leave. She’s no longer under my protection, nor is she my problem.”

If I wasn’t in such a hurry to find a way to get out there, I would jump over this desk and pound my fist into Lucas’ face, no matter who he is. Right now, I don’t care about any consequences. All I care about is getting to the crash site.

“Thanks for nothing,” I murmur, right before turning to walk out the door.

“This is not your fault, Quinton. You might not see it right now, but this is the best thing for you.”

Ignoring his words, I force my legs to keep moving. I don’t have time to analyze what he just said, but in the back of my mind, I already know it had more meaning.

The secretary keeps her head down and stays silent as I march past her once more. So do all the guards I pass on my way out. I head back to my room, hoping that Ren is not there because I don’t have time to deal with him either.

When I find our apartment empty, a flash of relief hits me. I quickly change out of my gym clothes into the warmest outfit I can find. Then I stuff a backpack full of essentials and strap it to my back.

By the time I'm ready and back in the elevator, a plan has already formed in my mind. When I make it to the surface this time, the cold barely registers as I sneak past the first guardhouse.

The second checkpoint only has one guard, who I easily creep up on from behind. He's watching a movie on his phone, and I use his distraction to wrap my arm around his neck.

A moment later, he passes out, his body sagging to the ground. Kneeling beside him, I unhook the keys from his belt and grab the gun from his holster. I drag his body into the guardhouse, grab his phone, disable the intercom, and lock him inside.

It shouldn't take him long to get out of here, but it will buy me a little extra time. I already know if Lucas finds out about this, he'll stop me. Probably lock me up, too, just to prove a point. The worst part is that I know my father will be on his side. Fuck, probably my mom as well. She would rather have me locked up than out risking my life.

Another wave of guilt washes over me, this time for putting my life in danger, knowing what it would do to my family. Shoving those feelings down as far as I can, I push on and find a truck. I get into the driver's seat and use the guard's key to start the engine. The vehicle roars to life, and I pull out of the underground garage onto the only road leaving Corium.

I drive for two miles and stop once I get to the outer concrete wall surrounding the university. Ahead is a large metal gate, and I search the car for some kind of button to open it. *Bingo*. I find it on a small square attached to the guard's keychain. I press the button, and the gate opens, and I'm free at last. Slamming my foot on the gas, the vehicle lurches forward.

It's already dark outside, so the headlight is the only thing to guide me to the forest. The paved road turns into a dirt road, and the trees become more and more dense as I drive in the direction of the flare I saw earlier. I am not sure what my chances are of finding the crash site. I'm not even sure if it's Aspen who's alive. I just know this is the only chance I've got to make things right.

Please, let me make this right.

ASPEN

Tearing another small piece of fabric from the bottom of my shirt, I twist it, making sure it won't rip more than I want it to. I drape it over my leg and pick up the two sticks I've selected. They were the straightest and most stable looking I could find.

I try to line them along my leg while wrapping the makeshift string around and quickly realize that making a brace looks much easier on TV than it does in real life.

It takes me another five minutes before finally getting the thing on and feeling like it's helping more than hurting. Once I feel it's secure, I try again to put some weight on my leg, slightly pushing myself off the ground.

"Motherfucker!" I curse out loud in pain, dropping back onto my ass quicker than I even thought about getting up.

Just when I thought this couldn't get any worse, the clouds above me turn an angry gray. The wind picks up, growing colder with each second, and my shaking intensifies. The only plus side is that my leg is still numb and only hurts when I try to move it.

Looking around, I consider my options of remaining where I am or moving. I doubt I'll be able to get far on my hands and knees, and with the storm moving in, my visibility will lessen. The worst possible case would be to get caught in a storm, the cold being the biggest contender. If I don't find shelter, I'll die out here. I can tell, feel it with every thump of my still-beating heart.

I blink back the tears in my eyes; this isn't over yet. The trembling of my body intensifies, and I reach for the second flare gun out of desperation. It's darker now, so maybe the first flare was missed, or maybe they've sent someone out to find me already.

Shooting the gun now might help them locate me better. I nod my head at the thought and lift the flare gun into the air, ready to shoot it. At the last moment, I freeze.

What if this is my last chance? What if no one is looking for me yet? What if no one saw the shot? I look up at the gun, my arm still raised in the air. No matter what I do, the risk of death is imminent. I have to at least try.

We weren't that far from Corium when we crashed. Letting out a sigh, I pull the trigger, sending the last hope of being found into the air. I watch it explode, lighting up the night sky.

The wind continues to pick up, so I wrap my arms tighter around my middle, wishing for a blanket and a cup of Brittney's hot cocoa. The thought of never seeing her again hits me right in the chest.

I didn't even say goodbye. In fact, I didn't really think anything through before I climbed on that helicopter. All I knew was that I had to get out of that school; to think being out here in the forest all alone terrifies me as much as being in that school. At least there I had the warmth of my room, a bed, and a meal in my belly. Well, if you can call those shakes a meal.

Everyone hated me, and I was miserable, but I was safe, kinda. At the very least, I wasn't freezing to death like I am out here. The wind whips through the trees, and the first drops of rain fall just as the tears I've been keeping at bay slip down my cheeks.

I drop my chin to my chest and squeeze my eyes shut, knowing that this is the end for me. I'm going to die. The tears continue to fall, and I don't even bother to wipe them away. My body shakes, shivering uncontrollably as the icy rain comes down harder.

Harsh wind and rain pound against my already beaten body. It's all I feel, all I can hear... until there is something else. It's like a whisper through the trees, a small light in the darkness. I brush it off, not wanting to plant a seed

of hope.

Aspen... I can almost hear Quinton calling my name. Maybe I'm going insane. Or I'm already dead, and this is hell. Quinton won't come for me. Then I hear it again. This time it's clearer than before.

"Aspen!" a voice booms through the storm, and adrenaline pumps in my veins again at the thought of a rescue. I try to move, pushing away from the tree, but the numbness in my legs makes it impossible, and I end up on my side on the wet ground.

Fear of them missing me zips down my spine, and I yell out against the wind, "I'm here. I'm right here."

Fat drops of rain pelt my face, but I continue to stare in the direction of the voice. I spot a flash of light through the trees and lift my arms, flailing them so that I'm seen.

The light moves, and it looks like it's coming toward me.

Oh, god. I've been found. I'm being rescued.

"Aspen?" The voice that says my name connects to an image in my mind, and I look up as he points the flashlight in his hand down at my face.

Quinton.

"Fuck... Are you okay? Can you walk?"

I shake my head, still shocked he's standing here in front of me. Maybe this is a dream?

He drops to his haunches so he can look me in the eye. His deep voice garners my attention, and when his fingers grasp my chin, I almost melt into his hand. "I know you're in shock and probably hurt, but we need to move fast, or we're gonna freeze to death."

All I can do is shake my head slightly. I know we're going to freeze because I'm halfway there already.

"The truck I drove out here broke down, but if we can make it back, we'll at least have shelter for the night."

He came, but why? I don't quite piece together what he's saying. My thoughts are sluggish, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around him being here. Part of me can't believe it, not with the way things ended between us.

"Why did you come?" I ask, needing to know more than I need shelter or to be saved.

If he only came out here to save me just so he can turn around and hurt me, then I'll gladly stay out here in the wild and die. At least I'll die with my dignity.

A shadow covers half his face, making it difficult for me to see what he's thinking. "We have time to talk about this later. Right now, we need to get out of here. Can you walk or do I need to carry you? Wait... Did the pilot make it?" he peppers me with questions.

"No, he's dead, and there's no way I'll make it to the truck. I'm pretty sure my leg is broken. It's numb from sitting here the whole time, but every time I move it, pain slices through it and up my spine."

"Fuck!" Quinton curses and looks around, shining his flashlight over the airplane rubble and through the trees. "Well, there's nowhere for us to stay out here tonight, and the truck isn't far. I think even if I have to carry you the distance, it'll still be worth it. The worst thing we can do is stay out in the elements."

I don't like the idea of him having to carry me the entire way, but there isn't much I can do about it. It's being carried or stay out here, and with the rain picking up, that's kind of the last place I want to be.

"Come on, let me carry you. We won't get anywhere if I have to help you walk."

"Thanks," I huff sarcastically.

I bite my lip to stifle a scream of pain as we work together to get me to my feet, not realizing how hard I've bitten it until the copper taste of blood hits my tongue. My chest heaves, the numbness in my leg is now gone, and all I feel are tiny pricks of pain radiating up and down my leg.

"I'm sure you're in a lot of pain, but are you okay?"

I'm not sure what to make of his question. He's never cared if I'm okay, but it seems now the seriousness of this situation has changed his outlook.

"I'm..." My lips tremble, and I want to tell him everything. That I'm scared, hurting, afraid to return to Corium, but also afraid of being out here and dying.

Holding me tightly to his side to keep the weight off my bad leg, he cups my cheek, the warmth of his hand making me lean deeper into his touch, and even though I can't see his eyes because of the darkness, I can feel his next set of words.

"We're going to survive this and make it back to Corium. I won't let you die out here, Aspen. I promise, okay?"

"Okay," I croak, my voice cracking, giving away my emotional distress.

Quinton pulls his hand away from my face, taking his warm touch with him, and then he takes a step back. I teeter on one leg, worried I'll tip over at any second.

Before I get the chance to complain, he swoops down and grabs me by the hips, lifting me onto his shoulder. I land with a huff, my leg protesting with the movement.

"Hold on to me!" Quinton yells, and I grab his jacket, fisting the fabric in my hand as we move.

Quinton's strides are huge and eat up a lot of space, but not fast enough. Each step he takes sends a jarring ache up my leg. I don't complain, mainly because he's carrying me the whole way to the truck in the pouring rain, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

Quinton lets out a grunt here and there, but nothing more to let on that he's exhausted. Time slips past me, and the suffering from my leg slips to the back of my mind. I'm not sure how long we've been walking when I realize Quinton's steps are slower now. I'm soaked to the bone with rain, so I know he is as well.

Lying over his back, I can't tell if we're slowing down because he's tired or because we've reached the truck, but almost like he can read my mind, he

stops.

“Are we here?” I yell, but instead of him answering me, he drags my soaked body down the front of his, gently setting me on my feet.

I’m disoriented and grab onto the nearest object, which is the side of the truck.

Quinton moves around me and opens the passenger door before scooping me up and placing me inside the backseat.

Inside the truck, I let out a sigh of relief and almost laugh. I’ve been through so much today; I can’t believe I’m even alive right now. The door on the other side of the truck opens, and Quinton climbs in, slamming it shut behind him. A shiver skates down my spine. We’re alone, more alone than we’ve ever been before, and while that should terrify me, it’s comforting. I spent the whole day thinking I was going to die out here, and then he showed up.

“I know it’s not the most comfortable of places, but we will stay dry in here and be safe from any animals.”

“It’s fine. It’s better than the rain, that’s for sure.” I try to smile, but for some reason, it’s still a frown.

Quinton makes quick work of his jacket, shrugging it off and hanging it over the driver’s seat. His dark eyes turn on me, and I start to undo my jacket, but my fingers are numb and trembling so much I fumble with the zipper. He brushes my hands away and undoes the zipper, helping me out of the jacket.

“Thanks,” I whisper, the moment feeling more intimate than it did before he carried me through the forest, for God knows how many miles.

“We have to get out of these wet clothes,” Quinton explains while continuing to peel the clingy fabric off my body. My shirt and bra are easy, but it takes some time and finesse to peel my pants off and over my leg.

“I’m actually impressed by your brace. Girl scouts?”

“No.” I smile. “TV.”

“I have to take this off. We’ll make a new one tomorrow.”

I try to hide how much every tiny movement hurts, but of course, nothing goes unnoticed by Quinton.

“You don’t have to pretend you’re not in pain. I know this hurts.”

“Did you ever break a bone? I never have before.”

“Yeah, a few times...” He trails off as he takes his clothes off and throws them to the front seat. “I broke my leg falling out of a tree once. I was climbing up to get my sister’s kite and slipped on the way down.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what else to say. Quinton rarely shares anything about himself with me. It’s not the kind of thing we do, so hearing him talk about something personal leaves me pretty speechless.

When he has stripped down to his boxers, he twists around and leans over the backseat, looking through the trunk of the jeep. A moment later, he pulls a blanket out, and I almost rip it out of his hands. It looks scratchy and uncomfortable, but when you are half freezing to death, anything that offers warmth looks great.

Wrapping an arm around me, he holds me to his side and drapes the gray wool blanket around our bodies. I hate to admit it, but I cling to him. The warmth of his body blankets mine, and I shudder against him. The chill of the cold I’ve endured all day finally melts away, and the first slivers of warmth return to my body.

I lean my head against his shoulder, and he rests his on mine, bringing our bodies even closer together. There’s a lot of bad blood and misunderstanding between us, but out here, all of that seems to fizzle away. The chances of us dying now are slim since I know Xander will call for a search party for his son, even if no one else cares to come looking for me.

Still, I’d rather clear the air between us while I can, and maybe by the time we get back to Corium, we can somewhat describe our relationship as friends.

“I didn’t steal the bracelet from your sister,” I start, but he interrupts me.

“I know.” He sighs. “I mean, I didn’t know. Not until it was too late, and you were already on the helicopter, but I know now. That’s why I came for you. I

owed it to you. You helped my sister. You were there for her, and I knew if I didn't come out here and at least see if you had survived, I would have this on my conscience for the rest of my life."

The response is more than I ever expected.

I take a deep breath. "So, you know she gave it to me as a gift? I was only trying to help her, make sure she was okay, and then she told me to take the bracelet. I planned to give it back to her; I still do."

"Well, you won't be able to do that anymore."

There's a coldness to his voice that wasn't there moments ago, and I know it has to do with Adela.

"Why is that? Did you already send it back?"

I can feel a wall forming between us, and I don't know how to stop him from building it up. "No... I don't want to talk about it."

I lick my dry lips, thankful that he didn't pull away and leave me cold, even if he's pulled away emotionally.

"I understand you were hurt; you thought I stole from your sister... but why did it have to be Matteo you sent after me? Did you really hate me that much?"

"What are you talking about? I didn't send anyone after you."

"You gave him your key card... he told me."

"That fucking prick. What did he do?" The venom in Quinton's voice is enough to strike fear in any man.

"He attacked me, came into my room, and told me he had a video of that night in the hall. He said you told him he could send it to whoever he wanted." I try not to sound accusatory, but the thought ignites a fire of rage deep in my belly. Silence fills the cab of the truck, and all you can hear is our heavy breathing.

"I didn't give him the key to your room."

I don't know why, but I believe him. He didn't give Matteo access to my room, but he is not denying anything about the video. I probably should leave it alone and concentrate on staying warm, but I have to tell Quinton the whole story.

"You know it was Matteo that night at the fundraiser."

Quinton's whole body stiffens at my words, his arms tighten around me like a boa. "What did you just say?"

"Matteo was the guy who cornered Adela. I stopped him; that's why he hates me so much... I mean, more than the rest of the school."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me earlier?" Quinton's voice takes on a murderous tone, and I instantly regret telling him.

"I thought you knew," I whimper. Quinton loosens his hold on me slightly, and I continue. "I didn't know you and your father cared about your sisters like that. I didn't think you would care. You know how most men in our world look at women. I didn't know..." I truly didn't. Most powerful men like Xander act like Matteo. They think women are to be owned, controlled, and fucked, nothing else.

"He'll pay for that," Quinton mumbles under his breath before the cab falls into silence.

We remain wrapped in each other's arms, and my eyes drift closed. The exhaustion of everything that happened weighs heavily on my mind, yet I still can't forget about Adela. Why can't I give her the bracelet? And why didn't she come to the founders' ball?

I let out a defeated sigh and turn to burrow my face into Quinton's side when I sense the stare of his eyes on me. Even in the dark, I can feel his gaze; it's penetrating, intrusive, and inescapable. I wish he wouldn't look at me like that because it makes me want to peel all my layers back and let him in, even while knowing he wouldn't let me in.

"What happened, Q? What happened to your sister?" I ask, assuming he won't tell me, but hoping he will.

After a brief pause, he sighs, and I can feel every single ounce of pain in his words. “She died.”

The confession slices through me, taking the air from my lungs. Dead? I’m not sure why I never thought that she was dead. Maybe because in the world we live in, the Rossi name is untouchable.

No one can hurt them, and no one tries.

“What do you mean, she died?” I whisper the question.

“She had leukemia. We tried everything possible to save her, but there just wasn’t... cancer doesn’t give a shit who you are, it just takes, and it took her, snuffed out her life before it could even be lived.”

All the pain I’ve felt over the last few weeks seems insignificant compared to the hurt in his voice. My heart breaks for him as I look at his handsome face draped in a darkness that only death can bring. I never realized how lost he looks until now.

It is all making sense. His need for control, his rage, and pain. He’s still grieving, and unfortunately, he found an outlet for all of it. I became his punching bag.

“I’m sorry, Quinton. I had no idea—”

“No one knows, and I expect you to keep your mouth shut about it. I’m only telling you because Adela obviously had a soft spot for you.”

“Of course. I would never tell anyone.”

“Good,” he growls, and I feel the vibration of his voice like a current rippling through my body. “Now, go to sleep. You need to build up your strength for tomorrow.”

“What happens tomorrow?”

“We head back to Corium.”

I don’t ask him if this makes us any less of enemies, but I want to. Good thing my eyes drift closed, and I fall asleep listening to the steady drumming of his heartbeat before I can.

QUINTON

*M*y body is tired, but my brain won't shut off. I'm consumed with the need to kill Matteo. Fifty different scenarios run through my mind of the ways I want to inflict pain until I snuff out his worthless life.

I should probably think about something else, but if I didn't think about this, I would have to let reality sink in. And right now, reality is not looking too rosy.

We are trapped out in a storm in the middle of Alaska. Aspen's leg is broken, and we don't have heat or a way to get back to Corium. We're also out of water and food. Looking down at Aspen's face, none of those worries reflect back at me. Aspen is wrapped up in a blanket, sleeping peacefully, her cheek pressed against my bare chest.

The last time she slept in my arms like this was the night when I forced her to suck me off. Before, the memory would have my dick hard. Now, I'm riddled with guilt.

It's not because of what I did to Aspen; it's because Matteo was watching. Because I let him touch her that night. I want to break each of his fingers, then carve his eyeballs out and feed them to him... actually, I might still do that.

BY THE TIME the sun rises the next morning, the storm has settled completely, and the forest is back to its normal tranquil self. I want to let her sleep longer,

but I know we need to get moving. It's going to take me a while to carry her out of here, and we don't want to get stuck at night.

"Aspen," I whisper.

Her eyes flutter open, and a ghost of a smile graces her lips when she zeros in on me. As if she remembers where we are and who I am, the smile leaves her face before it can fully form.

"Hey," she greets me sleepily. "We survived the night."

"Yes, but we still have to make it back to Corium. We're about five miles away, and I'll have to carry you there."

"You can leave me here and go back for help. You'll be much faster without me on your back."

She looks up at me, hopeful, and I don't have the heart to tell her that no one else is going to come for her. It's me or nothing. If I return to Corium without her, then I've signed her death sentence.

"I don't know if I could find the way back here," I lie. "Plus, you're cold. I don't think I can leave you here without the risk of you freezing to death. I didn't come all the way out here to save your ass just to leave you behind today."

"Okay." She sighs, and I can hear the relief in it. She didn't like the idea of being alone, either.

I pull our clothes from the front seat and start dressing myself first before helping Aspen into hers. They aren't completely dry, but it's better than they were last night.

"I guess we should get going then... I ahem... kinda have to go pee." Even in the cold, her cheeks heat brighter red.

"All right then, let's go pee together." I smirk, making her blush even more.

Careful not to hurt her leg, I maneuver us out of the truck and into the frosty morning air. I carry her to the closest tree, where I put her down so she can lean against it. I make quick work of undoing her pants and pulling them down to her knees.

“Squat down as much as you can with one leg. I’ll hold you.” I grab both of her hands, and she does what I tell her. The embarrassed facial expression makes me smile. “You had my dick in your mouth, and my thumb up your ass, but peeing in front of me is too much?”

“Shut up. I can’t help it.” She looks everywhere but at me. She uses some tissues she pulls from her pocket to clean herself before awkwardly trying to pull her pants back up.

I help her get dressed before leaning her against the tree again, so I can go piss too. When we’re both done with our little morning routine, I lift Aspen back on my shoulders like I did yesterday.

She isn’t heavy but holding her up for a long period while hiking through the tundra has my muscles aching.

Sporadically, I take breaks to catch my breath and stretch out my tired limbs.

“I’m sorry... that you have to carry me, I mean.”

“I told you, I owe you, and I don’t like to be indebted to anyone. Bringing you back to Corium will make us even.”

My statement makes her flinch, as if the reminder that there’s nothing more between us hurt her feelings somehow. She quickly covers that sadness up with a joke.

“Well, if that’s so, then saddle up, horsey, and take me back in time for dinner. I’m starving.”

“Did you just call me *horsey*? Maybe I’ll leave you here after all,” I say, looking up at the sky. It’s right around noon. We’ve been walking for a few hours, so we shouldn’t be far from Corium.

“It was a joke. Don’t leave me here,” she says, all humor gone from her voice.

“I won’t leave you, but I might find something else to do with your smart mouth. Now, let’s go, the sun will set in a few hours.”

The days here in Alaska are much shorter than back home, and we do not want to be caught out here another night.

We continue walking toward Corium... or so I think.

IT SEEMS like the sun is setting faster with each step I take. Out here in these ungodly temperatures, the day flew by rapidly. I haven't said it out loud, but I'm fairly certain we are lost.

"Don't you want to take another break? We have been walking for a while without stopping."

"No, we need to keep going. We have to get back before it gets dark or..." I trail off, not wanting to tell her what I'm thinking about.

"Quinton—"

"We'll be fine. Just a little further."

"Look over there." She shifts her hold and points at something to our right.

I turn my head to scan that area and stop mid-step when my eyes catch sight of the small wooden structure. I immediately change directions and start walking toward it. The closer we get, the more apparent it becomes that we've stumbled upon a small hunting cabin. About twenty feet away, I stop and make Aspen sit on a nearby fallen log.

"Stay here for a minute. I'm going to check it out first to make sure it's safe."

She nods, wrapping her arms around herself.

Turning away from her, I carefully approach the cabin. I slide my hand down my cargo pocket and reach for the gun I stole from the guard. Lifting it, I hold it out in front of me, ready to shoot anything that could pose a danger.

I don't hear anything inside, and the place looks like it was abandoned a while ago, but that could be a trap.

When I'm right in front of the door, I reach for the handle, realizing quickly that it doesn't appear to be locked. The handle turns, and with one push, the door creaks open. There are no windows, and the inside is so dark I can't make out a single thing.

Picking up a stick from the ground, I throw it inside, making sure it's not booby-trapped. When nothing happens, I step through the door slowly. I give my eyes a moment to adjust, so I can take in the small space.

The cabin is bare, but it has a little fireplace and a makeshift bed in the corner. It's not much, but it's enough to shelter us from the cold and allow us to survive another night.

Tucking my gun away, I go back out to where I left Aspen. She is still sitting on the log, just how I left her. I'm not happy about her being in pain, but I must say, I like the way she is depending on me.

"It's all clear."

"Where did you get the gun?" Aspen asks while I help her stand.

"I stole it from the guard I had to knock out to get past the checkpoint and to get the truck keys."

Bending down, I throw her over my shoulder.

"Quinton!" Aspen squeals, not expecting to be picked up this way. "Put me down."

Ignoring her plea, I walk her into the cabin, trying not to look at her ass while it's only inches from my face. My cock twitches in my pants.

Down boy. We don't have time for fucking. First, we have to survive another night.

ASPEN

Guilt presses down on my chest. I feel bad that Quinton had to carry me through the forest, for God knows how many miles. It's the only logical option, but that doesn't mean I like it.

Even now, I can't put any weight on the limb, and all I have to do is breathe for it to hurt. Occasionally, the whole thing goes numb, and I feel nothing, that is, until I move again.

I sit quietly on the bed, watching as Quinton does all the work, moving logs into the small fireplace so he can start a fire. I feel terrible just sitting here.

"I'm sorry that I'm not more help. I feel bad seeing you..."

Quinton pins me to the mattress with a glare, and the words I planned to say suddenly don't matter anymore. "Stop. I'm done listening to that. Plus, you can always make it up to me later. I'm sure you can think of a few things to show me how thankful you are."

The lines between us have blurred so much I'm not sure what we are anymore. Right now, we're just two humans trying to survive, but what happens when we get back to Corium?

"Nothing has changed. I still hate you. I just hate you a little less right now." His lips tip up in a knowing smile, and I don't understand why my thighs clench or my core tightens. All he's doing is smiling.

When it comes to Quinton, my hormones are all over the place. One minute, I want to punch him in the face, and the next, I want to sit on his face and let him devour me whole. It's a disastrous idea.

I watch through my lashes as Quinton starts the fire, the smoke in the fireplace giving way to tiny flames that crackle over the wood. Thank god, whoever this place belonged to brought in firewood. No way would we have been able to start a fire with wet wood.

With the fire now started, Q turns to me, his gaze guarded.

"We should take our clothes off so they can dry. Hypothermia can set in without warning, and we have enough problems without adding that in."

I know he's referring to my leg, but I don't take it as a dig. It's not like he's wrong. If we get hypothermia, we risk a sooner death, and I just want to make it back to Corium in one piece, not a million ice cubes.

I nod and tug my shirt over my head. My nipples become stiff peaks from the cold air that washes over them. I sense Quinton's eyes on me, and when I look up, his gaze meets mine.

It's molten lava, and if he keeps looking at me like that, I might melt into a puddle on the ground, broken leg and all.

I glance down at my pants and realize this is going to be a lot of work. Quinton must think the same thing because he moves toward me before I get the chance to ask for his assistance.

"Lay back and lift your ass up. I'll help you out of them." I do as he instructs, and the bed squeaks loudly under my weight. Pain lances my leg as I move to lift my ass. "I'll brace your leg again before we leave."

"Okay." It's all I can respond, my mind clouded with Quinton being so close.

"You look like someone used you as a punching bag." His knuckles brush against my skin almost purposefully, and the pain ebbs away; a warmth deep in my belly replaces the lingering phantoms of it.

"I think for being in a helicopter crash, I'm looking pretty well." Glancing down, I take in the bruises scattering the right side of my body. "My leg has

been hurting so bad, I don't even feel those."

"You're still beautiful. Even like this."

My cheeks heat, and I'm sure they're the color of crimson. If they are, Quinton doesn't comment about it.

He peels the material down my legs, seeming unaffected, though when I glance up at him once the fabric is removed and I'm stark naked below him, things seem different.

His gaze becomes wanton, and I shiver at the intensity of hunger deep within the depths. He licks his lips, and I look away, and I'm not sure why I do. It's not like we haven't had sex before, like he hasn't touched me or claimed my body, so I don't understand the shyness I'm feeling now. All I can explain is the difference in emotion. The sex and what we do with our bodies isn't different, it's the way we feel right now.

Death for both of us looms over our heads, and that makes this moment together so much different from all the others we've shared.

Turning around swiftly, he gives me his back and drapes my pants over the edge of the bed. Then he strips out of his own clothing, and it's my turn to become the peeping tom.

I try my best not to gawk at him, but I get lost in the flex of his muscles, and when his naked ass comes into view, I swallow down a bubble of laughter.

God, what is wrong with me?

He lays his clothes out identical to how he laid mine out and then walks over to the kitchenette. I grab the scratchy wool blanket and wrap it around myself, reveling in the warmth that is surrounding me.

With the fire going, my spirits have already lifted. If we can stay here for a bit, we might be okay.

Quinton scours the cabinets. Curses of anger slip past his lips, and I know he hasn't found anything to eat. I'm certain it's going to be a lost cause once he reaches the last cabinet, but then he says, "Bingo!"

He twists around and shows me a metal can of something. Whatever it is, I don't care. I'll eat it.

"While we aren't eating at Corium, we'll at least have water and some canned vegetables for dinner tonight."

"Corium's food isn't that great anyway," I add.

"You only say that because they give you those stupid protein shakes with all your vitamins and minerals in it."

"Like I said, not good."

Quinton's lips tip up at the side, and he grabs a knife. He cuts into the can of vegetables, and each puncture into the tin makes me jump. It takes him a few minutes to get through the can, but once he does, he turns and carries the can over to the bed, along with two bottles of water. The water looks like it was petrified ten years ago, but I don't say anything. Water is water, and I will do anything to get my whistle wet.

With him facing me fully, I avert my gaze, so I'm not staring directly at his cock. The man has no shame and wouldn't even try to hide it if he could. I open one of the water bottles and force myself not to gulp it down and risk throwing it back up later.

"Sip it, because I don't want you to get sick."

"Yeah, that's not really high on my list of things to do either," I reply sarcastically.

We make light conversation as we pass the can of green beans back and forth, and once we reach the last few, Quinton shoves the can back at me. "I've eaten enough. You need it more than me."

I hesitate, wanting to tell him no, but my stomach still aches from the lack of food.

"I... I can't, you..."

"Take it, Aspen, or I swear, I will shove every last green bean down your throat, and don't even tempt me. We both know I'll do it." The growl of his voice stops me in my tracks. I was considering arguing with him, but I don't

have it in me.

I'm exhausted as it is.

"Fine!" I huff and use my fingers to grab the remaining green beans. I shove them into my mouth and chew longer than normal, trying to savor the flavor.

When I'm done, I swallow it down with some water and lie back on the bed. Quinton quickly follows suit. The crackling of the fire and our soft breaths are the only sounds in the cabin. The heat from Quinton's body pressed against mine leaves me feeling warm and fuzzy all over.

We lie side by side, and even though I know it's way too small for the both of us, it feels just right. Or maybe I just think that because anything is better than the back of the truck.

That reminds me of how close I came to death and how there are still so many things I want to do with my life before that happens.

"I'm glad I didn't die last night," I whisper, not really to Quinton but just to the room.

"Aside from wanting to be alive, why is that?" he asks, and I shift onto my side so I can see his face.

I feel self-conscious admitting this out loud, but who knows what tomorrow holds. Hell, we might not even make it out of here.

"I've never been kissed before."

Quinton's features become a scowl. "What do you mean, you've never been kissed? That's something you do in grade school."

"Well, I didn't."

He shrugs. "It's just lips touching. It's nothing special."

"That's not true. Kissing is intimate. It's passion and heart. It's telling someone a secret with your lips. A secret only you and the other person can decode."

We're staring at each other now, and I can't believe I just said all of that out loud. How could I be so *stupid*... all my thoughts and words become flakes

of snow blowing in the wind when Quinton leans in and presses his lips to mine. His lips are like a fiery brand on my skin, and I startle at the soft caress, ready to push him away before something snaps inside of me, and I sink my fingers into his hair and hold him closer.

He devours my mouth, kissing me with purpose and confidence. I'm lost in him, drowning in him, and I never want to be rescued from this kiss. I can feel the same helpless emotions rushing off him. They slam into me like an asteroid hitting the Earth.

I return his kiss feverishly, afraid that it might end before it's even gotten started.

It doesn't end. It continues, and soon his tongue is in my mouth, and his hands are roaming every inch of my body, gripping and tracing the curves. For the first time in forever, I feel cherished and secure, and I let him continue kissing me. When his tongue touches mine, sparks of arousal ignite in my belly.

I want more, need more.

He breaks the kiss and presses wet kisses down my neck and across my collarbone. I'm dizzy with need, and I can tell he's aroused too, and not just because of the hard cock that's pressing into my side but because of the way his chest rises and falls and the dilation in his eyes.

He wants me as much as I want him.

Moving over the top of me, his body hovers just above mine.

“What secret did that kiss tell you?” he croaks.

I have to force my swollen lips to move. “It told me you're drowning too, so let's drown together.”

Something inside him snaps at my words, and his fingers find my wet heat. I'm ready for him, and he gives me a small smile before he sinks two fingers inside me to test the wetness.

“You're so fuckin' wet for me, Aspen. You couldn't deny wanting me if you tried.”

“I’m not denying it,” I whimper and let out a gasp when he pulls his fingers free, leaving me empty and cold.

He makes up for it a moment later when he parts my legs, making sure my hurt one stays against the bed while he lifts the other and sinks inside me with one thrust.

I don’t know what’s right or wrong in this instant. All I know is that if Quinton stops, I might die, and that’s all that matters to me. Not being stranded in the wilderness, not my broken leg, or that we’re enemies. None of those things matter right now.

It’s just us, together, as one. Two humans finding pleasure in one another’s pain.

He fucks me slowly, almost tenderly, like we have all the time in the world, and I cling to him. I wrap my arms around his neck to keep myself in place while he slides in and out of me. The bed squeaks in the background, but the sound disappears between our breaths. I climb higher and higher toward the finish line, and I look up and stare into Quinton’s eyes.

There is a storm brewing beneath the surface, a thousand unsaid words flickering in his gaze.

“Fuck, every time I’m inside of you, I forget who we are, what we are to each other.”

I nod. “We aren’t enemies here...” I drag my nails across his back, and a hiss escapes his mouth.

He smirks and fucks me harder, his cock rubbing at the sensitive tissue at the top of my channel. It’s the new ferocity of his hips that pushes me over the edge and into orgasmic waters. My eyes flutter closed, and ripples of pleasure course through me. I’m suspended in time, floating up and up while he uses my body.

Just as I’m drifting down from my orgasm, he comes.

“Shit... I’m coming, fuck...” He growls, and I hold on to him, wanting him to stay this close for as long as he’ll allow.

He shudders above me, his entire body rippling like waves rolling through the water. After a moment, he rolls off me and collapses down onto the bed. My emotions splinter at the loss of his body being inside of mine, but he wraps an arm around me and pulls me tight to his side.

All my worries and sorrows are swept under the rug when my head rests against his chest, and my eyes become heavy.

He took my virginity and gave me my first real kiss.

What else of mine will he claim next?

My heart? No, we could never love each other. Could we?

QUINTON

*A*nother sleepless night, another morning full of doubts. I do not know what to do. Should I wake Aspen up so we can head out as soon as the sun rises, or should we camp out here until someone comes to find us?

Surely Lucas has noticed what I did by now. He might have had no qualms about leaving Aspen out here on her own, but there is no way in hell he is not sending search troops after me.

The fire I built last night died a few hours ago, but this little cabin is surprisingly insulated, and the cold is not unbearable yet. Aspen is curled up on top of me, with her cheek against my chest, still sleeping like a baby. Part of me always yearned to have a normal sleep schedule, to just lie down and turn it all off for a few hours. On the other hand, if I were sleeping right now, I couldn't watch Aspen.

I decide to let her sleep until she wakes up on her own. Staying here another night should be safer. Plus, I'm already sore from carrying her all day yesterday. If we're still not found tomorrow, we'll try again to make it back to Corium.

My gaze is glued to her face, taking in every inch, every freckle, and every scratch marring her skin from the accident. None of them should leave scars, but even if they did, none of it would deter from her beauty.

Her eyes are moving under her eyelids, and I wonder what she's dreaming about? Her lips twitch as if a smile is trying to escape, so it must be

something pleasant. Maybe she's dreaming about how I made her come last night.

Damnit, now I'm thinking about it.

My dick is already hard, and the thought of fucking Aspen last night is not helping. I shift, trying to move my hard-on around, when Aspen's eyes blink open.

"Did you hear me thinking?" I ask.

"No, but I felt something poking me." Aspen yawns, looking fucking adorable.

"Can't help it." I shrug. "Morning wood."

Lifting her head, Aspen looks around the cabin and at the door. "What time is it? Shouldn't we be heading out?"

"I think it's better we wait here. I'm sure someone is going to find us soon." At least, I hope so.

"Okay... do you want me to get off you?"

"No, you're keeping me warm."

Aspen nods before laying her head back down and cuddling into me more.

"Can I ask you something?" she says after a while.

"Sure, but I might not answer."

"I don't care if you don't answer. I'd rather you not say anything than lie to me."

"What if you don't like the truth?"

"I can deal with the truth, no matter how much it hurts, but I can't handle lies."

"That's fair."

"Why did you ask me all those questions about Brittney?"

I suck in a deep breath, inflating my lungs slowly, then huffing out a loud sigh. I don't particularly want to tell her, but at this point, I might as well.

"Apparently, your friend is one of the best hackers around. I needed her to do something for me."

"Needed? As in, you got her to do it? Or you found another way?"

"As in, I might have blackmailed her into helping me," I confess.

"You did what?" Aspen's head pops up, and her eyes turn into daggers, ready to stab me.

"Retract your claws, kitten. First of all, I was only bluffing. I told her I would tell Phoenix where she is if she didn't help me. I don't want some lunatic number nerd coming to Corium. Second, I didn't ask her to do anything crazy. I just needed some information on someone I've been looking for."

Aspen inspects my face like she's looking for an indication that I'm lying. When she's satisfied that I'm telling the truth, she puts her head back down and buries her face in my chest.

She doesn't ask about the person I'm searching for, but I can feel her mind working and her curiosity growing. I know she wants to know more, and surprisingly, I want to tell her. I've already told her most of the story. I might as well tell her the rest.

"When Adela got sick, we all got tested to see if we could donate bone marrow to her. My parents were acting weird about me getting tested, but I didn't really think much of it. Not until I accidentally stumbled upon my full medical record. Ella is not my biological mom. I've been searching for my birth mother."

Aspen gasps at my confession. Her fingers curl into the blanket, but she says nothing for a few moments. When she finally speaks, her voice is filled with emotions.

"Wow... that must've been a lot to take in at the time. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

It's not even her place to apologize, but somehow, her words lift a weight off my chest. I didn't realize how much I was craving validation for my pain until Aspen pointed it out.

I can't even put into words how dark that time was for me. I was already lost and helpless watching Adela, my best friend, die. My little sister, who I was supposed to protect but couldn't do anything to help. In the middle of losing that battle, I found out about my parents lying to me my whole life.

But the icing on the cake was that nobody really understood why I was so upset. Even Ren kept saying Ella is your mom no matter what. She is the one who raised you, and she loves you. Of course, he was adopted and would say that. But there was a big difference because Ren and Luna knew their whole life they were adopted.

My father lied to me, and when I asked him about my birth mother, he simply told me to let it go.

How can I let something like that go?

"Did Brittney find anything out about your birth mom?"

"Not much. My dad went out of his way to make her disappear. Brittney found out her name was Tia and that she's dead."

"I'm so sorry, Q." Aspen snuffles like she is about to cry. "I love that name. Tia..."

"Yeah, it's a pretty name."

"Why do you think your dad kept it from you?"

"I really don't know why he does half the things he does. Maybe he didn't want me to treat Ella differently. I feel weird calling her Ella, even in my head," I admit, feeling oddly comfortable sharing my thoughts with Aspen. My brain must have frost damage or something.

"I'm sure it is. I mean, she's the only mom you've ever known."

"Yeah... but I still want to know what happened to my birth mother. I owe her that much."

“Why do you think you owe her anything?”

Logically, I know it’s not my fault. I was just a baby, but part of me feels so fucking guilty about forgetting her. I should have remembered her. I should have somehow held on to her. She is part of me, just like I am part of her. An invisible connection that I let slip through my fingers, and now I will never get it back.

ASPEN

Quinton shuts down after our conversation, and with his silence, the day drags on, and cabin fever sets in. I don't like thinking of how close Quinton and I are getting because then I'll have to think about how much it's going to hurt once we get back to Corium and everything goes back to normal.

My leg is throbbing, and I would do just about anything for some Tylenol. Quinton sits on the bed beside me, lost in thought. The silence is suffocating, and I need to do something or say something to stop it.

Adjusting myself on the bed, I grit my teeth at the pain that radiates down my leg with the movement.

“Who would've thought that I'd be here someday?”

Quinton turns to me, a brow lifted, confusion riddling his features. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, who would've thought that I'd end up here. At Corium... well, technically, in the university's forest, but you get the point.”

“I'm guessing attending Corium wasn't your choice?” Quinton asks like he's truly interested in hearing what I have to say.

I shake my head, “No. My parents told me I had to go. The risk of someone coming after me for my father's wrongdoings was too high, and believe it or not, I plan to live a long and happy life. So, to stay safe, we agreed Corium

was the best option.”

There’s a pause, and Quinton scratches the back of his head. He’s looking at me like he sees me—really sees me—and it’s terrifying because it’s been a very long time since someone looked at me like that, and to be seen instead of being looked *through* makes me vulnerable.

“What were you going to do if you didn’t attend Corium?”

His question makes me smile, and my cheeks heat. I’ve never told anyone what my true dreams were, and for a minute, I sit here awestruck.

