



*Corium
Ever After*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C. HALLMAN

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CHAPTER ONE

Q uinton

IF THERE'S one thing I'll never grow tired of, it's the look of joy my wife wears when I surprise her with something I know she'll love. After everything she's been through, she deserves no less than the best of everything, and I happen to be in a position to give it to her. She never expects or demands any of it, so the surprise is that much sweeter.

Her joy and wonder never get old. Like the twinkle in her eyes as we approach the lodge where I've booked us a stay over the Christmas holiday. As much as I enjoy spending time with extended family the way we normally do, I want it to be us this year. No distractions and no interruptions. We can always see them over New Year's, anyway.

"I can't believe it!" I've lost track of the number of times Aspen has whispered those words since we set out from the Swiss airport to our lodge in Gstaad. I'm not so jaded that I can't see the beauty around us—the view of snowcapped peaks from a charming little town bustling with people who came to Switzerland for a luxurious holiday to shop and dine. Night fell before we landed, meaning a star-spangled, moonlight sky set off those snowy peaks, and warm, inviting lights from countless windows shined on the snowy streets. It's beyond pristine, inspiring awe even in someone as world-weary as me.

She turns to me, her mouth hanging open and her green eyes sparkling. “It’s like something out of a fairy tale! Like a perfect little village in the snow.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” I warn her with a grin. “This isn’t some quaint little village. Someone could go bankrupt in some of the stores around here. But it is beautiful. You like it?”

“I love it!” Still, her brows draw together in concern. “So long as you don’t expect me to ski. I don’t think a broken leg would be a great Christmas present.”

“Point taken. Anyway, I figured you’d be more interested in sitting by the fire with a book.”

“Are you kidding? I can already imagine myself with a book in my lap and hot chocolate sitting next to me.”

“So long as that’s not all you want to do in front of the fire.” I run a hand up her thigh, and she giggles before playfully swatting it away, nodding toward the front seat where our driver navigates the darkened road up to the lodge.

I lean in, my lips brushing her ear. “You know it only turns me on when you tell me I can’t do something.” She rolls her eyes, but it’s all for show. When push comes to shove, she’s just as eager and ready to tear each other’s clothes off as I am.

There isn’t much I would rather do during this trip, even with all the other options at our fingertips. It doesn’t matter where we are. All I ever want is Aspen. To be inside her, beside her. It doesn’t matter to me.

We pull up at the sprawling lodge entrance, and staff members immediately descend upon us, taking our bags from the car and carrying them into the lobby. I take Aspen’s hand and follow them, smiling at how she looks around in obvious wonder. “I hope you don’t mind,” I explain as we step into the cavernous space, “but I went with a suite instead of renting one of the private cabins. This way, you don’t even have to step outside if you’re hungry. There are restaurants right here in the lodge, and the staff is ready to make sure you have everything you need. Room service is available as well.” I

wink, knowing that will come in handy one or two or maybe even all the mornings.

She slides her arms around my waist and squeezes, beaming up at me. “It’s perfect.”

She’s perfect, but hearing that would only make her roll her eyes. I settle for kissing the top of her head before meeting the concierge, who takes us to our suite while explaining some of the hotel’s amenities. “Guests rave about our outdoor hot tubs,” he assures us, pointing through a window to where the covered tubs are currently being enjoyed by a pair of families. “Your suite includes one of its own if you’d rather not venture outdoors.”

I catch Aspen’s eye, and there can’t be any doubt about what I’m thinking. She flashes a secret little smile, telling me she’s on the same page.

I slip the concierge and porter a tip to get rid of them quicker so we can be alone. Aspen admires the fireplace, the hot tub in the bathroom, and the view from the windows overlooking the village. The warm and welcoming suite has a huge four-poster bed I’ve made plans to use ever since first seeing a picture of it on the resort’s website.

My wife stands at the window, shaking her head slowly. “This is so incredible. To think, I’m spending Christmas here.” When I join her, she rests the back of her head against my chest, sighing softly as I wind my arms around her. “It’s so beautiful.”

It is, but something more beautiful is in my arms. I press my lips to the top of her golden head and whisper, “I’m more interested in looking at you.”

She glances up at me, grinning. “You can see me anytime you want. How often do you get to admire the Alps in person?”

“I’d still rather admire you. I haven’t gotten tired of it yet.”

She wears an expression that tells me she thinks I’m flattering her, though I mean every word. “So now that you’ve

whisked me away to Switzerland, what's your plan? What sort of things do you want to do?"

"This is all about you. What do you want to do?"

"You mean besides drinking a vat of hot chocolate?"

"Besides that."

She screws up her mouth at the corner, pretending to think about it. "I did see a few cute little shops in the village as we drove past."

"That's more like it."

"And even though I don't really want to ski, if they have other things to do like sledding or snowmobiling, that could be fun."

"I think I could arrange that. There are also some world-class restaurants here."

She nods slowly before biting her lip with a look in her eye that never fails to get my cock twitching in anticipation. "But what do we do after dinner? There's the question."

My arms tighten with demand. "Is there any question, really? I plan on defiling you in every corner of this suite. You'll be lucky if you're able to walk by the time we leave Switzerland."

"I'd rather not be able to walk because of that than because I went skiing. It seems like a lot more fun." Her eyes twinkle. "Warmer, too."

CHAPTER TWO

*A*spen

“ARE you sure you wouldn’t rather come out with me?”
Quinton frowns, eyeing the thick romance novel I’ve tucked under one arm.

“Don’t take it personally,” I beg before giving him a kiss.
“But you know I would rather hang out inside. When will I ever have an excuse to sit in front of a fire and do nothing but read in a chunky sweater while snow falls outside the windows?”

“You realize you could do that every day for the rest of your life if you wanted to. I would never stop you.” He wraps me in a tight hug that warms me from the inside out. I know he would never deny me anything.

“It would get boring after a while,” I decide with a shrug before taking a step back to admire him. I’m dressed for a morning spent inside, where it’s cozy and warm, while he’s dressed for a day spent in the snow. He provided his requirements to the concierge after we arrived last night, and this morning, as if by magic, a stack of packages waited near the front door of our suite. I didn’t even hear the maids come in to deliver them. Now, he’s dressed in a pair of ski pants and a jacket from one of the stores in the village with a pair of goggles perched on top of his dark hair. He could be getting ready to pose for a magazine spread.

He needs this. We both do. It's not that I'm unhappy with him—I've never been happier in my whole life. But something will always be missing from his life so long as Ren is out there somewhere, the way he's been this past year. He tries to act like he's moving on, but I know better. Losing somebody who's been like a brother weighs on him. Q isn't the kind of man who talks about his feelings, but I see it.

“Promise me you'll be careful out there.” We come to a stop at what I guess could be called a lounge area, with comfy couches and chairs arranged around a huge fireplace off the lodge's lobby.

“You promise me you won't end up getting your head turned by some ski pro. I would hate to have to kill a guy on this trip.”

Always possessive. “I don't think you have to worry about that. I'll only have eyes for my book.” As if I would ever look at anybody else. I kiss him, then give him a gentle shove. “Just make sure you're not too tired to have fun later tonight.”

“Impossible. I have plans for you.” He strolls off, heading for the main doors where guests walk in and out before I stake out a comfy chair and get settled in.

“You've got the right idea.”

I look up from the book to find a pretty brown-haired woman smiling at me as she sits in a chair across from mine. “Staying inside and getting cozy, that is.”

“So I'm not the only one who'd rather do this than be out there?”

Her laughter is light and soft. “Hardly. I know it's supposed to be great skiing, but that's never been my thing. I'm Teagan, by the way.”

“Aspen,” I offer with a smile as a member of the staff approaches and asks if we'd like anything. When she orders “the largest hot chocolate on the menu,” I get the feeling we could be friends. I repeat her order, and she gives me a thumbs-up.

“Is this your first time in Gstaad?” she asks.

“Yes, my husband sprang this on me as a Christmas surprise. I’m loving it. How about you?”

“Same here, though it wasn’t a surprise. I had to convince my boyfriend to leave our hotel and take some time for himself. Otherwise, he’d work himself to death.”

“Wait, you own a hotel?” I question. “Do you feel like cheating staying somewhere else?”

She laughs. “No, it’s not the kind of hotel you vacation in.” She suddenly looks away, almost like she’s worried she said too much, so I don’t ask her what she means by that.

“Is your boyfriend out on the slopes?”

Her head bobs up and down. “He was chomping at the bit to get out there, which is surprising. He usually doesn’t like to be outside much. Me? I usually do, but I’d rather take advantage of the chance to relax today. Must be opposite day.” She giggles.

We chat for a minute about how she publishes children’s books and her plans for the trip before our drinks arrive. I’m transported to heaven at the first sip. There’s a reason people love Swiss chocolate so much.

There are still times when I have to remind myself this is my life. When I think back on where I came from—a comfortable life, but nothing like this—and how bad things got overnight once the man I believed was my father decided to become an informant. Once he ratted, that was it. I was marked as poisonous, thanks to him.

I didn’t know then that I was adopted. That my birth father was actually the headmaster of the school I was sent to for my protection. I didn’t know my husband was waiting there for me, either. And that life would get even worse before it got so much better. Now, I have a new family. My birth mother lives in Italy with a family of her own. My father’s extended family. Even Quinton’s family, including a father who hated me for a long time, thanks to my adoptive father’s choices.

Now, here I am, in the lap of luxury, with nothing to do but enjoy my book, which gets better with every page I turn.

Occasionally, Teagan and I check in with each other and chat about other favorite authors, but for the most part, we leave each other alone. She gets it. Sometimes it's enough just to sit with somebody and not say a word.

It isn't until my phone buzzes that I realize I've been sitting here for a couple of hours.

Quinton: Going to take one last run. Looking forward to warming up once I come back.

I know what that means, and my cheeks flush while I type out a response.

Me: Maybe a nice soak in the hot tub would relax those muscles of yours.

I can't hide my smile as I tuck my phone away, anticipating what's to come. As far as I'm concerned, we could have taken a vacation anywhere with a nice bed, and I would have been fine with it. The excuse to spend one-on-one time connecting is all that matters to me.

I can probably get in another chapter or two of my book before arranging for lunch to be delivered to our suite. After all that exercise, I'm sure he'll be hungry, and it'll be nice knowing we don't have to leave the room for anything until we go out for dinner later tonight. I look out the window at the snowy scene on the other side and still want to pinch myself, but I settle for turning my attention to the page open in front of me.