“Uhh…” I stumble over my words a bit. “I wanted to go to school to be a doctor. I’ve always loved helping people, and the human body is intriguing.”

“You can still become a doctor.”

“No, that ship has sailed. No one is going to accept me into their medical program, especially not after I graduate from Corium. I’ll have nothing to show for the four years spent there.”

“That’s not true. The school will give you any official degree you need.”

“That might work for most, but I actually need to know all the medical stuff. I can’t do any continued education without knowing the basics in that field.”

Quinton frowns, and I must admit I don’t like the look on him. I’d much rather have his psychopathic grin or sexy smirk than see him frowning at me.

“It’s funny you mention wanting to be a doctor. Adela wanted to become a nurse.”

This conversation has taken a sudden nosedive into forbidden territory, and I’m not sure if I should encourage him to continue talking about his sister or change the subject.

Before I get the chance, he is continuing, “My father used to tell her she could be whatever she wanted, that she could do whatever she wanted.” I swear I see tears swimming in his eyes, and I look away, wanting to give him a moment of privacy.

“Adela loved to help others; she was kind and smart, and fuck...” A heavy sigh passes his lips. “I miss her.”

A knot forms in my throat, and I swallow around it. “I’m sorry about everything that happened. About what my father did, and how it affected your family when you were grieving.”

The look of vulnerability drains from his face, and his features harden as he wipes his eyes, appearing to realize that he’s showing weakness.

“I don’t want your apology. It won’t bring her back, and it won’t change what happened.”

I nod. He’s right. I can’t change what happened, but I can change our futures. *We can change our futures.* The room falls into silence once more, and all I can hear is us breathing.

“Why were you even wearing Adela’s bracelet that day I came storming into your room?”

“I was feeling weak, and the bracelet symbolizes strength to me. I wanted to feel strong, so I put it on, hoping it would make me feel better.”

“Did it?”

“Yes, it empowered me.”

“I’m sorry I took the bracelet. Adela gave it to you, so it belongs to you.”

That statement makes my heart swell in my chest. I can’t help but lean into his side. I know we’ll never experience another moment like this together, so I want to absorb as much of it as I can.

“She was lucky to have you as her brother.”

The air around us stirs, and I feel him pulling away, an invisible wall forming between us.

“No, she wasn’t. I should’ve tried harder. I should’ve been there more. Part of me wishes it was me that died instead of her. I’d have taken her place in a heartbeat.”

The thought of Quinton dying makes me sick to my stomach. I don't know what I would do without him—even if he makes my life hell—I know without a doubt, I wouldn't have survived Corium without him.

“I'm sorry... if mentioning her bothers you. I didn't mean to upset you.” And I didn't. There isn't a part of me that would ever consider hurting him by bringing up Adela. That's the lowest of low thing to do.

Quinton's blue gaze collides with mine. “It's not talking about her that hurts. It's everyone acting like because she died, she's no longer a part of our lives. Everything is different now, and she's not here anymore, and it's like a goddamn kick to the chest every time I think about it.”

All I can do is apologize because I don't know what else to say. I don't know how to make it better, especially when there is nothing that can make it better. Adela is dead, and there is no bringing her back.

After that outburst, Quinton moves over to the fire, and losing his body heat leaves me cold. I don't know if talking to him about Adela was a good idea, especially with how much he's pulled away, but it's shown me a glimpse inside of him. I watch as he fiddles with two pieces of wood, whittling them down, and uses some thin rope to thread through the pieces of wood, creating what looks like a brace.

Once he's done, he returns to my side. The mattress creaks as he moves, gently lifting my leg so that he can set it in the brace. I grit my teeth and ignore the throbbing pain.

He tightens the rope, and the brace presses into the sides of my leg, forcing it straight. It's uncomfortable but eases some of the pressure on my hips.

“As soon as the sun rises, we're leaving this cabin and heading back to Corium.”

I frown, staring down at the brace. “Are you sure you don't want to go for help and then come back for me?”

The last thing I want to do is stay here, but we both know I'm more of a hindrance than anything at this point.

“I’m not leaving you here. We already talked about this, and it’s not an option, so prepare yourself. At sunrise, we’re out.”

Butterflies erupt in my belly. His words shouldn’t have such an effect on me.

Still, my lips pull up into a small smile. “We don’t even have an alarm. How the heck will you know when to wake up?”

Quinton gives me a serious look, his brows pinching together. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll be awake. I’m ready to escape this cabin and get us back to Corium.”

QUINTON

We leave as soon as the sun peeks out at the horizon. The sky is still mostly dark, only now an orange-purple forms in the east, ready to paint the rest of the sky.

I'm tired and hungry before we even start walking, but I put all of that aside, knowing I can always eat and sleep later. Right now, I need to get us out of here and back to Corium.

Aspen climbs on my back awkwardly, hissing in pain with the movement of her leg. I try not to make any jerky motions, but there is no way around her being in pain while we walk. I remind myself what the alternative is, which makes a little pain not seem so bad. She'll survive a broken leg, but not staying out here in the cold without food and water.

"Are you going home for Thanksgiving?" I ask, just to take my mind off it all.

"I don't think so. My mom told me not to come. She said it wasn't safe," Aspen says.

I know her mom is probably right. Knowing how many people are after her father, I wouldn't be surprised if one of them came after her.

"And yet you still left? Where were you going to go?"

"Honestly, I don't know," she admits. "I didn't think. I just wanted to get out. I guess I was gonna go back home, no matter what my mom told me."

Besides, I'm pretty sure my mom is just making that up."

"Why would your mom make that up? Do you think she is lying about you being in danger?"

"I just..." Aspen trails off. "What was that?"

"What was what—"

Everything happens so fast. I don't have time to react until it's too late. The large figure seems to appear out of nowhere, and with a loud roar, the bear is suddenly in front of us.

Not worrying about her leg, I drop Aspen to the ground and reach for my gun, but the bear is faster. He swings his arm at me, and his claw rips through my clothing and digs into the skin on my upper arm. It knocks me back a little, but I don't feel the pain yet. With fumbling fingers, I grab the gun out of the cargo pocket just when the bear comes in for a second attack.

His arm is already in the air again when I raise the gun and pull the trigger. The first shot echoes through the forest, but the bear is not at the end of his strength yet. The bastard swipes me again, and this time I can't stay on my legs and fall back on my ass with a thud.

Luckily, I keep my hold on the gun. I shoot him two more times, aiming at the chest. The bear stumbles back, but he takes another few moments before he actually falls to the side and lands in a giant heap on the forest ground.

"Oh my god. Quinton, are you okay? You're bleeding. Your arm, it really hurt you!" Aspen's voice is frantic as she crawls over to where I am.

I look down and find my jacket shredded, exposing part of my arm. There's so much blood, I can barely see the skin peeking through.

Fuck, this is not good.

"No, no, no, Quinton. This is bad. You're bleeding a lot."

"I'll be fine. Just find something to wrap it up."

Aspen looks around for a moment like she will magically find something useful laying around in the forest. Sitting up, she pulls her jacket open and

strips out of the sweater and shirt she is wearing underneath. Before I can ask her what she's doing, she puts her sweater and jacket back on and uses her shirt to wrap up my arm.

She pulls the fabric tight, and I bite the inside of my cheek, so I won't groan in pain.

"What the hell are we going to do now? There's no way you can carry me like this. You're going to have to leave me here." Aspen swallows so loud I can hear it. Her bottom lip is trembling, and I know she doesn't want to be by herself, but we are running out of options. I might have to leave her after all.

I want to tell her that everything is going to be okay, but our future is looking grimmer by the second. I've already shot off three rounds, which means I should have seven bullets left in the magazine.

"I'm going to leave you the gun just in case something else tries to attack you. There might be more bears out here. Aim at the chest and shoot at least two times." I hand her the gun, and she takes it with shaking fingers.

I'm just about to get up and start walking when I hear a strange sound. I stay still and tilt my head to hear better. It only takes me a moment to realize the sound is not strange at all.

"A helicopter. Do you hear it?"

Aspen's eyes widen. "Yes! Yes, I can hear it too!"

We both look up at the same time. The helicopter is approaching, but the trees are dense around us, and they will probably not see us here.

"We have to move. We have to go back to where the trees were fewer."

"Okay, go! You tell them where I am." Aspen shoves at my leg, urging me on.

Pushing myself up with my good arm, I stand. Immediately, a dizzy spell catches me off guard. I must be losing more blood than I thought. Even with my mind clouded by pain, I know I can't leave her here. They will not come back for her.

Ignoring the sharp pain and blood loss, I bend down and pull Aspen off the ground.

“Q, what are you doing?”

Without answering her, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder.

“We have to go.” I head back to the small clearing we passed a short while ago.

The sound of the helicopter propellers is getting further away, but I’m hoping they are circling back around, giving us enough time to get to the clearing. With each step, I feel like I’m getting weaker, my legs more unsteady, and my vision blurs. I push through all of it, knowing that if I give up now, there will be no hope.

“Quinton, put me down. You’re not going to make it carrying me.” Her voice is trembling, and her hands are grabbing my jacket at my back.

“I can make it,” I assure her, even though I don’t know for sure. All I know is that it’s both of us or no one.

The helicopter seems to get closer again. I pick up speed even though my legs protest it. I push through the pain and exhaustion until we finally make it to the clearing.

Not even two steps in, I finally collapse on the ground. Aspen yelps out in pain before crawling off my back and rolling me over.

“Quinton? Quinton! Oh my god. Stay with me!” Tears stream down Aspen’s beautiful face, and I don’t understand why she’s crying. We’ve made it. She should be happy. “Don’t you fucking die on me now!” She presses her hands down on my arm, pain shooting up my shoulder before my body goes numb.

I want to tell her I’m fine, but my tongue feels heavy in my mouth. Just as heavy as my eyelids feel.

I wake up in the sky and see the helicopter hovering right above us. Its propellers projecting icy winds toward us. The cold pricks my skin painfully, but on the inside, I’m glad that they’re here because that means that Aspen is safe.

I did it, I saved her, and that's the last thing on my mind before the world goes black.

ASPEN

I should feel something, dread, anger, sadness, but all there is, is numbness. I'm numb to the chaos swirling around me, circling the drain called my life. There are people talking, and the engine of the helicopter roars loudly in my ears, but even the noise doesn't affect me. My brain refuses to digest anything I'm hearing.

All my attention is on Quinton and making sure he doesn't die on me before we get back to Corium. As soon as the helicopter lands, people move around us, and still, I feel nothing.

Everything happens at lightning speed. Guards rush toward us, grabbing hold of the stretchers and rushing us both toward the double doors that lead inside Corium.

I lift my head and look around, and the moment I do, I wish I hadn't. My stomach drops to my feet when I see Quinton's family standing at the doors. Their faces are stricken with fear watching Quinton. Except Xander Rossi. He's glaring daggers at me.

The intensity of hate in his gaze makes me want to curl into a ball. All I wanted was to go unnoticed, and instead, everything I've done has brought attention back onto me.

The guards' feet slap against the floor, and I force my gaze down to my hands. As soon as we reach the infirmary, I'm set on one bed while Quinton is carried into a separate room.

Everyone rushes into that room, and I realize then I'm not going to be seen, at least not until after Quinton is. While his injury requires more medical attention, it feels like I'm being brushed aside.

That thought becomes more and more apparent as the minutes tick by and I sit here silently waiting for someone to give a shit about me.

Bitter rage lingers at the back of my mind. Not because these people are ignoring me. I'm used to that, and I'm glad they make sure Quinton is okay before they look at my leg.

No, it's because my family ignores me. Quinton's family came to see him—they probably came as soon as they were told he went out into the forest. My mother hasn't even answered my calls for I don't know how long. I could've died. Hell, I almost did, and that wasn't even a sufficient excuse for her to leave her hideout. I mean, there is a chance they didn't tell her, but I doubt it.

Does she even care about me?

The question lingers in my mind for much longer than I care to allow. I don't want to be mad or permit myself to feel anything resembling anger toward my mother, but you would think she would be here, like Quinton's family.

A little more time passes, and eventually, Dr. Lauren comes out of Quinton's room. I recognize her from the last time I was here. She gives me a genuine smile as she walks up to me.

"I'm sorry you had to wait so long."

"It's okay, really."

She touches my arm and rubs gently. It's a small gesture, but my body instantly relaxes a bit, knowing that she will take care of me like a doctor is supposed to. "It sounds like your leg is broken from the report I got from the guards who brought you in. Do you have any other pain or injuries?"

I shake my head. "No, it's just my leg and a bunch of scrapes and bruises."

"You got very lucky. Not many people walk away from a helicopter crash like that."

Dr. Lauren starts her examination, checking my head for any bumps. My eyes, mouth, and throat also get a good look, as well as the rest of me. She is extremely thorough, and I appreciate it. When she's finished, she calls for a nurse and one of the guards.

"We're going to get an x-ray done. It doesn't appear she has any other trauma, which is a miracle considering what she went through." The doctor gestures to the guard and nurse. "Help her into the wheelchair and bring her back and put her in room four when you're done."

I'm not prepared for the adventure they take me on, and I use the word *adventure* lightly because it's anything but that. Neither the guard nor the nurse seem to care about my wellbeing as they manhandle me onto the x-ray table and back in the wheelchair.

After the x-ray is done and they confirm that my leg is broken, they take me back to an exam room.

"I'm going to help you put a gown on, and then we're going to put an IV in."

I blink slowly. "I didn't think I'd need an IV."

The nurse half-smiles. "Believe me, it's for the best. You're dehydrated, and we do not need a repeat from last time. We're going to put your leg in a cast, so they'll be moving you around a lot. Plus, they have to align the bones. It's just easier if we give you some meds that will knock you out."

Uneasiness coats my insides, and while I want to tell her I don't want to be put to sleep, I don't think I have much choice, so I let her do what needs doing. After I'm in the gown and she places the IV in my arm, the doctor finally comes back.

"As the nurse told you, we're going to give you some meds to calm you and put you to sleep. When you wake, the cast will be on, and the bone will be aligned. It should heal nicely with no complications."

"Okay, how long am I going to be asleep?" The idea of being put to sleep, even if it is for a medical procedure, makes me queasy, as it leaves me vulnerable.

The doctor's features harden. "As long as it needs to take, Aspen. We need to make sure the cast is on properly and that the bone is lined up."

I can only nod because if I speak, all that's going to come out is more worries.

The doctor walks out of the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts, and I press my back against the hospital bed and stare up at the ceiling, doing my best to take a couple of calming breaths so I don't hyperventilate.

My thoughts drift to Quinton, and I wonder how he's doing, if he's in pain? I should worry about myself, but I can't help but care, can't help but wonder if he's okay? He saved my life. It's the human thing to do.

The nurse walks into the room, and I spot the syringe in her hand. My entire body tenses.

"Relax, sweetheart, it's going to be fine," she says as she injects the clear liquid into my IV.

My chest heaves with the effort to calm myself as a strange sensation of warmth envelopes my body. I rest back against the thin mattress once more, my muscles relaxing as the medicine takes effect. I'm vaguely aware of the nurse leaving again.

The exhaustion from the crash and being out in the wilderness catches up with me almost instantly when combined with the medicine she administered. I try my best to keep my eyes open, to avoid falling asleep in a school where everyone hates me, and I don't have the protection of my four dorm room walls, but I can't.

Soon my eyes drift closed, and I drown in the sensation of sleep. I try to swim to the surface, but there is no evading the darkness, and soon I'm dragged down into the depths.



THE NEXT TIME I wake up, my mouth is dry, and my leg is aching. I groan and blink my eyes open slowly. For a half a second, I'm disoriented by the room. It's like I never left the place I fell asleep, but when I look down at my

leg, I see the cast and know that can't be possible. The door to my room is ajar, but there isn't a doctor or nurse in sight.

The red call light button is clipped to my pillow, and I stare at it, wondering if I should pull it or not. The thought slips out of my mind when my heavy eyes drift closed again, and sleep threatens to pull me under.

I'm almost asleep once more when I feel the strange sensation of being watched. I blink my eyes back open, though it takes some serious concentration. I'm not sure what I expected to see when I got my eyes to open fully, but it wasn't Xander Rossi.

In a millisecond, I go from sleepy to wide awake and afraid. I shove up into a sitting position and look down at the red call light.

Would anyone save me?

"If you're thinking of calling for the nurse or doctor, don't bother. They won't be able to save you from me."

I'm not sure how I get my mouth to work, but I do. "What do you want?" The words come out in a croak.

I stare at the man who helped to ruin my life. My father caused a lot of the issues, but Xander didn't help matters when it came time to pin it all on my father.

Even with his graying hair and older age, he doesn't look less threatening. It's obvious he still works out, and his features, though weathered, are still that of a man in his prime.

One might even say he was handsome if you were into dating an older man. I can't see him as anything but the man who has the power to break me into a million tiny pieces.

Xander's face goes from penetrating steel to mocking in the blink of my eyes. "I'm sure I don't have to repeat myself, but it seems you are hard of hearing, so I'll warn you one last time..." He moves like a snake slithering through the grass, each step brings him closer, and I don't realize until the moment he's standing beside the bed that I'm shaking. My throat constricts around nothing, and I feel the urge to get up and run, but where would I go? How

would I run? I'd never escape this man with a broken leg.

My hand moves to the call light button, and I grip it like my life depends on it. Xander smiles, full on smiles, like a lion staring at you right before he sinks his teeth into your flesh to rip you apart.

“Go on, push the button. See who comes running...”

“You... you can't be in here!” My lips tremble, and I squeak out the words, “Get out!”

Even after said no one would come to my rescue, I still press the call light button, hoping and praying that someone will prove him wrong.

“Stupid girl,” he growls, looking down at the lit button.

He moves so quickly, I don't have time to think before his fingers wrap around my arm, and a thumb digs painfully into one of my bruises. I bite the inside of my cheek as I clench my teeth together.

Don't cry. Don't cry.

I can't show him any more weakness, but fear rattles me. No one has come running into the room, proving his theory correct. When his gaze collides with mine again, a terrified shiver ripples down my spine.

His eyes brim with liquid rage, and it takes everything inside me to continue to meet his gaze. To look away would be defeat and as scared as I am, there is still a part of me that refuses to let this man win, to let any of them win.

“I don't care what my son's infatuation with you is. If you don't stay away from him, you will wish you had died in that helicopter out in the forest. I won't warn you again. Next time, you're dead.”

It hits me then, like running head on into a brick wall. My father's voice fills my head, and I remember the riddle he gave me that I could not solve. I'm not sure why it took me so long to piece the puzzle together. Q's mom is dead, and my father told me the answer to Q's questions is Xander, which means...

Xander's retreating footsteps meet my ears, and I force myself out of my thoughts.

“You won’t get away with this,” I growl.

His steps falter, and he turns just as he reaches the door. I don’t know why I think I can push back against him. He’s the mob, Quinton’s father. There is no one who can save me from him, but knowing that drives me to push back against him.

“I already have.” His lips curve into a sinister smile and he walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

My heart gallops in my chest as all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

Xander did it. Xander is the answer Quinton is looking for.

Xander killed Quinton’s mom, and Quinton doesn’t know yet. Which makes me wonder, what kind of hell will break loose when he finds out?

QUINTON

“*I* think he is waking up.” Scarlet’s voice meets my ear, and I am certain I’m dreaming.

“Quinton, open your eyes if you can.” My mom’s shaky voice breaks at the end as if she has been crying for a while.

Someone touches my right arm, soft fingers rubbing up and down my skin in a soothing motion. Another gentle hand is wrapped around my left, a thumb drawing small circles above my wrist.

“He’ll wake up when he is ready.” My father’s normal rough voice sounds almost wobbly today, like he’s unsure of what he’s saying.

It’s another few minutes before I can pry my eyes open, and that takes an enormous amount of effort. I feel like there are ten-pound weights sitting on my eyelids.

When my eyes finally open, I’m surprised to find my parents and Scarlet hovering around the bed I’m in, a bed that is definitely not my own. My thoughts are clouded, and nothing makes sense. Why are they here? And where is *here*?

“There you are. We were so worried about you, Quinton,” my mom sobs, stroking my arm. “They gave you a lot of pain medicine, so you might be a little out of it, but that will pass, and your arm is going to be fine too.”

I automatically looked down at my arm, and images of the bear attacking me flash in front of my eyes. Slowly, all the memories come back to me. The crash, Aspen, the cabin... and the bear.

Shit, that's a lot to take in. I want to ask them where Aspen is, but something in the back of my mind tells me not to.

"We were so worried about you." Scarlet squeezes my hand. I look over and find her eyes brimming with tears, her lips pulling into a half-hearted smile.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry," I rasp out. Clearing my throat, I try to talk again, and the words come out a little easier. "I didn't mean to worry you." And I didn't, but that doesn't make this any less my fault.

"You must be hungry," my father says. "Ella, why don't you find Quinton something to eat and take Scarlet with you."

"All right," my mom agrees. "But don't be too harsh on him," she tells my father, and I already know I'm about to get an ear full. Not that I don't deserve it.

Scarlet and mom both give me a gentle kiss on the cheek that almost makes me roll my eyes before they exit the room. As soon as the door closes behind them, my father steps closer to the bed and starts laying it on me.

"What the hell were you thinking?" My father paces around my bed, unable to hold my gaze. I don't remember the last time I saw him so angry. "Do you have any idea how worried we were? What it would have done to your mother and your sister if you had died out there? I can't believe you were so reckless and irresponsible. Why didn't you call me? You know if you have a problem, you call me!"

"We both know you wouldn't have helped me with this. You hate Aspen. There wasn't a chance in hell I'd have gotten your support."

"You are right. I wouldn't have, and for a good reason. I don't like the girl, and you shouldn't either. I would have talked some sense into you instead. Why would you go after her? Risk your life for *her* of all people?"

“Because I owed her. Actually, we both owed her. Did you know Matteo attacked Adela at the Belmont fundraiser?” That stops my father dead in his tracks. His pacing ends at the foot of my bed, where he turns his body toward me, his intense gaze searching mine.

“He cornered her on the way to the bathroom, trying to pull her into an empty room. Aspen stopped it from happening.”

“That can’t be right. Matteo wouldn’t be that stupid. Aspen is lying to you, and I can’t believe you don’t see it! Adela would have told us.”

“She told Scarlet,” I quip. “She didn’t tell you or me because she knew what we would do, and she didn’t want you to forbid her from attending parties in the future.”

“Motherfucker. If that’s true, then Matteo needs to pay.”

“Don’t worry, he will.”

“You can’t kill him while you’re here.”

“I know. That doesn’t mean I can’t make his life hell,” I say and watch a cruel smile form on my father’s lips. I use that small window of him being in a good mood to my advantage. “Where is Aspen?”

His smile turns into a frown immediately. “In a room down the hall. Her leg is broken, but she’ll make a full recovery. The doctor put her in a cast but will probably send her to her dorm room later today.”

“Okay...” I’m not stupid enough to ask if I can go see her. I wouldn’t know what to say anyway. What truce we had out there can’t be sustained here, can it? “When can I get out of here?”

“Tonight, or tomorrow morning. Dr. Lauren wants to keep you for observation to make sure your wound doesn’t get infected. Some parts were pretty deep. It took over fifty stitches to fix you up.”

“At least I’ll have a badass scar,” I try to joke, but my father is not in a joking mood.

“I’m going to go find your mom and sister. Ren is waiting outside. I’ll send him in to see you.”

“All right.” I nod, even though I don’t want to see him right now.

My father leaves. Before the door closes completely after him, Ren steps into the room.

“Hey,” he greets, his tone guarded, which matches his hesitant steps toward me.

“Did you steal my keycard and give it to Matteo?” I ask, getting straight to the point.

Ren sighs deeply. His shoulders slouch slightly as he gives me a curt nod. “If I had known you would go after her like this—”

“You stole from me,” I growl, deflecting my real anger.

“I’m trying to be your friend and protect you. There are things you don’t know.”

“And there are things *you* don’t know. For example, Matteo hurting Adela.” Shock washes over Ren’s face, his mouth opens, but no words come out, so I continue, “Never go behind my back like this again. I mean it. If you value our friendship at all, you will never fucking pull shit like this again.”

“I swear, I won’t. I tried to protect you. You have to believe me. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“Well, you won’t do it by lying to me and taking my shit. Did you have something to do with the helicopter going down?”

“I—”

The door opening cuts him off and my family walks back in. My mom is carrying a plate of food, and my stomach growls at the sight. Scarlet takes a seat right beside my bed, and Ren steps away until he is standing in the room's corner.

Scarlet looks up at him with a wide smile. Instead of returning it, Ren looks away before heading to the door.

“I’ll be back to check on you later,” he says as he leaves like he is suddenly in a hurry.

What the fuck was that about?

ASPEN

The next morning, I wake wondering if the last few days were a dream, then I look down at my leg that's encased in a cast, and reality smacks me in the face.

Turns out, I really was in a helicopter crash. Quinton rescued me, and his father threatened to have me killed. At least my leg is feeling better, probably thanks to the pain meds the doctor gives me.

I don't understand my brain or why I even care to know how Quinton is doing, especially after what his father said to me yesterday, warning me off or else, but I do.

No matter what, he saved me. He went out into the wilderness and rescued me when no one else would, and that has to count for something, right? He said it was just because he owed me, but I don't know if I believe him.

The nurse brings me breakfast, and I scarf it down like it's my last meal, which it might very well be if Xander has his way. I can't seem to forget the darkness in his eyes, the threat he made hanging in the air between us. I don't want to think about what else he could do to make my life hell, but the evidence of him being a cruel bastard is already out there. If he could kill the mother of his child, he could do anything.

After breakfast, my eyes feel heavy, and I let myself fall into that space between wakefulness and sleeping. When the door to the room creaks open, my eyes pop open, and I force myself to look calm when I see the nurse

standing in the room and not Xander. The man has found a way to frighten me, even without being present.

“Good morning, Aspen. How are you feeling?” The woman’s voice echoes through the room, and I stop myself from cringing at the sound. I recognize her being the nurse who took me to get x-rays.

I clear my throat a little. “I’m good, thanks for asking.”

She smiles, but I can tell it’s forced. “That’s wonderful. We’re going to release you in just a little bit. With the cast on your leg, it should heal up well. We will provide you with crutches. It’s going to be a pain to get around, but I’m sure your teachers will be accommodating.”

I want to laugh at the idea, but I simply nod and save myself the burden of explaining how the teachers and students are least accommodating to a person like me. Knowing I’m going to be released soon, my mind switches gears. It’s stupid to care about someone that doesn’t care about you or someone that refuses to admit they care, but Quinton saved my life, and I need to know he is okay.

“Could you tell me anything about Quinton?” I ask, expecting her to tell me she can’t disclose any information.

“We’re going to keep him for another night. He lost a lot of blood, and we need to make sure none of his stitches open up.”

I nod in agreement. My lungs seem to deflate, letting all the anxious air out of them at her response. I’m just glad he’s okay.

Almost like the nurse can sense what I’m feeling, she says, “What he did was very brave, risking it all to save your life. It’s a miracle that you survived that crash and he found you when he did. Mother nature is a force to be reckoned with; maybe what happened to you two is fate.”

I don’t tell her I agree, but I want to. I know if Quinton hadn’t gone out there to rescue me, I would’ve died on the very first night. I could have died, but it wasn’t my time yet, and I need to remember that, especially on the days when being here suffocates me.

“Anyway, I’ll have someone bring in the crutches before it’s time to go. The librarian is here waiting to see you. I told her I would check in with you first.”

The mere mention of Brittney makes me smile. “Please, send her in. She can help me up to my room since I’ve never used crutches before.”

“Of course, I’ll send her right in.”

I’m smiling from ear to ear when Brittney steps into the room. “Wow, can’t say I’ve ever seen someone so excited to break their leg.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not excited about this stupid thing. I’m excited that you’re here, and I get to see you again.”

The smile slides off her face. “I swear to God, Aspen. I was worried sick about you. When I heard you left...” She trails off, and I don’t have to ask if she’s upset because her words and voice paint the perfect picture.

For the first time since making that rash choice to leave, I feel sorry. I’m not used to anyone giving a damn about me, and knowing my leaving hurt Brittney makes me feel worse.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t do it because of you.”

“I know that much. It’s just, you could’ve come to me. We’re friends, and that’s what friends are for.”

Going to Brittney wasn’t an option. I wasn’t going to get her tangled in the web of my life. Friend or not, I would not endanger her just for a little help.

Another nurse interrupts our conversation, stalking into the room with a pair of crutches in her hand. She leans them against the foot of the bed and places sweatpants and a T-shirt with the school crest on them on the bed.

“I figured you could use some clothes,” she says. “I didn’t see anything that we needed to return to you, and they tossed the clothes you had on in the trash.”

I bite back a frustrated sigh. “Thank you,” I whisper.

The nurse nods and scurries out of the room, leaving Brittney and me alone once more. An uncomfortable silence settles over us, and after a few seconds, she speaks.

“Next time, come to me if you have any problems or need anything. I’ve got your back, and I’ll help you however I can.”

I look down at the clothes the nurse brought. “I won’t drag you into the mess known as my life.”

“Hate to tell you, buttercup, but I’m already a part of it, and I’m not going anywhere. Now, go get dressed, and I’ll help you to your room.”

As much as I hate to admit it, she isn’t wrong. She is already a part of my life and the closest thing to a friend I have here.

“Okay.” I nod and force myself to smile.

Brittney helps me get the crutches to the perfect height, and after a few incidents, where I almost fall over and smash my face into the floor, I make it successfully to the bathroom connected to my room. With only one good leg, I need assistance with putting the sweatpants on, but thankfully, I get the shirt on just fine.

The crest with a knife piercing through the skull reflects back at me as I stare at myself in the mirror. If you looked up hot mess in the dictionary, I’m sure my name would be right beside it.

I splash some water on my face and slap my cheeks a couple of times to give them some color before I hobble out of the bathroom. I can’t wait to get back to my room, to my bed, and shower.

Even if it’s nothing great, it’s still mine.

I can feel Brittney staring at me, but I ignore her questioning gaze and let her help me out of the room and down the hall. We’ve not made it far when voices carry from a room down the hall. The last thing I want to do is walk past that room, knowing that Quinton is in there with his family, but that’s the only way out of this place.

I tell myself to keep my eyes trained ahead, but for some stupid reason, my eyes gravitate toward that door as I hobble by. I glimpse Quinton and his family, and my stomach sinks to my feet.

He's smiling, his sister is laughing at something, and his mother is looking at him like he means the world to her. Even Xander is smiling. I look away and try to ignore the bitter jealousy I'm feeling. His life might not be perfect, but he has more than I do. More joy, more love, more everything.

I swallow down my emotions, and Brittney helps me on the way to my room, and I'm more than thankful for her since I know for a fact, someone would've tripped me and been laughing at me trying to get up more than once by now.

We reach my room, and I take out the new room key that they had made for me. I scan it and turn the door handle before pushing the door open. The door isn't even fully open, but I can't miss the audible gasp that Brittney makes.

"How? How do you stay here? It's small and bare. Jesus, Aspen. Why didn't you tell me you were living like this?"

My defenses are up, and I'm too tired and moody to argue with her.

I shrug. "It's fine. Plus, I don't really care. I only use the room to sleep and study. Otherwise, I'm not here." It's a lie, but there's nothing more for me to say. I know nothing will change, even if I tell her I hate this room and all its contents.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Brittney frowning. "I don't think that's true, but you don't seem like you want to talk about it."

"I'm okay, Brittney." The lie rolls so smoothly off my tongue, I'm wondering if it's really a lie anymore.

"I don't believe you," she says.

I sit on the edge of the bed, tears forming behind my eyes. "Look, I'm exhausted from the medicine they gave me, and all I want to do is rest. I'm not lying to you. I'm okay, really, and if I wasn't, I would tell you."

Brittney doesn't appear to believe me, but I'm thankful she doesn't continue to press on. She gives the room one last pitiful look before walking toward the door.

"Remember, if you need anything, just let me know. I'll come by to check on you in a couple days... actually, probably tomorrow would be better."

I nod and force my lips into a smile. I'm smiling on the outside but splintering into a thousand pieces on the inside.

She leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind her, and I curl up into a ball as best I can with my cast leg. I'm cold and tired, but worst of all, I'm alone.

I know I shouldn't wish he was here, holding all my broken pieces together, but I do. I miss his comforting touch, the heat of his body, his presence. Most of all, his protection. When I'm with Quinton, I feel safe, like nothing can hurt me. At least out there, it was like that. Out there, he wasn't my enemy. He was my protector. I wish we could have stayed that way forever.

Unfortunately, I don't think that's possible.

QUINTON

*A*lthough I don't particularly like the circumstances, I didn't mind having my family here for a visit. I love spending time with my mom and my sister, though there is still a big strain between my father and me, which is part of the reason I'm glad they left. The other part is that I haven't been able to talk to Aspen yet. I have no idea exactly what I'm going to say, but I need to see her.

Exiting my room, I slip into the sneakers I left at the door. My hand is already wrapped around the metal doorknob when Ren appears behind me.

"Before you go, we need to talk. Aspen is playing you, Quinton."

"This again? Why are you beating a dead horse?"

"I already told you, I'm just trying to protect you. She has you wrapped around her little finger, and you don't even realize it. Maybe it's better if I just show you." Ren pulls out his phone and starts typing something into the screen.

Annoyed, I let go of the doorknob and walk back into our apartment. I'm not sure what he could show me that would prove his point, but he has my interest piqued now.

"Aspen didn't show up to the trial herself, but evidence that she provided was used against your father," he explains and presses a button on his phone.

Aspen's father's voice comes from the speaker.

“Xander, it’s good to see you, old friend.”

“Clyde, it’s been a few years. You remember my son, Quinton,” my father announces, and I slowly recognize the conversation from one of the fundraisers we attended together.

“Of course, yes. I brought my daughter as well. Aspen, say hello to my friend, Xander.”

As I am listening, I recall seeing Aspen for the first time. We’re both still young. I remember how small she was then, so tiny I had almost missed her standing behind her father until she stepped around. Did she really use her size and innocence against us?

“Hi…” Aspen’s voice is the last thing playing before Ren turns off the recording and tucks his phone back into his pants.

“She was wearing a wire at the fundraiser. Actually, not just that fundraiser. Every time she was out with her father, she wore one. I guess they thought no one would pay attention to her as much as her father, and unfortunately, they were right. She caught a lot of conversations on tape she shouldn’t have.”

I listen to Ren’s words, and though I understand what he is saying, I can’t digest them right away. I expect to be angry, but before the anger can reach me, confusion and apprehension are center stage. In the past, I always thought the worst about Aspen. Every time, I blamed her for everything right away, never giving her the benefit of the doubt.

Even if she wore a wire, her father probably made her do it. Also, this was a year ago, before we knew each other well. A lot of things have happened since then. So, before I let the anger and betrayal seep in, I need to get her side of the story. As long as she is honest with me, I will forgive her. I can see past this.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” I say to Ren, who is looking at me like he is trying to read me but comes up empty.

Holding my feelings at bay for now, I make my way through the dorms to the other side of this level. Ren’s already returned Aspen’s keycard to me, which I now pull from my pocket to unlock her door. She scrambles off her bed on one leg, dropping a book on the floor.

“Quinton, you just scared the shit out of me,” she admits, catching her breath. She sits back down on the bed and pulls her leg that’s in the cast up to the mattress.

I close the door behind me while taking a deep, calming breath. I’m trying not to expect the worst, but there is so much between us that is in the dark. Turning my full attention to Aspen, I pin her with a glare. She immediately stiffens, picking up on my mood.

“I’m going to ask you a question, and I need you to be honest with me. I mean it, Aspen. Do not lie to me. If you tell me the truth, I won’t be as mad,” I warn.

Like the predator I am, I stalk toward her until she scoots back on the mattress, trying to put some distance between us.

“Okaaay,” she draws out the and nods carefully. “What’s the question?”

I stop at the edge of her bed. Looking down at her, I remain standing, looming over her like a shadow.

“Did you, at any point, wear a wire?”

“A wire?” She gives me a puzzled look. “I have no idea what you are talking about. When would I have worn a wire, and why?”

The anger I have been holding captive slowly emerges. “I’m talking about the fundraisers and parties your father used to drag you to. Did you wear a wire at one of those? Did you listen to people and spy on them so your father could use those conversations against my family?” I emphasize *my family* because I need her to know that her actions affected my whole family, including me, and that I won’t tolerate it. She might not have known that at the time, but she should know now.

“Quinton, I promise you, I’ve never worn a wire in my life.”

“Wrong answer,” I grit through my clenched teeth and get on the bed with her.

She scoots back as much as she can, but her back is up against the wall too soon. “Quinton,” she pleads but goes quiet when I wrap my fingers around

her throat.

“Why couldn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“I did,” she wheezes, and I tighten my grip.

Her hands wrap around my wrist, trying to pull me away, but I don’t budge. I need this, I need control. Need to make her submit.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, pushing her tits up and against her shirt. She is not wearing a bra, and I can see her rosy nipples through the thin white fabric. My dick stiffens almost immediately.

“Let go of my wrist and pull down your pants,” I order. Her eyes go wide as if she is shocked by where this is going. “Do it.” I give her slender neck another squeeze before she lets go and starts fumbling with her pajama pants.

Lifting her ass, she pulls them down, taking her panties off in one swoop. When they are bunched up around her knees, I use my free hand to help her pull her good leg out. Never letting go of her neck, I shift around and position myself between her thighs.

“Now undo my pants,” I demand. I can feel her throat swallow on my palm, but she gets to work right away, undoing the button and pulling down the zipper. “Put your hands back on my arm and keep them there.”

Again, she does what I tell her without fighting me, which makes me wonder if the fear in her eyes is real. I know at least part of her likes when I treat her like this. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t come so easily when I do.

Her slender fingers wrap around my forearm as her body slowly settles into the mattress like she is forcing herself to relax. I free my cock from my boxers and grip my girth. The wound on my arm still aches with every movement, but I relish in the sting of pain.

Finding her entrance, I rub the tip of my dick through her folds. She isn’t as wet as I need her to be, but I don’t have the patience for foreplay right now.

Sitting up a little straighter, I dip my head down, gather saliva in my cheeks, and spit into my hand that’s holding my dick. I rub my spit onto my length, using it as lube. Aspen doesn’t move the entire time, but I can feel her eyes

on me, burning into my skin like a hot iron.

When my cock is covered enough, I guide myself to her entrance. This time I slip inside with ease, groaning at the way her pussy grips me. Her welcoming heat swallows me so perfectly.

I wipe my hand on her sheet before grabbing hold of her hip, my other hand still wrapped around her neck lightly, not squeezing... not yet.

Not too gently, I slide in and out of her cunt. With each thrust, I bury myself so deep, my balls slap against her ass, and her whole body moves up on the bed. It doesn't take her long before she grows wet for me, and her body becomes pliant in my hold. That's when I decide to add a little pressure to the side of her throat, on her carotid artery.

She goes from content to being alarmed in a heartbeat. I can feel her blood pumping under my thumb, trying to get through to her brain. Her short but sharp nails dig into my arm, and her panicked gaze begs me to let her go, but that's not going to happen.

"Q..." she gasps, her bottom lip quivering, and her eyes turning glassy.

I take the pressure off her artery, watching as relief flashes over her face when blood flow returns to her brain.

"Stop fighting me. You're gonna lie there and let me fuck you however I want. And right now, I want to choke you while fucking you."

"I thought you were going to kill me," she admits, taking me by surprise.

Yes, I'm mad at her, furious, actually. I want to hurt her, control her, make her feel helpless, but I don't want to kill her. I don't know if I could.

"You know I can't kill you while we're here. Not even I can break that rule at Corium. If I could, Matteo would already be dead. Now, shut up and take what I give you." I tighten my grip, adding pressure to her neck once more. This time, she doesn't panic. She simply lets me fuck her.

Her eyes flutter closed, but her fingers are still wrapped around my arm. I watch her face carefully as I thrust into her with deep and hard strokes. Every time her face turns from red to pale blue, I release her, give her a few

moments reprieve before I choke her again.

Her thighs suddenly start quivering, a soft moan slips from her lips, and then her cunt squeezes me tighter than my hand on her neck. Her back arches, and her head falls back into the pillow. Her pussy pulses around my cock as her orgasm washes over her, and my own comes barreling toward me.

I let go of her neck and lower my body onto hers, hooking my right arm under her shoulder while holding myself up with the left. I pound into her so hard I don't know where my body ends or hers begins. I come so hard, for a moment, I forget where I am. I forget who we are, our past, and our future. All that matters is her and me.

My balls ache as the last drop of my cum shoots into her tight channel. I'm not sure if she just came again or if her orgasm lasted this whole time, but when I look at her face, I see her sleepy crooked smile. This is how she looks at me right after she comes on my cock. A smile I'm fairly familiar with now.

For a moment, I just stare at her, using the post-sex haze over my brain to suppress reality, and I simply admire her beauty. Even with her face red, her hair a mess, and mascara smeared, she is so fucking beautiful. I could get lost in her. Maybe I already have. She is like a siren, and I'm a stupid sailor heading blindly to my death.

All too soon, the hormonal fog lifts from my mind, and I sober. "Are you still taking the pill I gave you?" I ask when I realize I just came inside of her without protection... again.

"Yes, but I'm almost out, and I obviously didn't take it for a few days. So, if you're going to come and randomly fuck me, you might want to use a condom next time."

"There won't be a next time." I pull out of her, and we both wince at the loss. "I think you are enjoying this way too much. This was the last time." I get off the bed and turn away from her. I don't want to see her face when I say the next words. "I'm bored with you. Time to find someone else."

I tuck my now limp dick back into my pants as I exit the room. The door falls shut behind me, and an empty feeling spreads out in my chest. A deep ache forms inside that empty spot, begging to be filled with something I can't

have.

She did this to me. She lied to my face.

I keep reminding myself of these things, forcing myself to head back to my room instead of turning back to hers. I need to stay away from her before she pulls me under completely.

ASPEN

If it wasn't for Brittney bringing me books and food every day, I'm not sure what I would do. I can barely get around with the crutches in my room, so walking around Corium with people knocking into me is out of the question. The bruises on my arm are slowly healing, but the crutches dig into them every time I use them, and since I stopped taking the stronger pain meds, it really fucking hurts.

When Brittney shows up today, I'm smiling. She puts my next set of evening entertainment on the desk and hands me a sandwich, a bag of chips, and an apple.

"You're smiling. I like it."

"I'm happy to see you. I feel like I've been trapped in this room for weeks, and it's only been a couple days."

"No one is keeping you in this room, Aspen. You can go to classes."

I look down at the floor. "I know, but I'm not ready yet. My leg is just going to make me the center of attention. It's bad enough everyone knows I left and that I was the only person to survive the helicopter crash."

Brittney crosses the room and sits on the edge of the bed. The bed squeaks with the added weight, and the sound reminds me of what Quinton and I did just yesterday on this bed. Damn. My cheeks heat with the intrusion of thoughts.

Thank god, Brittney can't read my thoughts.

"Everyone knows what happened. News in this place travels fast. Plus, you can't hide your leg being in a cast. Eventually, you're going to have to leave this room."

The thought of having to step out into that hall makes my stomach churn. With the cast on my leg, I'm nothing but a target for every person I cross paths with.

"I'm not ready, the mere thought of leaving this room..." I don't finish my sentence because I don't want to whine to Brittney about my problems.

Before, I could at least move fast through the halls and thought it was annoying when someone bumped into me, but at least it wouldn't really hurt. Now, more things can go wrong. I know no one can kill me here, but that doesn't mean they can't hurt me, bringing me as close to death as possible without actually killing me.

"Have you talked to Quinton? Maybe he can help some?"

A bubble of nervous laughter escapes me. "He's not going to help me. Last night he showed up and basically told me he's done with what we have and that he wants nothing else to do with me."

Brittney's face contours with anger. "What do you mean he doesn't want anything to do with you? Like pardon my French, but what the fuck is wrong with that boy?"

I shrug. I don't have an answer for her. I don't know what's going on with him, but I do know the way he made me feel. I've never come so hard in my life. It was like an out-of-body experience until it was over, and I was left lying on the bed while he told me he was done with me.

After he left, that euphoric feeling disappeared, and in the wake of it all, it left me feeling used and discarded like trash.

"He's a fucking potato, and you know what? He can suck a dick. Don't let some asshole make you think you're less than who you are. If he can't see your worth, then he can fuck off."

My lips turn up into a smile, but I still feel depressed over it. I don't know why he's mad at me or what I did to anger him.

Brittney places a hand on my shoulder, drawing me from my thoughts. "Men are finicky creatures, don't let him bring you down. You're beautiful and kind, and if he doesn't see your worth, that's on him. Don't settle for someone like that."

Would it really be settling when there was never a relationship to begin with? It's not like we were exclusive or even dating. He saved me, but according to him, just because he owed me. He fucked me and controlled every move I made. I was just a pawn, and still, I feel empty at the loss of him from my life.

"I know. I'll get over it. It's just going to take some time." I try not to sound as depressed as I feel.

We eat together, and then she tells me about the new books she brought me. She gushes about this book called *Pretty Little Savage* by Lucy Smoke, and I can't hide my excitement. There is nothing like diving into the pages of a new book while wrapped up in a blanket with a cup of tea or hot cocoa. It's the best feeling in the world, and I don't care what anyone says about it.

"Anyway, the heroine is kickass, and I want you to read the book. It'll make you feel better." Brittney nudges my shoulder.

"I'll for sure read it. I need a new book. I feel like I'm devouring every single one you give me."

"That's because you are."

I laugh and shake my head. "I'm going to drop out of school and become a professional book reader."

"You mean librarian?" Brittney adds.

We both break out into a fit of laughter, and after a few seconds, we catch our breaths, and Brittney says, "My lunch break is up, but as always, if you need anything, let me know."

I frown, my eyes lingering on the cast. “I can’t wait to get this stupid thing off.”

I’m like a kid pouting because her mom won’t get her a candy bar at the grocery store, and yes, I know it could’ve been worse. I could’ve lost my entire leg or died, but I don’t care to be reminded of those things.

“It’s going to be okay. You’ll get over this hurdle, I promise.”

“I know. Thanks for the lunch and books. I appreciate you coming to hang out with me even if I’m being a big baby right now.”

“We all have days where we mope, cry, and whine. What matters are the days when you get back up and continue pushing on.”

As much as I don’t want Brittney to leave, I know she has to. After she is gone, I’m left with her parting words swirling around inside my head. I’m tempted to crawl back under the sheets and go to sleep, but I grab my laptop instead. I need to check my email and make sure none of my teachers have marked my assignments as missing.

I’ve been doing everything I can to get work done, but a lot of it is hands on, so if I’m not in class to do it, then I’m basically failing.

As soon as the screen loads, I want to slam the laptop closed and pretend like I never saw the email from Lucas, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Instead, I move my cursor over the email and click on it. The email opens on a new screen.

My eyes scan the screen as I devour all the words in the email. Bile rises in my throat, burning the sensitive tissue as I read. He wants me to come to his office. He needs to talk to me.

To do that, I would have to leave this room, but if I don’t go, then he’ll come here anyway, and he’ll definitely be pissed about it. It’s better if I go to him because if he has to come to me... I’ve got enough trouble going on without pissing off the headmaster.

Regardless of how anxious I am about leaving this room, I’ll do it. First thing in the morning.



Turns out, I was right to worry because the asshole people in this school are even less considerate of me than they were before. I've been shoved so many times since I left my dorm, I stopped counting. The bruises on my arms hurt like hell, and the muscles in my leg ache from the way I have to balance on it.

What should take me only fifteen minutes ends up taking me thirty, and by the time I get to the administration office, I'm sweaty and have a permanent scowl on my face.

A woman sitting behind a desk greets me with a fake smile. "Good morning. How can I help you?"

"Mr. Diavolo requested my presence." I try my best not to sound bitchy, but that's much easier to do when you don't feel like a tennis ball that's been whacked across the court for the last half an hour.

His assistant types something into the computer while I lean on my crutches, my chest heaving as I suck air into my lungs. It might not seem like a long walk, and it's not when you're walking on two good legs, but with crutches and dodging bodies, it seems way longer.

"Ahhh, yes. I see he made a note for you to come and talk to him. Head on in." She looks up at me and gestures to the door on the left side of her desk.

I swallow down my fear of what's going to take place in that office any second from now and trudge forward. As soon as I open the door, I want to turn around. Lucas is intimidating, and without Quinton's protection, I feel like a lighthouse on the beach ready to take the battering of the ocean.

"Have a seat, Aspen." Lucas gestures to the two seats in front of his desk.

My stomach knots, and I look at the seats and back at him. Lucas is what I would call a dangerous sort of handsome. For an older man, he appears rather youthful. Maybe it's the fact that he is covered in tattoos.

His features are still firm, and his body, which I imagine is chiseled from stone, probably doesn't show his age either.

I hobble over to a chair and almost let out a sigh when my ass hits the seat. Lucas watches me intently, his dark gaze penetrating deep inside me. It's terrifying.

His lips press into a thin line, and I open my mouth to ask him what's going on when he speaks.

"I know you've been through a lot, and with your broken leg, it might be hard to attend classes, but I can't let you graduate if you aren't going."

It's the final nail in the coffin known as my life. Not really, but it feels like it. The weight of his words slams into me, and my response sputters out.

"I understand. I'll start going to classes tomorrow. I've just been wary with the leg, and I take a lot longer to get places, but I don't want to risk not graduating or having to take classes over next year."

He nods. "I'm sure it's difficult, but my hands are tied."

I don't ask him in what way they're tied. I don't care. I knew I'd have to go back to classes. It just turns out I am going a little earlier than expected.

"It's fine. I'll go."

It hits me then, smashing into me with the intensity of a mac truck. I've been so consumed with Quinton and the crash that I never stopped to ask anyone if they contacted my parents.

"Did you contact my mother to let her know about the crash?"

Lucas frowns. "I called her the day you left, and then again when you were brought into medical. I even tried to get ahold of your father, but neither of your parents have responded."

I nod and swallow past the knot in my throat. Part of me isn't surprised, but another, smaller part of me is. Perhaps my mother didn't care enough to make sure I was okay, but my father sent me here to protect me. If he discovered I was hurt or missing, he would've done whatever he could to help. I'm sure of it.

"Was that all? Your email made it sound like you had more than one thing you wanted to discuss."

“That’s all. You’re free to return to your dorm.”

“Oh, okay. Well, please let me know if they get back to you.”

He nods again, and all I see in his eyes when I look back up at him is pity. He feels sorry for me. It’s written all over his face. The girl no one cares about. Not even her own parents care to know if she’s alive.

I’d laugh if it wasn’t so fucking sad.

Instead, I do what I do best and blink back the tears, refusing to let anyone see me weak. Quinton’s already seen the worst pieces of me, and he’s gone now. Now, I have to fend for myself... at least I know I won’t die. *Maybe.*

QUINTON

Staying away from Aspen has been harder than I anticipated. She has a hold on me I can't explain or shake, no matter how much I want to. I try to occupy myself with making Matteo's life miserable, but it's just not as satisfying as taunting Aspen. It merely scratches an itch.

"Did you like my presentation, Quinton?" Anja's annoying voice drags me out of my mind.

"Huh?" I lean against the wall outside the lecture hall.

"My presentation this morning in class? You watched it, right?" Anja moves closer, hooking her arm into mine.

I'm about to shove her off when I catch sight of Aspen limping down the hallway on her crutches. Her head is lowered, her eyes glued to the floor in front of her, but I know she saw me. I can tell by the way her jaw is set and her eyebrows are drawn together in anger.

"Of course, I watched it," I lie, watching Aspen head toward us. "Why don't we skip this class and go to my room? You can tell me more about *your project*."

Anja straightens up, and a satisfied smile spreads across her face. I can almost see Aspen roll her eyes.

Digging the knife in a little deeper, I drape my arm around Anja as Aspen passes us. She looks up just in time to see me pulling Anja into my side.

Aspen's eyes turn to fiery daggers, and for a moment, I think she is going to attack me with one of her crutches.

"Yes, let's go," Anja chirps, planting her manicured fingers on my stomach.

Again, I fight the urge to slap her hand away, but instead, force a smile and drag Anja with me down the hall without glancing back at Aspen.

Anja keeps yapping about a Halloween party, but I drown it out with thoughts of Aspen and wonder where she is going right now. As soon as we're out of sight, I shove Anja away.

"I'll see you around," I dismiss her unceremoniously.

"What? I thought we were going to your room?"

"I changed my mind. Maybe another time."

"You're a real prick, Quinton!"

"I know." I shrug. "It's not my fault you haven't figured it out yet."

"There's something you should have figured out by now as well. You shouldn't play games with me."

"Is that a threat?" I take a step toward her, crowding her space.

"It's a fact." Not backing down, she also takes a step toward me until the tips of our shoes are touching. "Have you wondered why my parents weren't at the founders' ball? It's because my mother killed my father... and I helped her." A wicked smile spreads across her lips, and the murderous glint in her eyes tells me she is not lying. Anja killed her father. Maybe I underestimated her.

"Touching story. Sounds like some quality mother-daughter bonding." I keep my tone bored. "Like I said, I'm done with you for the day." I step past her and head toward my place.

"You'll regret this, Quinton," Anja yells after me.

Fuck, I already am.

When I get back to my apartment, I'm glad to find Ren is not here yet. No matter his reasoning, I'm still fucking mad at him. I know I can't be mad at him forever, but I'm not just gonna forgive him either.

Trying to get my mind off that situation, I wrack my brain, trying to figure out why Aspen was walking through the hallway past the bio labs. She doesn't have any classes on that level. So why was she there?

Fuck. Not knowing is going to drive me insane. Not being able to control her has been bugging the shit out of me, but at least I knew where she was and what she was doing, or at least I thought I knew.

Maybe it's time to feed into my stalker tendencies a little more, and I know just how I'm going to do that.



I'M ALREADY in a bad mood today, but when Ren comes up behind me in our small kitchen, I know it's only going to get worse.

“Are you gonna talk to me, or just ignore me for the rest of the school year?”

Pouring milk over my bowl of cereal, I let his question linger in the air for a while before I answer. “What is there to talk about? You lied to me, stole from me, and went behind my back.”

Ren huffs behind me. “You heard the tape. What would you have done?”

Slamming the jug of milk on the counter, I spin around to face him. “I would have talked to you. I would have told you everything right away instead of playing fucked up games.”

“I'm sorry, Quinton. I meant what I said. I thought I was protecting you. I don't know what else to do.”

“Was the helicopter crash planned?”

“I don't know. I really don't. Your father asked me to get her away from Corium. That's all, I swear.”

“So, you work for my father now? Was your friendship with me nothing but a ruse? Let me guess, you’re here to babysit me so I don’t make any stupid choices that my father might not approve of?”

Ren shakes his head. “No, of course not. I’m not a spy, and I don’t work for your father. It’s not like that.”

The sting of betrayal intensifies, and merely looking at Ren right now makes me want to punch him in the face.

“I don’t know if I can believe anything you say anymore.”

“Fuck, Quinton.” He throws his hands up in frustration. “Tell me how to fix this. I can’t take this bullshit between us.”

“I don’t know how we can fix the trust, but if you really want to make it up to me, you could start with two things. One, I want to know how you got those recordings. Two, I want you to help me make Matteo’s life miserable. I’ve started already, but it’s time to kick things up a notch.”

“Well, one is easy. Your father sent them to me.”

“Of course, he did.” That was what I was thinking.

“I’m not sure what you have planned for Matteo, but I can promise you, I’ll have your back there. We can make his life hell while he is here, and I’m all for it.”

“Good, because I already have something in mind.”

Let the fun begin.

ASPEN

*A*nother day of trying to stay afloat on a life raft that has a gaping hole in it while a hundred sharks circle beneath, waiting for me to slip into the water. And by that, I mean attending Corium.

I hate being so vulnerable and helpless, and I'm fucking tired of feeling this way. As soon as I get this cast off, I'm done with this. I'm done letting them push me around. I'll spend every waking hour in the gym if I have to, but I will get stronger.

After seeing Quinton and Anja together, my hatred for him and this place explodes ten-fold. I try to blend into the background, but when everyone already hates you, and you now have an exposed weakness, it's harder to go unnoticed.

I thank my lucky stars that I've made it through another day of classes without becoming the target for someone else's amusement. I've been grumpy all week and think it would be good to get some sunshine. I remember the sunroom and how it rarely has many people in it, but it's been a while since I've been up there.

I guess if it's too busy, I'll just return to my dorm. My arms have healed, and it's not as painful to get around. Plus, I can take the elevator up and won't have to hike a flight of stairs. I leave my room and hobble down the hall to the elevator.

People are moving about the corridor, but it's not nearly as congested as it is in the morning. I ignore the people around me and make a beeline across the hall to the elevators. I'm almost there, when out of nowhere, someone slams into the side of me.

My nails dig into the wall as I try to gain purchase on something to stop myself from falling on the floor. One of my crutches clatters by my feet, and I peer over my shoulder just in time to see Anja smiling while walking past me. What a fucking bitch?

I want to ask her what the hell her problem is with me but keep it behind my lips. If it has anything to do with Quinton, I don't want to be a part of it.

Catching my breath, I stand there for a moment while people pass by without even blinking in my direction. Someone could slit my throat in this hallway right before their eyes, and I bet they wouldn't notice.

I look down at the ground. The crutch is resting on the floor beside my foot. I'm afraid to bend down and pick it up because if I lose my balance, there won't be anyone to help me up, but there isn't any other option. I guess if I fall over, I'll have to army crawl my way back to my room. The thought of doing that makes me laugh.

Having wasted enough time, I bend down, pick up the crutch, and continue on my way to the sunroom. My mood is already lightening, just thinking about the feeling of the sun on my skin. The warmth and joy that you get from a dose of vitamin D. It's exactly what I need.

The elevator comes to a halt, and there's a chime before the doors open. I hesitate to step out when I see numerous people occupying the sunroom.

Shit! I don't know what I was hoping for, but I didn't think there would be that many people here. I surprise myself when I take a step forward and step out of the elevator.

I'll just keep to the walls and do my best to blend into the background. My crutches make little noise as I enter further into the room. I can already feel the rays of the sun on my skin, melting my cold interior. The sound of laughter fills my ears, and I turn toward it, glancing at the group of men, but not just any men, Quinton, Ren, and their friend, Nash, are sitting and

laughing at something one of them said.

I notice that the worst of all of them—Matteo—is missing. In fact, now that I think back on it, I can't recall seeing him around Quinton and Ren at all. Before, he was everywhere they were, but now, it's like he doesn't even exist. At least to them.

He still haunts my every thought. I know he still has it out for me, and like a snake, he's slithering through the grass, waiting for the perfect time to strike. I can feel eyes on me and glance over at Quinton, but it isn't him looking at me. No, it's Nash.

His beady eyes scan over my body in a way that makes my skin crawl. It's more than being uncomfortable, the way he looks at me. It's like he wants to break me like a glow stick just to see what's inside.

My hands become clammy, and I decide it's probably best to return to my room. I've taken enough risks and drawn enough attention to myself today. Turning on my crutches, I walk toward the elevator when, out of nowhere, I'm tripped.

“Watch your step, rat!” Someone snickers.

Laughter rains down around me as I release the crutches and catch myself on my hands to stop from smashing my face into the ground. Pain ricochets up my bad leg, and I let out a soft cry.

I grit my teeth to hold back the rest of the pain and look up from the floor. My eyes meet Quinton's icy blue gaze, and all I can do is stare at him, wondering what his next move is going to be.

Will he help me?

He wears a perfect mask of pain and hate, but I know deep down there is more to him than meets the eye. I know the real him, the man who comes to my room at night and lets me see all his broken pieces.

Exhaling the air from my lungs, I break eye contact and ignore the eyes that are on me while I try to get off the floor. He's not going to help me. Why would he?

The pain in my leg intensifies, and I'd probably cry if there weren't so many people waiting for the tears to fall.

Assholes. Waiting to see me fall or fail.

I let that anger burn through my veins, giving me the drive to push through the pain and help myself up off the floor. Not that anyone gives me a helping hand, least of all Quinton, who I can feel watching me the entire time. I don't know why I expected him to offer.

What does it say about this entire room full of people if they don't make a move to help someone in need? I guess the better question is, who trips a person with a broken leg. Preying on the weak is the lowest, not standing up for someone who can't stand up for themselves, even lower. I vow to myself that I will never sink to their level.

It can't be more than a minute, but it seems like an eternity before I get to my feet. It takes even longer for me to situate both crutches so I can get out of this fucking place.

By the time I reach the elevator doors, I'm blinking back tears. I glance back at Quinton one more time and notice his jaw is tight, and confliction flickers in his eyes.

He's conflicted...but why? I mean nothing to him. I'm finally sure of it. He only cares about me when I'm on my back. And this time, I won't forget it.

QUINTON

Using the sharpened blade of my pocketknife, I cut away the tape wrapped around the top of the beat-up box. Even with expedited shipping, this took forever to get here. I've been waiting for the package for weeks, and now that I've finally got it, I find the outside damaged. If they broke my shit, I'm returning it with some C4 tucked inside.

Dropping the knife on the table next to me, I eagerly pull open the box and start taking out its content. Lucky for Amazon, the cameras inside are all undamaged. I inspect each one and connect them to my phone. After I try both out and know they are working, I check the time. Aspen should still be at class for another hour, which gives me enough time to install these.

If I can't physically be with her, I can at least watch her.

Dropping the small devices in my pocket, I grab her keycard from my desk and head out. When I get to her door, I unlock it and slip inside without anyone giving me a second glance.

As soon as I'm inside, her unique scent fills my senses, and for a moment, I think she is here. I flip on the light switch to find the room empty, and I hate how disappointment creeps its way into my core.

I make quick work setting up one of the tiny cameras in the vent above her bed. The second camera is a little harder to hide since there is not much in the small room to use.

Scanning the cramped space, my eyes catch on a corner tile in the ceiling that's coming loose, and I wonder if I can use it. Pulling her desk chair across the room, I climb up on it and loosen the tile more. Small debris falls to the floor as I gently wiggle at the corner, but I finally get it apart enough to tuck the camera inside.

I check the feed on my phone before I hop off the chair and place it back where I found it.

Just as I'm about to reach for the doorknob, someone swipes a card on the other side, and the lock disengages.

Fuck.

I quickly step to the side and let the door hide me as it opens. Aspen hobbles inside, trying to get her backpack off while balancing on one foot.

I sneak up behind her. "Need some help?"

She lets out a loud shriek, flailing her arm and almost hitting me with her crutches. Her quick movement makes her lose balance, but I grab her arm before she falls over.

"What the hell! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Maybe." I smirk. "Sit down before you kill yourself." I push her down on her bed. She sits, still clutching her chest as I close the door to her room.

"Now, you want to help me?" She scowls. An image of her struggling to get up earlier pops into my head, and a dagger of guilt embeds itself in my chest. An apology sits at the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it down.

"What do you want?" Aspen questions when I spin back around. Her eyes are guarded, just like the rest of her. It's almost like she expects me to attack her any minute now. Though I understand why she acts like this, it bothers me.

"Just came to check on you," I lie. "Wanted to make sure you're not withering away from jealousy."

Aspen rolls her eyes so hard her whole head moves with it. "I'll survive."

"Are you admitting to it?"

“Of being jealous? Of course, I am,” she admits openly. “I’m jealous of a lot of things, but I won’t die from it.” Kicking off her one shoe, she lifts her legs onto the bed and turns away from me. “Close the door on your way out, please.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” I grit out, annoyed by the way I feel as I listen to her defeated voice.

I want to tell her I didn’t sleep with Anja, that I haven’t slept with anyone, but that would defeat the purpose.

I want her to hurt.

Fighting the urge to crawl in the bed with her, I leave and head back to my apartment. As soon as I’m back in my room, I flop down on my bed and pull up the video feed on my phone. Her room appears on my screen, and excitement sparks in my chest. Not only that, but there is a satisfaction that comes with seeing her, knowing what she is doing when she thinks no one can see her.

For a while, she simply lies in her bed, curled up on her side, just as I left her. When I think she must have fallen asleep, she turns around to lie on her back. Her red-rimmed eyes tell me she’s been crying, and the satisfied excitement I was feeling turns sour.

She wipes her tears away with the back of her hand and reaches for a book on her nightstand. She spends the next hour reading, and I watch her turn every page with wonder. She is so immersed in the book, she probably doesn’t realize the facial expressions she is making.

Aspen flinches when her phone suddenly rings, breaking the silence in her room. She closes her book and reaches for the ringing device.

“Hey, Mom,” she answers the video call with a guarded smile.

“I just got Lucas’ message...” *Just now?* The crash happened weeks ago. This can’t be the first time her mother has called. “Why would you leave the school? I told you how dangerous it was.”

Aspen is not even fazed by the way her mother yells at her instead of showing any kind of concern. It’s like she doesn’t even care that her daughter

almost died.

“I told you, it’s just as dangerous here. I want to come home.”

“You can’t, Aspen. How many times do I need to explain that to you? Isn’t what happened proof enough?”

“The helicopter had some technical issues. It could have been bad luck.”

“It wasn’t. Someone tried to kill you, and they will try again if you leave that place.”

“Why would anyone want me dead? I don’t understand. I didn’t do anything.”

“They just want to get back at your father. He pissed off a lot of people, Aspen.”

“I know, Mom. I live with most of them.”

“Just keep your head low and ignore them. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m trying.” Aspen huffs. “Mom, I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth. At Dad’s trial, were there any recordings used for evidence?”

Holding my breath, I lean into the phone. *This just got a lot more interesting.*

“What do you mean by recordings?”

“Like tape recordings. Quinton thinks I wore a wire at one point. I don’t even know when. Did Dad ever put a wire on me without me knowing?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. How would he do that, and why?” I can’t see her mom’s face, but I can tell she sounds a little frazzled at this new revelation. “I don’t remember there being any recordings at the trial. Quinton is just messing with your head. Don’t believe anything he is saying.”

“It’s not what I believe. It’s what he believes. We kind of had somewhat of a truce, and now he is back to hating me and making my life hell.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Aspen.” Her mom almost sounds annoyed by her daughter’s problems. “Anyway... I just called to check up on you. I have

to go, but I'll call you back in a few weeks."

Wow, what a bitch.

"Okay." Aspen doesn't even try to keep her on the phone. "I'll talk to you soon."

"All right, bye, honey," her mom says, but it doesn't sound like a genuine endearment, more like how a southern person says it to a customer at a diner.

"Bye, Mom." Aspen hangs up the phone and lies back down on her mattress.

I was confused about her before, but that confusion just reached a new level. Could she really have been wearing a wire without knowing? Or is this all just an elaborate game? Aspen is smart. Maybe she suspects me of keeping tabs on her.

Fuck, my head hurts trying to figure this out. One thing is clear. I need more information.

ASPEN

A month passes, and it's much slower than I'd like, but I make it through without dying. I got the cast on my leg removed a few days ago, and now I feel like a new person. For the first time in six weeks, I can take a complete shower without having to wrap my leg up.

I'm so excited about it that as soon as I'm finished with classes, I head straight back to the dorm to take a shower. The door to my room is barely closed, and I'm stripping out of my clothes and rushing into the bathroom. It seems like I've waited for this day forever, and by forever, I mean six weeks.

I walk into the bathroom and head straight for the shower. I grab the handle and turn the water on. The pipes creak, and I step into the shower, expecting water to come raining down on me, but after a second, there's nothing. I look up to see a small trickle of water coming from the showerhead, but that's it.

Frustrated, I let out a growl. I turn the knob on and off, watching the showerhead to see if any water comes out, but nothing.

"Goddamnit!" I curse angrily while twisting the knob once more. "What the hell is wrong with this thing?"

It's my luck to not be able to take a nice, hot shower fully for almost six weeks without my cast being in the way for something to go wrong with the shower as soon as the cast is off. I slap the wall in frustration and try the knobs one more time like it might fix it.

As soon as I twist the knob again, the pipes make this strange noise. “What the—” My words are cut off when a geyser spray of water comes erupting out of the shower, soaking me in an instant.

I can’t seem to get my hands to work fast enough, my fingers slip over the plastic, and I scramble to shut the water off, half drowning myself in the process.

I twist and twist and twist until the water spray becomes a drip.

My half wet, half dry hair sticks to my skin, and I blink back the water on my lashes. I could try to take a shower, but I don’t really want to stand under a spray of water that’s going to peel my skin off.

I swallow down my anger, grab a towel, and dry myself off. It’s only four in the afternoon. I could go down the hall to the maintenance room and see if the guy who works in this corridor can fix the shower. Preferably today.

The idea sticks, and I get dressed in a hurry and rush out the door. I’m sure I look like a maniac with my hair all over, and my cheeks flush from the spray of water, but I don’t care. All I want is a hot shower, which apparently isn’t going to happen unless I can get someone to fix my possessed showerhead.

I reach the maintenance room just as the maintenance guy comes out. Oh, thank god, I caught him in time.

“Hi, can you please come look at my shower? Something is wrong with it.” The words come out in a rush, and I look up at him. He’s tall, with a bulging gut and a bald head. His eyes roam over me in a way that makes my skin crawl.

“What’s your room number? I’ll add it to my list.”

“What do you mean, you’ll add it to your list? I need it done now. I can’t shower with the way it is, and I haven’t—”

He cuts me off, his voice booming and drawing the attention of other students. “I said I’ll add it to my list. Now, what’s your room number?”

I want to order him to fix it now, but I can’t. I’m a nobody, and he wouldn’t listen anyway, so why waste my breath? I tell him my room number, and

walk back to my room.

I'm still hung up on taking a shower, but where else can I go? I guess I could ask Brittney, but she's already done so much for me. I don't want to burden her with more.

I slump down on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Of course, my thoughts drift to Quinton. They always do, no matter how hard I try to think about something else... anything else.

Why he was here yesterday? It didn't seem like he wanted anything since he left as soon as I walked in. Maybe he was just trying to scare me, keep me on my toes, or maybe he was working out and just passed through and dropped in.

It doesn't matter, but in a way, it does because if he's done with me like he said, then why was he in my room?

Out of nowhere, I remember that the dorm gym has a shower. I never use it, because why would I when I have an attached bathroom to my room, but it looks like there's a first time for everything.

I grab a backpack from the floor and toss my soap, towel, and pajamas into the bag. Then I race out of the room, a smile on my face because I know I'm finally going to get the shower I've been dreaming about for the last six weeks.



IT'S BETTER than I thought it would be, better than I could've ever imagined. I stand under the hot spray for an eternity, relishing in the unlimited hot water. I'm not sure why I didn't think to come to the gym showers sooner.

I take extra time washing my hair and body, and when I'm finished, I rinse off, shut the water off, and walk back into the locker room, where I left my clothes and towel.

Only as soon as I step into the locker room, an intense sense of dread consumes me, and at that exact moment, I know why. My towel, pjs, and even my dirty clothes are missing.

I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping that when I open them that maybe I'm seeing things, but when I open my eyes again, none of my stuff is there.

"Fuck!" Panic grips me by the throat. I have no clothes and no towel. How am I going to get back to the dorms? There's the option of walking back naked, but I like that idea the least.

I tiptoe around the locker room to see if the clothes were moved somewhere else but find nothing. I'm vulnerable without clothing. My teeth clack together, and I shiver.

I have to get out of here. I'm cold, tired, and soon to be humiliated. Who would steal my clothes, and why? I don't know why I'm even asking myself that question. I know who did this. The only person who hates me more than any other person in this awful university does.

Quinton. It has to be him, or at least, one of his friends. Yeah, everyone hates me here, but none of them hate me enough to go out of their way to make my life miserable. I understood what it meant when he said he was done with me, but I didn't think he would turn on me. I didn't think he would try and humiliate me.

I guess I was wrong to think we were past this.

I cross my arms over my chest to abate some of the chill. It doesn't help, but it makes me feel less vulnerable. My teeth grit together when I think of him and his stupid friends doing this. Hell, I bet they're probably waiting outside the door. Waiting for me to pop my head out so they can see my tear-streaked face. *Assholes.* Jokes on them.

I'm not crying over this trivial shit anymore.

Anger replaces my previous fear, and I'm burning with the intensity of the sun as I march toward the door to confront them. Only when I wrap my hand around the cold metal and tug on the door it doesn't budge, not even a little bit.

They... they locked the door? I'm trapped in here. Trapped in the locker room, naked and alone. I take a wobbly step backward and sit my bare ass against the wooden bench.

I shiver at the thought of someone coming into the bathroom while I was showering, but they did. Someone did, and that someone is going to pay. I'm not sure how long I sit there stewing in my rage, waiting for someone to unlock the door, all while knowing no one is going to be coming, at least not until tomorrow morning.

Tears form in my eyes, and I clench my hands into tight fists. The urge to punch something, to hurt someone like I'm hurt right now, is consuming me, but the only person to hurt is myself, and the people around me have done far enough of that.

Tucking my feet into my body, I wrap my arms around my middle and stare at the door defiantly. If it doesn't open soon, I'm going to scream. My frustration mounts with every passing second.

Why did he do this to me?

Why does he still hate me so much?

I thought we were past this.

All the questions pile up on top of each other, suffocating me. My chest heaves, and a single tear slips from my eye.

There's a commotion on the other side of the door, and I swipe the tear away with the back of my hand. The lock disengages, and I wait, ready to attack when the door is pushed open.

Quinton steps into the bathroom, his hulking frame taking up most of the doorway. I hate how handsome he looks, how he stands there staring at me like he doesn't know what happened when this is his fault.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" I grit out, jumping up off the bench. I toss my hands in the air, uncaring that my body is on display to him.

He doesn't seem affected as his gaze remains on mine. It's piercing and cold, and I want to make him feel the way I feel. I want to hurt him.

"Where are your clothes? Why was the door locked?" His tone turns accusatory, and my lip curls.

“Do you think I would just lock myself in this locker room for fun? Or misplace my own clothes?”

He’s playing stupid, but I’ve seen through it. Quinton and I will always be enemies.

“I don’t know, Aspen. But it sure seems to be that way.”

“You,” I growl, finally losing my composure.

My blonde hair clings to my skin, and I take a step toward him. Every part of me says, do not engage, do not piss off this man, but deep down, I know I have to do this. I have to let him know that I’m onto his games and that this won’t be happening again.

His lip turns up at the side. “Me?”

“Yes, you. You did this! You snuck in here, took my clothes, and locked me in here so that you and your stupid fucking friends could humiliate me and laugh about how I had to beg you for my clothes back. Maybe take a video and show it to your friends?”

Quinton doesn’t say anything, he doesn’t even blink, and that only makes me angrier. He doesn’t deny anything because I probably got it right, and that’s when it happens. All my built-up anger, pain, and resentment boils over, and I snap.

Before I can stop myself, I lunge for him. My hand moves on its own, striking him across the face. The slap echoes off the shower walls, and his head moves to the side with the hit. My hand tingles all the way through to my fingertips. I shouldn’t have done that, oh god.

Everything falls into an eerie silence.

My chest heaves like I’ve run a marathon, and I can see Quinton’s toned chest rising and falling at equal speed. We stand at a face off, neither of us saying a single word.

I didn’t hit him hard, but plenty hard enough to leave an angry red mark on his cheek. My palm is suddenly on fire. Maybe I hit him harder than I thought.

His face is slightly tilted, a few longer strands of his hair sweep over his forehead while surprise is painted over his normally stoic features.

Slowly, he turns his head until his burning eyes bleed into mine, and I swallow... *hard*.

“Didn’t I tell you what would happen if you hit me again?”

My mind flashes back to when I hit his arm after he took a bite of my candy. That feels forever ago now.

Next time, I will hit you back...

I can’t back down now, no matter how scared I am. I might never be his equal, but I can tell him I’m done being his punching bag. Lifting my chin, I puff my chest and square my shoulders.

“You won’t hit me. I know you won’t.” Even as I say the words, I realize that I’m actually not so sure.

The smile that graces his lips is so sinister, I visibly tremble. Danger crackles through the air, sparks of it igniting in my belly, telling me I should run, warning me of the danger ahead.

“If you don’t think I’ll hit you, maybe you haven’t been paying attention to what I am capable of.” His voice is so dark and rough, it almost doesn’t sound like him.

My mouth goes dry, and my whole body quakes. This time, not from the cold.

Just then, my flight instinct kicks in. The danger is real, and Quinton isn’t going to just let me get away with hitting him.

My eyes dart to the only exit in the room, and a second later, I try to dash past him to the door. He’s on me in a flash, wrapping his muscled arms around me before pulling me into his chest.

He drags me toward the center of the shower space, and I’m not sure what he is doing until he sits down and pulls me into his lap, leaving me draped over his knees with my ass up.

“What are you—” His palm connects with my ass cheek without warning, and a sharp yelp of pain erupts from my throat. “Fuck!” He slaps my ass again, and the burning sensation on my skin intensifies.

“Are you serious?”

“Very.” He chuckles.

His hand comes down a few more times, each time a little harder, or at least, it feels like it. I wouldn’t know since my ass is burning, and I feel humiliated being spanked by him.

“Okay, okay!” I shout, while trying to wiggle out of his hold. “I get it. I won’t hit you again. I’m sorry!”

“Are you, though? I think I better make sure.” His palm smacks against my tender flesh once more, and the pain brings tears to my eyes.

“I’m sorry. Please, stop!” I beg, and it’s either my begging or the tone of my voice that finally makes him take pity on me.

His hand lands on my ass one more time, and I flinch, expecting him to continue punishing me, but this time, his touch is gentle. Like Jekyll and Hyde, his behavior changes, and he goes from punishing me to massaging the aching flesh.

“Are you going to hit me again?”

“No...” I wince.

He lets go of me, and I scurry off his lap and stand on wobbly feet. I reach to touch my backside. The skin is hot to the touch and feels swollen. “I hate you.” I seethe.

Quinton grins like the fucking monster he is. “Maybe you do, but we both know you want me to fuck you, regardless of what I do to you.”

“No,” I snarl.

“You’re still a shitty liar.”

All over again, we’re facing off against each other.

“If I’m such a bad liar, then how could you not tell I wasn’t lying about the wire?”

“I have proof!” he yells.

“There is no proof,” I snap back without missing a beat. “There can’t be any because it never happened. Whatever you think you know is wrong. If I was wearing a wire, then why did no one know about Matteo attacking your sister?” I open my mouth again with more to say, but I’m cut off when Quinton’s hand wraps around my throat.

His grip is firm, controlling, and I know without very much effort, he could hurt me in a way that I would never come back from. Leaning into my face, he says, “You still don’t know when to shut up, do you?”

It’s stupid of me to poke the bear, but I’m angry and hurt, and the only outlet for my pain is the man who causes it all.

“And you don’t know when to be done, do you? I thought you were done with me, Quinton?” I smile even though on the inside I’m shaking like a leaf in autumn, seconds away from falling from the tree.

Fire flickers in Quinton’s eyes, and he walks me backward until my back hits the cold, tiled wall. It’s just him and me, and the open space suddenly seems smaller, everything closing in on me until there is just Quinton. He crowds me against the wall, his hand still wrapped around my delicate throat. There is nowhere else to go, no place to hide.

I’m a mouse caught in a trap, and Quinton is the cat, about to eat me alive.

QUINTON

She presses herself flat against the wall as if she can get away from me. In my time away from her, it appears she's grown some balls, and strange enough, I like it. I like she pushes back against me. That she's no longer the docile flower pushing up through the concrete.

The way she's looking at me now, her pupils dilated, her lips trembling. There is fear in her gaze, but right below that, there is excitement, which is only confirmed by the way her nipples poke out at me like small diamonds.

"Turn around, and put your hands against the wall," I order, but it's like her brain has short-circuited because she doesn't make a move. Or it's just not fast enough for me, and my patience snaps. I grab her by the hips and spin her around, so I have her in the position I want.

My gaze drops to her ass. It's still red from where I spanked her, and for some odd reason, I like it. It's as if I marked her skin, and I enjoy the visual of my dominance over her. I enjoy it very much. I want her begging me to stop while I continue to take. I want to be in control of her pain and her pleasure.

The last five minutes of verbal sparring have turned me on beyond words, and I'm going to give Aspen what both of us want. I free my cock from my shorts and fist the iron hard rod. Pre-cum is already beading at the tip, and I know it's not going to take me long to come.

"Are you still on the pill?" I ask impatiently.

“No, I’m out. You can’t come inside of me.” She looks over her shoulder at me, her pretty eyes shining.

I grin like a fucking psychopath. “Not inside your pussy, you mean?”

“Quinton, I’m not doing that…” The pitch of her voice changes, letting me know she’s truly scared. She tries to turn back around, but I place a hand between her shoulder blades to keep her against the wall.

“Calm down. I didn’t bring lube, anyway. But mark my words, Aspen.” I lean into her until my mouth is inches away from her ear. “It’s going to happen, and soon. All of your firsts are mine, including that tight little asshole of yours.”

She shivers in my grasp, and I relish in it. Her fear, joy, and tears. I want them all. “Arch your back and stick out your ass. I’m going to give us what we both want.”