That is until I catch sight of something that can't be possible.

"See you later," Teagan calls out behind me once I get up to follow the golden-haired woman I saw, but I hardly notice. I'm not even sure why I'm following her. She can't possibly be who I thought she was when I set my sights on her. It doesn't matter how familiar she looks or how many times I've seen that exact head of hair, that profile. It has to be a trick my mind is playing on me. Probably with Christmas coming up in a few days, my subconscious is flipping through old memories and making me think I see things that aren't there.

But I'll never rest until I'm sure that woman isn't who she looks so much like. My adoptive mother, the one who disappeared without a trace over a year ago. I've imagined the worst ever since—she was just as vilified as I was after the whole informant situation, if not more so. It didn't take a huge leap of imagination to guess somebody got to her and silenced her forever.

But I swear the woman I'm now following through to the lobby could be her twin. I just want one good look at her. Maybe if she turns around so I can see her full face. I need to prove to myself that I didn't see what I thought I saw.

Finally, I catch her head bobbing up and down near the doors. I bump into a couple walking hand in hand and murmur an apology, but I keep moving, hopping up and down on my tiptoes to see over the people between us. I want to call out to her, but the thought of shouting "Mom!" to a woman who can't possibly be her makes my stomach tighten with embarrassment.

By the time I reach the doors and burst outside, she's gone, and I'm freezing. I still wait a few moments, scanning the faces of the people milling around, but I don't see anybody who looks vaguely familiar.

Maybe it's for the best. I'd only feel like an idiot if I stopped her and she turned out to be nothing more than a stranger. There are plenty of blond-haired women in the world. That didn't have to be her.

No matter how much my heart tells me it was.

CHAPTER THREE

Quinton

SOMETHING'S OFF. She's trying like hell to convince me otherwise, but I've known Aspen for too long. She's troubled over something. She has to be.

Instantly, I imagine her being accosted by some dickbag back at the lodge while I was skiing earlier. She probably thinks it's better not to tell me about it—always afraid I'm going to start trouble or something like that. She still hasn't figured out it's my job to protect her, not the other way around.

I reach across the table and take her hand, admiring her the way I've been doing all night, ever since she did a little twirl for me back in our suite to show off the red velvet dress she bought for the occasion. "I figured when you said you had something special planned for the holidays, I'd need at least one nice dress." And it is nice, though I'd much rather tear it off her and leave it in shreds.

She tucks an errant strand of blond hair behind one ear when she feels me staring at her. "What's going on? Are you feeling okay? Too much hot chocolate earlier?"

At least she smiles at that. "I don't think there's any such thing. I think you're making the whole idea up." Then she shakes her head, growing serious. "No, nothing like that. Maybe I'm just a little jet-lagged."

A tempting little smile teases at the corners of her mouth. “Or it could be the way you’ve exhausted me.”

“Since when can you not keep up?” All that earns me is a playful grin.

“I made a new friend today,” she tells me once our wine arrives. So far, the service has been nothing short of impeccable, though I would expect nothing less from a Michelin-starred restaurant. We’ve gone with the chef’s tasting menu and await the first course. As I requested, a bouquet of red roses awaited us when we sat at our table—their color almost matches Aspen’s dress.

“I don’t know how you do it,” I muse before sipping a light, crisp Chardonnay. “You seem to make friends wherever you go.” It’s in her nature to draw people in with that big heart of hers like moths to a flame. I’m more of the get the fuck out of my way and leave me alone.

“Maybe because I don’t look all intimidating and growly everywhere I go.” She lowers her brow and purses her lips in what I assume is supposed to be an imitation of me. Really, it’s not a terrible impression. “We bonded over our books.”

And for a moment, when she talks about this, she looks happy. But then I watch in real-time as she remembers something that dims the light in her eyes. When she feels me watching, she looks out the window, pretending to be distracted by the twinkling lights strung up in the many towering firs. They’re pretty but not worthy of the attention she’s giving them.

“What do you think about shopping tomorrow?” I ask. “I don’t know that I could take a second day in a row of being out on the slopes.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you were going to turn into an old man overnight. If somebody had warned me, I might’ve thought twice about getting married.”

I lower my brow the way she did earlier when she was imitating me. “Watch it. Don’t make me punish you later.”

“All talk, no action.”

“You know that’s not true.” And now I’m more determined than ever to tie my wife to that bed and torment her until she begs me to let her come. “So is that a yes on shopping?”

“Sure, it’ll be fun. And I do want to pick up a couple of things for you.”

“That’s not what we’re here for. We’re here for you.”

“And I happen to care about making sure you have lots of Christmas presents.” I’m not the best at expressing my feelings, and I wish I could tell her so she’d understand: I don’t need anything. I don’t even want anything beyond her. Her safety, her health, her happiness. I want a life with her. All the gifts in the world don’t mean a thing when compared to what she means to me.

But being generous makes her happy, too, and I could never rob her of that. “Very well. I guess we’ll have to part ways at some point.”

“I’m sure you’ll live.” She’s smiling happily by the time our amuse-bouche reaches the table, so I’ll take that as a win. And even though I won’t bring it up again if only to keep the mood light, I won’t forget that haunted look she wore when she didn’t think I noticed. Or how distracted she’s been since I returned to the suite earlier.

I’m supposed to be the one carrying shit around inside me, not her. I’m the one fighting every day with a gnawing sense of loss and regret that’s barely softened over the past year. Ren was my brother, someone I believed I could trust. Until he decided to attack my wife and push me down the stairs. A part of me still doesn’t want to believe it. I still want to come up with an excuse for him, which is more credit than I think I’ve ever given anyone except for the very closest people in my life.

Unfortunately, the fact that he’s managed to avoid being found for the past year tells me this wasn’t a mistake or an accident, a spur-of-the-moment type of thing. More like something planned out in advance. Is someone helping him hide, and even more so, why would they?

There I go again, letting him get in the way.

If he's a traitor, he doesn't deserve a minute of my energy, and until I know otherwise, that's all I'll be able to see him as.

"That's not all I had planned for tonight," I warn her as we leave the restaurant after a two-hour-long meal that was more of an experience than a mere dinner. From beginning to end, it was nothing less than exceptional.

She pats her belly, laughing. "Whatever it is, I'll need a minute to digest some of that food. Twelve courses! I'm surprised the zipper didn't break on this dress."

"Don't worry. This is nothing too physical." The maître d' and I exchange a glance, and he heads to the door after giving me a knowing nod.

Aspen gives me a suspicious sort of look after I help her with her coat. "What do you have up your sleeve?"

"You'll see. Remember, I've had time to plan this." We step out into the icy air, our breath immediately forming a fog around our heads. But that's nothing compared to the fog from the pair of horses walking our way, pulling a sleigh I reserved to take us back to the lodge.

"Now, it's not exactly the same sort of sleigh Santa drives," I tell her when she gasps, her face lighting up. "And Rudolph was unavailable tonight, probably getting ready for the big show in a couple of days, but this will have to do."

"Unbelievable. They're so beautiful!" She beams at the driver, who nods in silent recognition.

"What do you say? How does a sleigh ride through the snow sound?" There's no need for me to ask, considering she's already climbing in. I can't help but be charmed by her excitement, which is probably why I go out of my way to come up with ideas that I know will excite her like this. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I want every minute we spend together to be one she can look back on happily someday.

A couple of thick, fur-lined blankets wait for us, so I make sure Aspen is tucked in before wrapping an arm around her and pulling her close. I nod to the driver, and he lightly

touches the reins to the horses' backs. Aspen squeals softly when we start out, causing a bubble of laughter to escape me.

"This is magical. It's so perfect." Our eyes meet, and hers are shining. "I love you so much."

"And that's only half as much as I love you." I kiss the tip of her nose, which is a little red, thanks to the cold. "And that's why it bothers me when I see something bothering you. All I ever want is to make it better."

"There is something that's been on my mind," she whispers, resting her head on my shoulder and gazing into the snowy night.

"You can tell me about it, you know. That's what I'm here for."

"I saw somebody today at the lodge."

My chest tightens instantly. "Who is he? Where can I find him?"

"Not like that." She treats me to a gentle nudge to my ribs. "I thought it was my mom. I mean, my adoptive mom."

That was unexpected. I'm not usually caught off guard like this. "At the lodge, you said?"

"Yeah, after you texted me. I looked up, and there she was—at least, there I thought she was. She looks so much like her."

"But it wasn't her, of course."

"It couldn't have been. I know that." So why does she sound unconvinced? No wonder she's so troubled.

"I didn't see much of her, is all. Just a quick look at her profile and the back of her head. But if your mom or your sister walked past you, even if you only caught a tiny glimpse of them, wouldn't you know it was them?"

"I might think it was them, but if they disappeared without a trace, and I was an entire continent away, I might think twice about it."

“I know. And it’s not like I wanted it to be her... very much. I only wanted to confirm it for myself. And I only wish I knew why.”

“I think I know why.” Because the streets are so quiet at this time of night, and the only sound is that of the sleigh gliding over the packed snow, I feel like I have to speak in a whisper, like anything louder than that would overwhelm the perfect beauty around us.

“What do you think? Because it’s been driving me crazy all day.”

“Because she raised you. Because even though she wasn’t your birth mother and you now have a nice relationship with Charlotte, she was still your mother for most of your life. The only one you knew. It’s bound to stir things up when you see somebody who looks just like her. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“When I first saw her, my heart...” She ducks her head like that will do anything to hide the emotion I know is there.

“I know.” Just like if I saw Ren standing outside one of the cabins and cottages surrounding the lodge, there would be at least a moment when happiness and relief would flood me before the bitterness and betrayal rushed in.

“I know. It’s natural. But I think the odds of her being here are pretty slim.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve let it go. It just sort of bothered me that I kind of wanted it to be her.” She lets out a long sigh before snuggling a little closer. “Now that’s off my chest.”

“I am good for a few things, you know. That’s kind of the whole point of me being part of your life.”

“I know you’re good for a few things.” Under the blanket, she slides a hand over my thigh. “Why do you think I keep you around?”

“Cute.” But there’s nothing cute about the way her hand lingers, then moves higher until she cups my swelling bulge.

It looks like she's shaken off her mood at just the right time. A four-poster bed at the lodge is just waiting to be taken advantage of.

CHAPTER FOUR

*A*spen

THE ENERGY in the air is electric when we reach the lodge. He doesn't say a word as we cross the lobby and get on the elevator, settling for holding my hand and occasionally glancing my way. I can't pretend I don't see what's in his eyes. I can't pretend I don't know where the night is going.

And I really wish the elevator would move faster.

We get there eventually and enter the suite. The staff already came in for turndown service and started a fire, which now warms the room and adds a romantic glow. That, plus the snowy scene outside the windows, makes it appear like a scene out of some fairy tale.

Quinton pours a drink at the minibar next to the fireplace. I decline his offer since I don't want my senses dulled by any more alcohol than we had with dinner.

He settles for leaning against the mantel, rattling the ice in his glass and staring at me. "Take off the dress," he orders in a deep, commanding voice. "Slowly."

A shiver runs up my spine as I turn, reaching behind me for the zipper. I lower it an inch at a time, letting it slide over my shoulders and down my arms before it drops to the floor. Then I turn around again and watch his nostrils flare and his jaw clenches when he takes in the lacy black bra and panties I bought for the trip.

“Fuck,” he groans before sipping his whiskey. There’s a definite twitching in his pants, and the sight tightens my nipples while making my heart race a little faster than before.

“What do you want me to do?” I whisper, and that was the right thing to say since his eyes light up.

“I want you to remove everything but your heels, then walk over to the bed and get on all fours so I can look at you.” I never break eye contact as I reach behind me to unclasp the bra. “Turn around when you take off the panties,” he adds. “Bend at the waist. I want to see all of you.”

Holy shit, it’s getting hot in here. I go slowly and listen for the sound of his breath catching when I work the waistband down over my ass, then my thighs. I feel the warm air on my pussy and asshole and know he can see them both.

He might control the situation, but I feel powerful as I cross the room, knowing he’s glued to my every movement. I take my time climbing onto the bed and remain on all fours so he can inspect me again. I’m so wet, so ready.

“What should I do to you?” he murmurs, drawing nearer. “Run an ice cube down your crack until you beg me to stop? Maybe I’ll put it inside you and hold your legs closed so you have no choice but to let it melt in there.” His fingers skim my ass cheeks, and I can’t help but moan a little, closing my eyes.

“No,” he finally decides. “I have a better idea. Lie on your back with your feet close to the end of the bed.”

He’s busy doing something as I arrange myself, and soon, I know what it is. He was pulling red satin restraints from one of his bags. Restraints that he ties around one ankle before knotting the other end around the nearest bedpost. My already wet pussy gets wetter when he ties the other ankle, leaving my legs spread, knees in the air.

Then he wraps one around my wrists, binding them together before attaching the other end to the headboard. My arms are over my head, my naked body is covered in goose bumps, and I can’t wait to see what happens next.

“There’s not a more beautiful sight on this planet than you right now.” He walks around the bed slowly, one measured step after another, his eyes never leaving me. “Tied up like this, completely at my mercy. Wondering what I’ll do next.” He comes to a stop between my parted thighs and runs the backs of his fingers over my exposed pussy, dragging the middle finger between my lips and teasing my entrance until I squirm and whimper. “So wet. It’s enough to make me think you like this.” He probes me, sliding the tip of his finger in and out. “Is that true? You like this? Tied up like a fuck toy, waiting for me to use you?”

There’s only one answer I can give. “Yes!” I gasp, struggling to bear down on his finger and pull him deeper but unable to move very much thanks to the way he arranged me. Which, of course, is exactly what he had in mind.

“Greedy girl. You don’t get satisfaction until I decide to give it to you. Understood?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Not good enough. I want a yes or no. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand.”

“Good girl.” He reaches into his back pocket one more time, withdrawing a final strip of satin. I know where it’s going to go, and I lift my head so he can drape it over my eyes and tie it. My heart’s racing, and my breath comes faster. I trust him completely, with all of me, but it’s still a little nerve-racking when I don’t know exactly what he has in mind.

“I’ve been thinking about this ever since I found this place,” he murmurs. I wish I could see him, but his voice tells me he’s still standing beside the bed—and now, he’s lowering his zipper. “Imagining what I would do once I had you like this. How many different ways I could use you. How many times I could make you come.”

I’m getting wetter with every word he speaks, leaving a puddle under me.

The mattress shifts as he climbs up beside me. I open my mouth when his thumb strokes the seam of my lips, and he inserts the digit. "Show me what a good girl you'll be when I feed you my cock," he growls. I suck him in deeper, using my tongue in slow, sensuous circles. "Hungry for me, are you? Hungry for the taste of it? You like it when I fill your mouth, don't you?"

I let him go so I can speak. "Yes!"

He cups the back of my head, positioning me just right before rubbing the tip of his cock over my mouth. "Let's see what you can do with this." I extend my tongue to swipe it over him, and he groans helplessly before thrusting inside without warning, almost choking me with the force.

He doesn't wait for me to adjust, pulling his length out only a little before plunging in even deeper than before. His thrusts are fast and hard, and his fingers dig into my scalp, where he holds me in place.

He fucks my face mercilessly until all I can do is fight to keep from gagging every time he hits the back of my throat. There is nothing in the world but the taste of him, the smell of him, and the sound of his grunts every time he goes deep enough to crush my nose against his base. The feel of his hand in my hair, tugging, gripping me tight. Controlling me. Oh god, I love it.

"Fucking gorgeous," he pants. "All mine to use. Whatever I want to do. You can't stop me." I moan out my agreement, my approval, which only makes him use me harder. I'm close to choking on him before he withdraws and rubs his slick head around my mouth while I gag and cough.

He leaves me alone for a moment, and I try to listen for any movement, but the blood rushing in my ears drowns him out. That makes the shock of an ice cube against my pussy that much more intense. "Quinton!" I shriek, fighting to wriggle away, but there's no moving, thanks to the way he tied me.

"I thought this hot pussy could use a little cooling off." He laughs at my agony, at the way I whimper and strain. The sensations are incredible and only get better when he replaces

the ice with his tongue, heating what he just cooled off. I try to jerk my hips and encourage him, but he uses the ice again. “You don’t get to do that. You come when I say you can. Understood?”

“Yes!” I sob, which makes him laugh again before he inserts what’s left of the ice cube deep inside me and uses his fingers to keep it in there. My sob turns to a scream, and my body stiffens, but I’m not coming, not yet. More like standing on the edge of the precipice, every nerve singing, my pussy quivering as the torture goes on and on before the ice finally melts.

The next thing I know, I feel his mouth on me, sucking the moisture from me, licking me clean. “I want to come...” I whine. “Please, can I come?”

“Not yet.” I don’t know if I love him or hate him now. Both, maybe. I can’t think too clearly now.

“What else can I do to you?” he murmurs while running his hands along my inner thighs. My frustrated tears soak into my blindfold, but oh, it feels so good. My body’s on fire. It’s never been this intense.

I’m almost disappointed when he frees my ankles—but he doesn’t untie the restraints from around them. Instead, he lifts my leg and ties the long restraint to the bedpost over my right shoulder. He then does the same to the left. Now I’m spread wide open with my legs in a V-shape, completely exposed.

He wastes no time taking advantage. The mattress shifts when he climbs up, and soon his thighs hit my ass. It’s the sweetest relief when he slides inside me, joining us. “Yes, yes, that’s good,” I whimper, hanging on the edge between pain and pleasure as he uses my body, leaning against me and pressing my knees into my shoulders.

“Mine.” He slams into me, pulling a strangled cry from my throat. “Mine.”

“Yes!” It’s building, the tension and delicious heat. “Yes!”

“And when you come, it’s because I made it happen.”

“Yes,” I whimper.

“Do you want to come now?” He pulls back and practically breaks me in half when he slams deep and hard, driving me into the mattress. “Are you close?”

“Yes, oh god, please!” His dark, breathless laughter is all I hear beyond my desperate cries. “Please, please!”

“You’ve been a good girl,” he decides before driving into me again and again, losing his rhythm in favor of flat-out rutting. “You can come now. Come on my cock, Aspen. Be a good girl.”

It’s like magic, the way my body reacts to his words. Enough to push me the extra bit I need to send me over the edge. He covers my mouth with his hand in time to muffle the screams I can’t hold back, screams of surprise at the intensity and relief as bliss radiates through me like ripples on water.

He pulls out all at once and grunts before his hot cum splashes over my chest. “You look so pretty covered in my cum,” he mutters as one spurt after another hits my skin. I can only offer a vague, exhausted smile.

He’s smiling, too, when he slides the blindfold away from my eyes. “You are a living, breathing fantasy.” He strokes my cheek gently, lovingly. “Nothing in the world is better than watching you fall apart because of what I’m doing to you.”

“I can think of one thing,” I whisper. “Being the one who gets to fall apart.”

“Good point.” I’m almost disappointed when he unties my ankles, even if it means being able to breathe more easily.

But he doesn’t untie my wrists. “What are you doing?” I ask as he walks away, headed for the bathroom.

“I’m going to clean you up,” he announces while the water runs in the sink. “Then I’m going to make sure you have some water and take a minute to rest.”

His eyes twinkle when he joins me again to wipe his cum from my skin. “What?” he mutters when he feels me staring at him. “Did you think that was it? That’s just round one, baby. You’d better settle in.”

His wide smile is knowing and full of promise. “It’s going to be a long night.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Quinton

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” Aspen turns to me, wearing sunglasses that take up half her face. “Too much?”

“You aren’t taking this seriously,” I grumble, shaking my head at the glasses. “How am I supposed to spoil the hell out of you if you won’t take it seriously? You’re supposed to be picking out things you love or at least like a lot so I can buy them for you.”

“I don’t need a whole bunch of stuff. I told you that.”

“Then you’re going to end up with a whole bunch of shit you don’t even like because I’m spending a lot of money on you today. Might as well like what you end up with.”

“Fine,” she huffs while returning the glasses to the display. “Be careful what you wish for. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I think I know what I’m doing.” I steer her away from the display and over to the shelves holding the purses. She could use a new one, and I know enough about these things to know a Prada bag is usually a good bet. It takes a minute, but she finally starts warming up, trying to decide between two of them. When I suggest she get both, the look she gives me could freeze me on the spot. Obviously, I’ll come back and buy the one she returns to the shelf.

Once we finish at Prada, we continue to the Louis Vuitton store. “I would like to get something for Charlotte,” she

suggests along the way. “A scarf, maybe. She wore a lot of them the last time we visited.”

“That’s a good idea. You should buy two, so you’ll match the next time we’re there.”