As afraid of me as she might be, she’s also trusting, giving me complete control. She follows my command, and I use the new position to my advantage. Taking my cock into my hand, I guide it to her wet entrance and bury my entire length into her tight channel with one thrust. *Fuuuuuuuuck.*

Pure bliss is the only way I can describe what being inside Aspen is like. The chaos around me pauses, the sounds, the fears I have, the misery and anguish.

Everything becomes radio silence when I’m inside her, and maybe that’s part of the reason I hate her, because I need her to silence the demons. I’m weak without her.

Aspen lets out a moan. It’s throaty, and the sound goes straight to my balls. I can’t help myself. All the pent-up anger toward her and the drive to want to fuck her when I shouldn’t come at me all at once. Threading my fingers through her hair, I press her face against the tile.

“Fuck, you’re perfect when you keep your mouth shut,” I growl into her ear, my hips moving faster and faster. I’m caught in the way her pussy grips and tightens around me and the sounds it makes while I fuck her against the wall.

“Oh,” Aspen whimpers, encouraging me to take her harder.

I answer each little plea with a deeper thrust. My hips piston, and I grit my teeth as the pleasure builds. She's squeezing me so tight it wouldn't take me but a second to explode, but I'm not ready for this to end, and I'm not coming until she does.

"What is it about you that keeps me coming back for more?" I lean into her ear and tease her lobe with my teeth. "Every time I slip inside you, I forget that I'm supposed to hate you."

"Yes..."

"Tell me you hate me," I growl.

"I hate you," she pants, her voice weak.

I snake an arm around her and move from her belly and over her perky breasts to wrap my hand around her throat. Her pulse jumps, and she tenses in my grasp but doesn't fight as I keep her at this angle and position her so half her body presses against my chest. It's about control and possession for me. Aspen is mine, to taunt, hurt, and pleasure.

The new position seats me deeper inside her, and I relish in the feel of her contracting channel around me.

I continue fucking her, hard and deep. The slap of our skin and our pants fill the air. Sweat beads against my temple. The drops slip down my face, but I don't stop.

"Quinton..." Aspen groans.

The way she says my name like she might die if I don't finish the job makes me slam into her a little harder, and a second later, I feel her nosedive off the cliff's edge.

Her entire body tenses, and only then do I allow myself to let go. A few more thrusts and my eyes roll to the back of my head, and I explode deep inside her; the warmth of my release radiates out of me. My heart thunders in my chest, the sound amplified with each breath I take.

Our sweaty bodies mold together, and I allow myself one beat of time to be weak and lean forward, inhaling her scent deep into my lungs. She smells

clean, flowery, but also like me. *Perfect. Mine.*

I'm floating back down from my euphoria when I realize I forgot to pull out. *Fucking shit!* I gently ease out of Aspen, and the evidence of my wrongdoing slips down the inside of her thigh.

"You came inside me," she announces, like I don't already know.

"I know." It's all I say.

I should've pulled out. Should've blown my load on the ground, but that seemed like such a fucking waste. I steady her on her feet while she's still catching her breath, one hand pressed against the wall. Grabbing the hem of my shirt, I pull it off over my head.

"Here, put this on," I order, handing her my shirt.

She lazily turns around and grabs it from me.

I drink her in. Beautiful, she is fucking beautiful with her face flushed and her hair wild. She still appears to have a little wobble when she lets go of the wall and puts my shirt on.

Her wearing my shirt doesn't help with the alpha 'you're mine' vibes I already have going on, but I must admit she looks good in it.

"You look thoroughly fucked," I point out.

"Thanks, I wonder why," she replies sarcastically.

Grabbing her by the waist, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder. She must be exhausted because she doesn't even complain as I carry her out of the showers and back to her room.

Now the bigger question is, who was fucking with her, and why? I know she thinks it was me, but it wasn't. I'm not going to tell her that yet, not until I know who the real culprit is.

I'm still thinking about it when we reach her room. I unlock the door with my keycard and step inside her room. Using my foot, I kick the door closed behind me and walk over to the bed.

I lay her down on the mattress and reach for her comforter to cover her up. Her small hands come out of nowhere, and she places them against mine to stop me. I look up at her and find her staring at me.

Her eyes are clouded with sleep, and my gaze gravitates down to her parted lips as she speaks, “Stay with me.”

Stay with me... it’s an innocent request, but one that will ultimately become my ruin. It’s bad enough I can’t help the physical draw I have toward her. I don’t need to develop actual feelings.

I shake my head. “No. Go to sleep.” I say it a little colder than intended.

She frowns but snuggles deeper into her pillow. “Is that what you do with Anja? Or do you actually treat her as your equal?”

“I’ve never fucked Anja,” I admit. “Not planning on it either.” I don’t have the heart to tell her she’ll never be my equal. There is no future for us. We will never go past fucking.

Instead of voicing those thoughts, I tuck her in, and before I can think better of it, press a kiss to the middle of her forehead. I walk out of the room quickly because if I don’t, I’ll do exactly as she wanted and crawl under the sheets with her.

When I step into the eerily quiet hall, a strange tingling fills my gut. Someone is trying to hurt Aspen, and the only person who gets to terrorize her is me. When I find out who’s messing with her, I’ll kill them. I know it, even while knowing the consequences could be dire.

Jogging back to my dorm, I’m halfway down the corridor when I spot Matteo. He leans against the wall with his arms crossed like he’s waiting for someone. I slow, my gaze darting around the hall for anyone else. Matteo’s got it out for me, and I wouldn’t put it past him to ambush me. He’d be signing his own death certificate if he did.

My gut instinct tells me he’s the one who tried to fuck with her, but I can’t be certain. Still, I’m going to drive home that he’s dead to me and that if he fucks with Aspen again, I’ll bury him six feet in the ground.

“Quinton,” he greets.

“Matteo. I’d say it’s nice to see you, but I don’t really give a fuck.”

He laughs. “Same. I couldn’t care less about your existence. Now, Aspen... She’s a different story.”

I have to stop myself from physically lashing out at this fucker, because I think he really wants to see how far he can push me.

Well, lucky for him, he’s about to find out.

“I didn’t think you were that fucking stupid, but it appears you are, so let me put this into words that even you can understand.” I take a step toward him so he can feel the warning in my words, but not too close, so I’m not tempted to punch his fucking lights out. “If you don’t stay away from Aspen, I’ll kill you.”

Matteo doesn’t seem phased, he doesn’t even blink. In fact, he smiles. “I’d love to see you try, Rossi. We both know that if either of us tried that, we’d be as good as dead. The rules here protect both of us.”

“Rules were meant to be broken,” I growl.

The mere thought of him getting his hands on Aspen again sends ripples of fury across my skin. I feel like someone has lit my insides on fire. I want to destroy this asshole, but there’s an invisible wall between us, stopping me from doing so.

“I’m not scared of you, Quinton. I’ve fought bigger monsters.”

“You might not be right now, but you should be. Given the first opportunity, you’re dead.”

Matteo shakes his head. “All of this over that girl... that seems a little ridiculous. She’s a liar, a fucking rat. Or has that tight pussy put a spell on you?”

“What she is doesn’t matter to you. Take the warning or don’t. Either way, I will fucking end you if you fuck with what’s mine.”

Turning around, I walk away, not giving him the chance to continue the conversation. It should’ve been done the moment I gave him the warning.

“You might be the untouchable king of Corium, but you left your queen vulnerable,” Matteo yells after me.

I don't even bother turning around. It's not me I'm worried about. It's the person that is slowly becoming my biggest weakness.

Aspen.

ASPEN

I attend classes like normal while wondering if Quinton was really the one who set me up the other night or if it was someone else who wanted to get a rise out of me.

It could be anyone. The whole university hates me. But how else did he know where I was? He just took a walk into the girls' gym shower? No, he has at least something to do with it.

I replay in my mind how we fought, like two feral animals with their lips curled, ready to take a bite out of each other.

He gave us both what we needed. I wasn't even aware how much I craved his attention or touch until his fingers were on me, and he slipped inside my body. Each stroke told me how he felt, and his possessive grasp on me reminded me that even if he didn't want to admit it. He still wanted me. What we did felt like heaven, even if I'm a little sore from his rough handling this morning.

Either way, I'm tired of letting everyone push me around and make me feel helpless. I will not stoop to their level and bully them, but I will fight back. I've been using Quinton as a shield, letting him protect me when I should have been able to protect myself.

I might never be a ninja like some students here who have been training how to use their body as a weapon since kindergarten, but that doesn't mean I can't get stronger.

The next morning, my alarm wakes me up at four-thirty AM. I pry my eyes open and shut the alarms off, wanting nothing more than to go back to sleep.

I force myself to remember the way Matteo held onto me, how Xander grabbed me, and Nash pushed me on my knees. All those times, I felt weak. These memories make me get out of bed.

Putting my hair up in a ponytail, I quickly get dressed in some workout clothes and slip into my sneakers before heading out to the dorm gym. I really hope my idea of getting there so early that no one else will be there pans out.

The hallway is empty, which gives me hope that I'll find the gym in the same state. I open the door slowly, sticking my head in to listen for any sign of other students. When I don't hear anything, I open the door all the way and step inside. I can't see the entire gym from the entrance, which is why I have a slight heart attack when I walk around the corner and find someone sitting on the weight bench.

Instead of jumping back three feet like I want to, I stand my ground and try to act like I'm supposed to be here. The guy is dressed in a dark gray sweatsuit, his hood pulled up as he looks down at his phone. It's not until he glances up that I realize it's Quinton.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, slightly out of breath. Sweat is dripping from his forehead, down his cheeks, and I can't help but wonder how long he has been in here.

"I... I'm here to work out."

"At five in the morning? Isn't it a bit early for you?"

"You're here," I point out the obvious.

"Yeah, but I'm here every night."

"Night? Like the whole night?"

"Sometimes." He shrugs and shoves his phone into his pocket. Leaning back on the bench, he lifts the weighted bar from the rack and starts pumping it up and down. The large plates stacked on each side are so heavy that the iron bar

is actually bending a little. Still, Quinton pushes them up and down like it's nothing.

He does a few more in quick succession before he slows down a little, grunting slightly with each move. I wonder what it would look like without his sweater on.

Are his muscles bulging? Is he sweaty all over? I'm mesmerized by watching his strength and endurance, only snapping out of it when he places the bar back on the rack attached to the bench and sits up.

"Are you just gonna watch me the entire time?"

Shit. I just now realize I haven't moved. I've been so occupied by ogling him like a hormonal teenager, I lost complete awareness of what I'm doing.

"Ah, no. Um, I'm here to work out."

Quinton lifts one eyebrow and stares me down for another moment before my legs finally start moving. I spin around and scan the area for something to do. I settle on the treadmill on the other side of the gym. It's one open space, so there is no place we wouldn't see each other, but at least there is a good amount of distance between us.

I only run for a few minutes to warm up and get my heart rate going. When my breathing gets heavy and my legs ache, I slow down the treadmill and walk for another minute.

My eyes keep glancing across the room at Quinton, even though I try my best not to. When he gets up and wipes down the bench, I think he might leave, and disappointment creeps up my spine. Instantly, I curse myself for it. I still despise admitting that his presence makes me feel safe. Even after all he has done to me. In some ways, he is my security blanket, and I fucking hate it.

Instead of leaving, he walks over to the wall where bars are hanging above his head. He stretches out, grabs onto one of them, and starts doing pull-ups.

Not wanting to get caught watching him again, I get off the treadmill and walk over to the dumbbell area. I pick one that looks like it's not too heavy and grab it from the rack.

I stand in front of the mirror, watching my form as I do curls on one side until my arm burns, then I switch to my other arm. When I can't do any more with that side either, I try to think of another exercise with the dumbbells, but I come up empty, so I look around for something else to do.

I almost drop the ten-pound weight on my foot when I realize Quinton is suddenly standing beside me. How the heck does he move so quietly?

"What are you doing?" he asks with genuine curiosity.

"Working out... obviously."

"Why?"

I think about some lie I could tell him, but since I know he would see through that in a heartbeat, I go for the truth instead. "I want to get stronger."

He nods with a somber expression in his gaze. I don't have to explain to him what I mean and why. "Isolating a muscle like this will work, but it will take you forever to gain strength like that."

"So, what should I do?" It feels weird asking Quinton for advice, but if he will help me, I'll take it... unless. "Wait," I throw up my hand between us, "before you answer this. I'm not doing anything in return. If you want to help me, then fine, but I'm done negotiating terms with you for every little favor."

"Got it, sex comes free now."

"That's not what I meant!" I yell, dropping my arm and fisting both hands at my side.

A mischievous grin spread across his face. "You know you want me. You love when I fuck you."

"Ugh, you are so full of yourself. Wait!" I lift my hand once more, holding it even closer to his face this time. "Do not say what you are thinking right now," I warn.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"I said, you are so full of yourself, and I know you were about to answer I bet you wish you were full of me," I say the last part in a deeper voice, almost

mocking him.

His grin turns into a chuckle. “I would never think or say such a thing,” he says, sarcasm lacing his voice.

I roll my eyes but can’t help the way the corners of my mouth turn up into a smile. This might be the friendliest interaction I’ve ever had with Quinton.

“Can you do pull-ups? That would be a good way to get stronger.”

“Um, I might be able to do one or two.” High emphasis on the might.

“Come on,” he orders, turning away from me. He walks back to the bars, and I follow him like a lost puppy. “Stand right here.” He points right below one bar.

As soon as I am where he wants me to be, he grabs my hips and lifts me up a few inches. I automatically reach for the bar above me until I’m hanging from it.

“Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I start my first pull-up, quickly realizing that this is way harder than I remember it from gym class. My arms burn, and my muscles feel like they are about to give out. I barely get my chin over the bar when I straighten my arm and let myself hang for a second.

“I don’t know if a second one is going to happen.”

I’m about to drop myself to the floor completely when I feel Quinton’s hands on my calves, his touch sending an electric current across my skin.

“Cross your ankles.”

I do as he says, wondering what the hell he is doing.

He bends my knees, places a hand at the top of my feet, and pushes up slightly. “Now, try again.”

Even though I know this won’t work, I give it another go. This time, when it gets more difficult, I use my legs to gain leverage and push myself up. It’s still hard, but not impossible. I keep going and do a few more, ignoring the burn in my upper arms and core.

“Okay, this time, I really can’t do anymore,” I huff after a while. Quinton lets go of my feet, and I drop off the bar.

“That wasn’t terrible. I mean, it was bad, but not terrible,” Quinton teases.

I ignore him and walk to one of the ab workout machines. To my surprise, Quinton follows me to it.

“Keep your core tight the entire time, keep your arms locked and only use your stomach muscles,” he instructs.

I stay on this machine for a bit, and after, I do a few more. Quinton stays with me the whole time, helping me figure everything out. By the time we’re done, my muscles are exhausted, and I’m covered in sweat.

I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand. “I’ve got to go and get ready for classes.”

“You’re gonna be pretty sore tomorrow. I should probably give you a full body massage.”

My entire body tingles at his words, knowing how good it would feel to have his hands all over me.

“Or I can just take a hot shower,” I say as we walk out of the gym.

“Not as good.” He shakes his head and turns away from me. “Enjoy your shower, maybe make yourself come while thinking of me.”

Shaking my head at him, I walk toward my room. I scan my keycard and go to turn the door handle but gasp and take a step back when the door opens from the other side. I press a hand to my chest to stop my heart from jumping out of my skin.

The bald maintenance guy from yesterday appears in front of me. A spark of excitement at my shower being fixed develops, but dissolves when he smiles at me. It’s not a friendly smile. More like an I’m-a-serial-killer-but-no-one-will-ever-find-out kind of smile.

“The shower is fixed,” he announces.

“Th—thanks...” I stumble over my words, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. “You came here really early.” A bit too early. It can’t be later than six. Was he hoping I’d still be asleep when he walked in?

Ugh, I know he had to go in my room to fix the shower, but I don’t like the idea of him in my room at any time or under any circumstances.

It’s like I’m walking on eggshells everywhere I go. I shouldn’t be so freaked out or paranoid, but after the incident last night, I can’t help it.

Which leads me to wondering if Quinton might have asked the maintenance guy to do something to my shower, and that was why he was grinning at me when he saw me on the other side of the door.

The man slips past me and starts walking down the hall. I stand there, afraid to step inside my room. Afraid that he set a booby trap, and I’m going to step right in it.

Somehow, I build up the courage to go inside the room and close the door behind me. Everything looks to be where it was when I left, but I still peer around the room, looking for anything out of the ordinary. When I’m sure the room isn’t going to implode around me, I check out the shower.

I approach it like a wild animal and slowly turn the handles, listening as the pipes creak. A moment later, the spray of water comes out, and where it was a firehose before, it’s now a nice rain shower.

I’m so happy I could jump up and down. I strip out of my clothes and dash into the shower. There isn’t an unlimited amount of hot water like in the locker room, but at least I don’t have to worry about getting locked in or having my clothes taken.



I’M NOT sure what time it is, but I blink my eyes open and am assaulted by the smell of sewer. I sit up on the bed, and the mattress creaks beneath me. The rushing of water meets my ears, and I blink slowly, wondering if I’m fully awake. The smells ferment in the room, and my stomach churns.

“Oh god—” I start but don’t even finish my sentence.

I rush into the bathroom and find the floor covered with an inch of brown, murky water. My gaze moves to the ceiling, where I see the water spraying into the bathroom from what has to be a busted pipe.

I contemplate if I should try to stop the water, but the idea of getting covered in that nasty water makes me want to hurl. Right then, there is a loud creaking noise. I take a step back and just in time too, as a tsunami wave of water comes rushing into the room, splashing on me.

I gag, the smell and feel of the slimy water on my skin. All I can think is that I have to get out of here. I sprint back to the bedroom and grab some clothes, shoving them into my laundry bag, along with my blanket. I'm in the hallway when I realize I don't know where the hell I'm going.

No one is going to let me stay with them, and I can't sleep in the hall. Not if I want to live to see the next day. I stand there, my bag in my hand, my eyes on the ground.

Paranoia skates down my spine. I'm not sure if Quinton did this or if the maintenance guy fucked something up when he was fixing my showerhead, but the result is the same. I have nowhere to go at this time of night. Brittney is going to be at her place, and I don't even know where that is.

With Brittney out of the question, there is really only one place I would be remotely safe.

I look down at the laundry bag and see Quinton's room number written on the white cloth with a sharpie marker. My shoulders sag, and I let out a sigh. What's the worst that can happen?

All he can do is send me away, I suppose.

The real question is, will he?

QUINTON

Using the sleek remote, I flip through the channels aimlessly until I finally stop at some old game show reruns. Nothing can keep my mind busy, distract me from the dreadful thoughts that haunt me every night. It's especially bad when everyone else is sleeping, and nothing but quiet surrounds me.

Laughter coming from the TV cuts through the silence, and I toss the remote beside me onto the couch. Leaning my head back, I keep my eyes trained at the flickering light of the screen when a knocking sound meets my ear. It's so faint that I think I might have imagined it. But when I turn down the sound and hear it again, I know someone must actually be at the door.

Getting up, I check the time on my phone, realizing it's after three. Who the fuck knocks on our door at three in the morning?

With an equal amount of curiosity and annoyance, I cross the room and unlock the front door. I pull it open and find Aspen wrapped up in her blanket like a cocoon on the other side. She looks at me like a lost puppy left out in the rain, and I wonder what the hell she is doing here.

"I didn't know if you were still awake," she finally mumbles.

"I don't sleep much. What are you doing here?"

"I'm..." she shifts on her feet, and the movement makes my eyes travel down her legs. She is barefoot, and the bottom of her blanket seems wet. "Never mind." She shakes her head and spins around to walk away.

Before she can get far, I grab the blanket and pull her back, making her trip and fall against my chest. “Not so fast. Tell me why you’re here,” I demand.

“I don’t know why I came here. It was stupid. There’s nothing you can do. I’ll find somewhere to sleep.” She sounds so defeated. And I hate it. Something crushed her spirit, and because I had nothing to do with it, I don’t like it.

“Why can’t you sleep in your room? What happened?”

“The maintenance guy came to fix my shower earlier. Well, it did work for a few hours, at least. I think a pipe busted. My room is basically underwater and smells like a sewer. But that’s not your problem. Don’t worry, I’ll find someplace to sleep.”

“And where would that be? Going to spend another night in the gym shower?”

“I’ll sleep in the library,” she announces.

“The library is locked up right now, and you know it. All the places are locked up at night or common areas where anyone can do anything to you while you sleep helplessly.”

“I know.”

“You came here for a reason,” I taunt her shamelessly. “So ask.”

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes at me adorably. “Can I stay the night with you?” A genuine smile tucks across my lips. The thought of Aspen in my bed enters my mind, and blood pumps straight to my dick.

“Look, I’ll sleep on the floor. I just want someplace clean and quiet, where I don’t have to worry about someone strangling me while my eyes are closed.”

“Who says I won’t strangle you,” I joke, but Aspen doesn’t find me funny at all.

With a huff, she tries to turn away from me once more, but I wrap my arms around her and drag her into my apartment. Surprisingly, she doesn’t fight me as I bring her inside and close the door behind us.

Once I release her and the blanket falls away, I realize her clothes are wet and dirty. “You do smell a bit like sewage. Maybe a bath first?”

“I’d love a bath, actually,” she says absentmindedly while taking in the apartment in awe. “I’m sore from last night.”

“Ren’s room is over there.” I point at my best friend’s door. “My room is that way, and I’ve got a bathtub in my bathroom.”

“Thank you,” she whispers and starts walking toward my room. I follow her with my gaze glued to her ass. Her pajamas are soaked, and the thin material clings to her skin and doesn’t hide much.

By the time we get to the bathroom, my dick is painfully hard, and only the stench coming from her keeps me from pulling down her pajamas and sinking into her warm cunt.

“Take a bath, use whatever you need. I’ll find something for you to wear while you clean up.”

I rush out of the bathroom before she peels her wet clothes from her body. I know if I don’t leave now, I won’t be able to stop myself. Plus, I have something to do before I can enjoy having Aspen at my disposal.

Back in my room, I flip my laptop open and check the video feed from earlier today. I rewind to the spot where the janitor comes in and starts fixing the shower. I don’t find him doing anything suspicious, but again, I know little about repairs. I’m about to close the laptop when I catch the guy lingering in Aspen’s room after he seemingly fixed the shower. I already didn’t like the guy, but my hatred for him grows exponentially as I watch him open Aspen’s drawers. His meaty fingers dick through her underwear until he finds one he likes. He picks it up and brings it to his nose before shoving it in his pants pocket.

I don’t know why his act enrages me this way. So what? He’s an old pervert, stealing some college girls’ panties. He isn’t the first, and he won’t be the last guy to do it. I should let this go; it’s not like Aspen would ever find out. No actual harm was done. I really should just forget about this. I should... but I’m not going to.

The thought of that lowlife having Aspen's panties to jerk off with leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. One I won't tolerate.

Once again, I'm glad I studied the layout of this place, and I know where everything and everyone is. That's one thing my father taught me, know your surroundings, always. Closing my laptop, I listen to the running water in the bathroom and decide I'll make the quick trip to visit the janitor right now.

A few minutes later, I'm exiting the elevator onto level C, which houses all the staff. The hallway is mostly empty, but I know the small apartment the janitor is staying in and head straight toward it. When I get to the door, I lift my hand and start banging my fist against the metal until I hear a grumpy voice coming from the other side.

"Jesus, stop already... I'm coming." The door swings open, and an angry-looking man greets me on the other side. "What the fuck—"

I don't let him get more than that out. Stepping into his space, I shove him backward, pushing myself into a small apartment. Clearly, I woke him up. He isn't wearing anything but a pair of old shorts, his face has red creases on his skin where he laid, and his eyes are still foggy with sleep.

Recognition sets in, and his anger disappears, turning to fear. Closing the door behind me with a kick of my foot, I turn my full attention to the man in front of me.

He might be twenty years older than me, but I'm taller, more muscular, and most definitely better trained in fighting. He doesn't even see my fist coming until I hit his cheekbone with bone-crushing force.

With a pained grunt, his head snaps to the side, and before he can recover, I follow up with a left hook to his chin. His eyes roll back, and his whole body goes stiff. Like a rag doll, his body crumbles to the floor, his head hitting the hardwood with a loud thud.

I wake him with a swift kick to the kidneys. He looks around, disoriented, cradling his stomach in pain. When his eyes land on me, his face goes even paler.

"Next time I tell you to fix something, you fucking fix it. Now, where are her panties?"

At my question, his eyes go impossibly wide. So wide, I think they might pop out of his sockets. With trembling hands, he points his finger to his coffee table, where I find the small pink piece of fabric. I snatch the panties from the table and stuff them in my pocket.

The man never even tries to get up as I step past him and head toward the door. “Tomorrow, you fix her room. Clean it up well, and make it look nice, got it?”

“G-got it!” He nods, looking like he is about to piss himself.

That’s what I thought.

Leaving the douchebag on the floor, I see myself out of the apartment. I hate the fact that this asshole has a nicer place than Aspen, but that’s not something I can’t help right now. At least she’s going to stay warm in my bed tonight.

At this time of night, the hallways and elevators are deserted. The only sound echoing through the empty halls are my own footsteps as I make my way back to my apartment.

When I get back to my place, my room is completely quiet. The door to the bathroom is open, but the light is turned off, and the water is not running anymore. The faint smell of my soap lingers in the air, which is the only sign left that someone took a bath recently.

The lamp next to my bed is turned on, illuminating most of my room. I frown when I find my bed empty.

Where the fuck did she go?

Stepping into the attached bathroom, I scan the small space. The bathtub is drained, a wet towel draped over the edge, and a small pile of dirty clothes is stacked in the corner. Her soiled clothes remind me I didn’t lay out anything for her like I told her I would. Which means she either helped herself or is running around naked. I smirk at the thought.

A rustling sound next to my bed catches my attention, and I spin around. My eyes land on the small body on the floor, curled up into a ball. She is wearing one of my hoodies and a pair of sweatpants. They are so big on her, she could

pass as a pile of laundry with feet sticking out. I walk over to her and nudged her leg with my foot.

“What the hell are you doing?”

She rolls over and looks up at me, half asleep. “I told you I would sleep on the floor. Where did you go?”

Ignoring her questions, I order, “Get up on the bed.”

“No, I’m fine down here.” She turns away from me again like a petulant child.

“Either get up on the bed or give me my clothes back,” I warn. “You wanna sleep on the floor, do it naked.”

“Ugh. Fine,” she huffs and scurries off the floor. Crawling on the bed, she curls up on the edge of the mattress.

“On second thought, maybe I’ll have you naked on the bed as well. You know, just in case my dick gets cold, and I need a place to warm it up.”

“Don’t you have a microwave you can put it in?”

“I prefer your pussy. Last time I microwaved my dick, I burned the tip.”

A tiny giggle escapes her lips, but she still doesn’t turn over to look at me. “I’m tired and sore, Q. And I’m about to get my period. Can we please not do this today?”

“Fine. You can keep the clothes for now, but I can’t guarantee that I won’t be peeling them off your body in your sleep.”

“Okay.” She yawns. “That’s fair...” she trails off, her voice laced with sleep. After that, the room falls silent.

Just when I think she has fallen asleep, her tiny voice fills the room once more. “I didn’t wear a wire. I wish you would believe me.”

“Even if I believe you, it won’t change anything between us.” And it won’t... nothing will ever change the war between us. We will always remain on two different sides.

ASPEN

This time when I wake, there is no sewage smell or water pouring from the ceiling in my room. In fact, I'm not even in my room, and I know this because the pillow beneath my head smells spicy, manly, like Quinton.

I blink my eyes open and look to the other side of the bed. Unfortunately, I'm alone, though I don't know why I expected him to be here. I can't believe I actually had the courage to come here.

I stretch beneath the sheets before tossing them back and sit up in the bed. It's so comfy that I consider staying in his bed forever. Ha, like he would let me do that. I mean, maybe if I was naked.

I roll out of bed and look down at the clothes I'm wearing. This isn't going to work. I can't go to classes wearing Quinton's sweatpants and T-shirt. My eyes scan the room, and that's when I spot a T-shirt, pair of yoga pants, and tennis shoes all neatly stacked on top of each other in the chair. A smile appears on my lips. I shouldn't be smiling, so what if he did something nice for me?

It doesn't change anything. Like he said last night, nothing we do will ever change the dynamic between us. My heart aches for a moment, but I push the broken pieces aside.

I go to the bathroom, get dressed, and do my best to tame my unruly hair. It's a mess, and I'm surprised there aren't sticks sticking out of it. I put it in a

ponytail, so I don't have to deal with it and sigh.

I'm not sure where Quinton is, but I tiptoe over to the bedroom door and hear voices on the other side. I know he and Ren are roommates, so maybe he's just having breakfast with him. My hands slip against the doorknob when I grab onto it and pull it open.

Time ticks by slowly, and since I've already missed a bunch of classes because of my leg and just overall bullshit, I have to go—which means leaving this room, even if I don't want to.

Squaring my shoulders, I scrape together every bit of courage I have. *It's probably just Quinton and Ren. It's not a big deal.* I tell myself as I pull the door open and step out into the living room.

The apartment is open concept, so of course, as soon as I open the door, they spot me. I stand there like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle. Nash, Marcel, and Ren sit at a breakfast nook, eating.

All three of them are staring at me. Marcel and Nash watch with shock as I take an unsteady step forward while Ren's face remains impassive. Emotionless. He probably knew I was here all along and was just waiting for the gopher to pop its head out of the hole.

Not wanting to stay longer than I'm welcome, and without saying a word, I scurry out of there. Once in the hallway, I take my time walking to my room. I expect students to be staring at me or whispering, but there's none of that. When I reach my room, I use the keycard to get in.

My nose wrinkles when I catch a whiff of the air inside the room. It smells even worse than it did yesterday, and my heart sinks deep into my stomach as my eyes scan the room. All my stuff is ruined. I didn't have much before, but what I had is gone, dissolved down to nothing beneath this putrid water.

Angrily, I walk out of the room and slam the door behind me. I'm so upset and angry over the busted pipe ruining my things, but what can I do? I feel helpless and trapped. Even if I wanted to call my parents, it wouldn't matter. One, my computer is somewhere in that mess of a room, and two, they wouldn't be able to help me. No one can help me.

I lift my head and tip my chin up. The only thing I can do is go to Lucas and see if he'll give me a different room. Surely, he won't make me stay out in the corridors...

Who am I kidding? He would. The mere thought sends a shiver down my spine. I decide to go to my classes and make a pit stop by his office at the end of the day. Maybe he'll take pity on me?

The day drags by slowly, the anticipation of what I have to do after classes sits heavy on my shoulders. I race to the administration office as soon as I'm done with gym. I'm sweaty and hungry, but none of those things matter. Not if I don't have a place to lay my head at night, and I highly doubt Quinton will let me shack up with him again.

I march into the office and head straight for Lucas' door.

"You can't go in there! You don't have an appointment!" his assistant calls after me, but I ignore her.

This is between Lucas and me. I shove open the door to his office and find him sitting behind his computer. He looks up from whatever he's typing and right at me.

"Thanks for making my life a little easier." He grins and tosses something at me.

I barely manage to catch it and look down at the card in my hands. It's identical to the keycard I have for my room, but somehow, I don't connect the dots in my mind.

"What's this?"

"It's the keycard for your new room."

I stand there, my mouth hanging open, shock pouring out of me. "My new room? What do you mean?"

Lucas shakes his head. "Just go check it out. I don't have the time to explain it all to you. The room should have everything you need."

Everything I need?

“Uh, okay.” I flounder, trying to figure out what the hell just happened. I came in here ready to rip the walls down and tell him he was going to give me a new room, and he was already one step ahead of me. It’s rare that something like that occurs and discovering this puts me on edge. This must be a trick.

I lick my lips. “If this is some cruel joke, I swear—”

Lucas gives me an I-don’t-have-time-for-your-shit look. “It’s not a joke, Aspen. Now, get out of my hair before I change my mind.”

I don’t wait a single second more, afraid that he might just change his mind. Once out of the administration office, I flip the new keycard over in my hands and find the room number etched into the sleek metal.

302. That’s my new room. This moment doesn’t feel real, and even once I’m standing in front of the door, it hasn’t sunk in.

I swallow around the lump in my throat and look down at the keycard. It feels heavier in my hand now. I can’t believe that he’s giving me a new room. At this rate, I don’t care if it’s another closet-sized room that smells like a basement. I’ll take it. I’ll take anything but that sewer-filled room.

Exhaling all the air out of my lungs, I slide the keycard over the reader, and my lips turn up into a smile when I hear the lock disengage.

I hold my breath, grab the door handle, and push it open. I’m not sure what I expected to find, but it wasn’t this nice, clean room. There’s no musty smell, no damaged ceiling. I walk inside, close the door, and peer around the room, noting how clean it is.

My eyes catch on a bag that’s sitting on the bed, which is made with what looks like brand new sheets. I run my hand across the smooth fabric just to see if they’re real. This has to be a dream. Soon enough, I’ll wake up and realize it.

I grab the bags on the bed and open them, inspecting the contents inside. The bag almost falls out of my hands when I discover there are clothes inside the bags. Replacements for everything that got ruined in my old bedroom.

With shaking hands, I place the bag back on the bed and walk into the bathroom that's connected to the bedroom. It's clean as well, with all the essentials I could ever need.

"How the hell did this happen?" I whisper to myself, my hand over my mouth.

I walk back out into the bedroom and twirl around in a circle, smiling the entire time like a lovesick teenager before falling backward and landing on the bed.

I'm still grinning from ear to ear when I go through the bag later that evening, putting all my new clothes away. I can't replace all the things I lost in that room, but I can be happy with what I have now.

When I reach the bottom of the bag, I find a white envelope. *Shit!* My heartbeat thunders in my ears, and I pull the envelope out. I rip it open with trembling fingers and read the inked words on the card inside.

YOU OWE ME BIG TIME FOR THIS -Q

I'M NOT sure why I didn't see it before. Lucas didn't give me this room because he knew I was coming to ask for it. Quinton did this. Damn him. Now I'm back to being in his debt, and I'm positive I liked it more when he wanted nothing to do with me.

QUINTON

I moved the cameras to her new room the first day she moved in. I haven't seen her face to face in a week, but I spend most of my time in my room watching her in her room. A lot of the time, she isn't even doing anything besides reading a book, and yet this is the most entertaining thing I can think of.

There is definitely something wrong with me. My obsession with her is both concerning and annoying. I know it, Ren knows it, my father probably knows it too, but none of that is stopping me.

No matter how insane my little fixation with Aspen is, it does do one thing, it distracts me from the grief and anger that's constantly brewing right below the surface. Anything is better than that.

Though I enjoy simply watching her, the tape Ren let me listen to still weighs on my mind heavily. Anyone could have recorded that one tape, and part of me believes Aspen. Like she pointed out in the shower, she is a shitty liar, and I don't think she is lying about this. Plus, if the wire was on her, why is there no tape of the incident with Matteo? My father wouldn't have kept that from me. Would he? He seemed shocked when I told him about it, but, of course, unlike Aspen, he is an excellent liar.

I guess there is only one way to find out.

Using the trackpad on my laptop, I exit out of the video feed from her room and open Skype instead. I haven't called my father in so long, I have to scroll

down to even find his number. The moment I click his name, an uneasy feeling spreads in my gut. I hate I feel this way about my father, but I can't help resenting him for the things he's done, and I honestly don't think this will change.

The line rings only for a short while before my father picks up. He rarely shows emotions, but he can't hide the surprise in his gaze as he answers the video chat. He is in his office at home; the familiar shelves filled with books and framed pictures fill the background of the screen.

"Quinton, is everything okay?" Slight concern lingers in his tone, something else I'm not used to.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but I need something."

My father leans closer to the camera. "What do you need? I'll send it to you, whatever it is, you know that."

"Ren let me listen to the tape you sent him. I want to listen to the rest."

Within a split second, my father's usual stoic mask slips into place, not giving a sliver of emotion away when he speaks next. "I can't let you listen to those. There is a lot of stuff on there you do not need to know about. Information that will put you in danger simply by knowing them."

"Bullshit. You just don't want me to listen because it doesn't fit your narrative. Aspen wasn't the one recording, and you know it. You just wanted me to hate her."

"You should hate her. She is not your friend. I'm trying to protect you, Quinton, from her and from yourself. I know you are hurting, son. Your head is not in the right space. You are grieving, and grief clouds your mind."

"Maybe your mind is clouded too then, or are you not grieving?"

"Quinton, you know I am."

"No, I don't. You won't even acknowledge publicly that she is gone—"

"Enough!" My father slams his fist on his desk hard enough to make the laptop quake. A moment of silence stretches between us as we both try to simmer down our temper enough to continue a somewhat civilized

conversation.

“If Aspen really was wearing a wire, then you would have known about Matteo,” I point out once I’m calm enough. “Did you know?”

“I didn’t know. There was no tape of that, but from the rest of the tapes, it could have only been her.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Sighing heavily, my father leans back in his leather chair. “I know you don’t, but I can’t give you the rest of the tapes. You’re just going to have to take my word for it.”

“Great... I guess I’ll talk to you soon then—”

“Before you hang up, there is something I need to tell you. I was actually going to call you today. A new student is coming to Corium in the next few days.”

“Who is it?” My father knows everyone attending here in one way or another, which makes it so surprising to hear what he says next.

“I’m actually not sure. Apparently, he is Alessio Bianchi’s son.”

“Bianchi?” I recognize the name. I’ve never met them, but I know they are one of the most powerful families in Europe, and Alessio is the most powerful man in Italy. I remember him having siblings. “I don’t recall him having a son.”

“Exactly.” My father taps his fingers against the smooth surface of his desk. “He says he kept him a secret to protect him, but he is ready to let him be part of our world now, and Corium is the perfect place to integrate him.”

“Sounds like fun,” I say with disinterest.

“It might be, and it might be the opposite. Either way, Bianchi is one of the founding members of Corium, so we can’t tell him no. I need you to be careful. I never had a problem with Bianchi, but we are not close allies either. I don’t know as much as I’d like about him, especially not about this suddenly appearing son.”

“I’ll be careful, but like you said, we never had an issue with them before. Why would they start something now?”

“You are probably right, but it won’t hurt to be cautious.”

“Okay, well... I got to go... do stuff...”

“All right, call your mother when you get a chance. She misses you.”

“I will.” I close the laptop before he can say his goodbye, not that I was expecting anything heartfelt. My father is not that person, and I guess neither am I.

I make a mental note to call my mom tomorrow, but right now, I have something else to do. Something that’s been overdue.

Getting up, I grab my phone and stuff it in my pocket. Slipping into my sneakers, I head for the door and make my way to the library. On my way, I wonder if Aspen is going to be there. I don’t normally like surprises, though the thought of seeing her in person excites me.

When I get to the library, I find it completely silent and empty. A ping of disappointment hits me, but I shove it away and concentrate on what I came here to do.

It takes me a few minutes to find the librarian between two heavy oak shelves on the second floor. I casually lean against one of them, my face inches from a plaque with the engraving Fiction C-E. She is sitting on the floor with her legs crossed and a thick book in her lap. Her long blue hair covers most of her face since her head is bowed.

“Oh, that’s juicy,” she murmurs to herself.

“Shouldn’t you be working?”

“EEEEKKKK!” she shrieks. Her whole body jerks, and the book goes flying into the air before landing with a thud a few feet from her. She scrambles off the ground, clutching her chest with one hand. “Fucking Christ! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

I can’t help but laugh at her accusing tone; the accompanied outrage is just too comical. “Why would I want you dead? I need you to get me what I want

first. Speaking of, you don't look very busy. If you are not working, and you are not searching for the information I want, you must have already found it."

"It's not that easy, Quinton. I can't just go around and hack like I used to. I need to do it a little at a time, change my pattern, let numbers run, and programs do their job. It takes time. More than normal because I can't let Phoenix find me. If I'm not super careful, he can trace me here."

"All I'm hearing is a bunch of excuses."

"It's the truth. I'm sorry it's not what you want to hear, but this is going to take time."

"Fine, take your sweet time. I guess I'll just have to find something else to keep me busy. I'm sure I will find something or *someone* to entertain me." I look down at my short fingernails as if I'm looking for a treasure in my cuticles.

"Threatening me is not helping, and we both know you won't hurt Aspen." Brittney crosses her arms over her chest and tips her chin up.

Squaring my shoulders, I take a step toward her, eating up the space between us. "In my experience, threats are the best kind of motivation, and don't believe for a second, I wouldn't hurt her to get what I want. I will do whatever it takes to get this information."

She visibly shudders, but continues to stand her ground. "Like I said, I'm working as fast as I can."