“You never miss a chance to spend money on me, do you?”

“Not if I can help it.” She can pretend all she wants, but she’s loving this almost as much as I am. Strolling the promenade with her scratches an itch I didn’t know I had. Just the two of us, even surrounded by so many strangers coming in and out of stores and restaurants. As far as I’m concerned, we might as well be the only two people in the world. And there’s something to be said for the degree of anonymity here. Being Xander Rossi’s son has its benefits, for sure, but I can appreciate not being recognized the way I usually am in our everyday life.

“You look happy.” I didn’t know she was watching me as we walked hand in hand. “And you slept a lot more last night than you usually do.”

“It must be this mountain air.”

“Maybe we should move here. It might be good for us.”

“Maybe.” I would agree to just about anything right now, so long as I could keep her smiling.

I make it a point in the Louis Vuitton store to point out a few things I like since I know she’s looking for gift ideas for me. For the most part, though, I have more fun pointing out things I think she’ll like. I don’t even mind carrying things for her as she browses even though one of the store clerks offers to do it for us.

She’s trying to decide between a pair of wallets when my attention wanders, and I look out the front window. It’s a cloudy day, late afternoon, and the white lights strung along the eaves of every chalet-style store are now glowing. It’s idyllic enough to make me consider turning this trip into an annual tradition.

It only takes one split second for my mood to flip. The joy and carefreeness lift from my chest and are replaced with the dreadful thought of seeing Aspen hurt. My unwavering need to protect my wife roars to new heights when I see the woman who broke her heart walk past the store.

I must grunt or make a similar sort of noise since Aspen turns to me. “What’s wrong? You’re bored out of your mind, aren’t you? I’ll wrap this up—”

“No, not at all.” I glance toward the window again, and the blond woman is now crossing the street. Son of a bitch. It looks just like her. “I just remembered something.”

“What?”

“I promised I’d give Dad a call. And I think I saw something I’d like to get for you in one of the stores we passed.”

She shakes her head with a sigh. “You probably already got me too much.”

“There’s no such thing.” I press a firm kiss against her lips before ducking out and searching for the woman. Either she’s who she looks like or she has a doppelgänger. Now I understand why Aspen was so convinced. Until now, I assumed her eyes were playing tricks on her. Like she wants so much to bring closure to her relationship with her adopted mother that she saw someone who looked similar and imagined it to be her.

Now, I get it. Because I would swear the woman who passed the window was Clyde Mather’s wife. Aspen’s adoptive mother.

The woman crosses the street, and I follow, noting the bags she carries in both hands. Somebody has been doing a little Christmas shopping today—for herself, for someone else, who knows? Judging by her clothing, she’s not hurting for money. She looks just like any one of the pampered, wealthy women crawling the promenade.

She steps into the Cartier store, having a conversation on her cell that ends once she’s inside. She tucks the phone away

before she's greeted by one of the employees, then shakes her head at what's probably an offer of assistance. She starts wandering, looking into the cases, smiling as she admires the glittering jewelry.

I don't know what makes me do it. Rage on Aspen's behalf, perhaps. I wouldn't expect the woman to be part of my wife's life anymore, especially not after the way things ended up with her now dead husband and her life as good as over back home. It makes sense for her to run away now that she's associated with a rat.

But to completely cut off the daughter she was supposed to love? I've seen the pain in Aspen's eyes and heard it in her voice. The abandonment and all the questions. Not knowing if she's okay or even alive.

That's what sends me into the store when I know I ought to turn around and pretend I saw nothing. "Hey," I call out once I draw nearer. "Hold up!"

She turns, a perplexed smile beginning to form before she recognizes me—and her face falls. How is she going to play this? Will she pretend she's somebody else, that she doesn't know me? I almost hope she does. I want her to give me a reason to put her through one of these display cases.

And she's considering it, too. It's written all over her face, the way she hesitates. "What are you doing here?" she finally whispers, the color draining from her face.

"I could ask you the same thing. It looks like I'm not the only one enjoying a holiday trip."

"Is she here?"

"Who would you be referring to?" I ask, folding my arms. "She has a name, or have you forgotten by now?"

"Don't you dare! Not when your family forced me—"

"Forced you to do what? To flee the country without letting your daughter know you were at least alive? You realize she thinks you're dead, right? You could have warned her. You could have done something, anything, to let her know

you were still alive.” My anger mounts by the second, and I know this woman’s appearance will send Aspen into a tailspin.

“That wouldn’t have helped her, and you know it.”

I grit my teeth. “Why don’t you admit you never cared? You think I don’t know how dismissive you were of her when she needed you?”

“If I was dismissive, it was because of you,” she snarls, firing back with dismay.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” The same clerk who first greeted her at the door comes to a stop beside us, and he doesn’t bother hiding who he thinks is at fault here. He’s basically glaring at me but in a polite way. For all he knows, I could be somebody important. I’m sure people who work around here are used to sweet-talking assholes if they want to keep their jobs.

“We’re fine.” I never look away from her, my rage barely holding at a simmer. Who the fuck does she think she is trying to blame this shit on me. The fucking audacity of this woman.

“Everything is fine,” she confirms, even if it’s obvious she doesn’t mean it. “Thank you.”

I wait until he creeps away before hissing, “She saw you, you know. She knows you’re here.”

Her eyes widen. I finally got through to her. “How did she ___”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave. Because I don’t need the sight of you ruining what’s been a happy trip so far.”

“That’s just like you Rossis. Thinking you can dictate what the rest of the world does. The selfishness, I swear.”

Forget trying to keep this civil for the sake of avoiding trouble. “Don’t you give me any of that bullshit,” I growl, “or else—”

A sharp gasp startles me into turning around, bringing me face-to-face with my shocked wife. “Aspen...”

She's not looking at me. I could set myself on fire, and she probably wouldn't notice right away. Not when she's staring over my shoulder in horror.

"I knew it was you," she whispers, and the look of anguish in her eyes is enough to bring me to my knees.

CHAPTER SIX

*A*spen

IT'S like looking at a ghost. I was so sure she was dead that it might as well be what I'm doing right now. Staring in horror at the ghost of the woman who I used to think was my mom.

That might be true, but ghosts don't usually look better than they did when they were alive, do they? And she does, for sure. I can't imagine how much money she spent on the outfit she's wearing or what's in her shopping bags. The woman's husband died in prison, and she hasn't spoken to the adopted daughter she raised for almost two decades, but she's swanning around like somebody without a care in the world.

How many nights did I spend crying, wondering what happened to her once she disappeared? Because no, my own mother would never walk away without so much as hinting she was still alive and making this move of her own free will. That would be too twisted and unforgivable. I couldn't conceive of it at the time.

When will I finally figure out how determined most people are to be selfish assholes?

"Aspen," she whispers, and for some reason, that's what breaks me. The sound of her whispering my name. I've heard it so many times and for so many reasons. But it never made me feel the way it does now. Heartbroken. Abandoned.

“How could you do that? How could you? You didn’t even tell me you were still alive. I never would have done that to you.” I’m sure people are looking at us, but I don’t care. “I wouldn’t have tortured you by letting you think I was dead.”

Her mouth opens and then closes like a fish out of water. After a moment, the words spill from her lips. “That’s not how it was.”

“No, that’s exactly how it was. You couldn’t wait to run off and live some big, expensive life. So what if you had a daughter who needed you? Oh, wait,” I add, laughing bitterly. “I’m not really your daughter, now am I? Yeah, I found that out, too. I guess that made it easier for you to forget I ever existed.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Quinton murmurs, taking my arm. I shake him off since I’m not finished yet.

“Don’t worry about it anymore. That’s if you ever did in the first place,” I tell her, and I hate the way my voice shakes. “I don’t need you. I don’t even want you. Enjoy your life.”

I twist on my heels and rush out of the store, not bothering to wait for Quinton. I’m sure I’m attracting attention, almost running past the stores, weaving my way in and out of small groups of people, but I don’t give one single fuck.

She never even told me she was alive. She couldn’t bother to check in on me. I guess once Clyde was dead, she figured I wasn’t her problem anymore.

I feel like my heart’s going to explode. I’m so disappointed in her that I don’t know what to do with the feeling. It’s not like I couldn’t have gone on with my life just fine if I had never seen her here. I’m happy with Q, and I have Charlotte and Lucas now. My birth parents. But dammit, they weren’t the ones who sat up with me when I was sick. They weren’t the ones I went to when I had nightmares as a little girl.

It’s probably crazy, but I pull out my phone with shaking hands and call Lucas. “Hey, I didn’t think I’d hear from you until Christmas,” he greets me, and his warm voice makes the tears I’ve been fighting spill over a little.

Due to the tears in my eyes, I have to stop before I crash into something. I duck alongside one of the little restaurants and lean against the wall, breathing hard. “Did you know?”

“Did I know what?” The warmth is gone, replaced with concern. “What’s wrong? You sound upset. Is everything—”

“Did you know she’s still alive? And very well, living it up in Gstaad?”

“Who?” Then in the next breath, he says, “Oh fuck. You’re kidding. Your other mom is there?”

“Did you know?” I ask accusingly once more.

“I had no idea. You know I’ve looked into it, too. She dropped off the face of the earth. No one could find her.”

“And she landed in Switzerland.” It’s so ridiculous I have to laugh. “I guess you can afford to do that when you conveniently forget you have a kid, even if I was adopted.”

“I’m sorry this had to happen. Did you talk to her?”

“Oh, yeah. She knows exactly how I feel now.” Does she ever. In fact, part of me wishes I could’ve said more to her, but I was angry, so upset.

“That’s a good thing. You deserved that chance to tell her how you felt about her disappearing. And now you know she is alive and well. I know that weighed on you.”

“But did she have to look so well without me?”

He sighs. “I know. It’s not easy imagining her jet-setting around the world like that.”

“It’s like she just forgot. How could she do that unless she never loved me at all, which would make total sense.”

“You know feelings and things like that aren’t my forte, but I do know some things about the world. And I’m pretty sure her running around and living her life now has nothing to do with the way she felt about you. You don’t raise a child all those years and then stop caring about them overnight. Don’t put that on yourself.”

I frown. “We were having such a good time, too.”

“Don’t let this ruin anything. You deserve to have fun. Your holiday shouldn’t be ruined because of her.”

I know he’s right, but that’s harder than you’d think. “I’ll do my best. Thanks for talking with me.”

“Hey. I wasn’t able to be there for you all those years before, but I’m here now. You need anything else, just let me know.” I promise I will before ending the call and taking a big, deep breath.

Now I’m sorry for running out of the store the way I did. I owe Q more than that. He’s probably looking for me, too. Pretty soon, I bet there’ll be sirens going off somewhere and police swarming the village. The idea would make me smile if it wasn’t so realistic. Maybe not for most people, but definitely for somebody like Quinton. He makes being possessive and protective a full-time job. One minute out of his presence, and he’s having a panic attack.

I start for the lodge. My feet are heavy, but I force myself through one step after another. The dread that spreads through me when I imagine running into her at the lodge is almost enough to stop me in my tracks, but I push through it. I vow that I’ll handle it better if I see her again. I can only hope I don’t dissolve into tears and beg her to explain when she stopped loving me and why if that time comes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Quinton

SHE'S NOT in the suite.

I expected her to be there when I returned to the lodge, but the room was empty. Where else would she be?

By the time I make it back down to the lobby, I'm seeing red. What a way to ruin what was otherwise a perfect holiday. It's a shame that bitch was left alive now that I've seen what her presence has done to Aspen.

I know her. She wouldn't do anything drastic. It's just the thought of her being alone, even in a beautiful place like this, when she feels the way she does that threatens to tear my heart from my chest. She's alone and probably hurting, and I want to stop that hurt. I have to. I made a promise long ago that I'd never let anyone hurt her again, and I'm half tempted to go murder her adoptive mom and bring her still beating heart to Aspen as an offering of forgiveness, but of course, I can't do that.

I'm about to approach the concierge desk and see what can be done about locating her when I spot her entering through the main doors across the lobby. I'm almost weak with relief as I charge across the crowded space and gather her up in my arms. "You scared the fuck out of me." I hold her tighter to my chest, pressing my nose against her head, breathing her unique floral scent into my lungs. "Don't do that to me again. I almost committed murder and burned the entire place to the ground."

“I’m sorry. I had to get away from her.” She pulls back, and it’s clear she’s been crying. Her pretty green eyes are puffy and red. “And I called Lucas. That’s what took me so long. I had to know if he knew, which thankfully, he said he didn’t.”

“I believe him.” Lucas spent copious hours searching for her adoptive mom. He wouldn’t have wasted all that time only to turn around and know where she was the whole time.

“Oh, Aspen!” A woman’s voice pierces my ears. “It’s good to see you again! I wanted to introduce you to—” I shoot a puzzled expression toward a brunette holding the hand of a tall man who scowls once he catches sight of my wife.

“Are you all right?” he demands, coming closer when he notices Aspen’s tearstained face.

“Excuse me, but who the fuck are you?” I’m halfway to placing myself between them when Aspen places a hand on my chest.

“I’m fine, Teagan.” She looks up at me with an almost apologetic smile. “This is the friend I told you about. Teagan, this is my husband, Quinton.”

Now she’s the one who looks apologetic, taking the hand of who I suppose is her husband. “Sorry, I didn’t notice you looking so upset. Are you okay?”

I open my mouth, prepared to tell the woman to get lost, but Aspen is quicker. “I’m okay. Everything is fine. Really. But thank you for caring.”

“Come on, Mason.” Obviously, this guy doesn’t believe us, but his girlfriend is smart enough to pull him away before he makes a mistake and pushes any further.

I barely wait until they’re gone before taking Aspen’s face in my hands. “What do you need? What can I do?”

“I just want to go back up to the room and try to get my head together.”

“That’s fine. Let’s go.” I steer her toward the elevator, her head resting on my shoulder as we walk.

“I really will be fine. I’m not trying to ruin the day or anything.”

“I would rather you take a little time to relax and feel what you’re feeling than pretend to be fine for my sake.” Once we’re in the suite, I set our bags aside, then unzip her jacket. “Come on. Let’s sit by the fire to warm you up. Do you want me to order anything from downstairs? Something to eat or drink?”

“That’s sweet of you, but this is enough right now.” She sits on the sofa in front of the fireplace, and I join her, putting an arm around her shoulders while she tucks her feet under herself and snuggles against me.

Turning toward me, she says, “I really am sorry for running off like I did. Did anything else happen while I was gone?”

I can barely hold back a growl at the memory of being in that woman’s presence. “No, I left her standing there. There was nothing else to be said.”

“I know it shouldn’t matter. But I can’t help it.”

“You’re only human. You don’t have to apologize. And it was a big shock—even I was shocked when I saw her.”

Curiosity flickers in her eyes. “So you followed her to the store?”

“I had to see for myself. And once I did, I couldn’t help but go in and tell her off.”

She smiles. “You’re always trying to protect me.”

“There will never be a day when you have to worry about me not protecting you. The day I chose to marry you, hell, even before that, I protected you. It’s my job.”

“You’re the best husband ever, and I’m sorry for my crummy mood. I just wish I understood. Doesn’t it bother her at all? Does she have a conscience? How do you abandon somebody and never see or talk to them again?” She snorts softly. “It would have been easier if she looked miserable.”

A grin tugs at my lips. “I can make her miserable if you want.”

“No, you cannot!” she scolds before letting out a small laugh.

At least she’s chuckling, which is a good sign. I hold her tight as if I could somehow make up for the loss she’s feeling. “You are loved. So deeply and completely. Don’t ever forget that.”

“How could I? You remind me all the time, every day.”

“And I’m sure whatever happened had nothing to do with you. You got caught up in a bunch of shit you had no hand in. It’s unfair, and I wish there were some way to change it. But you are not to blame for any of it.” Now, looking back, it brings me nothing but pain to remember how I punished her for things that weren’t her fault. I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make up for the pain I caused, and it won’t be enough.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but it still hurts.” She buries her face in my neck. “Is that wrong?”

“Not at all.” I stroke her hair, then let my hand slide down the slope of her back. “You’re only human, too. You can’t turn your emotions on and off with the flip of a light switch.”

“You do.” Her voice cracks.

“Yeah, well, I’m a different story.” I’ve had years of practice, thanks to the family business. You don’t walk around with your heart on your sleeve when your father is the head of the Mafia.

“Hold me,” she whispers, almost climbing onto my lap. “I need to be close to you. I need you.”

“You’ve got me.” I pull back a little, tipping her chin upward so our mouths align. “That’s one thing you never have to wonder about.” I press my lips to hers, and in that kiss is all the love I carry deep inside, somewhere only she can reach. I hate seeing her in pain and hearing her doubt herself. Knowing how confused and betrayed she feels. I want to take it all away, to wipe the slate clean so she can have the joy she

deserves. Right now, this will have to do. Kissing her deeply, I hear the way she sighs when my hands explore her more slowly, deliberately.

“Touch me.” She’s peeling off her jacket and the sweater underneath, and I’m happy to help. She’s one gift I’ll never get tired of unwrapping. Once she’s down to her bra, it’s my turn, and I waste no time chucking my jacket and sweater before pulling her close again.

Now, nothing but hunger, desire, and heat builds between us. The heat from the fire is nothing compared to what’s blazing in me as I lay her down on the thick rug. For a moment, all I can do is stare down at her perfection and wonder what I did to get so lucky. We’ve been through so much over the years. Who knew this was where we would be now?

Her bra clasps in the front, and I unhook it before lowering myself on top of her and taking one of her nipples into my mouth. She threads her fingers through my hair, holding me down so I can lavish her. And I do, lapping at her like an ice cream cone while working on getting her pants off. She lifts her hips, letting me lower them along with her leggings and the thong underneath them. I cup her pussy with one hand, and she gasps, arching her back, spreading her legs wider, and inviting me between them.

It’s more than my constant craving for her that has me kissing my way down her body until I reach her swollen, slick lips. It’s being able to relate to her need to forget. Just for a little while, she wants to lose herself in pleasure, to stop thinking and worrying in favor of feeling. That’s what I have in mind when I run my tongue along her slit before pressing harder, sliding between her lips, and thrusting my tongue into her quivering channel.

“Oh god, yes...” She rocks her hips, fucking herself on my tongue and coating it with her sweet nectar.

I watch her, drinking in the sight of her abandon. Eyes closed, lips parted, and her head rolling from side to side. I

replace my tongue with my fingers, sliding two of them inside her so I can feast on her clit.

“That’s right,” she whispers, jerking her hips. “So good. You’re so good to me.” I respond by hooking my fingers, massaging her G-spot while sucking on her little bud. She moves like a wave, undulating, tits heaving with each labored breath. She starts tightening around my fingers, and I increase the pressure from them and my lips, flicking the tip of my tongue against the bundle of nerves under it.

She lets out a broken cry, “Oh fuck! Quinton.” Her hips shoot up off the floor, her thighs squeezing my head like a melon. Nothing will ever top the satisfaction of knowing I was the one to do this to her, to make her call my name over and over as she rides out her release. By the time she’s finished, my palm is slick with her release. My impulse is to lick it up, but instead, I pull out my cock and rub her over my shaft until it glistens.

I find her watching me through half-lidded eyes, her face flushed, and her breathing still ragged and uneven. “Something about that is really hot,” she admits in a whisper.

“Why don’t you taste yourself on me?”

She sits up and replaces my hand with hers, stroking me slowly, teasing me, and brushing her tongue against my swollen cock head until I moan helplessly. “Take me into your wet mouth,” I groan, taking her by the back of the head. “Take it deep.”

Our eyes meet for an instant before she takes me between her lips; the unspoken trust that passes between us is what brings us closer. She closes her lips around me and sinks down, down, drawing me deeper. It’s bliss, especially when she cups my balls with one hand and massages them while her head bobs up and down. She knows just how I like it, too, twisting her head from side to side, running her tongue up and down my shaft, sucking a little harder on the head before plunging back down again.

“So fucking good,” I groan, thrusting until I hit the back of her throat. “I could fuck your mouth forever and watch the

cum drip out the sides. I could lick your fucking tears off your cheeks, the salt tang only making me harder.” My words egg her on, and she takes me eagerly, slurping on my shaft. Her moans reverberate through me until the familiar tingling begins to build, and I have to pull out, leaving a string of saliva connecting us before she wipes her lips with the back of her hand.

I stroke her hair, loving her and wanting to split her open with my cock in equal measure. “Ride me, baby.” We switch places, with me stretching out in front of the fire before she straddles me, wasting no time impaling herself on my cock.