"I'll be back soon. Have fun reading your smut book." I glance at the shirtless guy on the book cover.

"I will," she huffs defensively and picks up her book like it's a prized possession.

I definitely understand why she and Aspen get along so well.

Spinning around on my heel, I take a few steps before the librarian calls after me, and my steps falter.

"You might not believe me, but I actually want to help you. I'll do whatever I can."

I can hear the promise in her voice, and though I'm not sure why, I believe her.

Making my legs move, I don't turn back or answer her. Making my way back through the library and to the tunnel connecting to the base. Going from the lavish antique castle library into the plain concrete tunnel is almost depressing, and I wonder why more students don't spend time up here.

Those thoughts disappear into thin air when I see one particular student walking down the corridor. Her gaze is glued to the floor in front of her, her step quick and precise, like she's memorized the way to the library to a tee. Only when there are less than five feet between us does she look up.

As soon as she sees me, her feet stop moving, and her body comes to a sudden halt. "Quinton." My name falls from her lips hesitantly, like she is not sure where we stand right now.

Fuck, neither am I.

Where do we stand?

"Your friend is upstairs, Fiction C-E," I say, so she knows exactly where I've been.

She doesn't ask why I'm here. I guess she can figure it out on her own.

"Okay... and thank you for getting me the new room."

"Don't thank me just yet, Aspen. I told you, you owe me big time for that." I close the distance between us until her shoulder brushes against my arm. Leaning into her, my nose is so close to her hair, I can smell the flowery scent of her shampoo. "And I'm going to collect... soon."

Without looking at her reaction, I tear myself away, forcing my legs to carry me down the hall and away from her.

Just thinking about all the ways I'm going to collect that favor has me on edge. I'm going to come for her soon. Very, very soon.

ASPEN

Quinton's warning has me on my toes, so I spend the next couple of hours in the library talking to Brittney to calm down. She's cataloging books, and I'm helping or *trying* to help.

I grab a book from the return pile and hand it to her. "I used to think I wanted to be a doctor, so I could help people, but the more I think about it, the more I want to be a librarian."

Brittney smiles. "You can't possibly believe how much that means to me."

I roll my eyes and smile. It's hard to believe this woman hacked into someone's shit and destroyed lives. She's more like a hero than a villain.

"I like the solitude and the quiet. The only people that come to the library are people like you that crave the same things you crave."

Her phone pings with an incoming text, and she grabs it off the desk. To give her some privacy and not appear like I'm watching her, I sort books again.

Except, I know something terrible has happened because after a few seconds pass, she's still staring at her phone, her hands trembling, her face as white as a sheet.

"Is—is everything okay?" I stutter, my fear from her reaction to whatever she just read seeping into my voice.

Slowly, she looks up at me. Her eyes are huge, and terror pools in the depths. "Phoenix."

A shiver skates down my spine at the significance of his name. “How... how did he get your number, and what does he want?”

“He wants to talk.”

“You aren’t going to, right?” My fear for her safety mounts. “What if he finds out where you are and tries to come here and hurt you?”

“I never considered him to be the brightest crayon in the box, but I don’t think he’s stupid enough to do that.”

Somehow, I don’t believe her, mainly because when someone wants revenge, they’ll do whatever they can to get it.

“If it’ll be safer to leave, I understand. You don’t have to stay here. I want you to be safe, and if being here isn’t a safe place—”

“Stop, everything is okay.” Brittney places a hand on my shoulder, anchoring me to the ground.

I take a calming breath, just now realizing how afraid I am for her.

Her lips tip up into a smile. “Corium is more secure than Fort Knox, Aspen. I’m not worried about him coming here. If I was back home, then yes, that would be a different story.”

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you. You’re the only person who actually cares if I’m alive or dead.”

A flash of concern crosses her fairy-like features. “No one within these walls can kill you or even attempt it. There are rules in place to protect you.”

My thoughts flash to Matteo. There’s no one to protect me from him now. Nothing to stop him from getting revenge. Brittney is right. He can’t kill me, but he can make me wish I was dead, and that’s the same thing.

“Yeah, I know the rules, but I don’t trust them. My death would be a drop in a bucket to these people.”

“Stop thinking like that. No one is going to hurt you, not if I have anything to say about it.” I wish her confidence in Corium could hold me over, but it doesn’t. I don’t trust this place, much less the people living in the walls. I

glance at the watch on my wrist and realize I've been here longer than I anticipated.

"Shit. I need to get going," I grumble.

"That's fine. Thanks for helping." Brittney beams.

I hesitate to leave. I'll miss lunch and doing my homework if it makes her feel better to have me here. "Are you sure you're going to be okay? I can always stay a little longer."

"Don't be silly. Phoenix is like a chihuahua. He thinks he's vicious when he's not. I can handle this, and if I can't, you'll be the first person I tell. Okay?"

I know she is downplaying it, but I still nod and give her a hug before I leave. The corridor is dark and mostly empty as I race back to my dorm. Paranoia pulses through my veins, and I glance over my shoulder with every step I take.

I wouldn't be surprised if Quinton decided now was a good time to collect his *favor*. Alone in the hall, the dark shadowing us. Is it fucked up for me to be slightly turned on at the thought?

Fuck, yes, it's wrong.

I shouldn't even have to ask myself that question. He's my enemy, his father wants me dead, and here I am, wondering what it would be like to have him fuck me again. I crave something I can never have with someone who is completely off-limits.

The door to my room is just ahead, and I race down the hall like I'm being chased by a serial killer.

Only a few feet, and I'll be in the safety of my room.

That's as far as I make it before I'm grabbed from behind. A hand slips over my mouth, and my back collides with a firm chest. For a moment, I think it's Quinton, trying to scare the life out of me, but it's not. I can tell just by breathing in his scent. Quinton smells woody, intoxicating, and warm. This is... this person smells like a monster.

"You think I don't know that it was you?"

Matteo. His deep, sinister voice slices through me, and the blood in my veins becomes ice. I struggle in his grasp, but the arm around my middle tightens, and the pressure on my ribs becomes so painful, I know he'll leave bruises. A whimper slips from my lips without permission.

His teeth nip at my ear. "This is all your fault. All of it. Now I have to live in that piece of shit room you used to live in. Wait until my father gets here..." He squeezes me a little tighter, and the air in my lungs becomes a wheeze. "As soon as he arrives, you'll wish you had never met me."

Something inside me snaps, and the urge to hurt Matteo festers. I'm tired of being the weak mouse, caught in a trap. I want to be the big bad cat. I want to be strong. I want to save myself. I struggle in his grasp, moving my arms backward, hoping to elbow him in the side. I hit him in the ribs, but it does nothing, and his hold on me tightens.

"Yes, keep struggling. You're making my cock hard."

Weak. I'm weak. The words resonate in my mind. I need to do more to protect myself. I need to take care of myself.

Gritting my teeth, I pull forward and then slam my head backward. My head contacts his face, and he releases me instantly. I gasp at the release, shocked I've escaped him.

"You fucking bitch!"

I whirl around and press myself against the wall. He cradles his face in his hands, but I can see a rivulet of blood trailing down his face.

A door slams somewhere down the hall, and I watch Matteo's beady eyes fill with panic. Still, he turns his attention back to me and growls, "You'll pay for that. Maybe not today, but soon."

His warning lingers in the air, and I stand tall, my body threatening to crumble to the ground. My chest rises and falls rapidly, and my galloping heartbeat fills my ears.

I'm vaguely aware of him leaving, and I scurry across the floor like a newborn fawn. My fingers are slick with sweat, and I scan my keycard. Rushing through the door, I slap my hand against the light switch to turn it

on. Whirling around, I slam the door closed and toss my bag near the tiny closet.

All I can think about is making sure the door is locked so I can erase the whispering threats from my mind.

I want to pretend this is a nightmare and that at any minute I'll wake up in my bed. I stare at the door, part of me hoping Quinton walks through it.

He could save me, protect me, but he won't. I'm not safe, and maybe I never was, to begin with.

Matteo is out for revenge, and something tells me he won't stop until my blood is coating his hands.

QUINTON

As soon as I step into the large open space of the gym area, my eyes land on the one person I've never seen before. Instantly, I'm reminded of what my father told me yesterday. This must be him. Alessio Bianchi's son. Just like my eyes are drawn to him, his are drawn to me. As I walk toward the group, he doesn't hide the fact that he sizes me up. Neither do I. He is tall and well built, his skin is tan, and his hair is black like mine.

To a normal person, he would look casual and relaxed in the dark gray sweatsuit he is wearing, but I notice things others don't. I notice the way his right foot is set an inch behind his left, the way his knees are slightly bent, and his eyes are constantly scanning his surroundings for danger. He is ready to fight, probably stays that way constantly, just like I do.

I catch a movement out of the corner of my eyes, and when I tilt my head, I find Aspen trying to sneak past me. For the time being, I let her; knowing I need to give this newcomer my full attention.

"Now that we are all here, please welcome our new student, Vito," Quan announces, and every person in the room turns to look at the newest member of Corium's elite.

Vito gives a curt nod but chooses not to give a further introduction. Fine by me. I'll find out who you really are one way or the other.

Quan goes over some fighting techniques while I keep a close eye on the new student, who pretends to listen to Quan while his eyes keep searching the

room as if he is memorizing each corner, each exit, and each face.

“Partner up,” Quan’s voice booms across the room, and I immediately look around for Aspen.

Normally, I stay close to her throughout the class, but I’ve been preoccupied and didn’t realize she moved around. When I find her, Vito is already talking to her. *Motherfucker.*

Pesky, unwanted jealousy weasels its way up my spine. My feet move on their own accord, carrying me across the mats to where Vito is chatting up Aspen.

Like a dog fighting for his bone, I head straight for Vito with my teeth bared. Only when he looks over at me in amusement does the fog of anger lift from my brain, and I come to my senses.

“Vivo, is it?” I say his name wrong on purpose.

“Close, it’s Vito.” His accent is surprisingly faint, which means he’s either been in the US for a while or has a damn good tutor in Italy. “Nice to finally meet you, Quinton.”

Vito holds out his hand to me, and I take it without breaking eye contact. My hand wraps around his fingers, and I squeeze, envisioning his neck in my palm instead. The asshole merely chuckles. *Fuck, I hate this guy.*

Suddenly, Quan appears next to us. “I guess the extra student leaves us with an uneven number. One of you three can train with me.”

“We’ve already partnered up,” Vito announces, pointing between Aspen and himself.

“Um, yeah... I told him yes. I mean... it was okay... to partner,” Aspen stumbles over her words, her eyes ping-ponging between us nervously.

“No problem.” I force a smile and step away before I slam my fist into Vito’s teeth.

Quan moves us away from them, but I motion for him to stay closer and position us so I can monitor Vito. Luckily, Quan doesn’t object.

We run through the new moves Quan showed us just a few minutes ago with ease. My body moves quickly and fluently. My counters are a little more forceful than necessary, as my mind is consumed with anger.

Quan grunts as he dodges one of my kicks, but it's not loud enough to drown out Aspen's giggle at something Vito says. Is he fucking flirting with her?

Irritated, I try to listen to what they are talking about, but there is too much noise around us to make it out.

I watch as Vito shows Aspen the moves slowly. His hands are on her body, and my blood boils in my veins. My fist slams into something with bone-crushing force. I don't even feel the pain, but I hear the gasps around me, when I realize I just hit Quan in the face.

"Shit, sorry," I apologize to Quan, who is pinching the bridge of his bleeding nose with two fingers.

"I think we're done for today," he grits through his teeth.

I'm not sure if he is pissed at me or mad at himself for letting me get a punch in. After all, he is the one who is supposed to teach me, not the other way around.

Quan walks off to lick his wounds, and I take a moment to grab some water from the fountain to cool off. The cold liquid quenches my thirst, but it does nothing to simmer down the burning rage inside of me.

When I turn back around, Aspen is giving Vito an awkward wave goodbye before scurrying away as fast as she can. She already knows she made a mistake. One, I'll make her pay for later.

The rest of the students leave slowly, but Vito doesn't make a move. He simply remains standing casually with his hands folded behind his back. I approach him slowly, wanting the rest of the people to be gone so we can talk in private.

"I hope everyone has been welcoming," I offer, once we're alone.

"Very. Especially Aspen. She is very nice." He smirks, and the urge to rip his eyes out almost overwhelms me.

“Seems that way, but you should be careful with that one. Her family are known traitors.”

“Thank you for the warning, but I assure you, I can take care of myself. Besides, I’m well aware of who Aspen Mather is and what her father has done.”

Another wave of anger washes over me, making it hard to stand still and listen to this fucker. “You seem to know a lot for a guy who just showed up.” Something is off about this guy, and I don’t like him being here one bit.

He simply shrugs. “I know enough.”

“Why are you really here?” I don’t expect him to give me an honest answer, but he might give me a clue without meaning to.

“Same reason everyone else is here, I guess.” I almost snort at his washed-down answer. “I have to get to my next class. I’ll see you around, Quinton.”

I give him a small nod and watch him walk away before I cross to the corner of the room. I pick up a pair of boxing gloves and slip my hands inside, tightening the velcro using my teeth.

There are multiple setups for solo training, including boxing and mixed martial arts stations. I rotate, using all of them. I let my anger out on the leather-covered pads and punching bags until my muscles ache and sweat runs down my face.

Only when I’m so worn out that my mind has somewhat calmed, I slip out of the gloves and allow myself to get some water from the fountain.

Instead of going back to the dorms, I head to the level below, where I know Aspen has her next class. When I get to the room, I don’t bother knocking. I simply walk into the history class taught by Professor Brush. The old man glances up from his desk in shock. His mouth opens like he is about to yell at whoever barged into his class, but when recognition sets in, his thin lips smack back together.

“Can I help you?” he asks, like he is actually offering to assist me in any way he can.

“No, just need to borrow one of your students for a minute,” I explain.

The professor gives me a baffled look but doesn't interject as I pass him and walk further into the room. I scan the class for Aspen and find her sitting in the very back corner, probably trying to stay off people's radar. Her shocked eyes find mine, and I can't help but smirk at the perpetual frown on her face.

All the other students in the room are glaring at me with a mixture of fear and caution, as if one wrong move might set me off. All except Aspen, who is looking more annoyed by the second.

Keeping my gaze on her, I lift my finger and motion for her to come with me. I'm pretty sure she is stomping her leg under the table, but even with her obvious frustration, she gets up. Leaving her bag and book behind, she follows me out of the room.

As soon as I shut the door behind us, she folds her arms in front of her chest defensively. “What the hell are you doing? That professor already hates me. He will never let it go that *I* interrupted the class.”

“I interrupted the class.”

Aspen rolls her pretty blue eyes at me. “That's not how it works, and you know it. At this university, everything is my fault, and nothing is yours.”

“Yes, you are probably right, so why don't you skip class and let me fuck you instead?”

“Is that seriously why you pulled me out of class? For a booty call?”

“No, but that would be a plus.”

“I can't skip any more classes... not that I would just because you want to get your dick wet. Now, tell me what you want so I can go back to hell.”

“I want you to stay away from Vito.”

“Vito? This is about the new guy?”

“Yes, you need to avoid him.”

“Wow.” Aspen shakes her head. “You can't stand seeing anyone being nice to me, can you? Would you rather him trip and elbow me in the hallway like

half of the students? Or maybe just ignore me like the other half?”

“I’d rather you be tied to my bed so no one but me can touch you.”

“Of course, you would. You know I’m a person, right? I’m not your plaything, a sex toy you can use whenever you feel like it.”

“I don’t see why you can’t be both. Now shut up and listen to what I’m telling you. Stay away from Vito. I mean it, Aspen.”

She unfolds her arms with an exaggerated huff. “Fine. I’ll stay away from him. Can I go now?”

Nodding, I wave my hand to dismiss her. She takes a deep breath as if she is readying herself to get yelled at and opens the classroom door. The room falls silent as she steps inside. Just before she closes the door behind her, I glance over her shoulder, and my eyes lock with the professor’s. I give him a warning glare, communicating without words that she is off-limits.

I’m tired of people messing with her. Maybe it’s time I make it clear to everyone. There is only one person who is allowed to mess with her. *Me.*

ASPEN

I'm snuggled under the covers, reading a book, when there's a knock at the door. I look away from the cream-colored pages of the book to the heavy wood door. Ever since the other night when Matteo assaulted me, I've been more leery than usual, if that's even possible.

Even now, I find the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. What if he's returned to make good on his threat? What if he doesn't let me go this time?

I try to swallow, but the saliva in my mouth becomes thick, like concrete. A moment passes, and the air in my lungs shudders out. All I can do is hope the person on the other side of that door goes away. Unfortunately, there is no such luck for me.

Instead of another knock, the beeping of the door unlocking from the use of a keycard fills my ears. My heart skips a beat in my chest when the door opens, and Quinton comes strolling in, a smirk on his devilish face. I let out a calming breath and try to play off the look of terror I'm most likely wearing.

"Ding-dong. Ever heard of answering the door?"

I glare at him, noticing he's wearing a Halloween costume. He looks like the devil. He's dressed head to toe in black, the button-down shirt is black, and his jeans are black as well. He's wearing a pair of devil horns on his head, giving him a medieval look.

“If I wanted to talk to you, I would’ve answered. Also, what the hell are you wearing?”

“Good thing I don’t care what you want.” He looks down at his costume. “And Hades—King of the Underworld—why do I not look the part?”

I shrug. “You look fine. Now get out because you’re interrupting a good chapter of my new book.”

I point to the door, but he doesn’t appear to have heard a single word I’ve said because instead of leaving, he continues into the room, stopping only once he reaches my bed.

His scent invades me, and I try not to look at him because I know as soon as I do, he’ll draw me in—he always does. Still, I end up peeking up at him.

His midnight-black hair has grown out a little, a few strands cling to his forehead, and I’m tempted to reach up and brush them away. The usual faint dark bags under his eyes seem a little darker than normal, and I wonder if he’s sleeping at night? It’s none of my business, and I shouldn’t care, but I can’t help myself.

He doesn’t deserve my compassion, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to give it to him.

As if he’d take it anyway.

Those dark eyes of his pierce right into me, immobilizing me. I lick my lips involuntarily. The air heats around us. Is this all we will ever be? Two people who fuck each other but pretend there is nothing but hate between them?

“Forget the book and get dressed,” he demands. “We’re going to a Halloween party.”

I grit my teeth. “We are not going anywhere. You are leaving.”

He leans down, his eyes gleaming with annoyance. His spicy cologne fills my nostrils, and the heat of his body blankets mine. “I don’t remember asking you what you wanted.”

“I have nothing to wear.” I frown, giving him a lame excuse.

Quinton rolls his eyes like I'm inconveniencing him. "Here." He tosses a bag at me I wasn't aware he was holding.

It lands in front of me, and I stare down at it. *Fuck*. "You have it all planned, don't you? Where did you even get a dress?" It's not like he can drive down to the mall and pick something up.

"Don't worry about that." Quinton's grin widens. "Of course, I planned everything. Now, get dressed, or I'll get you dressed, and I promise, you don't want me to do that because we might not make it out of this bedroom."

"Seriously?" I sigh and toss my hands in the air. "We both know there's nothing for me at a Halloween party. Nobody wants me there, and I don't want to be anywhere that I'm not wanted. Plus, I'm not wearing some stupid costume where you show my ass and tits off to your friends. I'm not some show horse." I know I'm pushing it, but I want him to understand how much I don't want to do this.

I've struck a nerve, and I know it because the contours of his face harden to stone. Moving lightning fast, he strikes like a jaguar, his hand circling my throat.

The movement causes me to move up the bed, and my head presses against the wall. His grip is firm, and I stare up into his eyes, waiting to see what he does next.

I'm at his mercy, completely trapped between him and the wall.

"I want you there," he whispers, leaning into my face. He seems different tonight, and I wonder if that has anything to do with Vito, the new guy, taking a strange liking to me.

"Well, I don't want myself there," I say, my voice coming out a little weaker than intended.

"I'm not going to put you in some skintight costume. Open the bag and put the dress on. You'll look beautiful."

An entire kaleidoscope of butterflies erupts in my belly at the fire that flickers in his eyes. He could eat me alive, and the worst part is, I would let him.

I want to challenge him, but would it really matter? Quinton is like a shark, and any sign of weakness to him is like blood in the water.

“I don’t want to go,” I whine.

He releases my throat, and I think maybe I’ve gotten through to him until his nimble fingers reach for the button on his jeans.

Those full lips of his tip up at the sides. “Well, since you don’t want to go, maybe it’s better that we discuss your payment for this room. I think it’s time for a proper thank you.”

“I’m more than thankful, and you know it,” I say.

“No, not yet, you aren’t, but by the time I get done with you, you will be.”

“I’m not having sex with you, Quinton, so you can leave.”

“You’ll do whatever the hell I say, and not because I tell you to, but because deep down you want this too. You want my cock inside you. You want me to fuck you like I hate you, so you can justify this fucked up relationship we’ve developed. I know because I want it too. I want to fuck you until I don’t remember who we are.”

Fuck, this shit is getting too deep, and I don’t have the emotional capacity to deal with it right now.

Jumping off the bed, I announce, “Fine, if it gets you to stop undressing and talking, I’ll go.”

I know I’ve fed right into his hands when his smile turns wicked. This man has no shame. I shouldn’t go with him. I should just let him fuck me and send him on his way, but I don’t want that.

I don’t want him to fuck me and discard me like I’m nothing, and knowing I feel that way is more terrifying than anything because it means...

I don’t allow myself to finish the thought. I grab the bag off the bed. “Wait in the hall.”

I’m not surprised when he does the opposite and instead leans against the nearest wall. “Shut up and get dressed. I’ve literally fucked your pussy,

licked it, and come inside you all in the same night. I can handle watching you get dressed.”

I roll my eyes and ignore every word he just said. He is going to be the death of me, I swear. I should be shy about undressing in front of him, but I’m not. He’s seen parts of me no one else has; he’s touched me and licked me in places... Jesus, I cannot think about that right now. My cheeks burn at the memories ingrained there.

I tug my oversized T-shirt off over my head and toss it on the bed. Then I rip the bag open and find a silky white dress inside. The fabric looks sheer, but when I hold it up in front of me, I find it’s not. I’m thankful I hadn’t taken my bra off yet. It’s easy to ignore Quinton’s presence, but not when he’s staring daggers through you.

I’m just about to pull the dress on over my head when I hear a growl being emitted from across the room. I think maybe I’m hearing things, but then Quinton is headed right toward me, his steps echoing around the small space. Every muscle in my body tenses as I prepare for the wrath that is clearly written on his face.

He’s a foot away when he stops, and I flinch at the touch of his fingertips ghosting over my skin. I look into his face, which is contorted with rage—his jaw tight, and his lip curled.

“Who did this to you?” Venom drips from his words.

I shake my head and look down at the bruises Matteo left on my skin. They’re no longer purple, but a smattering of yellow and black. The lump in my throat grows tenfold.

“No one.” The lie rolls easily off my tongue. “I fell.” I don’t need Quinton to fight my battles, I remind myself.

I’m not sure it’s possible, but it seems his features have darkened more. He laughs, but the sound that comes out of his mouth is anything but that of a jolly, happy laugh. No, this laughter is filled with violence and rage.

“I am not fucking stupid. You don’t get bruises like this from *falling*.” He pauses, and though his voice is sharp as a knife, his touch is incredibly gentle.

I've never seen this side of him. Yes, he's been territorial before and even possessive, but he's never shown he truly cared outside of making sure I could take his cock once a week.

"I'm fine. Nothing happened."

"Why won't you tell me who did this to you?"

I nibble on my lip a second longer than I should. Hesitation is not what I need. "I don't need you to protect me," I half-lie. I wish I didn't need him at all, but we both know that Quinton has been a gatekeeper to who knows what Matteo has planned. "But most of all, you getting involved would just make it worse. He already hates me."

His hand drops, and a shiver slithers down my spine. It's stupid, but I crave his touch more than I hate it. I crave his attention, even if it's bad. I crave his comfort, even if he's the one causing me distress.

"Fine. Don't tell me," he barks, but I'm pretty sure he's figured out who *he* is all by himself.

Hopefully, he'll just let it go this time. I don't want anyone fighting because of me. I take that moment to change the subject and get back to putting the dress on.

"Are you going home for Christmas break?"

"I planned on it. You are staying here, I assume?"

Frowning, I say, "Yes. Looks like it's me and a book celebrating Christmas together."

"That sounds very boring."

I pull the dress down and grab the little golden crown with leaves on it and place it in my hair. "Thanks, it sounds like you really care."

"I mean, I don't. I was just saying it sounds boring."

"Part of me actually looks forward to everyone else being gone. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, let's go make heads spin."

The only head that will spin tonight is mine when I go Carrie mode on everyone at this party.

QUINTON

*H*er whole body is stiff as we walk up to the great hall of the castle. It's the same room they held the black and white ball in, which is probably half of the reason Aspen doesn't want to be here. The other half is that she knows people don't like her. She is probably less than welcome here by all the other students, but I don't care what everyone else thinks.

What's important is that everyone knows she belongs to me, she is mine, and I don't like sharing.

"Quinton, I really don't want to go." Aspen digs her heels into the floor, but I simply tighten my arm around her and force her to keep moving. "Can we just go back to my room? I'd rather just sleep with you than go through with this."

"How about both? Let's go to the party for a bit, then we go back, and I fuck you into the mattress."

"I mean it."

"So do I. Now, relax. It's just a party."

"It's a party to you. It's a nightmare to me. I don't understand why you want me there."

"Just making sure everyone knows who you belong to."

"Don't say stuff like that. I belong to you as much as you belong to me, which is not at all."

“You are very wrong because you are mine. Mine to torment, mine to touch, and definitely mine to fuck.”

She turns her face away from me, but I can feel her body shuddering in my hold. A moment later, we enter the large, lavishly decorated party room. Unlike the founders’ ball, there are no tables to sit. Only a few bar-top tables scattered across the edges of the room. They have repurposed most of the space into a giant dance floor. On one side of the room, two bars stretch out. One for drinks and one holding a buffet of foods.

Aspen leans into me. “Can you at least not leave me alone while we’re up here?”

“I thought you didn’t need my protection?”

“Not when I’m in my room, but I wouldn’t mind someone watching my back while I’m in a crowd full of people who would like to dig a knife between my shoulder blades.”

“No one will bother you.” Even as I say the words, I know they are untrue. People mess with her wherever she goes, and until now, I let it happen. The reality of it hits me like a kick in the chest when I look around and see confused stares directed at us. Everyone is wondering what I’m doing here with her, and for a second, I wonder myself... *What the fuck am I doing?*

All my doubts about taking her here evaporate when I scan the room, and my eyes land on Vito. He is standing at one of the tables, his arms leaning against the surface while he is holding a beer in his hand. He notices us right away, giving me a small casual wave, almost like he was expecting us.

Ignoring him completely, I lead Aspen to the other side of the large space. Her dress is a little too long for her, and she has to lift the fabric slightly in the front to walk without stepping on the hem. I keep my hand on her lower back, guiding her where I want her to go.

As we move through the crowd, it seems that all eyes are on us. People either gawk at us in shock or inspect us with curiosity. Though we are met with plenty of confused looks, no one dares to say anything to us. Not until I spot Ren, Nash, and Marcel surrounding one of the tables, and we join them.

“Are you shitting me?” Nash calls out over the music. The words come out slurred, making it clear the beer in his hand is not his first. “What the fuck is she doing here?”

I don’t miss the way Aspen slightly leans into my side. It’s so minute, I don’t think anyone else notices, maybe not even Aspen herself. She likes to pretend she doesn’t need me, but we both know she seeks out my protection and comfort. I like that part too, the part where she depends on me. I appreciate the control it gives me over her.

“She is here with me... obviously.”

“Okay, but why?” Nash probes.

“So I can keep an eye on her.” It’s not that far off from the truth. “Now, quit asking stupid questions and hand me a beer.”

Nash murmurs something under his breath but grabs one of the unopened bottles from the table and pops the cap open with his lighter. He hands it to me while not even glancing over at Aspen. Maybe he’s chosen to ignore her for the rest of the night, which is fine by me.

Both Ren and Marcel don’t say anything about Aspen being here, but I can tell by their stares that they are confused too. Which is why I’m shocked when Ren offers Aspen a drink.

“Here, you look like you need it.” Ren opens a beer bottle and slides it across the table.

“Mhh, thanks.” Aspen sounds unsure, her gratitude coming with a hint of a question mark at the end. She is hesitant but ends up taking the bottle and brings it to her lips.

“Ah, okay, I get it now.” Nash sets his empty bottle down on the table. “We’re getting her drunk so we can all fuck her. I mean, she must be a good lay if you keep her around.” Nash laughs, and Aspen stiffens next to me.

Gripping the neck of my beer bottle, I imagine it’s Nash’s neck while trying not to show how close on edge I am.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ren shaking his head. He knows how much Nash is fucking up right now. I remind myself that he is drunk and doesn't know what he is saying, but when the idiot reaches for Aspen's dress and tries to push it off her shoulder, I see red.

My body moves before my mind can think it through. Fueled by rage, I drive my fist into Nash's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He doubles over, cradling his stomach.

"No one touches her but me," I growl, shocked by the possessive tone in my voice. I shove him away, and he barely stays on his feet. "Get lost, Nash. I don't want to see your ugly face for the rest of the night."

I turn back to look at Aspen, who gawks at me with her mouth hanging open before quickly composing herself. She hastily takes another sip of her beer, her eyes looking everywhere but at me.

When I glance around the crowd, I find the people around us staring. Only Ren gives me a knowing look. I decide to forget Nash and grab another bottle of beer. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here, but getting drunk sounds like an excellent solution at the moment.

A few minutes later, everyone seems to have gone back to minding their own business. Some brunette dressed as a sexy nurse even dares to come to our table. She gives Ren a shy smile before leaning into him to whisper something in his ear.

Ren's eyebrows shoot up, and I'm almost certain he is about to take her somewhere to fuck, but to my surprise, he shakes his head and shoos her away. With a huge pout on her lips, the girl leaves, and I wonder what she said to turn him off like that.

Aspen draws my attention back to her when her hand lands on my arm, only inches away from the scar that now marks my skin. "Can we please go now?"

"Are you eager to get back to the room so I can peel that dress off your body, part your thighs, and sink deep inside of you?"

"I'm eager to get out of here, where there isn't anyone to look at me like I'm a sideshow."

“Let them look.” I smirk.

That’s really why I brought her here. So everyone can see she is mine. I want everyone to know that there will be consequences if you fuck with what’s mine.

Aspen huffs, her features riddled with annoyance. Pulling her hand away, she crosses her arms over her chest. She’s doing so out of defiance, but all it does is push her tits together, drawing my attention to her cleavage. Maybe it is time to take her back to the room after all. I’m hungry, and there is only one person who can satisfy that hunger.

I open my mouth to say something, but the words get caught in my throat when the music suddenly turns off. The grand hall fills with drunk chatter and displeased partiers before a large projected screen above the buffet comes to life.

For a moment, it’s nothing but static and white noise, but then the wall projector plays, and a video comes to life.

The first thing I see is Aspen’s tear-rimmed eyes filled with fear and anger.

The first thing I hear is my voice. *“Open your mouth and relax your throat.”*

Fuck.

The entire room goes quiet. All eyes are on the large screen, showing Aspen on her knees in front of me while I slowly fuck her mouth.

I’m frozen in place as I watch the video replaying the scene I remember just fine on my own. Aspen’s whimpers come through the speakers, followed by sounds of gagging and grunting as I fuck her harder.

“Fuck, yes, make her choke on it.” Matteo’s voice fills the space. *“I can’t wait to fuck her next.”*

“I’m next after,” Nash calls out before Marcel groans, *“Fuck, you guys.”*

My stomach churns, and for a moment, I think I’m actually gonna throw up. Tearing my eyes away from the screen, I look at Aspen beside me. Just like me, she is frozen in place, too shocked to move.

Her mouth is hanging open, like a fish out of water. Her eyes are wide and glued to the screen, almost as if she is hypnotized.

“Aspen,” I whisper, but in the silent crowd, it feels more like a shout.

Her gaze flickers to me, and I feel like someone punched me in the fucking heart. Her baby blues are filled with so much despair and pain, it’s hard to look at her.

I’ve hurt her before, pushed her more than I should have, but she always stood up to me with fire in her eyes. Not this time. That usual fire is gone— not even a spark remains. All that reflects at me is the pain only a guttural betrayal can leave behind.

“I hate you,” she grits through her teeth, and for the first time, I actually believe her.

ASPEN

The sound of me gagging while Quinton fucks my face booms from the speakers, haunting me as I try my hardest to get out of here and away from this never-ending nightmare I'm trapped in.

Glares that held curiosity earlier are now filled with disgust. Snide comments about me being a rat turn into calling me a whore and slut as I pass them on my way out.

I want to cover my ears and hum just so I can drown them out, but if I don't hold up this fucking dress, I'm going to be on my ass in no time. Is that why he made me wear this? Is it all part of his fucked-up plan to destroy me?

Of course, it is. I'm so fucking stupid to fall for this. To believe anything he says.

I finally make it out of the ballroom and into the corridor leading underground when I hear footsteps behind me.

My vision blurs, tears running down my face rapidly as I desperately try to get away from him. I move faster, though I know better than to run in these heels. As if the night couldn't get any worse, my heel gets caught on a crack in the concrete floor, and I fall forward.

My knees hit the unforgiving ground and pain shoots up my legs. The urge to curl up in a ball and wallow in my own pity is strong, but my aversion to letting them win is stronger.

I push myself off the floor when a set of hands grab me to help me up. I immediately shake them off.

“I don’t need your help!” I spit, certain that Quinton came after me, but surprisingly, it’s not his face I see when I spin around.

“You might not *need* it, but why refuse when it makes things easier?” Vito asks.

“Because in my experience, even the smallest amount of *help* comes with a price.” I run my palms down my dress, straightening the fabric as much as I can.

“That’s true for most of the people around here. I simply wanted to help you. I don’t want anything in return.” His voice is calm, sounding genuinely sincere.

I want to believe him. The thought of another friend in this hell beckons me like a moth to a flame. Quinton warned me to stay away from Vito, but why?

“I don’t know if I can trust you,” I admit. “Don’t take it personally. I don’t really trust anyone these days.”

“I’d say you have valid reasons after seeing that video.”

I wince at his words. The reminder that everyone saw me sucking Quinton’s dick. The memory fills my veins with anger and shame. Anger toward Q and his friends for what they have done, and shame for myself because I keep letting Quinton treat me this way. I let him in, let him slip through the cracks when I should build my walls higher. I let him comfort me when I should only count on myself.

“Don’t do that,” Vito says in an almost warning tone.

“Don’t do what?”

“Feel humiliated. You’re not the one who did this.”

“It’s easy to say, but I can’t help how I feel.”

“Ah, yes. Pesky feelings don’t always go in the direction you want them to.” Vito gives me a solace smile, and I wonder if we are still talking about the

same thing. The way he is looking at me right now with puppy dog eyes makes me think he has some feelings on his own he can't control.

"I guess I should go back to my room. Thanks for helping me up, even if I yelled at you at first. I do appreciate it."

"Why don't you let me walk you to your room?"

"I don't know..." I chew on my bottom lip, torn by what to do. I wouldn't mind someone walking me back to my room. I hate being out here on my own, but I still don't know if I can trust Vito.

"I promise I won't bite." He smirks, his eyes gleaming with mischief, but he makes no move to touch me. His gaze flickers to something behind me. "Looks like Quinton decided to walk you home after all."

I don't turn around, but I can hear Quinton's footsteps approaching. His feet pound against the ground like he is angry. As if he has a right to be upset. Fury builds inside me like lava inside a volcano, ready to spew hot molten rock and kill everything in my path.

All the anger and pain has made me bitter, and all I want to do is hurt Quinton the way he hurt me. I want to defy him, stand against him and do the opposite of what he is asking of me.

The small hairs on my neck stand and a shiver runs down my spine as I feel Quinton come closer, feel his presence, his glare boring into my back.

I look up at Vito, who is taking in my face like he is mapping out my features. He doesn't seem the slightest bit bothered by Quinton, who is getting closer by the second. Instead, he is simply looking at me like I'm the only thing that matters.

Fuck it. I act on impulse.

Before I can think anything through, I take a step toward Vito. His eyes widen just a smidge, and his lips part in surprise as I push up on my tiptoes, close my eyes, and press my mouth against his.

Oh, shit. I'm kissing Vito.

He doesn't pull away, which I half expect. His lips are soft and inviting against mine, but there is nothing else there, no spark, no butterflies, no warm and fuzzy feelings. Just two lips touching.

Neither one of us moves, too shocked by what I'm doing. My mind is going at a million miles per hour, confused, shocked, and a little scared by the consequences of my actions. I'm about to pull away when someone else does it for me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Quinton growls from behind me. The deep, gravelly sound of his voice holds rage and promises retribution. He grabs me harshly and pulls my back against his chest, knocking all the air from my lungs.

My eyes fly open just in time to see Vito smirk with satisfaction. Next thing I know, I'm spun around and picked up by my hips. Quinton throws me over his shoulder, leaving me hanging upside down and grabbing onto his shirt for support.

He stamps off in a fit, my body bouncing on his shoulder with each step. I lift my head enough to get one last look at Vito. He is standing in the hall with his hands tucked in his pockets. The smile remains on his lips as he watches me being carried off caveman style.

Ugh. I want to tell Quinton to put me down, yell at him, pound my fist against his back, but I know he is furious right now, and that means I better let him cool off before I say anything.

It doesn't matter that he has no right to be angry with me, and I have all the right to be furious at him. Quinton makes his own rules, and if I don't follow, I'll have to pay the price. That doesn't mean I'll make it easy on him.

He carries me all the way to my room without either of us saying a word. Kicking the door shut after us, he drops me on my bed unceremoniously, making me bounce on my mattress.

My entire body goes rigid, bracing for what's coming. I expect him to be on me any second, grabbing my throat, tearing at my dress, demanding control, and my complete submission.

“Go to sleep and do not leave this room again tonight,” he orders, then spins around and heads back toward the door.

My mouth pops open, my jaw hanging slack as if I’ve lost the ability to move it at all. I blink slowly, wondering if this is some kind of alternative reality. It has to be. Any moment now, I’ll be sucked back into my universe.

Quinton’s steps falter a foot away from the door. Looking over his shoulder, he asks, “Did you hear me?”

My mind snaps back into what I’m now certain is reality. “Why do you care what I do? I don’t owe you anything.”

“No? You owe me nothing? I guess you can pack your shit and move back to your old room.”

“I didn’t ask for this. You can’t do something nice for a person and then tell them they owe you.”

“I can do what I want.” Quinton’s words might be that of a bratty child, but his voice is that of a powerful man who can indeed do as he pleases. No one will even attempt to stop him... only me.

“Clearly! You do what you want, no matter who gets hurt in the process.”

“I didn’t play that video for everyone to see if that’s what you’re referring to.”

“Maybe not, but you are the one who did it to me. You are the one who forced his dick down my throat while your friends were watching. You knew about the video, and you told Matteo you didn’t care who saw it. And you are the one who made me go to the stupid party today, where I was humiliated in front of the entire school!”

By the time I’m done with my speech, my throat is painfully raspy because I basically screamed the last sentence. Still, I feel a little better now that it’s out.

After my outburst, the room falls into an eerie silence. Again, Quinton’s behavior is throwing me for a loop. Judging by the way his hands are balled into tight fists, his knuckles white, and his arms shaking, I wouldn’t say he is

calm, but he isn't moving either. Normally, Quinton is rash with everything; his anger and need for dominance, uncontrollable. He might look like he is about to punch something, but the fact he hasn't yet is throwing me off.

"Go to sleep, Aspen," he orders, his voice so low I can barely hear it from across the room.

"That's it? Go to sleep?" I should probably just keep my mouth shut and let him go, but when did I ever choose to be quiet? I never learn.

"Yes, that's it. You've already said everything. Laid out all the things I've done to you. I won't deny any of it because it's all true. I hurt you, I humiliated you, and I took things from you that you didn't want to give, but I also saved your ass more than once, and let's not forget, I got you this room. Now, lie down, shut up, and go to sleep."

And with that, he leaves the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

I remain sitting on my bed and gawking at the door for several more minutes, almost positive that this is all an ill-mannered joke, and he'll waltz back in here any moment.

When nothing happens, I force myself off the bed and into the bathroom, where I peel the dress off my body and get into the shower.

I turn on the spray, letting the hot water warm my chilled skin. Now that I'm left with silence, the events from earlier are running through my mind on replay.

Everyone saw.