It’s always the same thrill, filling her like this. Her muscles stretch, gripping me tight, enveloping me in her wet heat. After closing her eyes to adjust to the sensation, she opens them. The green in them is luminescent, and she holds my gaze as she begins to set her pace, grinding hard between each rise and fall.

I reach up and take hold of her creamy breasts, molding them in my hands and pinching her nipples. She covers my hands with hers, squeezing them before placing her palms against my chest to lean down and feed me her tits. I lap at one nipple, then the other, before pressing them together and flicking my tongue back and forth between them. Her head falls back, and a string of incoherent moans fills the air.

“Fuck me harder,” I coax, pinching her nipples the way she likes it, stretching upward to catch her mouth and plunge my tongue inside. Her helpless moans are so sweet, so melodic. “Make yourself come for me. I want you dripping on me before I’m dripping out of you.”

“I’m going to... I’m going to...” She rolls her hips in circles, driving herself hard against my base, tightening a little more with every thrust. “Oh yes, Quinton...”

I grab her by the hips and dig my fingers in, working with her now, my own release building. “Come for me, baby,” I groan. “Soak my cock.”

She closes her eyes, brows drawing together almost like she’s in pain a split second before she explodes. Her muscles

clench around me, drawing me in and holding me in place. I can't help but give her body what it wants. Letting go, I let out a primal growl and fill her with my cum. My cock seems to pump deep inside for a long moment. Seconds later, Aspen collapses against my chest. I hold her, stroking her back while we both come down from our dizzying high. For a long time, there's nothing but our ragged breathing and the crackling from the fire. I'm spent, body and soul, and it's a feeling I want to hold on to. I want to freeze us like this, wrapped in each other with the rest of the world on the other side of a locked door.

“I love you.” It's a breath, a whisper, a promise delivered through pursed lips.

“I love you,” I assure her before wrapping my arms around her back. “Always.” And I would gladly kill anyone who tries to hurt her, but that goes without saying by now.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*A*spen

“YOU’RE sure you want to do this?”

I eye up the snowmobile Q rented for the morning. It looks shiny and new and safe enough... I guess. “So long as you’re the one driving the thing, and I can hold on tight and close my eyes if it gets scary. I want to do this.”

Quinton bursts out laughing before kissing the top of my head. “It’s not scary. Believe me. As soon as we’re done, you’re going to wonder when we can do it again.”

I tap my chin, pretending to think. “Sounds like something else we’ve done together.”

“Good point.” Then he jams a helmet over my head before doing the same to himself. “Let’s go. Remember, whatever you do, keep a hold of me. You do that, and everything will be fine.”

Famous last words, right? But it’s only snowmobiling, and I did say I wanted to come along. Do I really want to? Not exactly, but it makes him happy. And I need to get out of the suite, anyway. If I go down to read by the fire, I might end up running into her again. I don’t want that. I don’t even want her to have the chance to defend herself. I can’t look at her again. I can’t even hear her voice.

Snowmobiling it is. It’s not a bad idea to get my mind off things. Something tells me rocketing down the mountainside

on the back of a snowmobile might be what it takes. Who can ask themselves all kinds of painful questions about their past when they're busy clinging to somebody, hoping they live through the experience?

I climb on behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. Then we're off. Slowly at first, if only for my sake, but soon he lays on the throttle, and before I know it, the snow-covered trees whip past us. The engine rumbles through the air, rattling my butt, and I find myself laughing.

It's exhilarating, the cold air hitting my face, snow flying up on either side of us as we cut a path down the mountainside. And I thought I'd want to ride with my eyes closed the entire time? Now, I'm stretching, straining to see more over Quinton's shoulder. I almost wish I was driving. I squeeze him a little, squealing, and I barely hear him laugh before he increases the speed.

By the time we finish, I'm freezing, and my cheeks sting from the wind. They also ache from me smiling so much. "Is it too soon to say I told you so?" He teases me once we climb off in front of the rental office.

"Okay, whatever," I grumble while he laughs. "I guess you were right. That was a blast."

He jerks a thumb in the direction we came from. "Do you want to go again? You could drive this time."

"I don't know if I can handle much more of that right now, but definitely again before we leave. What I could really go for is some lunch."

"That can be arranged." Once we've returned the snowmobile, we walk back up to the lodge hand in hand, trying to decide where to grab something to eat after changing out of our gear.

Maybe he doesn't notice, but I do. All the kids running around with their families, throwing snowballs at each other, asking if they can get hot chocolate or go ice skating. Is it morbid of me to think about my mom at a time like this? And no matter what, I can't stop thinking about her that way. She's

still my mom, even if Charlotte is my actual birth mother. I've called her Mom for too long now.

She was a good mom. She showed the same patience these parents display toward their rambunctious kids. She was loving and nurturing. Sure, there were times when she seemed a little wrapped up in herself, but she took care of me like I was her own child. She didn't have to do that. And she never once made me feel anything less than loved. I would never have guessed she wasn't the one who gave birth to me.

It's so hard remembering that when comparing her to the woman I saw at the store. What if she was glad to be rid of me? Like now, she can finally start living her life without me hanging around her neck.

I need to stop torturing myself. And maybe I need to forgive her a little bit while I'm at it. I wonder if I could ask the front desk crew to dial up her room so we can talk things out. What if seeing her here is a gift, like my chance at closure? I don't want to waste it.

When we reach the suite, an envelope lies on the floor in front of the door, like somebody slid it underneath. Quinton picks it up and examines it before handing it to me. "It's got your name on it."

Yes, and I know that handwriting. It's the big, swoopy letters she always uses. "It's from her."

"You don't have to read it if you don't want to. She's hurt you enough, and the thought of her doing it again makes me murderous."

I gave him a shaky laugh, still staring down at the envelope. "Like the curiosity wouldn't kill me." Even my legs are a little shaky, so I sit on the sofa before opening the envelope and pulling out a folded piece of paper with the name of the lodge embossed along the top.

Aspen – I understand why you wouldn't want to see me or hear anything I have to say, but I can't leave things like this without at least making sure you know a few things. First, I was telling the truth when I told Quinton yesterday that I left

without telling you as a way of trying to protect you. You didn't need me around when there were so many questions about what I knew and whether I played a part in what Clyde did. We discussed it, the two of us, and decided it would be for the best if I removed myself from your life. But it wasn't easy. I need you to know it wasn't easy.

Quinton sits next to me and closes a hand over my knee but doesn't say anything. Knowing he's right next to me gives me the strength to keep reading despite the tears in my eyes.

I know I was never the perfect mother, but please don't think that had anything to do with how I felt about you. I have loved you your entire life—not a day has gone by that I haven't. And even though we can't be together now, I had to make sure there was a mother figure in your life once I was no longer part of it. That was why I got in contact with Charlotte and told her where she could find you.

I cover my mouth but can't stifle the gasp. "Oh my god. I always wondered what made Charlotte come looking for me. It was her. She told Charlotte where I was."

"She did that for you," Quinton murmurs. "I'm sure that couldn't have been easy, either." This is a big change from the way he usually talks about her.

I'm checking out from the resort today. Not because I don't want to see you again, but because I'm sure it will be easier for you not to see me. Please enjoy yourself while you're here, and I hope you have a wonderful Christmas—and a wonderful life—because no one deserves that more than you. I will always carry you in my heart.

I drop the paper onto my lap and cover my face with my hands. These aren't tears of sadness or grief or loss. They feel good, actually—like a relief. At least now I know. I don't have to wonder anymore if she suffered or what ended up happening to her. At least I know she's doing all right. And that whatever she did was for my sake.

"Will you be okay?" Quinton asks.

I'm smiling as I lower my hands, my head bobbing up and down. "I have everything I need. And I'm just grateful I had parents who cared so much about me."

"You still do," he reminds me, drawing me close. "Lucas and Charlotte love you. My mother loves you. My father... I don't think he would ever admit it out loud, but he loves you, too. We're your family. You'll always belong with us."

Forget shopping at Prada and Cartier. This is the best Christmas present I could ask for.

CHAPTER NINE

Quinton

I COULDN'T IMAGINE A MORE idyllic Christmas Eve scene than the one that greets us when we reach the restaurant. Nestled high in the mountains, it's surrounded by trees whose white lights dance in the wind. The biggest tree of all sits directly in front of the restaurant, decorated in what have to be thousands of red, green, and gold lights. Snow covers the building's roof, smoke rises from the chimney, and the scene inside is warm and inviting. In other words, perfection.

"It looks like something you would see on a Christmas card," Aspen murmurs, beaming as she looks up at the enormous tree. "It's beautiful. I could stand here and admire it all night."

"A nice idea, but maybe we should get inside before we freeze to death." It will look a lot better once we're inside, where it's warm. And she's the one wearing a dress—I can only imagine how cold she must be. We walk inside, and instantly, the warmth from a nearby hearth begins seeping into my bones.

The inside of the restaurant is beautifully decorated and draped in pine boughs that fill the air with a scent that will always bring Christmas to mind. I reserved us a table by the front window, knowing Aspen would want to admire the scenery.

“You thought of everything, didn’t you?” she asks with a soft smile as we take our seats.

“I know you, and I know what makes you happy.”

“You make me happy. Just you. And being here together, the two of us, means everything. I want to make sure you know that. Even though things got kind of emotional there for a little while, I would rather be here with you than anywhere else.”

It’s as close to a miracle as somebody like me will ever experience, looking across the table and seeing all my love reflected back at me. “That’s exactly how I feel.”

“So I guess you don’t want this little gift I got for you.” She pulls a small, wrapped box out of her purse and slides it across the table. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it. I know we said we’d wait until we got back to the lodge, but I wanted to give this to you now.”

“You know you didn’t need to do this.” Honestly, I have everything I could ever want or need.

“Please. Like I’m going to let a holiday pass without buying you something. Go ahead, open it.” She’s practically bouncing up and down in her chair, so it’s not like I could deny her.

I pull out a sleek, elegant watch and smile at her. “I love it.”

“I found it down in the village at one of the shops. As soon as I saw it, I knew I had to see it on you.” I indulge her by removing it from the box and placing it on my wrist, where it does provide a nice finishing touch against my suit. “Oh, it looks so nice.”

“It really does, but then you have good taste.”

“Well, I guess I do. I married you, didn’t I?”

I can’t help but grimace. “Have we really been married so long that it’s time to start making corny jokes?”

“There’s never a bad time for corny jokes.”

“It’s funny you should bring up our marriage, though. I’ve had that on my mind lately.”

Her brow furrows. “That’s not a great lead-in.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I would choose you again a hundred times over. No questions asked. But I’m afraid this hasn’t been totally fair to you.” After all, she wasn’t exactly given a choice. It was either marry me for my family’s protection or else. I already loved her and would have asked her to marry me eventually, but that wasn’t the way things panned out.

“Not fair to me? Look where we are. Look at the life I live now. That’s all thanks to you.”

“Still. We didn’t get the best beginning. So I wanted to try to make it up to you.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, a nervous little smile beginning to play over her lips.

“I didn’t get the chance to do this right the first time.” It might be the most cliché thing I’ve ever done and completely against my nature. How many times have I witnessed something like this in a nice restaurant, usually while dining with my family? Of course, the girls always thought it was romantic, while I grumbled about how pathetic it was to do something like this in public.

Now, I understand a little better. Now I know how much love it takes to leave a man willing to do this. Now I understand it’s not about me. It’s about making things right for her. Making her happy and giving her the sort of experience she deserves.

That’s what forces me out of my chair and down onto one knee beside her.

“Oh my god.” She covers her mouth with one shaking hand. “You don’t have to do this. We’re already married!”

“Better late than never, right? How many times do you think you’ll have the chance to watch me drop to one knee in a crowded restaurant?” I give her a wink, as a part of me wants to answer for her like an asshole and say never again.

I ignore the gentle hum of anticipation in the air as the people dining around us take notice. “I could have waited until we got back to the lodge,” I murmur, looking up at her and blocking everything and everyone else out. She’s all that matters. “But I’ll never have a more perfect setting. And I want you to remember this as the moment we chose to become one.”

“I was already going to,” she whispers. Tears pool in her eyes, making them gleam greener and brighter than ever in the candlelight.

“Then we’ll say this is all for me,” I suggest with a shrug. “Because I can’t shake the feeling you were robbed. This is how it should have gone. I should have gotten down on one knee and proposed to you this way, with all this beauty around us. And I didn’t want us to start a new year without me making up for what you missed out on.”

I take her left hand in mine. “Aspen, you mean the world to me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, nothing I wouldn’t give you so long as it made you happy. You deserve nothing but the best. I only hope I can live up to that. I promise to try every day for the rest of my life. I will do everything in my power to continue earning your love. Because nothing in the world means anything without you. You’re the only thing that matters, my only reason for being.”

I pull out the velvet box that’s practically burned a hole in my pocket since I got dressed for dinner. How can something so small hold so much weight? “Will you agree to continue being my wife?” I ask with a faint grin as I open the box to reveal the diamond ring inside. Her stunned reaction is exactly what I was going for—five carats, emerald cut and set in platinum. The stone blazes like there’s a fire inside it.

“Will you?” I whisper. “Will you continue making me the happiest man who’s ever lived? All you have to do is say yes.”

It doesn’t really matter if she says yes or not. There wouldn’t be any way in hell I’d set her free. She’s mine forever, and if she ever tries to escape, I’ll grab her by the hair and drag her back to my side.

She doesn't keep me waiting. "Yes. Yes, of course." She almost launches herself out of her chair, wrapping her arms around my neck, laughing through her tears as everyone around us applauds. I wonder what they would think if they knew we've already been married for over a year.

"Thank you," I murmur, standing and winding my arms around her. "Thank you for everything you've given me already."

"I love you." She snuffles as I slide the cool metal band over her finger. "I guess we never have done things the conventional way, have we?"

"No, we haven't." I can't help but grin as she admires the ring, tilting her head from side to side while wiggling her fingers to make the stone sparkle and shine. That alone makes the whole thing worth it.

We're taking our seats again when the *maître d'* approaches. "To celebrate the happy couple, a bottle of champagne."

"Wow, thank you!" Aspen beams while we wait for our two flutes to be filled. Once they are, I raise one while she raises the other, and we touch them together gently.

"To us," I offer, then lift the glass to my lips while she does the same.

"I can't believe you did that in front of so many people," she whispers. Her cheeks are flushed, and there are still tears in her eyes, but I don't think I've ever seen her look so happy.

"Tell me about it. Now you know for sure how much I love you."

"I already did." Still, she's wearing what looks like an unhappy little pout as she lowers her glass.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." The way she sighs tells another story. "It's just the outfit I'm wearing under this dress kind of pales in comparison."

"Outfit?" I ask, my interest piqued.

“It’s nothing special.” Her lips twitch like she’s trying to hide a smile. “Look under the table.”

I very deliberately drop my napkin, then bend down as if to pick it up when I’m really checking out my wife. She lifts her dress a little, revealing the garters and stockings she’s wearing—and the panties she isn’t. Her bare pussy beckons, and now I can’t remember why we came here in the first place. Food? There’s something else I’d much rather be eating right now.

My cock is like steal by the time I sit up. “Not that it’s a contest, but you never have to worry about the sight of you wearing something like that being overshadowed by anything else.”

“That’s good to know.” She flashes a devilish little smile before lifting her glass to be refilled. “It sure would be a shame if you got me tipsy and had your way with me back at the suite.”

“My heart breaks at the thought.” I pour champagne into her glass while imagining how much better it would taste if I licked it off her body. We’ll have to find out after dinner. I’m sure I could have a bottle brought up.

“Thank you for the best Christmas I’ve ever had,” she whispers, and the diamond on her hand flashes when she lifts her flute.

“Thank you for giving me a reason to look forward to it again. You’ve helped me see it all through new eyes.” This shouldn’t come as a surprise since she’s had that effect on my entire life. Making the darkness easier to bear, bringing out the light when I can’t find it on my own.

We toast again, this time to all the holidays to come. No matter what happens, I’ll have her by my side. That’s all I need.

CHAPTER TEN

*A*spen

I WATCH the Swiss Alps disappear under the clouds as I lean back in my comfortable leather seat. Being a Rossi has endless perks, including flying private.

“Are you ready to head back to Corium?”

“Actually, yes.” It’s hard to believe the words coming out of my mouth, but it’s true. Corium has turned into my home. One I share with Quinton for the time being. We’re in our third year now, and Scarlet will be in her first in a few months. “I miss Brittney and Lucas.”

“We’ll be there by tomorrow.”

“Can I interest you in some champagne or anything else?” our stewardess comes by to ask.

“Nothing for me, but thank you.” I rub my stomach. “I think I went a little overboard on the hot chocolate while on vacation. My stomach is a little upset. Or maybe I’m just starting my period.” Yes, that’s probably it. It’s that time of the month, I realize.

“Why don’t you sit back and take a little nap?” Quinton suggests and I’m more than happy to agree.

I push the button to lean the seat all the way back and let the footrest pull out so I’m laying in my seat. Quinton brings

me a blanket and tucks me in, before placing a soft kiss on my forehead.

One minute, I'm taking a nap; the next, Quinton wakes me up. "We're about to land in New York," he whispers into my ear. "Sorry, you have to sit up."

"Oh my god, I slept the whole flight!" I rub the sleep out of my eyes. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"There was no need. Traveling clearly makes you tired." Quinton helps me straighten my seat back up for landing.

The stewardess brings me a bottle of water before buckling up in the front of the cabin. The landing is as smooth as always. Xander only hires the best pilots and staff.

After a quick meal while the plane fuels up, we lift off again to Alaska. We land in Takotna a few hours later. From there, we take the helicopter to Corium since the university doesn't have an airstrip.

The castle part of Corium comes into view, and the familiar feeling of being home settles in my chest. It's odd thinking of Corium as my home when I hated being here for so long. But that's exactly what it has become.

"I think we have a welcome committee waiting for us," Quinton points out.

Excitement fills my veins when I see Lucas and Brittney standing at the edge of the helipad, holding their coats, as the wind from the helicopter washes over them rapidly. As soon as we land, I unbuckle, open the door, and rush out into the cold Alaskan air to run into my father's arms.

He engulfs me in a warm hug, kissing the crown of my head. "Welcome back. I hope Quinton spoiled you the entire time."

"Would you expect anything less?" I break the hug just to give another to Brittney.

"I missed you, bestie!" I tell my best friend as I squeeze her tight.

“Missed you too, Aspen. I’m glad you’re back. I got a whole new shipment of romance books. I’ve been dying to go through them, but I couldn’t do it without you.”

“The one we’ve been waiting for?!” I squeal with anticipation.

“If you mean the second part of the duet, no. It’s not in yet, but I finally got a release date! It’s March twenty-ninth.”

“Ugh, still so far away,” I whine. Stomping my foot on the ground, I let my inner child out.

“I know,” Brittney whines along with me. “But I’m sure it will be worth the wait.”

I glance over at Quinton and Lucas. They’re looking at us like we’re talking in a different language.

“Could we take this conversation inside? My fingers are about to freeze off,” Lucas complains.

“Yes, let’s go in so I can tell you all about this amazing and crazy vacation!” Lucas already knows about my mom being there, but I still have to fill Brittney in on that little tidbit.

“I’m not surprised you threw a little crazy into your getaway.” Brittney laughs. “You never do anything normal.”

“Normal?” Quinton asks. “What’s the fun in that?”

My husband is right. No fun in that at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Quinton

MY FAVORITE PART of each morning is waking up before Aspen does. All this time, and I've still not grown tired of it. If anything, my obsession with my wife has only grown. Aspen invades every part of my mind, every fiber of my being, and there isn't a moment of the day I'm not thinking of her. Even when she is close, I want her closer. When she is happy, I want her to be happier. And on the off-chance something made her sad, I want to burn down the world and kill everyone and everything that made her frown.

Even in the dim light from the bathroom, I can make out her beautiful features. Usually, they are relaxed and soft, but today, frown lines cover her forehead, and her jaw is tight as if she's grinding her teeth together. She must be having a bad dream.

Propping myself up on my elbow, I gently run my index finger over her forehead, trying to flatten the creases. When I run my finger down her jaw, her lips part, and she sucks in a deep breath. Her eyes move behind her eyelids, but she doesn't open them. I swipe my thumb over her full lips, and she parts them farther, inviting me into her mouth.

Taking the invite, I press my thumbs inside, massaging her warm tongue. She closes her lips around me and sucks softly.

"Naughty girl," I whisper, my voice raspy.

Aspen traps my thumb between her teeth and bites down gently before a grin tugs on the corner of her mouth. Her eyes finally open, and I see the mischief brewing in the depth of her baby blues.