Their voices calling me names ring in my ear, and the dirty looks they gave me play in front of my eyes. I want to forget all of it, but I can't make it stop. I wish I could distract myself, but whatever I do, my thoughts are pulled back to how I was humiliated beyond measure.

Every time I think this place can't possibly get any worse, that's exactly what it does.

QUINTON

I'm starting to wonder if Aspen suspects the cameras in her room or if there is another reason she has been spending all of her time either at the gym or library. I've been leaving her alone in the library, and the few times I followed her to the gym, she just left and did push-ups in her room instead.

I figured she would be cooped up in her room after the disastrous party two weeks ago, but of course, in true Aspen fashion, she does the opposite of what I expect.

Leaning against the cold brick wall, I keep my eyes trained on the entrance of the library. Like the stalker I am, I'm hidden in the shadows. In a corner Aspen won't see when she walks out.

A few minutes later, she does just that.

With her bag slung over her shoulder, she steps out into the corridor and peeks down both sides before turning her back to me and heading down the hall. Keeping my distance, I follow her, surprised when she walks past the elevator. It doesn't take me long to realize she is going to the sunroom.

I let her go ahead, walking in after her a few minutes later. I find her sitting with her legs crisscrossed on the grass, her back perched up against a tree. Her bag is sitting next to her, and an open book rests on her lap. With her head down and her nose in the book, her hair falls over her face like a golden waterfall.

Enjoying seeing her peacefully sitting in the sun, I sneak up on her from behind, letting the moment stretch out a little longer. If she wasn't so immersed in her book, she'd probably have noticed me by now. A faint smile is playing on her lips, and I wonder what she is reading.

Only when I take another step toward her does she turn, and her eyes lift to mine. Her content demeanor falters, and the corners of her mouth pull down into a frown.

“What do you want?”

“A lot of things, but right now, I just want you to come with me so I can have my way with you for an hour.”

She snorts. Fucking snorts.

“I'm done being your plaything. Just leave me alone and find someone else to plague. I've had enough of this torment to last me a lifetime.”

“Torment, huh? Maybe I need to remind you of how much you enjoy it when I *torment* you.”

Looking anywhere but at me, she slightly shifts and closes her book. Grabbing her bag, she opens the zipper and shoves the book inside.

“I haven't bothered you in two weeks. You must miss me by now.”

“You are such a prick! Trust me, I don't miss getting humiliated in front of the whole school.”

“Yeah, but I'm sure you still miss coming on my dick.”

She rolls her eyes at me, and my hand twitches, wanting to redden her perky little ass again. Shaking my head, I shake the thought away. She doesn't need a spanking right now. She needs to be reminded of how good I can make her feel.

I catch movement in the distance, and my gaze finds Vito standing on the other side of the large space. He is casually leaning against a tree, taking a bite of an apple while watching us like we're acting out some soap opera.

Annoyed by his presence, I look back down at Aspen, who is occupied with fighting to get the zipper of her backpack closed. That's when an idea hits me...

Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone here.

I quickly scan the entire sunroom, happy to find only us and Vito. *Perfect.*

Aspen finally gets her zipper to close and pushes herself off the ground. She slings her bag over her shoulder, ready to walk off when I grip her by her hips and start walking her backward.

“What are you—” Her words cut off when her back contacts the rough bark of the tree. Her breath hitches as she looks up at me in confusion.

“I'm refreshing your memory...” I eat up the distance between us until my body is flush against hers. This close, she has to tilt up her face to look at me.

Sunlight catches in her hazel eyes, and for the first time, I can see all the colors in them, every little speck of blue, brown, and green. Almost like an intricate mosaic, tiny pieces artfully arranged around her iris. I'm so mesmerized by their beauty that for a moment, I forget everything else around us.

“Quinton...” My name falls from her lips like a plea, but I don't know what she is pleading for.

I'm close enough to feel her breath fan over my skin and smell the feminine scent of her shampoo. Suddenly, I feel drunk, lightheaded even, and all I can think about is tasting her.

“Keep saying my name like that, and I don't think I'll be able to stop myself from fucking you against this tree.”

Aspen shakes her head, but I can see the desire trickling into her eyes. She wants me to fuck her, wants me to make her come.

“We can't. You can't...” Her gaze moves to something behind us.

No, not something. Someone. *Vito.* She's watching him, probably worried about what he thinks about us.

Little does she know, this entire charade is to prove to him she's mine, completely, every inch, every tear, every single smile or moan; it all belongs to me. She might have kissed him, but she did it in a fit of rage. He means nothing to her, and I'm going to slap him in the face with that truth right now.

Trailing my fingers up her thigh, I notice the rapid rise and fall of her chest and the way her pulse flutters at the side of her throat. Her tongue darts out over her bottom lip, and I'm tempted to take that lip of hers between my teeth and bite it.

But kissing is intimate, and I don't want Aspen to get the wrong idea. We aren't boyfriend and girlfriend. We're enemies. I pause when I reach the inseam of her leggings. Her hot core beckons me forward, and I rub gently along the seam, smirking when she startles because I know she is enjoying this way more than she's letting on.

"He's watching us," she whispers, trepidation lacing her words.

I lean into her, my lips just below her ear. "Let him. Let him watch how you come apart just for me. I want him to know who you belong to. Who this pussy belongs to."

Aspen grunts but doesn't stop me. In fact, she spreads her legs a little wider, and I take that as an invitation. Moving higher, I reach the waistband of her leggings, and thank god, they're stretchy. I'm not sure I'd be able to do this if she were wearing jeans.

Slipping inside her pants, my fingers graze the top of her cotton panties. So fucking innocent and pure. It's a shame that I've dirtied her up. I move beneath them and nearly groan when my fingers contact the top of her mound.

She's always well-manicured, leaving a little strip of hair down the middle. My mouth waters, and I'm truly tempted to fuck her rather than finger her. I want to be inside her so badly. Pre-cum beads at the tip of my cock, and I can feel myself growing thicker with every second.

We both let out a sigh when my fingers slide between her folds. I'm not surprised to find her wet. The idea of being watched, of someone seeing us, turns her on.

Leaning forward, she buries her face in my chest. I force myself to move slowly, drawing circles over her clit. It doesn't take long for her to arch into me, her body knowing what she needs from me.

She's slippery wet, and I move from her clit to her entrance, sinking two fingers inside her.

"Fuck, Aspen. You're so tight and perfect." I move faster, fucking her with my fingers while wishing it were my cock. "All mine. You're all mine. Tell me you're mine. Tell me who you belong to, who this pussy belongs to."

She lets out a low groan. "Don't... don't do this in front of him."

I press against her harder. The friction of our bodies is exactly what she needs. "Shhh, I already am. Now, tell me who you belong to, or I won't let you come."

"Quinton..." she whimpers, pulling back.

Her hazel eyes are darker and brimmed with arousal. I can tell she wants to come, but she doesn't want to admit the truth.

I slow my strokes, and she claws at my shirt, her nails sinking into my skin through the fabric of my cotton tee. Fuck, I love her claws.

"Say it," I growl, the words coming from deep within my chest. I can only imagine what Vito is thinking. If he's smart and values his life, I'm sure he's left by now.

"*You*. It belongs to you."

"What does?" I up my pace once more and fuck her hard with my fingers.

Her lip trembles, and her eyes become hazy. Fuck, she's close to coming. I know that look. I've seen her wear it.

"Me. My pussy. You own me."

"Even if it's the only thing we ever agree on, I'm glad you know it's me who owns your body."

Satisfied with her confession, I choose to take mercy on her. Using my thumb, I apply the perfect amount of pressure to her clit. It doesn't take but a

few strokes for her to ignite, bursting into flames. We might be like fire and ice, but we detonate when we come together. Her channel squeezes me tight, her walls fluttering as an orgasm rips its way through her. I hold on to her, keeping her upright as I watch her float back down to reality.

After a few moments, I gently ease out of her, sliding my fingers through her sensitive folds, eliciting a wince from her lips.

As soon as my hand is free, I bring those same fingers that were just inside her to my lips and suck the sweet nectar off them. My eyelids flutter closed, and this fucked up euphoria surrounds me.

Her taste explodes against my tongue, and I need more, want more. I'm starving, and there is nothing that can curb my hunger.

I pull my fingers free of my mouth and open my eyes to find her heart-shaped face peering up at me. Her cheeks are flush, and she still has that dazed, post-orgasmic look lingering in her hazel eyes.

Suddenly, she snaps out of it, and I peer over my shoulder to see if Vito is still standing there. I'm left with a grin on my face when I find the space he was in empty.

I turn back around to find Aspen has slipped past me and is reaching down to grab her backpack.

I place a hand on her shoulder to stop her, and she gives me a strange look, shrugging off my hand like I didn't just use it to get her off.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I really need to go to my next class."

Her behavior is almost laughable. She wasn't thinking about that a few minutes ago. I check the time on my phone.

"Your class doesn't start for another forty minutes."

"I need to get there early so I can get a seat in the back. If I sit anywhere else... never mind." She shakes her head, her words cutting off.

I'm not ready to be done with her yet, so I ask, "How about I walk you to your class, and we'll grab some lunch from the cafeteria on the way? I'll make sure you get the seat you want in your class."

Her brows draw together as she inspects my face, as if I'm a crossword puzzle she is trying to solve.

"Why? I know you didn't just come and find me and do what you just did because you were feeling kind. You wanted Vito to see what we were doing."

"One, because I want to, and two, of course, I wanted Vito to see what we were doing. I want him to know that the kiss you shared means shit, and that you're mine." I'm sounding like a damn caveman. Next thing I know, I'll be peeing in a circle around her.

I don't really know why I care to accompany her to lunch, other than I want to make sure she eats, and more importantly, that no one touches her. I want to make certain that every single person in this fucking school knows who she belongs to and that if they fuck with her, they'll face me.

She chews on her bottom lip, a look of apprehension in her eyes.

"I already got what I wanted, Aspen. Let me take you to lunch and make sure you eat."

A moment passes, and then she finally answers, "Um, okay. I guess I could eat."

I shake my head. I'll never understand her. She let me finger fuck her against a tree, where anyone could've come walking in and seen us, but needs to be convinced to let me take her to lunch.

ASPEN

I'm afraid that I'll wake up and these last two weeks will have been a dream. It's odd how bearable things have been, almost to where I'm hating this place a little less.

It helps when the person who makes your life a true living nightmare most days has made a change for the better and decides not to terrorize you for a little while.

It's a nice change of pace, but I suspect soon enough, Quinton will be back to his vicious ways. His anger comes with a warning, but his niceness makes me wary. There is always a reason behind it, even if I'm not aware of the reasoning right at this second.

I lie in bed for a while with the covers pulled up and over my head and try not to pout. It's Thanksgiving Day, but that doesn't mean shit.

Not here. It's stupid to wish because I doubt it would be any different there than here, but part of me wishes I was at home. Just the comfort of being in your own bed. Spending time with your loved ones. My father wouldn't be there, but my mother would. *Maybe?* I shouldn't put as much faith in her as I do. She doesn't care about me like she should, but she's my mother.

What the hell else am I going to do? I roll over in bed and grab my phone from the nightstand. I've contemplated calling for the last twenty minutes. Every time I do, and she doesn't answer, my heart breaks a little bit more.

Hesitantly, I navigate to my mother's number and hit the green call button. I hold my breath and listen as the line rings, and rings, leaving me a little more disappointed with every second that passes.

I end the call, squeezing the device in my hand. I don't know why I try. Really, I don't. She doesn't care about me, not enough to check up on me, and certainly not enough to return my phone calls. I drop the phone onto the mattress beside me.

The screen lights up with a text, and my stomach twists into a knot. Maybe my mom texted me instead of calling? Maybe she's busy after all. It's hopeful thinking that evaporates into thin air when I see the text is from Quinton and not my mother.

Worst Nightmare: *Come to my room. I've got a surprise.*

I exhale and run a hand through my blonde hair. His idea of a surprise isn't the same as mine. Still, if I don't go, it'll only make him come for me, ending with me in his room anyway. There is no winning with him. It's Quinton's way or no way at all.

Tossing back the covers, I contemplate telling him *no* but instead text back a single letter.

Me: **K.**

I take my time in the shower, and since I'm not sure what kind of surprise it is, I choose to dress casual, mainly because I have nothing dressy to wear. My eyes catch on my reflection in the mirror. The hazel orbs looking back at me seem dull, and my heart-shaped face appears thinner, my cheeks hollow. I toss some water on them and give them a gentle slap to add some color.

I look like a goddamn ghost. My blonde hair falls in gentle waves down my back. Overall, I still look like the Aspen I've always been minus a beaming smile. I used to be happy, smiling, and excited for the next day. Now, I hide my teeth behind my lips more often than not. I can't remember the last time my smile was genuine. I can't remember the last time I was happy—no, not happy, but truly happy.

I turn the light off in the bathroom on my way out. I'm already dreading going to Quinton's place, and I haven't even stepped into the hall yet. With

no other reason to drag my feet, I leave the safety of this room behind and venture out into the hall.

Even the halls are mostly vacant, a few students venturing out to study or do who knows what. It's both convenient and a pain that my new room isn't that far from Quinton's. What would've been a ten-minute walk has become a five-minute one since moving to this side of the university. No one bats an eye at me over here, and I know it has everything to do with Quinton.

The only one with balls big enough to mess with me was Matteo, and I suspect he knows better than to try anything again. He wanted to intimidate me, but I was over being the girl who hides in her room.

My thoughts waver when I stop right in front of Quinton's door. There's nothing to contemplate. I'm going to go inside and see whatever his surprise is, mainly because I have to, though part of me is curious to know what he wants to show me.

With the way things have been between us, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Lifting my hand, I knock on the door. The sound echoes back through me. Anxiety bubbles in my belly, and I impatiently move my weight from leg to leg.

The door is jerked open a moment later, silencing my anxiety with Quinton's huge frame standing in the doorway. His dark hair is wet, droplets still cling to the strands, and I can't help but drag my gaze over his body, drinking him in.

He's sharp as a knife, ready to cut your throat and watch you bleed out, while at the same time, he still finds a way to be so breathtakingly gorgeous it hurts.

"I'm glad you came on your own. I was almost worried I'd have to come to your room and drag you here." He smiles wolfishly—those perfectly straight white teeth of his shine in the light.

"I wouldn't give you the pleasure of doing such a thing." I give him an equally snide grin, and he laughs before taking a step back so that I can come inside.

I'm almost ready to ask him what the hell he wanted to show me and why he couldn't just take a picture and text it to me when my mouth pops open.

There are no words for the display of delicious foods that I see on the kitchen table.

It's like someone took a buffet of favorite Thanksgiving Day foods and put them on Quinton's table.

Stuffing, turkey, pumpkin pie, potatoes and gravy, and rolls, among other things, stare back at me, waiting to be devoured.

"What do you want?" I ask, whirling around to face him just as he's shutting the front door.

Nothing is free, not when it comes to Quinton Rossi.

He walks toward me, his lips tugged up at the sides, but not in a conniving way. Instead of saying something snide or funny, he grabs my hand and leads me toward the table.

I'm shocked and a little worried that an alien got inside him and replaced him with someone else.

"Let's eat and talk a bit. There is no price for a meal that we both deserve. Plus, it's Thanksgiving," he whispers into my ear while pulling out the chair for me. "I'm a monster, but even monsters have their own limits."

This is charming. *He is charming.* I look at the meal before me and consider my options. There is a cost for everything, and I'm certain this will come back to bite me later, but the smell of the food is almost intoxicating, and it's been way too long since I had anything close to a family meal like this.

The meal isn't set up in a romantic way, but it feels intimate, like a date. The thought is ridiculous since I mean nothing to Quinton outside of being his personal fuck toy.

Maybe that's why this feels weird, because the only times we ever talked are when we're verbally sparring with each other or when I'm on my back, and he's inside of me.

He hands me a plate, and I take it, waiting for him to load up his plate before I do.

"Ladies first." He gestures.

“This feels wrong. We never talk, and we definitely never eat dinner together,” I say while loading my plate up with an array of items from the buffet in front of me.

Even as apprehensive as I am, there is a sort of joy buried beneath it. A joy that Quinton sees me as his equal, that he cared enough to invite me to Thanksgiving, knowing I was going to be alone. His words may show one thing, but his actions show he doesn't hate me as much as either of us thought.

“We should change that.” He grabs a roll and takes a bite out of it, “Though, I have to admit when we first started our agreement, there were times I wanted you to shut up. Now I'd rather talk to you than anyone else, besides Scarlet or my mom.”

“Nice to know you don't see me as a blow-up doll you can fuck whenever you want.” I shove a fork full of turkey into my mouth and chew it slowly, watching his face for a reaction.

“Oh, I still see you as the girl I can fuck whenever I want, however I want, for as long as I want. The difference now is that part of me respects you. We won't ever be equals, not in this world, not with all your father has done, but that doesn't mean I have to hate you outright. It doesn't mean I can't be civil with you and enjoy what we share.”

My lips part, and my hand freezes with a fork full of food midway to my mouth. I'm shocked and happy and uncertain because I think that's the nicest thing he's ever said to me.

It takes me a moment to ask, but I do.

“What do we share?”

“Pain. Anger. Loneliness. We're more alike than you think.”

Silence grows between us, but in that silence, I know he's right. We're more alike than either of us let on.

The tension breaks when Quinton grabs a bottle of wine that's sitting to his right. The space is small enough that he can reach across the table and grab my glass. Without asking, he pours me a cup of wine and places the glass

back down on the table. I watch the bubbles pop for a moment, thinking about the last time he offered me wine.

My silence must be an unspoken question.

“If you’re worried this is a set-up, don’t be. I’m not going to hurt you. This isn’t a trap. I want you to enjoy dinner. No one should have to be alone on a holiday.”

I swallow the stupid emotions that are building at the back of my throat because of him. I don’t know why he’s being so kind to me lately, why he’s gone from tormenting me to treating me like a friend, but I don’t like it. Without an answer, there isn’t a point in dwelling on it, so I grab the glass and bring it to my lips.

I take a hesitant sip, the fruity tang of the liquid exploding on my tongue, and I gulp down a little more than I should. It’s refreshing and crisp. I almost want to ask him for more but place my glass back down and dig back into my food.

After a few bites, I choose to speak again. “There is no way you made all of this.”

Quinton spears a piece of turkey on his fork. “We both know if I tried to cook this, I’d burn the whole university to the ground.”

“Then who did?”

“Back home, we have a cook. She always makes Thanksgiving dinner for us. There is nothing better than her holiday dinners. I didn’t want to go home since I’ll be home for Christmas, but I also didn’t want to miss out on dinner, so yeah, that brings us to the present.”

“Your family must really love you if they had an entire Thanksgiving meal prepared and shipped here.”

Quinton lifts a brow. “Don’t act like you don’t know who my father is. Is it really that crazy to think he would have our chef make Thanksgiving dinner and have it delivered?”

I want to say yes, but I know it's not. Xander might be vicious, cunning, and a criminal, but the love he has for his children and wife shines through all those things. Even if I don't agree with the way I've been treated, I understand why he hates my father. I understand all of it, and I wish like hell my mother and father cared about me as much as Quinton's do.

"Well, thank you for inviting me." My cheeks heat even before I speak the words. "It's nice to not spend the entire day alone, and the food helps a lot."

Quinton grins, and then asks, "More wine?"

I nod, continuing to fill my belly, but at a much slower pace. A door opens behind me, and I freeze mid-bite. I'm not sure why, but I didn't think of Ren being here until this moment.

"Hey, you started eating without me, douchebag," Ren's voice carries across the space.

Quinton finishes filling the glass and hands it back to me just as Ren saunters up to the table. I tense, waiting for the snide comment or a dirty look, but none of those things happen. He pulls out a chair, grabs a plate, and starts piling food on.

"Fuck, they even set pumpkin pie." He beams, taking a slice and placing it beside his turkey.

"Yup, they sent everything we usually have. I was shocked, but you know my dad. Whenever he does anything, he does it over the top."

"I'm grateful we didn't have to eat Corium's version of Thanksgiving. I'd rather eat the cupcakes your sister made for me for my birthday a couple years ago than try what they were serving in the cafeteria today."

Quinton bursts into laughter, and the tension drains out of the room.

"Shit, those things were horrible. I couldn't even stomach eating a whole one. Scarlet worked so hard on them, and I remember your face as you ate the whole thing, acting like you loved it 'cause I told you if you made her cry, I'd punch you in the face."

"Yeah, I'm lucky I didn't get food poisoning." Ren shakes his head.

I peek up from my plate at him. He's attractive in the same way Quinton is, except unlike Quinton, who has this boyish charm, Ren doesn't have that. He seems more mature than he should be, his features sharp, his gaze penetrating like he can see right through you.

He catches me staring, and I dart my eyes back down to my plate. Strangely, I'm not intimidated by him, not like I would be under normal circumstances. It doesn't take me long to eat again, and I drink all the wine in my glass, letting the warmth of the alcohol spread through my limbs. Ren and Quinton talk for a bit, and I immerse myself in their conversation, feeling like we're friends instead of me being the enemy.

After a while, my head becomes heavy, and I know the wine is affecting me. I push from the table, my legs like jelly.

It's a bold move, but I stare at Quinton as I speak. "I think I'm going to go back to my room. Thank you for dinner. I really appreciate it. I can't imagine how bad today would've been if it wasn't for you."

Emotions I can't pinpoint flicker in his stormy blue eyes.

"Don't leave yet. Come to my room with me," he offers before I can take a step away from the table.

I should tell him no, but things feel different, and with the wine pumping through my veins, I don't have the strength to deny him.

Instead, I whisper, "Sure."

Then I wait for him to make the next move.

QUINTON

The wine has definitely loosened her up a bit. I can tell because no way would she have agreed to stay if she was sober. Ren gives me a strange look from across the table but keeps his mouth shut. I don't want or need his judgment.

I shove away from the table, leaving him to clean up the mess. Aspen and I walk to my room side by side. The last two weeks have shed a new light on my relationship with Aspen. I don't hate her, and in fact, I don't think I ever did, but I need her, and that terrifies me.

Needing her when I've needed no one is not something a man like me, who was born into the mafia, trained to kill, and will eventually overtake the Rossi empire, should feel. To need someone is a weakness I can't afford to show or have, and because of Aspen, I am weak.

I open the door, and we both step inside. I can feel the tension between us—it's thick and suffocating. We haven't done anything in two weeks, and I crave her like a man starving for oxygen.

I flick the light switch on and shut the door behind us. Aspen cranes her neck back and stares up at me. Her big hazel eyes appear glassy, and I'm reminded of how much wine she had.

I want to make sure she understands that even though I want to fuck her, I didn't intend to actually do so. Then again, maybe I did since I invited her back to my room.

“I didn’t invite you here tonight intending to get laid.”

“I’m sure you say the same to every girl.” Her mischievous grin is contagious, and when she reaches for the hem of her shirt, I know she’s decided.

She wants me in the same way I want her, and I’m not going to deny giving us both what we want. Not now, not ever. Reaching over my head, I grab the back of my T-shirt and pull it off, tossing it to the floor. We’re both shirtless except for the bra she’s wearing, which will be removed shortly. I move onto my pants, flicking the button on my jeans and pushing them down my thighs.

Aspen does the same, shoving her yoga pants down and breaking out into laughter when they get caught on her ankles and feet. Balancing from foot to foot, she falls back on my bed and tries kicking them off, but her efforts are short-lived, and I step in, grabbing her by the foot and tugging the material away.

With the material out of the way, she’s lying on the bed, partially naked, her body beneath mine. I have this strange urge to taste every inch of her, to memorize her body, to ingrain the way she tastes into my mind because I know someday we won’t be able to do this anymore. But while we can, I want to enjoy every fucking second.

Half sitting up, half lying back, she reaches behind and undoes her bra. The straps slip off her shoulders, and when she tugs them away, I’m graced with the sight of her perfect tits. Her hard nipples are a dusky pink, the tips hard like diamonds and ready to be sucked. There is no denying I am a tits man, and Aspen has an incredible rack.

Leaning down, I blow softly against the hardened peaks, listening to the heavy intake of breath from Aspen. I smile and flick my tongue against the peak again, enjoying the sharp intakes of breath she rewards me with. She’s so turned on, I bet by the time I make it to her pussy, she’ll have my sheets soaked.

Finally giving in to temptation, I suck one of her nipples into my mouth and swirl my tongue against it. I alternate between sucking and nipping at the tight bud, knowing that, like me, Aspen enjoys a little pain with her pleasure. She writhes beneath me, and one of her hands reaches out to spear through

my hair, her hand holding my head against her breast. I stare up at her, watching her face fill with bliss as I move to her other tit, giving it the same amount of attention. My cock is painfully hard and strains against my boxers, begging to be free.

I release her breast with a pop that reverberates through the room.

My gaze rakes down her body, and I lick my lips. So soft and perfect. There isn't a single blemish on her skin. It's creamy white, and she lies before me like a clean canvas. I want to dirty her up. I want to devour her in ways that shouldn't even cross my mind.

"Do your worst, Quinton," she whispers, just as my gaze reconnects with hers. Lust and need swim in her hazel eyes.

"You have no fucking clue what you're asking for," I say through my teeth, her words turning me on further, damn near to the point of pain.

With the flames of desire igniting, I reach for her. My hands splay across her hips, and I dip my fingers into the waistband of her panties. She lifts her hips, and I tug them down her legs, my eyes following the movement. It's been weeks, and I'm barely hanging on as it is.

No point in further tempting myself. I pull back and shove my boxers down my legs.

"Roll over, I want you on your hands and knees." The sound of my voice is hard.

Aspen doesn't argue, which is surprising. She does exactly as I ask, pressing her face to the mattress while pushing out her perfect ass. The creamy globes beg to be spanked and turned a soft pink, but that will have to wait. I need to fuck her tight cunt before I explode and blow my load all over her ass.

"Hold on to the sheets, and if you have to scream, do it into the mattress," I growl and grab her by the hips.

A squeak slips from her lips when the head of my cock presses against her entrance.

“Shit, go slow. It’s been a while,” she whispers, her voice so low I almost miss it.

I ease back a bit and replace the head of my cock with two fingers to test her wetness. The stiffness I noticed before leaves her body, and she pushes back against my fingers as I gently fuck her with them.

“Fuck yourself on my hand, get your pussy nice and wet for my cock.”

She pushes back on my hand, and my fingers move deeper inside of her. *Fuck*. I watch as the digits disappear into her tight channel. Seeking an impending orgasm, she moves faster, tiny moans escaping her lips, the sound going straight to my cock.

“Fuck,” she whispers harshly.

My gaze moves from her pussy, where she’s swallowing two of my fingers, up to her pert little asshole. The tight ring of muscles begs to be fucked, and I massage the area with my thumb.

“Yes, that’s right, you’re fucked. *Completely*. You won’t be leaving this bed until I’ve taken every fucking hole in your body.”

“Oh, god. I think I’m coming,” Aspen whimpers, her forehead pressed against the mattress.

I start to fuck her with my fingers then, scissoring them inside until I feel the distinct fluttering of her muscles telling me that she is about to come.

I know I’m an asshole, and Aspen lets me know it with a growl when I pull my fingers from her cunt, right as she’s about to come. I’m selfish and want to feel her fall apart on my cock, not my fingers.

Knowing she is more than wet and ready for my cock, I bring myself to her entrance and slide inside her with ease. A shiver skates down my spine when I reach the end of her channel and bottom out with my balls pressed against her ass. I hold myself there for a moment, relishing in the feel, with my fingers dug into her supple hips.

“I’m full, so full.” Aspen writhes, her hands fisting the sheets.

The things I'm going to do to her tonight. I'm going to fuck her tight little ass and claim it as my own, but first, she's going to come on my cock. After a moment, I move.

I fuck her with hard strokes. The head of my cock rubs purposefully against her g-spot, the sensitive tissue at the top of her channel. I don't just want her to come. I want her to explode, to burst into flames around me.

Her blonde hair hangs down her back like a waterfall of sunshine. I grab a fistful of it and use it as a rope, tugging her head back while I continue to fuck her at a punishing pace. She moans and claws at the mattress. It doesn't take much to get her right back to the cliff's edge I left her on when I was finger fucking her.

I release my hold on her hip and slap her ass. "Keep fucking yourself on my cock."

I tug on her hair, and she pushes back on my cock, fucking me with quick strokes, chasing her own release. My balls are full and ache, needing to spill myself inside of her, but I don't want her pussy full of my cum. Not today. I want her ass. I eye the puckered hole that has never been touched. She's either going to love it or hate it.

Building up some saliva in my mouth, I spit on the hole and bring my thumb to the forbidden land.

"Quinton?" She says my name like a question.

I smirk and gently prod at the hole, massaging the muscles while slowly working my thumb inside. "Do you trust me?"

"I do, but I'm scared." The tremor in her voice confirms her fear, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop.

"Make yourself come on my cock," I order and continue to fuck her ass with my thumb, swirling around the hole while watching as she brings herself to orgasm on my dick.

Her channel squeezes my cock so tightly I damn near see stars and feel cum leak from my dick. I release her hair and trail my hand down her back to soothe her. I add a second finger to her ass, and her entire body tenses. I

massage her cheeks and move in and out slowly.

I might be a cruel fucking asshole, but I will not go into her ass without preparation. I would rip her apart, knowing once my cock is inside this tight hole, there is no holding back.

Over her shoulder, she peers at me, a curtain of blonde hair shielding part of her face. “You can’t have my ass, Quinton. We talked about this.”

All I can do is smirk and watch the way the muscles in her ass give way to my assault, stretching around my fingers. Using my other hand, I move between her legs and find her swollen clit.

“We both know I’m taking your ass, fucking it, and coming inside of it tonight.”

I don’t know if she wants to say something or if she finds arguing with me futile, but she doesn’t put up any more of a fight. Tiny moans of pleasure slip from her lips while I rub her clit and fuck her ass with my fingers. After a bit, I add a third finger and some more saliva, making sure my fingers slip in with ease.

With the ring of muscles giving way to my fingers, I pull them from her ass and fist my cock in my hand. I reach for the drawer on my nightstand and pull out the bottle of lube I keep handy. I squirt some on my dick and onto Aspen’s ass.

“Jesus, that’s cold,” she complains.

“Don’t worry. I’ll warm you up,” I lean down and whisper into her ear while I stroke my cock, coating the entire thing with lube. With my appendage thoroughly coated and lube dripping down between her ass cheeks, I bring the head of my cock to her asshole.

Like a scared mouse, she tries to pull away, but I anticipate her move and grab her hips, holding her in place.

“Shhh, relax. Take a deep breath and let me in. This will work best if you don’t fight me.” I blanket her body with mine.

I push forward, and the tight ring of muscles gives to the head of my cock, letting it slip into her puckered hole.

“You’re too big,” Aspen whimpers as I move, sinking another inch into her ass.

“You can take it. You were made for me,” I grunt.

My entire body ignites, and even though I want to slam to the hilt inside of her I’m able to take my time working myself into her ass.

My fingers circle her slippery clit, and no matter how much she wants to deny it, she enjoys having me in her ass. I move deeper into her ass, eliciting another whimper from her lips.

“Fuck, it hurts.”

“Relax your muscles. Let me in. I can feel you fighting me. Don’t make this bad for yourself. Relax and let me fuck your ass. We both know I can make it good for you.”

Her body sinks into the mattress a little more, and she becomes putty in my hands. After a little more finesse, I’m seated all the way into her ass, and my cock leaks pre-cum inside of her. The tightness of her ass squeezes me so good; it almost hurts to move. But I didn’t make it this far not to fuck her.

“I told you I’d take your ass. Now, tell me how it feels.”

“Full. I feel full.”

“Good, you’re going to feel fuller when I blow my load into your ass.”

I start my assault on her clit again but don’t thrust into her ass until she starts moaning. The little sounds she’s making become too much for me to endure, and that’s when I snap. I pull almost all the way out and slam back in, my balls slapping against her pussy.

The ring of muscles tightens further as she tries to escape my hold, but I fuck her faster and harder, pressing her slim body deeper into the mattress while I take and take.

Her entire body trembles, and I rub her clit a little faster, whispering into the shell of her ear. “You want me to fill your ass with my cum, don’t you? You want it dripping out of your ass and down your thighs. It’s okay to say so. It’s okay to say you want the enemy to make you come.”

“Yes, yes,” she chants, and god, it’s fucking music to my ears. My vision blurs, and this profound pleasure encompasses me. I’m not sure how it happens, but together we fall off the cliff’s edge. Her entire body shudders against mine as I bottom out inside her and empty myself.

Sweat drips down my face and back, and I hold myself inside her ass before I slowly pull out, watching as my sticky cum drips down her ass and onto her pussy.

So messy and perfect. I already want to fuck her again. I know I shouldn’t. That we’ve already crossed a bridge we won’t come back from, but I can’t help myself.

I want more than just one fuck. I want an entire night.

“Spend the night with me,” I half plea, half order.

I’m not sure what she’s going to say, but I expect her to be the smarter one out of the two of us, but she surprises me when she yawns and nods her head yes.

Fuck, we’re ruining each other, and if we don’t stop, something bad will happen. Something that neither of us can come back from, and yet, all I can do is throw caution to the wind and slip back inside her to forget how wrong it is.

ASPEN

I'm not sure what time it is when I wake, but this delicious ache ripples through my muscles. I shift and stretch against the sheets, the movement causing my thighs to rub together.

I'm sore but in the best way. Memories of last night flicker through my head. The way he fucked me, first in my pussy and then after making me come so hard I saw stars, he slowly worked himself into my ass.

I was afraid he would just press against my ass and start fucking me like a savage, but he didn't. Don't get me wrong, he still fucked me, hard and fast, leaving bruises on my hips and thighs as a reminder, but there was something different in the way he took me.

Something slow, and dare I say, sweet. Like he didn't want to hurt me but instead wanted me to enjoy it.

Like we weren't enemies but something more.

I look to the bathroom door that's cracked open, and the sound of running water fills my ears. The sheets on his side of the bed are still warm, which tells me he just got up.

Slowly, I roll out of bed and tiptoe to the bathroom. As soon as I'm standing, I feel the effects of yesterday's romp deep in my bones. I smile, wishing the feeling could last forever.

Steam billows out of the bathroom like little puffs of smoke, and I enter the room, staying as quiet as a mouse. The moment my gaze lands on him standing beneath the hot spray of water, I can't look away.

His body is lean like a swimmer, but his shoulders are broad, and each muscle is well defined, and I itch to trace all the dips and planes of his body. I want to see what makes him tick if he would melt beneath my hands like I melt for him.

“Stop staring at me and get your ass in here,” he growls, startling me.

I've been caught watching him.

I can feel my cheeks heating already. It's so stupid to be embarrassed over something mundane like watching him shower when I let him wreck my insides hours ago.

Still, I walk up to the glass shower door and pull it open. I step inside, suddenly becoming envious of the size of his shower. I guess when your dad helps fund the place, you get a shower this big.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, his voice thick.

“Just that I'm envious of your shower. It's huge.”

He whirls around and grabs me by the hips, moving me beneath the water. The hot spray hits my back, and I let out a sigh.

“That's not the only thing that's huge.” He wiggles his dark brows at me, and I can't help but smile.

“Believe me, I know. I'm feeling it this morning.”

A look I've never seen before flashes across his face, but before I can pinpoint what it is, it's gone. His usual scowl replaces it a second later.

“How do you feel this morning?” He turns away from me to grab the soap.

I let the water cascade down my back before I tip my head back and start wetting my hair. “Sore, but not in a bad way.”

“Good. I was worried when you blacked out, but it turns out you were made for me.”

I know he doesn't mean that in the sense of me meaning anything to him but hearing him say that has my brain thinking otherwise.

I'm thankful he doesn't ask me anything else and instead squirts some soap on a loaf and starts washing me from head to toe. He takes his time, paying extra attention to my breasts and the valley between my legs.

Afterward, he lets me rinse, then grabs the shampoo, squirts some into his hand, and starts massaging my scalp. His touch is gentle, caring, and I won't lie. I'm affected by it. Every time he touches me, I'm reminded that beneath the hard exterior that he projects to everyone is a tender soul wanting to be unleashed.

He moves me back under the water and rinses the soap from my hair. Our gazes collide, and the air in my lungs becomes heavy. It hits me then with enough force to knock me off my feet.

I'm falling for him, or maybe I already have, and it's simply taken me this long to realize it.

The fear of what that means turns my blood to ice, and I take a sudden step back. I need space, air. I need to stop this before it becomes something that I can't control.

I turn and reach for the shower door. I'm vulnerable, all my protective layers are peeled back, and I don't like it.

"What's wrong?" Quinton asks, sensing the change in my demeanor.

I look him dead in the eyes because I know deep down even if he doesn't want to feel it or acknowledge it, we're moving into a territory that neither of us will come back from. One of us has to be strong enough to end it before it's too late.

"We shouldn't be doing this." I gesture to the space between us.

"Showering?" He laughs. "Normal people shower, Aspen."

I glare at him. "That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it. We both know it. There's no point in ignoring it. Whatever this is between us, it's growing like a cancer, and if we don't stop it..."

“What?” he asks, his voice low, so low I almost can’t hear it over the rush of water from the shower. “What will happen?”

“It’ll kill us both,” I say.

I walk out of the shower, water clinging to my hair and skin. The organ in my chest thuds loudly, but I don’t feel it. I can’t believe it took me until now to realize I’m falling in love with my enemy.

I’m falling in love with the villain in my story, and I don’t know if I’m strong enough to let him go. I dry off quickly and tug on the clothes I wore last night. I need to get out of here before Quinton walks out and tries to stop me. The water in the bathroom turns off, and I rush out of the bedroom. I catch a brief glimpse of Ren sitting at the breakfast nook. He doesn’t say anything as I head out the door, and I’m thankful for it.

I can’t keep doing this with Quinton.

He could never love me, and I could never love him.

We’re enemies, and it has to stay that way.

QUINTON

Aspen is back to avoiding me at all costs, and it's really pissing me off. Part of me knows she is right. We are getting too close, treading into dangerous waters. In my head, it makes sense to stay away, but the rest of me craves her too much... craves the control she gives me.

Sitting down at my desk, I grab my laptop and flip it open. I'm just about to pull up the video feed from Aspen's room when a Skype call pops up on the screen.

I click on the green answer button, and a second later, Scarlet's smiling face fills the screen. "Hi!"

"Hey, everything all right?"

"Yes, why? Can't I call you more than twice a week?"

"You can. I'm just surprised since we only talked yesterday."

"Well, I miss you, and I'm bored, and also I'm excited to see you soon!" Scarlet beams, making me hate what I'm about to say.

"About that... I'm not sure if I'm coming."

Her face falls. Her happy smile turns into a deep frown. "Why?" The sadness in her voice has my stomach in knots. This is exactly the reason I have been procrastinating about telling her.

"It's just a lot of traveling—"

“Don’t lie to me,” she snaps in anger, reminding me that even though she looks sweet, she is still a Rossi. “At least tell me the truth.”

The truth...

“You can’t tell anyone,” I warn.

Scarlet rolls her eyes at me. “Duh.”

“Aspen is staying here, and I don’t think she is safe without me being here.”

“I knew it! You love her!”

“What? No, it’s not like that.” I shake my head. “I owe her. We owe her. I’m just repaying her,” I half-lie.

I don’t love her, but it is more than simply owing her. I already repaid her when I brought her back to Corium.

“Sure, let’s call it that.” Her lips curl back into a smile.

“You’re not mad?”

“I’m disappointed I won’t see you, but I’m not mad. Especially now that I know the reason. I already told you; I want you to be happy, and I think Aspen makes you happy.”

“Happy is a strong word. She calms down the storm.”

“Well, that’s enough for me. Wait! Don’t think that not coming will get you out of buying me something pretty for Christmas. I still want my present.”

Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes at her. “I’ll send you a present. Maybe even two as an apology for not coming home. Or three, if you break it to Mom—”

“Oh, no, no, no. You call her and tell her you’re skipping out on the holidays yourself.”

“Four presents?”

She shakes her head but purses her lips like she is thinking about it. “How big of a present are we talking about here?”

I smirk. “The biggest?”

“Five, and you’ve got a deal, but I can’t promise she is not going to call you after.”

“Deal. You drive a hard bargain, little sister.”

“I learned from the best.” She winks. “I guess I’ll let you go so I can tell Mom the news.”

“Tell her I’ll send her something too, and you know... that I love her and stuff.”

“What a heartwarming message.” She gasps and wipes a fake tear away. “I’ll make sure I say it just like that.”

“Good, then she knows it really does come from me.”

“That’s true.” Scarlet laughs before blowing me a kiss. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Talk soon.”

We end the call, and I waste no time pulling up footage of Aspen’s room. She is lying on her stomach, her pillow propped up under her chest while she reads a book on the mattress in front of her. She is only wearing an oversized T-shirt, and the bottom of her panty-covered ass is showing. Her long legs are bare, looking as smooth as I know they feel. My cock twitches in my jeans, begging to get free and be stroked.

I lean back in my chair, reach for my zipper, and undo the button on my jeans. I shove them down and pull my cock out.

I’m hard as steel, the mushroom-shaped head of my cock is dark red, and I spit in my hand before I stroke it, keeping my eyes on the screen, watching Aspen, wishing I could rip that shirt off her, tug her panties off and shove them into her mouth before I fuck her ass until we’re both spent.

I let my eyes drift closed, the image of her no longer enough. My imagination takes over. A movie plays right before my eyes. Aspen is riding me, her perky tits bouncing as she fucks herself on my cock. Her features are flush, and her eyes burn into mine.

Pleasure pulses through my veins, and I dig my hands into her hips hard enough to leave bruises, and I want to leave them. I want to mark her, make certain every fucker at Corium knows she is mine.

As the image of her fucking herself on my cock plays out in my mind, I stroke myself faster and faster, my grip growing tighter. I imagine my hand is her cunt, squeezing me so tight and perfect, like only she can, taking my cum and thanking me after.

“Fuck,” I hiss through my teeth, the pleasure in my balls reaching a new high.

“Fuck me, Quinton. Take me harder. Come inside me.”

I can practically hear her saying the words, and it’s enough to make me explode. Like a teenage boy, cum spurts from my cock and onto my stomach. I let out a sigh, releasing my cock, and open my eyes. I reach for the tissue box on my nightstand and clean myself up.

It’s then that Aspen’s phone rings, drawing my attention back to the screen. The sound startles her. She pushes herself up quickly and reaches for her phone. As soon as she looks at the screen, her eyes go wide, and I wonder if her mother finally called.

My guess is proven wrong when Aspen answers the call and starts speaking. “Dad?”

“Hey, sweetie,” a man’s voice meets my ear.

“Dad, the school has been trying to reach you and Mom—”

“I know. I’m sorry, Aspen. They just told me what happened, and I haven’t heard from your mom either.” I can’t see him on the small phone screen, but I can hear him take a deep exaggerated breath. “I knew he would try to get to you. It’s not enough for him that I’m in here.”

“Who? They said the helicopter had technical issues.”

“Don’t be naïve, Aspen. Xander tried to kill you. I know it was him.”

I grind my teeth together, wanting to forget that my father had anything to do with this. Unfortunately, I know Aspen’s father is right. My father was the one who made Ren do it.

“You need to use what I told you against him. Tell Quinton that it was his father. That’s gonna rattle them.” I lean closer to the computer screen at the mention of my name. “Hell, maybe Quinton is gonna take out Xander himself for what he did. You’d be a whole lot safer then.”

“I can’t... I can’t tell, Quinton.”

What the hell are they talking about?

Their words run through my mind, but they don’t make sense. It’s like a puzzle with a few pieces missing.

“He is the one who saved me, you know? Quinton came for me when no one else did. How can I possibly tell him what his father did to his mom? It would break him.”

Everything stops. The world around me stills, my vision blurs, and all I can hear is the soft echo of Aspen’s voice... *what his father did to his mom.*

The last piece falls into place, completing the puzzle I’ve been trying to solve for months.

My father killed my birth mother.

The statement runs through my mind, but they are just words, a string of letters that make little sense right now. It can’t be true.

My father killed my birth mother.

I test out the words again, but I still can’t grasp their meaning. My lungs burn, and I realize I’ve been holding my breath. Sucking in a deep breath, the room suddenly spins, and bile rises in my throat.

My father killed my birth mother.

Slowly, like a dripping faucet filling up a sink, the gravity of what I just found out sets in. Because of him, I’ll never know my birth mother. Not only did he take her from me, but he also tried to cover it up and erase her, like she never existed at all.

Images of my father ripping me from a faceless woman’s arms fill my head. Did she cry, beg, and fight for me? Was I there while he did it, crying for

her? Did he make me watch?

Fucking Christ. I shut the laptop so forcefully I'm sure I crack the screen. A million questions, but not a single answer. I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the longer strands as hard as I can without pulling it from my scalp. The pain doesn't even register. I'm numb. Overwhelmed. So many emotions run rampant that I can't feel a single one.

How could he do this to me?

I don't understand how anyone could do this to their child, but I know that I have to ask him face to face. I need answers.

On autopilot, I get up from my desk and walk across my room. I grab my bag from the bottom of my closet and start stuffing essentials in it. I grab my jacket and slip into my boots on the way out of my room. With my bag slung over my shoulder, I head straight for the door, walking past Ren without even noticing him.

"Where the hell are you going?"

I stop and turn toward him just as he is getting up from the couch.

"I have to go back home," I explain. "I can't stay."

"What? Why?" Ren asks, perplexed. "What's wrong? Just let me grab my shit, and we're out of here."

"No! You need to stay."

"What the fuck?" Ren is getting more agitated by the second, heading toward me like a bull seeing red. "Tell me what the fuck is going on right now!"

"My father killed my birth mother," I blurt out, making him come to a sudden halt.

His anger turns into shock immediately. The astounded look in his eyes tells me he didn't know, which I just now realize is something else I have to worry about. Who all knows about this? Who knows what my father did but has been keeping his dark secret from me? Does Mom know? Uncle Damon?

"Are you sure?" Ren asks carefully.

“Yes,” I say confidently.

There is no fucking way Aspen is that great of an actress, not to mention it all makes sense. Why else would he keep it from me? Why else would he erase everything about her?

Of course, he killed her. It’s what my father does. If people don’t obey him, they pay.

“Why don’t you want me to come with you?”

“I want you to stay here and watch out for Aspen. You need to protect her from Matteo. He is going to try to get to her without me being here.”

For a moment, I think he is going to refuse. A weight is lifted off my chest when he sighs. “All right, I’ll make sure she is safe.”

“Thank you. I owe you.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

“I know you will.” I turn around and leave our apartment. Whatever Ren is going to call in, this favor is going to be worth it. I have to see my father, but I can’t leave Aspen unprotected, because no matter what she thinks, she can’t keep herself safe.

That’s my job now.

ASPEN

I've become a damn ninja at avoiding Quinton. In passing between classes and in the cafeteria, I can feel his eyes on me, watching every step and breath I take. It's only been a couple of days, but it feels like an eternity.

After I grab breakfast, which I force myself to eat, I walk to the locker rooms to change into my workout clothes.

I've been dreading this day since I walked out of his apartment. It's the only class we have together, and if he's going to make a move to talk to me, it's going to be here. I pull my long brown hair into a messy bun and walk into the arena.

My stomach is in knots over it all, and my muscles tense with every step I take. I'm expecting the worst but surprised when I survey the room of students standing around and don't find Quinton among them.

What the hell?

I'm hit with worry, worry that something has happened to him. That worry intensifies tenfold as I continue to look through the throng of students, but I don't see his familiar frame towering above everyone.

Quan's deep voice slices through the air. "All right, let's partner up. I want everyone to work on speed today. Go through everything from last week and make sure you do it faster this round."

I continue scouring the room for any sign of Quinton. Maybe he's running late? Or he's sick?

Vito steps in front of me, his hulking frame blocking my view. I'm tempted to push him out of the way but resist at the last second. I don't want to seem like I'm looking for someone. Of course, the mysterious Vito sees right through me.

"If you're looking for Q, he's not here."

I drag my gaze to his face. I'll be the first to admit that something about Vito has me curious. His dark gaze is penetrating, and it helps that he's attractive too.

"What do you mean, he's not here, and who said I was looking for anyone? I'm merely trying to find a partner," I half-lie. I'm actually trying to find *my partner*, but it appears he's not here.

Everyone else is moving, breaking up into teams, and I know I have to choose someone quick.

Vito's lips tip up at one side. "I'll be your partner," he announces.

Looking around one last time, I realize everyone else is partnered up. I guess it's him or no one.

"What? You don't like me anymore? I thought I was special to you." He places his hand on his chest and fakes a heartache. "First you kiss me and then discard me like I'm nothing to you?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"You mean use me to make Quinton jealous?"

"Yes. It was an impulse decision. I was angry and wasn't thinking straight. I am really sorry."

"I guess I can forgive you. It's not that it was bad for me. At least I got a kiss out of it."

He winks, and my cheeks heat. Damnit, I really regret kissing him.

We square off against each other, and even with all the moves Quinton taught me, it's not enough to keep me on my feet, not against this man anyway. My curiosity over where Quinton is gets the best of me, and after having the wind knocked out of me on the mat three times, I finally build up the courage to ask him. I look up at him from the floor. Pain prickles across my back. My chest heaves with every breath I take. I'm winded, and we haven't even done anything.

"What happened to Quinton?" When he doesn't answer right away, I continue, "You said he's not here. What did you mean?" I'm afraid of what the answer to my question will be. Turns out, avoiding him really did more harm than good this time around.

"You both act like you hate each other, but everyone with a pair of eyes can see right through it."

I grit my teeth. "Think what you want. I don't have to explain anything to you."

"I suppose not, but if you hate him so much, why do you care to know where he is?"

I shrug. "Because it's better to keep your enemies closer."

We face off again, and I let out a deep growl when Vito kicks his legs out, and I trip over them, tumbling backward onto my ass.

Like the gentlemen he is, Vito offers me his hand, but I bat it away. I don't want his help. A long moment passes, and the sounds of others battling around us filter into my ears.

I look up from the mat and straight at Vito, and something resembling guilt flickers in his brown eyes.

"If you must know where he is, he left this morning. Took an early winter break. I guess when your father is who he is, you can do whatever the hell you want?"

"He left?" I speak the words out loud unintentionally. Even saying them makes me flinch. He left. I won't lie. It hurts. The truth cuts me clean down the middle. *He left?* Without telling me.

Not that he owes me anything. I should be happy he's gone, that I no longer have to worry about him hunting me down to have a conversation neither of us is ready for. Instead, it feels like a piece of my soul has been ripped from my body. There's a gaping hole there, and I have nothing to fill it with.

Whiplash hits me full force when my sudden sadness becomes anger, but not at him, anger at myself. I should rejoice, but in a strange way, knowing he's gone now makes me miss him.

It's fucked up. I shouldn't miss the person who has a habit of making my life completely miserable, but I've grown used to his presence, his piercing gaze, and Jekyll and Hyde emotions. Now I'm lost, a life raft drifting at sea with no sense of direction.

"I get the sense you aren't happy about him leaving?"

I don't want to come off as a bitch, but I can't help but lash out. "Can we—I mean can you—not pretend like you care. No one cared about me before you came along, and no one will care when you finally realize that paying me a single lick of attention is bad for you. I'm the plague, a leper. Do yourself a favor and pretend I don't exist like everyone else."

Vito's features twist with irritation. "Like I told Rossi, I already know all there is to know about you, Aspen. Everyone knows who you are, and you'd have to be stupid or living under a rock to miss the mayhem your father has caused."

"Don't talk about my father," I hiss, my hand tightening into a fist.

I know better than to try and fight someone twice my size, but Vito is looking like a good punching bag right about now. Vito seems nice, but so does a dog before it rips off your hand.

"Why don't you take your own advice and do yourself a favor." He takes a step toward me. We are toe to toe. Leaning down, he stares me straight in the eyes. "Quinton might seem vicious, but there are worse animals roaming this kingdom."

I wrinkle my nose at him. I'm not sure if he is threatening me or warning me, and honestly, part of me doesn't want to know. With Quinton gone, any chance of protection from Matteo ceases to exist, so if Vito tried to hurt me, I

am screwed.

Yes, the deal was off before, but I knew he wouldn't let anyone hurt me. I was learning that while Quinton was a monster, it was only him that could bring me to my knees.

“Are you threatening me?”

“What would you do if I was?”

“I don't know,” I answer honestly, while biting the inside of my cheek.

A cheeky grin splits his face at my reply. “All I'm saying is watch your back.”

After that, I can't stop thinking about what he said and whether he was trying to warn me or threaten me. If he wanted to hurt me, he could, but he doesn't give me Matteo vibes. Vito is definitely the type to get revenge with violence, knives, and guns, but I doubt he is into abusing women or rape. He doesn't take me as that type, but I'm not the best judge of character.

My body aches by the time the class finishes, while Vito is just breaking a sweat. I already hate him.

After showering and changing back into my clothes, I head straight to the library. I am desperate to talk to someone, and Brittney is as close to a friend as I have. I walk, though it's more like a run, down to the library, only to be greeted with closed doors.

She never closes the library, no matter what. Something must have happened. *Oh god, what if Phoenix got to her?* I'm both worried and shocked by the sudden change.

I press my hand against the heavy wooden door, willing it to open. The library is my safe place, and Brittney is my friend. If I lose either of those things, I'm not sure I will survive.

The realization that I am completely alone finally hits me. No one will come to my rescue if something bad happened. I am more alone than I have ever been in my entire time here. Quinton is gone, and so is Brittney. The two people that kept me afloat are absent from my life, and I don't know what

I'm going to do.

I look down the long, empty corridor. I don't know what is going to happen next, but all I have is myself, and for right now, that will have to be enough.

QUINTON

I've been home for a few days now, spending every waking minute thinking about confronting my father, who is conveniently away on a business trip. Mom and Scarlet have been trying to get me to talk about why I came home early, but I refuse to tell them. I need to talk to him first. I don't want him to have time to think of an excuse.

Leaning back in his leather office chair, I stare blankly at the framed picture of Scarlet, Adela, and myself that's sitting on our father's mahogany desk. At Corium, it was easier to suppress the memories of her, the grief, and the never-ending anger. But back here, everything reminds me of my dead sister. My father's betrayal only amplifies my misery, and with Aspen being out of reach, I'm in a constant state of insanity.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back and let it rest in the cushy leather. I imagine being back at Corium, burying my face in Aspen's sunshine-colored hair, and not in my father's office surrounded by the scents of expensive whiskey, rich leather, and illegal cigars.

My imaginary bubble bursts when I catch the sound of heavy footfalls coming down the hallway. Blinking my eyes open, I sit up straight and watch the door open. My father enters his office, not the least bit surprised that I'm in here waiting for him. Of course, he knows I'm here, but hopefully, he doesn't know why yet.

"Quinton, I'm glad to see you home."

Not for long.

I don't greet him or make a move to get out of his chair. I simply watch in silence as he comes closer, shrugs off his suit jacket, and neatly hangs it over the chair in front of his desk.

As always, his movements are controlled, almost as if he rehearsed this in preparation. He turns away from me and heads toward the wet bar next to the oversized bay window overlooking my mom's rose garden.

"Fancy a drink?" he asks, looking over his shoulder.

I shake my head. Unscrewing the bottle, he pours himself a healthy amount of whiskey before setting the bottle down and bringing the glass to his lips. He downs the entire contents like a shot, and I briefly wonder if he expects what's coming.

"Go ahead, Quinton. Ask me what you came here to ask."

"I didn't come here for an answer. I already know the truth. I came here because I want to hear you say it."

"Why? It won't change anything."

"You owe it to me, that's why. Now tell me."

"Yes, I killed her." I already knew this, but somehow, hearing it from his mouth drives the knife deeper, a knife that's coated with the pain of betrayal that burns through me. "Are you happy now?"

"Happy might be an odd reaction for getting confirmation that my dad killed my mom." I try my best to keep my voice even, to hide the rage lingering right beneath my skin.

"Don't call Tia your mom. Ella is your mom. *Tia* never deserved that title." The way he says her name with such disdain only fuels my anger, and I basically spit the next words at him.

"What would you want me to call her? Birth giver, life creator, or genetic mother?"

“You call her nothing!” he yells, catching me off guard. Why is he so furious? I’m the one who has been wronged. “She was nothing to you.”

“Because you made sure of it! You did everything in your power to make her disappear.”

“I did that to protect you.”

“Protect me? From what? Someone who would love me? What did she do to piss you off? Not listen to every one of your fucking rules?”

“My rules are in place to protect you. Everything I fucking do is to protect you, and Tia didn’t love you.” Part of me expected him to say something like that, but still, I’m not prepared for the words. They hit me like a sucker punch to the kidneys, knocking the air right out of my lungs. “She didn’t love you, but that wasn’t your fault.” His voice softens at the last part, but it doesn’t make it sting any less.

“How would you know if she loved me? Did you even give her a chance, or did you take me from her right after she gave birth?”

“Quinton, knowing what happened will only hurt you more. Just let it go.”

“Tell me!” I pound my fists against the heavy wooden desk hard enough to make it quake.

My father sighs deeply before taking a few steps toward the desk and taking the seat across from me.

“She didn’t take care of you the way she was supposed to. She had a lot of issues, but her drug habit was her biggest one. You were born addicted to meth. I didn’t even know about you until the hospital called me, saying Tia listed me as the father. When I got to the hospital, she was already gone. She just left you there.”

“And, of course, you had to hunt her down and kill her.”

“That’s not what happened. Just shut up and listen for a minute. You had to stay in the hospital for a few more weeks because you were born a few weeks early and were withdrawing from the drugs in your system. I really didn’t know what I was doing at the time. A DNA test confirmed you were my son,

but I didn't want to be a father."

I'm a little taken aback by that addition. My father has many flaws, but he has never given me the impression that he didn't want me, or my sisters.

"Why?"

"I didn't know if I could. I didn't have the greatest example to work with, and my life was dangerous. A child didn't quite fit into that."

"So, what changed?"

"Tia took you from the hospital a few days before you were supposed to be released. At first, I was relieved. I thought it would be better if you grew up with her and away from me, but a few days later, Tia sent me a message..." My father trails off. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Tell me," I demand.

"She told me to send her ten thousand dollars if I ever wanted to see you again."

"You're lying."

"I'm not, Quinton. She tried to use you to get money out of me."

"Maybe she simply wanted a new start?"

"I thought about that as well. I was actually okay giving her money. Matter of fact, I thought about sending her money every month, making sure you were taking care of, but when I met her to talk to her, she was clearly high, and you weren't with her."

"Where was I?"

"I told her I would give her another ten grand if she brought me to you. She promised you were being taken care of, but I insisted. Tia finally brought me to a motel she was staying at. I heard you crying from across the parking lot, and when we got to the room, I knew I could never leave you with her again. She left you alone in that room, lying on the filthy stained carpet. You were only wearing a soiled diaper; your whole back was bright red with an angry rash. You cried like you were in pain."

“Maybe she just didn’t know how to take care of a baby.” I try to make excuses for a mother I never knew because none of what he is telling me matches the image I had made up in my mind.

“She didn’t know how to take care of anyone, including herself. When I picked you up and walked out of there, all she was worried about was the money. She yelled at me to give her the money I had promised her, but not once did she ask me to leave you with her.”

Slowly, his words sink in, and the picture I had made up becomes muddier. Could it really have been that bad? Or is he lying so I will forgive him easier?

“Like you said, she had issues. You could have helped her instead of killing her. She was still my mother.”

“At that time, my father was still alive and actively trying to kill me. Damon and I hadn’t talked in a long time. I was alone and bitter. I had no one, and then you came along. This little helpless human who was a part of me, who needed not only to be protected but also something I wasn’t sure I could ever give again... love.”

“That still doesn’t explain why Tia is dead.”

“I took you home and had the doctor come and look at you. You were in bad shape, Q. Malnourished, dehydrated, and the rash was so bad it got infected. You almost died, and while you were fighting for your life because of her neglect, Tia kept trying to reach me, sending me threatening messages. But it was always about the money; not once did she ask how you were or if she could see you. I ignored her until I couldn’t any longer. She somehow got onto the property and into the house... that’s when I killed her.”

For a moment, silence blankets the room as I process everything he just told me. I don’t know what to feel. Anger, sadness, and guilt? Logically, I know none of this is my fault, but if I was never born, she might have still been alive.

“Don’t grieve for her, Q. She doesn’t deserve it. She was never your mom—Ella is. Ella loved you like a mother should from the first time she held you. I saw it in her eyes then, the fierce determination to protect you at all costs. Ella never looked at you any other way. She always knew you were supposed

to be her son.”

“This has nothing to do with mom, I know she loves me, and I don’t love her any differently now that I know she didn’t give birth to me. I’m angry because you lied to me, you hid this from me, even went out of your way to make it disappear. I don’t know if I can trust you again, and I don’t know if I can ever forgive you for it.”

I push myself up to stand. My limbs feel heavier than before, as if all this new knowledge is wearing me down physically. I imagined punching my father, fighting him, maybe even winning because I was so angry. Now, I simply feel drained and beyond exhausted.

“I hope you can,” my dad says quietly as I leave the room.

I walk back to my room in a daze and flop onto my bed. Closing my eyes, I try to make sense of everything I learned, but nothing fits into what I knew before. It’s as if my whole life needs to be rewritten.

The problem is, I don’t know what the new storyline will look like.

ASPEN

Corium becomes a haunted house when there aren't any students roaming the halls. I won't lie, the silence is eerie but also comforting. Almost everyone left yesterday, leaving behind those that weren't wanted by their families back home during the holidays. I can't imagine there are many of us here. Even criminals celebrate the holidays *together*.

That word leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I'm angry that my mother refused to let me come home. She hasn't seen me in months and rarely calls to check in on me. It really wasn't a surprise that she didn't want me there, but it didn't lessen the sting.

There's a knock at the door, and I startle, my eyes darting to it. Quinton's gone, and I'm pretty sure Brittney is hiding somewhere. With that knowledge, I stare at the door and wait for the person on the other side to go away. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen.

The knocking continues, and a moment later, Brittney's voice filters through the door. "Open up, Aspen! I know you're in there."

A smile appears on my lips, and I toss the covers back and rush from the bed, damn near tripping over my own feet. I pull the door open and wrap both arms around her, holding her tight to my chest. I squeeze her tight, thankful that she didn't have to leave or go into hiding.

"I was worried sick about you," I say, releasing her before taking a step back.

She frowns. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I needed Phoenix to think I left Corium.”

I should’ve known it had something to do with that terrible ex of hers. My eyes drift down to her hand, where I see a plastic bag dangling between her fingers.

“Lunch?”

Her gaze follows mine. “Yes, I figured I could explain everything, and we could eat lunch together.”

I usher her in and close the door, sealing us inside the room. She pulls two plastic containers from the bag, passing one to me, as well as a fork. I grab a couple of bottled waters that I keep in the mini-fridge and hand her one. She thanks me, and then we sit side by side on the bed. The smell of Chinese food wafts into my nostrils, and my mouth salivates.

I should wait for her to start eating, but my stomach growls loudly, giving away my hunger. Everything from the cafeteria is prepackaged since nearly all the staff went home for break. I have had nothing that wasn’t in plastic wrap for over two days.

We open our containers at the same time and burst into laughter. I let out a groan after I shove the first forkful into my mouth. It’s been forever since I had chicken fried rice.

“This is so good.” I groan, shoving another forkful into my mouth.

Brittney nods as she does the same. “I love cooking. It’s the one thing I hate about being here. I only have a small studio kitchen, and I have to put in a list for groceries a few weeks in advance since we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s a good thing I don’t live with you. I don’t think I’d ever starve.”

“No, you would not. I don’t know how to cook for one person. I’m always making enough to feed an entire army.”

She isn’t lying. More often than not, she gives me leftovers, and they’re just as good as they were fresh, I’m sure of it.

Once my belly is mostly full and no longer growling, I slow and start shoving the remaining rice around on my plate. Sadness rams into me like a ton of bricks, and I frown, staring down at my plate.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing... I’m just... tired.”

Of being alone, of being here.

There are so many things that I could finish that sentence with, but I press my lips together instead of confessing them out loud. I love Brittney, but I don’t want to be the friend that bogs her down with my problems.

“Is it Quinton?” she implores.

The mere mention of his name makes me shiver. It was pure luck that I escaped running into him before he left. Now I kind of regret it since my stupid heart misses him and all his violent tendencies.

“No, it’s not him.”

“You can tell me if it is. I won’t judge you.”

I give her a half-smile. “I know you won’t, but really, it’s not him.” I pause before deciding to continue. “It’s lots of things, but mainly, it’s being here alone during the holidays. Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve loved the holidays. Putting up the tree, making cookies, and spending time with loved ones. It was such a joy. Now...” I gesture to the room. “I’m here while my mother is God knows where and my father is in prison.” I’m being such a downer. “I’m sorry. I sound pathetic, don’t I?”

Brittney smiles. “No, not at all. I think it’s normal to feel what you’re feeling, but I don’t want you to think you’re alone here.”

“How could I ever be alone when I have such an amazing friend like you?”

“See, we have each other. I’m here, and we’re stuck together. Two frozen peas in a pod.”

“Frozen is right.”

Brittney glances at her watch. “Ugh, I hate cutting this short, but I need to get back to the library. Lucas has been on my case about encouraging students to come to the library, so I’ve been putting more effort into hanging flyers and creating study groups for students.”

“I can come help if you want.”

She shakes her head. “No, enjoy your break. Relax. I will come and hang out soon.”

Brittney leaves, and suddenly, I feel colder. Like I’ll never warm up. I grab a sweater and pull it on, shivering.

If only this place had more windows. I’m reminded of the sunroom then and shove off my bed, walking to the door. I shouldn’t have a problem with the space being crowded, not with everyone gone. I take the elevator up to the sunroom.

As soon as I step into the space, I’m engulfed with warmth. It’s like being hugged by your grandma or mom. I walk toward a sitting bench and spot Anja sitting on a nearby bench.

Neither of us says anything as our gazes collide. *Awkward*. I sit on the bench and ignore the nagging thoughts at the back of my mind. The more I wonder why my mom ignores me and refuses to acknowledge my existence, the angrier I’m going to get, and there’s nothing I can do here to expel that anger.

A few minutes pass, and just as I’m getting comfortable with the silence around us, Anja clears her throat and gets up from the bench. I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She walks toward me, her boot-covered feet slapping against the concrete.

Stopping in front of me, I can feel her eyes on me. I swallow, my saliva thick. I pretend like she’s not standing there and continue staring straight ahead, enjoying the warmth of the sun.

Her voice slices through me. “I guess this is how you always feel, right?” I don’t reply right away, and she takes my silence for conversation and takes the empty seat beside me. *Great*.

“What do you mean?” I finally say.

“Alone?”

I shrug. “I was alone before I showed up here.”

Anja stares out into the nothingness. It doesn't matter that she's being friendly and striking up a conversation with me. I don't trust her, not at all. Still, part of me feels bad for her, the same part of me that wishes I was home with my parents.

I finally give in and ask the question weighing on my mind.

“Why didn't you go home?”

She turns to look at me, her gaze darkened with anger. “My mother didn't want me to come home. She told me to stay here and that she didn't want to see me.”

I frown, feeling the venom in her words. She's angry, and I don't blame her. For once, I can't believe that we actually have something in common.

“I know the feeling,” I murmur.

Another minute passes, and I decide to head back to my room. I push off the bench and walk toward the elevator.

My fingers graze the button for the elevator when Anja asks, “Does it get easier? The loneliness. Does it become easier to deal with, or will it always feel like someone has punched a hole in my chest?”

Her words mirror mine, but I don't think she really knows how I feel. How badly I've been tormented by her and her friends.

By Quinton and his friends. They've made my life a complete nightmare in every single way. Yet, there is a strength behind still standing here, standing against all the bad, even when the need to break was profound. A reply sits on the edge of my tongue, but I don't speak the words I want to say. The door to the elevator opens, and I step inside, turning to face her. Our gazes collide, and I don't really see her, I see through her. Anja might, for the first time in her life, be feeling a sliver of the pain I've endured, but we're not the same.

QUINTON

Christmas Day. The entire house is decorated and smells of sugar cookies and gingerbread spice, and the lights twinkle across the Christmas tree in the same tempo the music plays softly in the background. All of this used to excite me and make me feel fuzzy and warm inside. Today, there is emptiness, a hollow feeling in my chest, where the memory of my sister lingers.

I look down at the bracelet in my palm, the diamond in the heart-shaped pendant glittering even more than the Christmas lights surrounding me. Adela loved this piece of jewelry, and knowing she gave it to Aspen leaves me with an odd sense of satisfaction. Almost as if my sister approved of Aspen from the afterlife. At least I got my sisters on board. The rest of the family will be a whole different issue.

“Ivan, Violet, Damon, and Keira just got here.” Scarlet’s soft voice drags me out of my head.

I close my fingers around the bracelet in my hand and stuff it in my pocket before I spin around to face my sister. “It’s about time, I’m starving.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible after the mountain of cookies you ate earlier.”

“Cookies don’t feed these muscles. I need protein to keep this gun show going,” I say, pointing at my arms.

Scarlet rolls her eyes at me. “You are so full of yourself.”

“Funny, people keep telling me so. Maybe there is some truth to it then?”

“Definitely.” Scarlet giggles, and I enjoy the moment of lightness with her.

We walk into the dining room together, where our parents, uncle Damon, and the rest of our extended family are gathered around the table.

“There they are.” Mom smiles, but it’s half-hearted. She tries her best to pretend to be happy today, but we all know how hard this is for her.

Our entire lives, she counted our firsts. First steps taken, the first day of school, our first love, and our first heartbreak. Since Adela’s death, we count a new, much more dreadful set of firsts, and this will be the first Christmas without her.

Scarlet and I join our family at the table, where I take my seat next to our father. Damon is on the other end of the table, with Aunt Keira by his side.

My mom’s sister, Violet, is sitting next to her with her daughter, Tessa, between her and her dad, Ivan. Roman, Ivan’s brother, and his family, including Ren, are here as well. He came home when Christmas break officially started, and Matteo left Corium for the holidays.

Scarlet and Tessa are about the same age but don’t see each other much since Ivan doesn’t want her involved in our business. After an incident when Tessa was six, Ivan took her and Violet and moved away, leaving the life of crime behind them for good.

I know it was hard on Mom not seeing her sister as often as she’d liked, especially when Adela died, but I don’t blame Ivan for leaving.

Out of our entire family, my cousin is definitely the most sheltered. As a matter of fact, she thinks my father runs an international freight company, and Uncle Damon, as well as Roman, are part owners. At least some of that is technically true.

“Hi, Quinton, how is school? Learning anything yet?” Damon greets.

“A few useful things, but mostly stuff I already know.” I shrug.

“I looked up Corium University. It looks beautiful online. Maybe I can see it in person one day,” Tessa asks hopefully.

Of course, the Corium website is a complete fake, a front so students have something to show to keep appearances up for instances just like this.

“It looks nice, but it’s fucking cold up there.”

“Quinton, no cussing,” my father warns, and I almost laugh.

“Sorry,” I mumble before I continue talking. “Seriously, though, they make it look much nicer in the pictures than it is. You’re not missing anything.”

“I must be missing something if you, Ren, and Scarlet get to go there. I’m sure Luna will too. Basically, I’m the only one not going.”

“You’re not missing anything,” Ren chimes in.

“Really, I’ve been there once, and it’s not that great,” Luna agrees.

“And I don’t even know if I’ll go there.” Scarlet shrugs. “Where are you planning to go? Maybe I’ll join you.”

“Well, it depends on where I get in. Of course, I’d love to go to MIT and get an engineering degree, but I’m not sure if I’ll make it.”

“Are you kidding? They’ll be crazy not to have you.” My sister beams.

Of course, Tessa will get into MIT. Not only is she ridiculously smart, but we also have the money and contacts to get her into any college she wants.

The rest of the dinner goes over rather smoothly. We mostly talk about generic stuff like sports and movies, never straying too far from the fluffy things with Tessa around.

After dinner, our dads go to smoke a cigar on the balcony while our moms set up the living room for us to exchange presents. As soon as our parents leave, Tessa slides her dessert plate away and throws her napkin on top like she is about to storm out of the room. Instead, she scowls at us.

“Why is everyone lying to me about Corium? I’m not stupid. Corium University does not exist.”

Well, shit. I didn’t expect that. I guess I should have, since I wasn’t exaggerating about her being ridiculously smart.

“What makes you say that?” I ask carefully.

“The website has an image of a different university with the Corium name photoshopped on it. None of the staff has social media profiles, and there is no forum or groups either. Why are you going to a made-up university?”

“We’re not—” Ren and I answer at the same time.

“Why are you lying?” Tessa glares at us.

“They are not going to school at all,” Scarlet chimes in. “Quinton, Ren, and I don’t want to study, but you know how our parents are. They would never be okay with either one of us not going to get a degree, so we made up this school.”

I’m equally impressed and worried about how smoothly Scarlet delivers this intricate lie.

Playing right along, I add, “We use the money they think is going to tuition to build our own business. By the time they catch on, we will hopefully be large enough to show them we can do it on our own.”

“Wow... Jesus.” Tessa stares at us wide-eyed.

“Please don’t tell them. They haven’t suspected anything so far,” Scarlet pleads. “We don’t want them to find out until the business takes off.”

“Okay.” Tessa nods, pulling her lip between her teeth. “What kind of business are you—”

“Guys,” my mom interrupts just in the nick of time. “We’re ready for you to open your presents.”

“Coming!” Scarlet jumps up and speed walks away.

I give Tessa a hopeful smile, and she returns it with a slight nod. Hopefully, that means she’ll drop the subject because I honestly don’t know what else to tell her... sorry, Tess, your entire life has been a lie, and you are part of one of the largest crime families in the US.

Yeah, I’m sure that would go over well.



I EXCUSED myself and went back to my room the first chance I got. If it wasn't for Scarlet and Mom, I would have probably skipped out on today altogether.

Sitting down at my desk, I flip my laptop open and pull up the camera feed from Aspen's room. The light is turned off, but the night vision camera is able to give me a clear black-and-white image.

Aspen is curled up in her bed, wrapped up in her blanket tightly. Her lips are slightly parted, and her face is relaxed, giving her a child-like appearance. I smirk. Aspen is anything but a child.

A knock at my door has me shutting my laptop quickly.

"Come in," I call, expecting one of my parents to check on me after I left abruptly. Instead, Uncle Damon steps into my room. "Oh, hey. What's up?"

"Just wanted to talk to you about something," he announces ominously, and I'm almost certain Tessa must have told him about our chat earlier, but then he steers the conversation somewhere different. "I know your father can be difficult. He has many flaws, but he loves you."

"He also has an odd way of showing it."

"I know, but he shows you in his own way."

"He killed my mother."

"She was not a good person."

"That doesn't make it right."

"A lot of things in our world are not right." Damon sighs and shakes his head. "I'm not defending what he did. I'm trying to explain why Xander does the things he does."

"I don't think anyone knows why."

"Understand that he didn't grow up like you did. Our father started training us very young, treating us like adults and keeping us away from our mother

before he then killed her.”

I knew about my grandfather being a tyrant, but I didn’t know about him killing my grandmother. “So, I guess history repeated itself.”

“That’s exactly what I thought when I found out. I thought Xander had turned into our father, but then I saw the way he looked at you. I seriously thought it was a joke at first. My brother holding a baby was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen. The more I watched him with you, the more I realized this was anything but a joke. He looked at you with a kind of love in his eyes you can’t fake, and he did whatever he could to protect you.”

Part of me knows he loves me, but it doesn’t lessen the hurt. “This doesn’t change anything for me. I still don’t know if I can forgive him. He lied, kept stuff from me.”

“I know. Just try to understand, even though your father doesn’t show it, he is hurting too. All of this is weighing on him, and he is still grieving your sister.”

“So am I!” I yell at him at the mention of Adela.

He lifts his hands, palms up, and takes a step back as if backing away from a wild animal. “I understand, you are both hurting, but pushing each other away is only going to make things worse.”

“Thanks for the Ted talk,” I dismiss my uncle.

He gives me a stern look, but thankfully, takes the hint and turns away from me to leave. “Merry Christmas,” he says gruffly before shutting the door behind him.

Fuck me. This is even worse than I’d imagined. I figured the holidays would be a shitshow, but this has reached new heights. The surrounding air suddenly becomes stale, and I feel like I’m not able to suck enough oxygen in. My chest heaves. I need some fresh air or a fucking drink.

Grabbing my jacket, wallet, and keys, I exit my room and speed walk downstairs. Not wanting to run into my parents, I walk through the kitchen and head for the back entrance. The staff is still busy cleaning up when I enter, but besides a curious glance, no one questions me about being here.

Without a word, I cross the space and open the back door. Cool December air whooshes over me, simmering the rage down for a split second.

“Where are you going?” Scarlet’s voice meets my ear.

Looking over my shoulder, I find her only a few feet away, and I wonder how long she has been following me, and why the hell I didn’t notice it.

“Go to bed. I’m just going for a drive.”

“I wanna come with you.”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Yes.”

“No!”

“Yes!” She glares at me and stomps her foot like a perpetual child. “Take me with you, or I’m telling Mom you left.”

“Sometimes, I wish you were a boy, so I could at least punch you in the face.” I grin.

“Please, Q. I never get to go anywhere, and I don’t see you a lot. We’re just going for a drive. No one will know.”

I look over her shoulder at the kitchen staff, who are about to leave. They are still not paying us any attention, and I don’t think they’ll say anything.

“Fine, let’s go.”

ASPEN

I'm startled awake by the shrieking of an alarm. I roll over and slap a hand against the nightstand, searching for my phone. The alarm gets louder, and I peel my eyes open slowly. My body is still heavy with sleep, and I take a bit to realize my phone alarm isn't going off.

A loud booming mechanical voice fills my bedroom. ***“EVACUATE THE PREMISES!”***

The sleep drains from my body and mixes with confusion. *What the hell is going on?* I climb out of bed, tossing the covers back. I reach for a pair of pants and tug them up my legs. Then I grab a shirt and sweater sans bra before shoving my feet into a pair of sneakers. I look like a mess.

The computerized voice continues blaring right along with the alarm, and I pocket my phone and rush out of the room. There is only one exit, so I head toward the elevators. In the hall, the sound of the alarm is louder, making my ears ring.

By the time I reach the elevator, I'm panicked. My heart gallops in my chest, beating like a drum. I still don't know what the hell is going on, but I'm thankful to see I'm not the only confused person when Anja comes jogging up to me.

She looks just as out of sorts as I am. I press the button for the elevator, hoping it's still working, and that whatever has caused this evacuation is a false alarm.

“What’s going on?” Anja yells over the deafening sound of the alarm.

“I have no idea. I was sleeping, and the alarm woke me up,” I yell back, and though we’re standing a few feet apart, it’d be impossible to hear one another without yelling.

As we stand there, it becomes obvious that the elevator is out of commission. Anja looks at me, fear swimming in her eyes. She’s afraid, and I understand that fear. It makes me want to make sure we both get out of here safe and sound.

“The elevator isn’t working. We need to take the stairs,” I yell and point toward the door a few feet away.

Anja crosses her arms over her chest, wrapping them around herself, and follows behind me. I walk over to the door, grab the handle, and give it a push. That’s where it ends, because nothing happens. My brows pinch together with confusion, and I try again, unsure why the door would be locked or unable to open. Again, the door doesn’t even budge.

I’m the one panicking now, and my stomach churns when I peer at Anja over my shoulder. Her eyes are glued on me, and I know as soon as I tell her the door is locked or blocked, she’s going to freak out. I can see it happening before it does, and it will not make the situation better.

I approach her like a battered animal. “Listen, Anja, I need you to stay calm.”

Of course, that’s the last thing she does. “What do you mean, stay calm? What’s going on?” She shoves past me, her shoulder hitting mine as she reaches for the door handle. “Just open the damn door, Aspen!” Turning the handle, she pushes on the door the same way I did a moment ago, her result ending the same way mine did.

Taking a slow step back, her skin turns white as a sheet.

“Look, everything is going to be okay.”

“We’re going to die down here. The elevator isn’t working, and someone locked the door to the only way out. They’re trying to kill us. We’re going to die. God, we’re going to die.” Her voice cracks at the end, and I realize this is the first time I’ve ever seen Anja genuinely worried.

I shake my head, ready to deny her accusation, but I can't. Someone definitely set this up, but if it was to kill us or not, I can't tell.

"We aren't going to die. Let's just stay calm." I force myself to take a couple calming breaths. "People know we're down here. There are still students at Corium. They won't let anything happen to us."

I tell her these things as a need to pacify her and keep her from freaking out more. I don't know if Lucas or any of the other staff here really care enough about us to come to our rescue, but I hope they do. I really hope they're better than that, at least at this moment.

"You don't know that. You don't know anything! Everyone at this school hates you. They would do anything to get rid of you, even if that means bringing me down right along with you." The words come out in a rush, and I clench my jaw, biting back my response.

She's just scared, that's all.

"The rules say no one can die here. They won't kill us. It's not worth the paperwork or headache." We both know I'm lying. I don't believe that statement at all, but I'm not going to tell her that.

She lets out a bitter laugh, and her lips part, a response on her tongue. Before she lashes me with her words again, there is a loud banging on the other side of the door.

It's so loud, I can hear it over the annoying boom of the alarm. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* I jump back with each bang. It sounds like a stampede of elephants is trying to break down the door.

"Back up!" I yell to Anja, who takes a defiant step back.

A gasp slips from my lips when the door explodes off the hinges and comes flying into the corridor. Jesus Christ, what the hell? My eyes bulge out of my head when I find Lucas standing there, in a T-shirt and sweatpants, his features twisted into a scowl.

"Let's go. We need to evacuate the building and get everyone outside!" Lucas orders, his tone venomous.

“What’s going on? What happened?” Anja interjects and starts following Lucas up the steps.

I follow close behind, also curious as to what happened.

“Gas leak. We don’t know who did it, but someone set us up. They’ll pay, but in the meantime, we need to get everyone to the surface.”

Lucas is practically running up the stairs. I’m not sure how old he is, but I never considered him to be the type that kicks in doors and runs up and down stairs. With Lucas’s help, we make it to the surface, and I let out a long, ragged breath, leaning forward with my hands on my knees as I suck the cold Alaskan air into my lungs.

Once I’ve caught my breath, I look up and see that there’s already a small group of students and teachers near the helipad. I easily spot Brittney with her blue hair in the congregation of people. My slipper-covered feet crunch over the icy concrete, and as soon as Brittney spots me, she covers the distance between us and wraps her arms around me, enveloping me in a hug.

“Thank god. Are you okay? I was so worried about you.”

“I’m okay. Are you okay?” I ask, just as she pulls away.

“I’m all right, just a little shaken up is all.”

“Same.” I pause, looking around. “What’s going on? What are we waiting for?”

I never thought about what we would do when we reached the surface. I had assumed we’d go outside for a bit and then return inside, but I get the feeling we aren’t doing that.

“Lucas called for two helicopters. We’re leaving Corium until they figure out what happened.”

The sound of blades slicing through the air fills my ears. *Leaving Corium?* Oh, god. The thought has my stomach twisting in knots. Last time I tried, I was almost killed.

Everyone moves out of the way as the helicopter comes into sight and prepares to land on the helipad. Everyone rushes toward the helicopter, but I

stick behind, staying close to Lucas, who hasn't moved yet. I watch as Brittney, Anja, and a few other students climb into the helicopter. Brittney frowns and calls my name, but I shake my head.

I know there'll be another helicopter, and I'll get on that one. I think the worst part is I have to hype myself up enough to get on it.

Since the last time I was in an object moving through the sky, it crashed in the forest. The helicopter takes off, zipping through the sky until it's completely out of viewing distance.

I look around to see who's left. It's just me, Lucas, Doctor Rose, and Professor Brush.

"The second helicopter should be here soon," Lucas announces.

As we wait for our ride out of here, the air grows tense between all of us. I can feel Professor Brush's eyes on me, and I don't like it. He's staring at me with so much disgust, it's almost suffocating.

"You know, Lucas, I bet this happened because of her," Brush accuses, pointing a finger at me.

I don't dare say anything, not that it would matter. Everything I say ends up getting used against me.

"I don't know what happened or who did it, but I'll find out, and when I do, the person will beg for death to take them from me."

"No need to figure it out. We already know who the culprit is," he accuses once more, and my anger reaches its boiling point, and still, I keep my mouth shut.

"Actually, we don't," Lucas growls, frustration in his voice.

"Let's just leave her here. No one has to know, and we can just say she died from the gas leak."

"There's no need to talk like I'm not standing right here. I can hear every word you're saying." My voice trembles and my eyes dart to Lucas.

For a brief moment, I wonder if he would do that. Leave me here to fend for myself. He hasn't always liked me, and at times, I think he might have thought it would be better to get rid of me, but he shocks me when he takes a threatening step toward Professor Brush, causing him to take a trembling step back or stand toe to toe with him.

“Say one more thing about her, and you'll be staying here.”

The finality of his words makes me feel like I've won some strange victory, but I know I haven't. I've merely escaped the mousetrap.

Now I have to make it through protecting myself until I can return to Corium, and to think I thought the x on my back when I arrived here was huge. Now I'm facing a whole new warfare, and I don't know how I'm going to protect myself without Quinton or the brick walls of Corium.

QUINTON

I stare at the blank screen of my phone. The words CAMERA OFFLINE, the only thing staring back at me. Fuck. She must have found them.

“It’s green, you know.” Scarlet giggles from the passenger seat. “Who are you texting?” She tries to grab my phone from my hand, but I’m faster, stuffing the device back into my pocket as I push down on the gas.

“I wasn’t texting. Just checking on something.”

“Apparently, nothing good because your mood just went from bad to worse.”

“You’re not wrong.” The thought of not being able to spy on Aspen while I’m here has me irritated and disappointed. “I need a drink. Ever been to a bar?”

“Sure. Dad sometimes drops me off at a sleazy biker bar downtown and picks me up the next day,” Scarlet jokes.

“Well, this one won’t be as sleazy as you’re used to then, but they serve booze, so it’ll do.”

I pull the car into the parking lot of my favorite bar. Yes, I’m nineteen, and technically, not legal to drink, but when your dad is the head of the mob, people don’t check your ID.

“Are you sure about this? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“We’re just having a drink. No one will mess with us here. They know who we are.”

“Okay.” Scarlet nods, but the tone of her voice tells me she is still not sure about this.

“It will be fine,” I promise. “You know I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

My words must ease her mind because her lips turn into a grin, and she reaches for the door handle.

“All right, let’s go have some fun.”

We exit the car, and I lock it with the key fob on our way to the front door. We enter the bar quickly, getting out of the frigid December air. Scarlet stays so close to me, it must look like she is tied to my side. The space is dimly lit, but with Christmas music softly playing in the background and multicolored lights strung up around the place, it doesn’t look or feel that bad.

“Wow, there are a lot of people here for it being Christmas and all,” Scarlet says low enough for only me to hear.

“I’m actually surprised there is room at the bar at all. People like to drink on holidays, especially when they have family problems,” I explain.

I lead us to the only two empty stools on the long L-shaped bar. Scarlet scoots the stool as close as she can to mine before she sits down. A guy sits on the other side of her, but when he recognizes me, he moves his own chair away from us, giving Scarlet even more room.

“Um... hi, I’m Sherry,” the young female bartender greets us nervously, swiping her thick blonde bangs from her forehead as she forces herself to smile. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll have whatever top-shelf bourbon you have, neat, and she’ll have a vodka cranberry.” I nod toward Scarlet.

Sherry glances over at Scarlet but doesn’t question my drink choice for her. She scurries away and starts pouring our drinks with trembling hands. I watch as she almost knocks the glass over twice, and I wonder if our drinks are

going to make it in one piece. Surprisingly, she manages to sit them in front of us a few moments later with minimal liquid spilled.

“Thank you,” Scarlet mumbles quietly and lifts her glass to her lips. She takes a few small sips, wrinkling her nose at the taste, but then takes another large gulp. “This is good. Not too strong, but not too sweet.”

“I figured you’d like it.”

This isn’t the first time Scarlet’s had alcohol. My parents let her drink a glass of wine with dinner often, which is why I know she doesn’t like her drink to be too sweet. Adela used to be the same way.

The thought of our sister sends a flare of pain through my chest like it always does, but today, it seems to hurt even more than normal.

Wrapping my hand around the glass, I bring it to my lips and down the entire contents. The bourbon burns my throat slightly but settles in my stomach with a comforting warmth.

I motion for Sherry to bring me a refill, and she does right away, even though she is in the middle of pouring someone else a beer.

I drink my second glass just as fast, adding to the heat in my gut. I’m about to ask for another refill when Scarlet grabs my arm.

“Unless you want us to Uber home, you need to stop drinking.” If it was anyone else besides Scarlet, I would tell them to fuck off, but the soft spot I have for my baby sister doesn’t allow me to yell at her.

“I’m fine, but you are probably right. I should slow down. Tell me about school. Any boyfriends I need to beat up?”

“Nah, no boys at school... I’m into older men.” Scarlet lifts her glass and sucks on the small cocktail straw innocently.

“That better be a joke,” I warn. “Plus, no matter how old he is, I’ll still beat the piss out of him.”

“I know you would.” Scarlet giggles. “And I was kidding, well, kind of. But enough about me. Tell me what’s up with you. We’ve barely talked, and you’ve been home for over a week.”

“I’m sorry. I just have a lot going on, and I found out some stuff.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them.

“What stuff?”

Shit. Stuff I can never tell Scarlet about, which is exactly the reason I have been avoiding her. Our dad killed my birth mother. That’s not something I ever want her to know.

“It’s not important. What is important is that you are right. We’ve barely talked or hung out, and that’s my fault. I’m glad I took you out today. We both can use some time away from everyone.”

Scarlet nods, her eyes flicker at something behind me, and guilt flashes over her face. It only takes me a glance over my shoulder to know why.

“Fancy meeting you guys here.” Ren smirks, and I almost roll my eyes.

“You texted him?” I accuse.

“Sorry,” Scarlet admits. “I was worried; you were acting funny. I didn’t want to call Mom or Dad, but I felt like I needed back up.”

“You might as well have called Dad. Ren likes to spy on us for him.”

“Shut up. You know that was different.”

“If you say so.” I run my finger over the edge of my empty glass, reminding myself that Ren stayed back for me to watch Aspen until everyone left for the holidays.

“Wow, you are in a jolly mood today. Did Santa not bring you what you wished for?” Ren moves to the free spot on Scarlet’s side, propping up one of his elbows onto the bar top.

“I didn’t know you still believed in Santa. Did no one explain this to you yet?” I tease. “Since you’re here to drive us home, I guess I can drink some more.” I wave Sherry over to order another drink.

Scarlet leans into me, so she can speak without anyone else hearing. “I’m going to the bathroom.” Sliding off her stool, she pulls her sweater dress down over her black leggings and walks toward the back of the bar.

As soon as she is out of earshot, Ren lays into me. “What the fuck are you thinking? Bringing her to a place like this? You know your father is gonna find out.”

“Let him. I don’t care.” I hold out my glass to the bartender, and she pours me another shot.

“You don’t care that he is going to keep Scarlet even more sheltered?”

Fuck, I didn’t think about that part. He is already strict and overprotective. Her going out with me will only pour gas into the fire, no matter if I try to take the blame.

“All right, let’s go home.”

I reach for my wallet to pay the tab when I hear Scarlet’s distressed voice over the Christmas tune. Ren and I spin around at the same time.

A guy twice my age has stepped in Scarlet’s way, not letting her pass. He is clearly drunk, slightly swaying from side to side, but that is not going to save him from what is about to happen. Scarlet is trying to pull her arm out of the asshole’s hold, yelling something at him.

I’m on my feet and across the room at lightning speed. My right hand wraps around the prick’s neck from behind, and I pull him backward. Letting go of my sister, he flails his arms around and stumbles back. Before he even has the chance to get his bearings, my fist is pounding into his face. By the second punch, he is already on the ground, but that doesn’t mean I’m done.

I get on top of him and keep smashing my fist into his ugly mug. I’m vaguely aware of someone trying to get me off this prick, but my mind is too consumed with violence. It’s not until I hear Scarlet’s pleading voice behind me that my mind clears long enough for me to stop.

“Please, Q, stop! You’re killing him.”

“Come on, man. Let’s go,” Ren urges.

I force myself to my feet and tear my eyes away from the passed-out piece of shit in front of me. Looking up, I find the entire bar staring at me in shock. No one moves except me. When I turn around to look at Scarlet, I find her

clinging to Ren, her fingers grabbing his shirt while she is plastered to his side, looking scared. *Fuck.*

“Get her to the car. I’ll deal with this and be out in a minute.”

Ren nods and starts pulling Scarlet out with him. I move back to the bar and pull out my wallet. Grabbing all the cash I have, I throw the stack of hundred-dollar bills on the counter.

“To cover the tab and the clean-up.”

Sherry stares at the cash for a few seconds as if she is not sure it’s real before she grabs it and shoves it in her pocket.

I scan the crowd one more time, making sure none of our rivals are here who could use this against me. The asshole who touched Scarlet is getting to his feet, cradling his bloody face. His swollen eyes find mine, and he takes a step back, holding up his palms. A broken sorry passes his busted lips.

“Not a word to anyone about this, or I really start beating you next time,” I warn before I finally head out.

I let the cold winter air cool the heated blood coursing through my veins as I walk to my car. Ren is sitting in the driver’s seat while Scarlet is huddled up in the passenger’s seat. Her legs are drawn up, and she is hugging her knees.

Opening the back door, I slide into the seat behind her. “Are you okay? Did that guy hurt you?” I place a hand on her shoulder, wanting her to look at me. If he did hurt her, I’m going back inside to kill him.

“I’m fine. I was just worried about you. I’m always worried about you,” she admits, her voice breaking at the end.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize, knowing that a simple sorry is not going to be enough. “You don’t have to worry about me, okay? I shouldn’t have brought you here, and I’m glad you called Ren. I always tell you, you are much smarter than me.”

“Flattery will not make me less mad at you... but it helps.” She snuffles. “How much smarter are we talking?”

“I’m basically on a fifth-grade level while you’re taking advanced statistics. You’re a genius. I’m a dumbass.”

“I’ll remind you of that in the future,” Ren chimes in, just as he is pulling out of the driveway.

Leaning back, I suck in a deep breath. Using the ride home, I reflect on what a disaster tonight ended up being. I am a dumbass. What was I thinking? Taking Scarlet there? My only hope is that my parents didn’t realize we were gone.

That hope bursts like a soap bubble when Scarlet’s and my phones ring simultaneously. I answer on the first ring.

“We’re on our way home. Everything is fine,” I say without even checking who it is.

“There better not be a hair out of place on your sister’s head,” my father roars into the receiver before ending the call.

“I promise, Mom. I’m fine. We just went out for a drive,” Scarlet lies. “I will see you in a few minutes. We’re almost home... okay. Love you too.” She ends the call and looks back at me.

“I’m sorry,” I say again.

She gives me a sad smile and nods. “It’s okay. Let’s just not do that again.”

We make it to the house ten minutes later. Our parents are already waiting outside. My mom looks worried, but my dad simply looks furious. As soon as the car stops, Scarlet gets out, and our parents crowd her, peppering her with questions and scanning her body for any injuries.

I almost roll my eyes at how obsessed they are with her safety, but then I remind myself that they have every right to be this concerned. My mom quickly takes my sister inside, which is my cue to exit the car.

“Good luck,” Ren mumbles from the front seat as I get out.

My father doesn’t waste any time ripping into me.

“What the fuck, Quinton? What the hell were you thinking? First, you put yourself in danger at Corium. Now you drag your sister into your shit? What were you thinking?”

“We just went—”

“Shut up! It’s not your turn to talk,” he growls.

Squeezing my lips together, I remain quiet and let him continue to yell at me. “You act like an irresponsible child. How am I supposed to trust you? You are supposed to protect your sister, not put her in danger!”

“I’m—”

His lips turn into a snarl, and the usual stoic man he is, is replaced with the fierce Rossi Crime Family leader I’ve only ever seen directed at others. “Shut up! I’m not done. If you don’t get your shit together, I will cut you off and kick you out of this house until you figure out what kind of man you want to be because the one standing in front of me right now is not someone I’m going to leave my legacy to.”

His disappointment in me spreads like a cancer through my veins, and with one last glance, my father spins around and stalks off, leaving me to wallow in my pity.

Just like I deserve.

ASPEN

The helicopter lands at the airport, where we get onto a jet that flies us back to North Woods. It's a lot of traveling for someone who didn't wake up expecting to spend her entire day in the air. Surprisingly, I only had one slight panic attack when the helicopter first took off, but after only a few minutes of my heart racing and gasping for air, I was able to calm down.

By the time we land, I'm ready for a hot meal, shower, and bed. I don't really have a plan in place on how I'll get home. Lucas tried contacting my mother on the way back to North Woods, but like always, he got no answer. It's hard not to be disappointed, but there isn't much more I can expect when it comes to my parents. My mother fails to have time for me and acts like I'm a nuisance more than anything, and my father is, well, he can only do so much behind concrete walls.

When we land in North Woods, I stand to exit the plane. The air is stale, and my neck and butt ache from the constant sitting. Lucas was the lucky one stuck sitting beside me the entire way home. I'm eager to get off this plane and home.

I move to brush past Lucas and escape the people inside the plane, but I'm stopped when his thick arm comes out of nowhere, cutting off my escape. "Wait, let me take you home. I'm getting a rental and can swing by your house to drop you off."

The idea is appealing, but I don't want him to do me any favors. I don't need anyone holding anything over my head anymore.

I crane my neck back and look up at him. "I'm not looking for a handout. I'll figure it out."

Lucas' jaw clenches. "It's not a handout."

It's my turn to grit my teeth because as much as I don't want to speak it out loud, a ride would be great. Impatience fills Lucas' features, making him appear weathered, and I swallow around the words forming in my throat. My options are slim, and if I don't go with him, I'm not sure how I'll get home. Knowing this, I suck a ragged breath into my lungs.

"If it's not out of the way, then yes, I could use a ride." I expect him to react with a smug smile, but he doesn't.

"Great, let's go then," he says, tight-lipped.

As soon as we step off the plane, I follow behind him like a puppy to the rental car place in the airport. The lady at the desk eyeballs us, but I dismiss her curious looks. I can't imagine what she is thinking. Lucas is old enough to be my father, not that it's any of her business.

It takes a few minutes, but as soon as we have the keys to the rental, I sigh. When we enter the parking garage, there are numerous vehicles. I follow Lucas as he unlocks the Tahoe with the key fob, and I slide into the passenger seat. The leather is cold on my butt, but outside of that mild inconvenience, I'm happy to be home.

He climbs into the driver's seat and starts the vehicle. The engine roars to life, and he turns to face me, a look of sadness in his eyes. After all the things I've been through, he's got the balls to show sadness now? *No*. I don't want his sadness.

"Don't look at me like that," I snip as he backs out of the parking spot.

Puzzled, he looks over at me, the shifter moving into drive. "How am I looking at you? I offered you a ride, which I had to practically beg you to take. What was your plan, Einstein? Let me guess, you didn't have one?"

I'm angry, sad, and alone, but more than any of that, I'm tired of relying on people. Tired of needing someone else. I want to save myself for once. I want to be the hero in my story.

"It doesn't matter if I had a plan or not. That has nothing to do with the way you just looked at me."

"How did I look at you?" he asks, clearly playing stupid.

"Like you feel bad for me, and in case you didn't know, I don't want your pity. I don't want anyone's pity."

"I don't pity you, Aspen."

"Yes, you do. I can tell. I don't need you to feel bad for me. You had plenty of chances to do that."

Silence settles around us, and I ignore the giant elephant in the room. I've lashed out at him when none of this is really his fault. I know it's the weight of the day weighing on my shoulders, and an apology rests on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it down, hunkering down into the seat while staring out the window.

If Lucas is bothered by anything I've said, he doesn't show it. Thankfully, the drive to my house is quick. As soon as Lucas pulls up to the curb, I'm reaching for the door handle.

I pause only for a brief second and scan the house. There are no lights on, no car parked in the driveway, there isn't a sign of anyone being home, and I don't know why I'm not surprised.

"It doesn't look like anyone is here. Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

I glance back at him, my hand still on the door handle. I nod. "Yeah. I'm used to being alone."

"If you say so..." His voice trails off, and I finally open the door and hop out of the Tahoe.

"Thanks for the ride," I say before shutting the door.

I half expect him to roll the window down and tell me to get back into the SUV, but he doesn't, so I start my walk across the lawn.

The grass is long, another confirmation that my mother hasn't been here for some time. Not that she would ever be caught dead mowing the lawn. It just means she's not spending money on someone else to upkeep it. I reach the front steps and look up at the huge white door. This place used to be my home, but I don't know if I'll ever be able to see it as a home again. It's a reminder of how broken my family is.

I shake the thoughts away. In my haste to escape Corium, I didn't get the chance to grab my keys, so I flip the ugly gnome near the front door over, where the spare key is.

My eyes light up when I spot the metal key, and I pick it up from the concrete and shove it into the door. I turn the key, and the lock disengages. Slowly, I twist the doorknob and push the door open.

At least I didn't have to break in.

I step inside the dark house and reach for the light switch. The lights flick on, and I must admit that I'm shocked. The shock gives way to sadness when I close the front door and find myself alone in this gigantic house. I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone, still surprised that I brought it with me.

My chest feels heavy, and my fingers move across the screen, involuntarily typing out Quinton's name into my contact list.

No, no. I can't call him. *I won't.* He left without a goodbye, and I don't want to be the first to give in and try to contact him, even if it is to let him know I'm no longer at Corium. I don't need him. It's time to grow up and take care of myself.

At a snail's pace, I walk through the house and up the grand staircase. I always thought this house was too big for three people to be living in. Lonely and quiet.

When I reach the landing, I walk the short distance to my bedroom. With a twist of the knob, I'm back in my bedroom, a space that was mine but feels like a thousand light years away now.

The sheets are still crisp, the bed made, not a single pillow out of place. It's so perfect, it's almost creepy. I stare in rage at the perfection of the room, of the emotions left inside of this place.

I want to cry, scream, and yell. I want to break things and let the ground swallow me up, but I do none of those things.

Instead, I walk over to the bed and fall face-first on it. I'm beyond exhausted, and I just want a hot shower and some food, which I'll be lucky to find. I peel the sweater off my body and toss it onto the bed when I hear the creak of the front door opening and closing.

"Mom?" I yell and rush toward the stairs, where heavy footfalls are approaching.

No, that can't possibly be my mother.

My heart leaps out of my chest, and I stop just before the landing, realizing my mistake of calling out for my mother. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when my eyes land on Matteo, who is mere feet away from me.

Oh, god! No one is here to save me this time. Behind him are two other men, and I stumble backward before I twist around and start running down the hall.

I can hear Matteo gaining speed. His heavy boot-covered feet slap against the hardwood, reminding me that if I don't find a way to escape him, I will become the rat stuck under his foot.

"Where are you going, Aspen? You don't want to play a game?" I swear I can feel his breath on my neck. Sweat breaks out across my forehead and straight ahead is my door.

If I can just make it to the door. If I can make it inside the room and shut the door behind me, it'll buy me a little time. I reach forward, my fingers graze the knob, and I'm sure I'm safe when Matteo's thick arms wrap around my middle, breaking the false sense of hope.

He tackles me to the ground, his hulking frame lands on mine, knocking the wind out of me. I shove at his body as we roll, trying to escape his grasp, but his fingers dig into my flesh. I ignore the pain and lash out with my hands

and feet, kicking and hitting any part of his body I can touch.

“Yeah, fight me, bitch. Fight me. It makes me so fucking hard when you struggle. I can’t wait to sink deep inside you and fuck the thought of Quinton right out of you. By the time I’m done with you, he won’t want you anymore. No one will. I can promise you that.”

I slap at his hands as he grabs me by the throat, squeezing it like he’s trying to bend steel.

“Get the rope, Rico,” he growls at someone over his shoulder. Black dots fill my vision, and I grit my teeth, struggling to breathe.

Matteo’s grip on my throat lessens a bit, and I suck a ragged breath of air into my lungs. He smirks and leans down, licking the lingering tears that have escaped my eyes from my skin.

“You will pay for this!” I scream, my voice hoarse.

“Maybe or maybe not.” He shrugs. “Either way, this will be so much fun.”

Before I can respond, I’m tossed onto my stomach. My hands tugged painfully behind my back. The rope, some Rico guy got for him, is wrapped and knotted around my wrists. Next are my ankles, and I can feel the tears building in my eyes. I should’ve gone with Lucas. I shouldn’t have been so stubborn.

As fast as I was tossed onto my stomach, I’m picked up. Matteo’s meaty hands dig into my skin hard enough to leave bruises as he throws me over his shoulder.

“You don’t want to do this, Matteo, please...” I beg, but my plea falls on deaf ears.

Every step down the stairs and out of the house is another crack to my fragile being. Another man is standing outside the house, and I only see him for a moment as I’m tossed into the open trunk of the vehicle.

“You’re right, Aspen. I don’t want to do this. I need to do it. I’ll have my way with you, even if you don’t want me. Even if Quinton will kill me. I don’t care.”

He doesn't give me a chance to respond and slams the trunk closed, and I'm left in nothing but darkness. A moment later, the car moves, and my thoughts race. How am I going to get out of this alive? How am I going to survive him? There is no reasoning with him, and yet, there is no escaping either. Fear slices through me with every passing second. I roll to my side as we turn and slam my head against the wall of the trunk when the driver makes another sharp turn.

Pain lances across my scalp, and I barely hold back a cry of pain. I'm not sure how long they drive, but it's long enough for the throbbing in my head to subside and for my hands and shoulder blades to go numb.

The vehicle turns once more before coming to a complete stop. Fuck. Time is running out. I have to escape, to get away. I'd be stupid not to. My entire body trembles when I hear the slamming of car doors. I force myself to take a calming breath, and when the trunk opens, it's completely dark outside now.

Matteo stands above me, and his sickening grin makes me want to barf. "Did you miss me?"

I snarl my lip like a feral animal when he reaches for me. With the closeness of his body to mine and the fact that I'm sitting up, I use it to my advantage. Tipping my head back as far as I can, I headbutt him right in the nose. Pain explodes across my forehead, and I'm knocked off-kilter for a moment.

"You fucking bitch!" Matteo shouts, a hand pressed against his face.

I try to roll out of the trunk, but he stops me before I can get far. His fingers thread into my hair, and he grabs a fistful of the locks, tugging me out of the vehicle by my hair.

A scream rips from my throat, the burning pain lances across my scalp, and I can feel him ripping the strands from my scalp. Tears slip from my eyes, and my skin burns as he drags me across the concrete.

"Get the door, Rico. We're going to teach this bitch a fucking lesson. I was gonna fuck you alone, Aspen, but since you are being a cunt, I'm going to let my brother and uncle fuck you too."

"Please, don't do this!" I scream, struggling in his grasp.

When he finally stops, he releases my hair, and I sag to the ground. The ground is cold, and I realize we're in a warehouse. It's musty, and my lungs burn as I suck air into them.

Matteo tugs me forward, a low-hanging pipe just above my head. My eyes catch on the glint of a knife, and even in the dim lighting, there would be no denying that it's a sharp blade. He rolls me over and cuts the rope holding my hands in place.

I'm already thinking of my next move, ready to lash out when he rolls me back over and a pair of handcuffs appear. He attaches one to my hand and the other to the pipe above my head.

"Please, Matteo, please, think about this," I plead, hoping to reason with him, even if there is no hope.

"That's the thing, Aspen. I have. I've thought about it often. Every. Single. Night."

Rico hands him another set of handcuffs, and I wonder where the third person disappeared to. He handcuffs my other hand to the bar and leans back, taking a look at me like I'm some prized trophy. Blood trickles from his nose, and I smile with satisfaction, knowing that I made him bleed, that I hurt him, even if only a little bit.

He grabs me by the cheeks, squeezing hard enough to crush bone. "Keep smiling. I can't wait to wipe that look off your face, to remove the light in your eyes."

The knife comes back into view, and I shiver as he drags it down the front of my loose-fitted T-shirt. The cotton parts in an instant, the blade moving through the fabric like a hot knife through butter.

He glides the tip over my skin, and I realize how badly this is going to get. I tip my head back and stare up at the metal pipe, trying to disappear inside my head.

The tip of the blade slides into the waistband of my sweatpants, and I'm certain he's going to cut me open with it when he moves the blade in a sawing motion and slices through the fabric. It falls away, landing on the floor, leaving me bare.

“So much creamy, smooth skin. I can’t wait to mark you.” He drags the blade down my thigh, the tip sinking into my skin. I don’t realize he’s cut me till I feel something warm on my skin. *Blood*. “Oops, guess I got a little excited.”

By the time he reaches my ankles, I’m shivering and praying to God that I pass out, so I don’t have to endure this. No one is coming to save me. No one can protect me. Matteo is going to break me, and I’ll never be able to put myself back together again.

“I don’t know what I should fuck you with first, the blade or my cock?” Bile rises in my throat, and I have to force myself not to vomit. He drops to his haunches. “Maybe I’ll do both. Fuck your mouth while I fuck your cunt with the blade.”

All I can do is shake my head. The tears continue to come, slipping down my cheeks.

The ringing of a cell phone fills the space, and I blink my eyes open to see Matteo reach into his pocket and pull his phone out. I almost sigh with relief when he pulls away from me.

“Sorry, I’ve got to take this, but I’ll be back in a few to make good on our deal.” He slaps my thigh, and I tense. “Get comfortable and think about which you would prefer inside you. Maybe I will be nice if you beg for my cock.”

I say nothing, even if I want to lash out at him. He walks away, his receding footsteps leave me a little calmer, but my head still spins, the headbutt from earlier now affecting me more since the adrenaline has worn off. Shivers wrack my body, and I lie here freezing for what seems hours. Eventually, even though I shouldn’t, I let my heavy eyes flutter closed, and I doze off.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but I wake up when I feel the air shift around me. Someone is approaching from behind. I try to twist my neck to look behind me, but before I can move, someone grabs me from behind and holds me still.

A shriek escapes my lips when a sharp pain erupts in my neck. The room is blanketed in complete darkness, but I can feel warm breath on my ear, followed by the words, “I hope you know I just did you a huge favor.”

My lips part and I'm seconds from asking them to help me when my eyes flutter closed, and I'm welcomed into the darkness of my dreams.

The only place I have left to hide.

QUINTON

The next day, I do my best to avoid my parents. My mom came to my room early this morning, telling me not to worry too much about what my father said, but I could see her own disappointment in her eyes. She wants to trust me, but not if it means putting my sister in danger.

“I’ve got to be home for dinner, or Luna is gonna be mad. She is already salty that I’m spending so much time with you while we’re here.”

“I don’t blame her. I see your ugly face all the time.”

“Ugly? Maybe you need to get your eyes checked.” Ren huffs.

We’ve been driving around aimlessly for hours just so I don’t have to go back home. Currently, we’re parked in a diner’s parking lot, though we’ve been done eating for a while. I’m tempted to go back to Ren’s place with him, but I already know I’d be getting dirty looks over there as well.

“I’ll drop you off at your house and leave you alone for the rest of the winter break. I’ll find something to do.”

“Go home, Q, spend time with your family. I know a lot has happened between you and your father, but it will get better.”

I’m about to tell him I don’t want it to get better when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I almost ignore it, thinking it’s probably my mom, but something in the back of my mind tells me to check. Fishing the sleek device out of my jacket, I unlock the screen and read the message popping up.

UNKNOWN: I'M DONE WITH HER NOW. YOU CAN HAVE HER BACK IF YOU WANT. THOUGH SHE'S QUITE USED UP NOW.

I STARE AT THE SCREEN, reading each word carefully, not wanting them to be true. My lungs burn painfully, making me realize I am holding my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Ren’s concerned voice meets my ear.

Everything. Everything is wrong.

I read the text one more time, and the worst scenario runs through my brain. Aspen’s beautiful face, pale and bruised, and lifeless eyes staring back at me. Her slender body, cold and rigid. Matteo standing over her, bloody knuckles and a sinister smile on his face.

No, no, no... He doesn’t have her. She is back at Corium, safe and sound.

Ren grabs the phone from my hand. I’m so out of it I don’t even move. I simply stare at my now empty palm.

“Fuck. Do you think Matteo sent you this? He is probably just messing with you. How would he have gotten her—”

My phone buzzes again, cutting Ren off.

“What is it?”

I snatch the phone back before he can answer. It’s another message, but nothing is written in it. He only sent an image of a North Woods city map. A red pin hovers above a building in the warehouse district. I throw the phone back into Ren’s lap and put the car in drive.

“Are you sure you want to just go there? This could be a trap, Quinton.”

“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do. You just can’t think straight when it comes to Aspen. You don’t even know if he really has her or if this is Matteo at all. Stop for a second and think, Quinton. We have no idea what we are walking into.”

“I. Don’t. Care. Call my father or text yours for backup. I don’t give a shit who you call, but I’m not waiting. I am going there now. You don’t have to come with me. I don’t want to drag you into this.”

“Just shut up and drive. I’m calling for backup.”

I break every speed limit and traffic law possible, and still, I feel like I’m going too slow. Every second I’m not there could be her last. I know what Matteo is capable of, and thinking he’s had her since yesterday when the cameras went offline has bile rising in my throat.”

THOUGH SHE’S QUITE USED UP NOW... His message replays in my mind, only adding to my panic. He touched her, he fucking touched her.

We pull into the empty parking lot of the warehouse from the map. There are no cars anywhere and no sign of anyone being here, except a single lamp flickering right above a door. I park right in front of the door and get out before I even cut the engine.

“Q, wait!” Ren calls after me, but I’m already at the entrance, pulling the handle hard enough to rip it off the heavy metal door.

It’s unlocked, and I push my way inside. The warehouse opens up into one large, empty space. The air is thick with dust and mildew, and even the dim light can’t hide how dirty and run down the inside is. I walk further into the warehouse, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness.

Eerie silence blankets the space, only to be disrupted when heavy footfalls approach behind me. I’m about to turn around to make sure it’s Ren, when I spot something in the corner of the room.

My heart stops, frozen in place right in the center of my chest as I take in the lifeless form on the floor. With the lack of light and distance between us, I can’t make out a face, but I already know it’s her. I know it deep in my gut.

My feet move of their own accord, carrying me to the body sprawled out on the cold concrete. With every step that brings me closer, the pit in my chest becomes larger, and when I come close enough to see her face, I almost fall to my knees.

I thought my mind had conjured up the worst, but I was wrong. Nothing compares to what I see in front of me now.

Aspen.

She is completely naked, lying on her stomach with her limbs awkwardly around her. Her beautiful face is turned toward me, her cheek pressed to the disgusting floor. One of her eyes is swollen, blood caked on her forehead and cheek. More blood smeared all over her body, accompanied by endless bruises, scrapes, and cuts.

“Fucking Christ,” Ren mumbles in horror beside me.

I’m still frozen in place, unable to move, breathe, or think.

While I stand there like a useless statue, Ren kneels beside her and reaches out to her face. He runs his knuckles across her cheek slightly before pressing two fingers to the side of her neck.

“She is alive,” Ren announces.

Finally, my body allows me to move again, and I get down on the floor with them. I hover my hands over her body, afraid to touch her fragile-looking skin. Only when I see her body shake and realize how cold she must be, do I slide my arms carefully beneath her.

I lift her up as if she is made of glass, trying not to move her injured body too much as I pull her into my chest. Her eyes never open, but a pained moan falls from her cut lip.

“We have to get her to a doctor,” I whisper as I carry her out to the car.

Ren is already on the phone by the time we get back to my SUV. He opens the backdoor, and I slide inside, cradling Aspen on my lap.

“Turn up the heat,” I order when Ren gets into the driver’s seat and starts the engine.

He is still on the phone talking to someone, but I can’t even concentrate enough to make out what he is saying. My mind is too consumed with the beaten body I’m holding.

There is blood everywhere, but a lot of it seems to come from between her legs. I grind my teeth together, knowing that he raped her.

“Quinton,” Ren gets my attention. “Here, it’s your dad.” He holds out his phone, and I take it with trembling fingers.

I don’t remember the last time I was truly looking forward to talking to my father. Our relationship has been strained for a long time, but in this moment, I yearn to hear his voice, to assure me that everything is okay, and he’ll fix all of it. I know it will never happen. I’m no longer a boy who looks up to his father like he is a god. Like he can fix anything and keep me safe. I know it was never real, just a little boy’s warped perception of his father, but right now, I want it to be true. I want to pretend, even if it’s just for a little while.

“Dad,” I rasp into the phone, barely recognizing my voice.

“Quinton, it’s gonna be okay.” My father’s voice wraps around me, soothing my mind and soul. I clutch onto that piece of comfort, knowing it won’t last long. “The doctor is already on his way here. I have him set up downstairs.”

“No, not downstairs. I’m bringing her to my room.”

“Okay,” Dad agrees calmly, catching me by surprise.

Since when does he agree with me on anything, especially regarding Aspen? I don’t have time to analyze his odd behavior.

“Keep Mom and Scarlet away. Aspen is... in bad shape. I don’t want them to see.”

“I’ll make sure no one sees her but the doctor. Don’t worry, Son. It’s gonna be all right.” Again, his words are comforting, pulling me back to a time when I needed him. When my dad had the power to make everything better.

“We’ll be home in ten minutes,” I murmur into the phone before ending the call so I can give Aspen my full attention once more.

Her breathing is even, her bare chest falling and rising in a steady rhythm that calms me down even more. The cab of the car is heating quickly, and though she has stopped shaking, her skin is still cold to the touch. I need to get her warm and covered.

Without moving her too much, I shrug out of my jacket and drape it around her battered body, wrapping her up as much as I can.

When we finally get to the house, I sigh in relief when I see Dr. Roni's car parked at the door. Ren stops behind him, and I get out of the car, moving Aspen with me as gently as possible.

My father and our personal doctor meet us at the front door. Roni looks over Aspen immediately, his facial expression not giving anything away. My father only briefly glances at Aspen before dragging his eyes away from her.

We move through the house and up the stairs. My father kept his promise and made sure no one else would see Aspen. Even he isn't following us.

I enter my room and place Aspen on my bed softly. Her body relaxes slightly, her limbs going slack as she sinks into the mattress.

Roni pushes me out of the way and continues to examine her, taking her vitals and placing an IV port into her arm. She doesn't even flinch, making me wonder how hurt she is that she is passed out like this.

Standing at the end of the bed, I watch the doctor in silence as he gives her a head-to-toe examination. He cleans every wound, no matter how big or small the cut. None of them seem deep enough to require stitches, but that doesn't make it easier to watch.

When the doctor parts Aspen's legs to check her down there, I almost lose it. Her pussy is swollen and bruised, blood dripping out of her. More blood and cum is caked to her thighs, all the way down to her scraped knees.

"You don't have to watch this, you know," he says without glancing my way.

"I want to."

I have to watch this, so I never forget what Matteo has done. I need to ingrain this into my mind, let this memory fuel my anger, so I have nothing left besides the need to avenge.

"I have one of my best nurses already on the way. We'll get her cleaned up and comfortable while I run some tests."

He pulls out a few syringes and vials from his bags and takes a blood sample. After that, he takes the samples and his bag to my desk and sets up what looks like a mini lab.

A few minutes later, there is a soft knock on the door before it opens, and a woman I've never seen before walks in.

"This is Maria, my nurse," Dr. Roni introduces her.

She simply nods. Dropping her bag on the floor, she quickly walks to Aspen's side and begins to gently clean the rest of her body, reapplying ointments to her cuts as she moves.

The doctor suddenly reappears on the other side of the bed. Using his fingertips, he feels alongside Aspen's stomach as if he is looking for something in particular.

"What's wrong?" I ask, panic bubbling up again.

"She is going to be okay. I know she looks bad, but most of her injuries are superficial and will heal completely within the next few weeks. As far as I can tell, she has no broken bones or internal bleeding. Her vitals are good, and her oxygen is normal."

"Then why is she so out of it?"

"She was drugged. I have to run another test to know exactly what they gave her, but if we're lucky, it will be out of her system soon so I can start her on pain meds."

"So physically, she will recover completely?" The mentally will be a whole other question.

"Like I said, I have to run some more tests to confirm everything, but I'm certain she will be fine. However, I'm also fairly sure she lost the baby. She must have been in her first trimester..." The doctor keeps talking, but his voice is fading into the background of my thoughts.

Aspen was pregnant.

She was carrying something inside of her I never knew I longed for.

A baby... our baby.

A child that never had the chance to be born, taken from me by Matteo.

Shoving my hand inside my pocket, I pull out my phone and unlock it. I find the messages he sent me earlier and type out a response:

ME: BEFORE I KILL YOU, I'LL KILL EVERYONE YOU'VE EVER KNOWN, SLOWLY.

The response comes almost immediately.

UNKNOWN: COME AND GET ME.

Oh, I will. And when I'm done with you, you will beg me to end your life.



First of all, **Thank you for reading Drop Dead Queen!**

Second, we are deeply, deeply sorry about this cliffhanger. Please, we beg you for your forgiveness and promise we will deliver a worthy conclusion for this trilogy in book three of Corium University [Broken Kingdom](#)

Did you know Quinton's parents, Xander and Ella have their own book?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

J.L. Beck and **C. Hallman** are a *USA Today* and international bestselling author duo who write contemporary and dark romance.

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