I pull my thumb from her mouth to kiss her plump lips. She immediately leans into me, snaking her arms around my neck and pulling me closer. I'm more than happy to oblige, covering her body with mine until no space exists between us.

My leg wedges between her thighs, and I feel her hot cunt on my skin. My cock is already hard, and I would love to fuck her until she can't walk, but I have other plans today.

I break the kiss. Both of us breathing heavily, eager to tear off the clothes we're wearing. "As much as I would love to have a morning quickie, we actually have somewhere to be in an hour, and I want you to eat breakfast before we leave."

Aspen yawns, using the back of her hand to rub her eyes. "We still have a few days of winter break before classes start."

"I know. I have a surprise for you."

"Surprise?" Aspen perks up right away. The sleep disappears from her eyes, and excitement replaces it.

"Yes, and if you want to see it, you better get this sexy ass out of bed before I lose all restraint." My idle threat has her moving quickly. She ducks under my arm and rolls out of bed, leaving me cold and yearning for her touch.

"What kind of surprise is it?" she questions as she starts pulling things out of the dresser, her gaze on me. I prefer this side of her to the many other sides of my wife I've seen. The things she's gone through—that I put her through. I'll never forgive myself, which is why I'll spend every single day reminding her of our love, of how much she means to me.

"Well, a surprise only works if you keep it a secret, right?" I make the gesture of my lips being sealed, and she rolls her eyes.

"I could always beg..." She bats her long lashes, her eyes doing that thing that makes my cock instantly hard. Fuck,

she's a temptation, but she's going to ruin my plans if I don't get her back on track.

"Later, baby. You can beg me all you want when we get back, and if you're good and behave, I'll make you come on my cock."

She snorts. "You'll do that anyway."

I watch as she gets dressed, and it takes more self-will than I care to admit not to try to fuck her. *Think of the surprise.* Since I'm an early riser, I'm already dressed for the day.

Aspen interrupts my thoughts as she skirts by me, her yoga pants accenting her ass perfectly. I shove out of bed and follow her.

She makes a pit stop in the bathroom to run a brush through her hair. Our gazes collide in the mirror as I watch, completely obsessed and blinded by her beauty. I can see the wheels in her head turning. Sometimes she gets anxious, and it's best to just remind her everything is okay.

"I guess I should've asked if I needed to dress up, but I assumed..." I take her gently by the chin and lean into her, cutting off her tirade. Worry gives way to desire that shines bright in her eyes.

I'll never get enough of her.

"Shhh, stop worrying. There is no need to dress up. We aren't even leaving Corium." I drop that little nugget of info to get her thinking.

Her pink lips part. "So the surprise is here? At Corium?"

I nod and release my grasp on her chin, placing a soft kiss on the corner of her mouth. Mine. Forever. For always.

"Hmmm, there aren't many options for surprises here, but you're Quinton Rossi, so anything is possible."

"Exactly, now let's go get some breakfast and coffee. I'm hungry, and what I wanted to eat for breakfast isn't available." I grin.

“Why’re you so obsessed with me?” she taunts and rushes toward the door. I give chase because no matter how much I love her and how much we’ve been through, the one part of me I can never shut off is the need to dominate her, to keep her in my arms. She is my prey, and I am her dark wolf.

“I’ll forever be obsessed with you, Aspen Rossi. My wife, my everything.” I growl into her ear as she rushes out of the bedroom with me hot on her heels. Today’s going to be a good day. I can feel it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*A*spen

I TRUST Quinton with my life. I know he would never put me in any danger or cause me any pain. Yet as he leads me to the dorms of Corium, my heart beats irregularly fast, my palms are sweaty, and fear swirls around my gut to the point of nausea.

“You okay?” Q asks, reaching for my hand to interlace his fingers with mine.

“Yeah, just antsy to see this surprise.”

“Well, that’s good because we’re here.” Quinton comes to a halt, and I follow suit.

Looking around, I don’t see anything besides the empty hallway. I’m about to ask what the hell he’s talking about when Quinton turns sideways, lifts his arm, and knocks on one of the dorm rooms.

I’ve never been to this part of the dorms, so I have no idea what to expect, which is probably the reason the uneasy feeling won’t leave my gut. Quinton must pick up on my anxiety. He squeezes my hand gently.

“Don’t worry, I think you’re going to like this, and if not, you don’t have to do it,” he assures me, and a little bit of tension disappears.

The door opens, and a guy I've only ever seen in passing before greets us. "Hey, guys, come in. I'm all set up." He addresses us both but keeps his eyes trained on Quinton.

I'm not sure if people automatically do this or if Q threatened everyone with torture if they look at me too long.

Both scenarios are very possible.

Clinging onto Quinton's hand like it's my life raft, I follow them inside the dorm room. Scanning the open space, I immediately notice how much smaller this is than the apartment we're staying in but still bigger than the room I had when I first came to Corium.

He must live here alone since only one bed is in the corner. The walls are covered in hand-drawn art, which is really the only thing that gives this room some life. The little furniture that's in here is bland and colorless.

My eyes land on a weird-looking chair wrapped in clear plastic wrap. The table beside it is also wrapped in foil, with some kind of tools on top.

"I came up with three designs, but, of course, I can change anything or even go a completely different way," the guy I don't know explains.

Still not completely sure what's going on here, I glance over at Quinton for an explanation.

"This is Billy." Q offers, "He is the one who did my tattoo, and if you want, he'll tattoo your back today."

"Oh..." My mouth stays in an open O shape long after the word has fallen from my lips. Realization settles in, and my whole body relaxes.

"Like I said, you don't have to do this," Quinton repeats.

"I want to," I blurt out. "I'm just surprised, that's all."

"Why don't you look at what Billy came up with, and we can go from there?"

"So I came up with this." Billy points at three drawings laid out on the coffee table.

Never letting go of Quinton's hand, I take a few steps closer until my thighs bump against the table's edge. My eyes go wide as I take in the drawings. All three are stunning.

The first one is a lotus that looks so realistic it's coming right off the page. The second is a serpent winding itself around a rose. It's drawn in an edging style that looks both interesting and artful. The last is an intricate fine-line mandala with so many little details it's hard to look away.

I take all three in, trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to choose. "They are all stunning. Honestly, I don't know how to pick one. I love them all."

"Could you somehow combine the three ideas?" Quinton questions before I can voice the same idea.

"Absolutely." Billy doesn't hesitate. He actually seems pretty excited about the idea. "Give me a few more minutes to draw up the stencils." He gathers his papers and pencils, then sits at the small desk next to his bed, where he starts drawing.

"Do you really like it?" Quinton asks softly. "I thought you could use it to cover up the scar you hate."

The reminder of the scar feels like a jab with a knife. I have become good at hiding my pain every time I remember what happened to me that night, but I'll never be good enough to hide from Quinton.

My husband wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his strong chest. "I'm sorry," he whispers into my hair. I've told him a million times to stop apologizing. It wasn't his fault, yet he blames himself.

I bury my nose in his shirt, letting his unique scent calm me through the dark thoughts. They always linger in the back of my mind, but times like these have them trying to claw their way to the front until my head is consumed with dread, fear, and grief.

Q holds me, drawing small circles over my back until Billy finishes drawing my tattoo.

"Here it is," he announces, bursting with pride. One look at the drawing tells me why. It's stunning. "If you want anything

changed, let me know. Quinton told me the most important thing is to cover up the scar. I can definitely hide it in the petals of the lotus. You won't even see that it was there at all."

I stare at the beautiful drawing. He really did combine all the ideas, leaving the fine lines of the mandala in the background, the lotus in the center, and below, the snake will line up with my spine like it's slithering up my back. It's both feminine and badass. "I love it!"

"Perfect. I need you to take off your shirt." As soon as the words leave Billy's mouth, both he and Quinton go stiff. Billy's eyes go wide as he realizes what he just said. "I mean just to tattoo... obviously. Nothing more. I'll go to the bathroom while you get changed. You can lie down on the chair; I've already disinfected everything." He scurries away into the bathroom, and I give Quinton a knowing look.

"You knew I had to take my shirt off for this."

"Knowing and actually doing it are two different things. The thought of someone else seeing your bare skin, even if it's just your back, drives me insane."

"Good thing we'll only have to do this once." I grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head.

Quinton's gaze lowers to my boobs immediately, like two magnets pulling his eyeballs toward me. The thin fabric of my bra is still between us, but that doesn't stop my nipples from hardening and tingling with excitement.

"Maybe we should have had that quickie after all." Quinton circles me, dragging his finger over the tender skin on my stomach, ribs, and lower back until he stands right behind me. His skillful fingers unclasp my bra, and I let the straps slide down my shoulders slowly. Cool air washes over my already heated skin.

"I can't believe you let me get naked in someone else's room," I tease, making Quinton growl angrily behind me.

Reaching around, he cups my breasts in his large palms. His touch is urgent and rough as he pulls me against his chest.

“I know what you’re doing.” Quinton pinches my nipples, and I let my head fall back against his shoulder with a moan.

“Me?” I ask innocently.

Of course, he knows exactly what I’m doing. I’m egging him on, making him a little jealous. It’s no secret that I love my husband’s dark side just as much as I love his soft side. Maybe even more so.

“Lie down on the chair before I bend you over the couch and fuck you raw.” Heat blooms in my core, and I have to force my legs to move before I bend myself over the couch. Teasing my husband has become one of my favorite pastimes, and we don’t have time for that right now.

The chair smells like disinfectant, reminding me of a hospital. My mood darkens in an instant. I straddle the reclined chair and press my chest to the back, letting my arms dangle to the side.

Quinton walks around me, making sure Billy won’t get a glimpse of side boob. When he is somewhat satisfied, he straightens up and yells, “You can come in now.”

The bathroom door opens, and Billy pops his head through the opening as if he’s still not sure if it’s safe to come out. When he realizes I’m on the chair, he opens the door farther and steps into the room, still a little apprehensive.

Quinton stands next to me, his arms folded across his puffed-out chest. His eyes are set into an angry glare, and his foot taps against the floor impatiently. He didn’t think this through. He didn’t foresee what it would do to him, having another guy touch me, no matter the circumstance. Somehow, I find this a little funny.

“Okay, so I’m going to clean her skin and put a stencil on,” Billy explains with a shaky voice while putting on a pair of latex gloves.

A moment later, I feel a cold rag being rubbed over my back. Then he carefully centers the stencil and transfers it onto my skin. “We’ll hide the scar right under here.” His fingers run

over what I assume is going to be the lotus. “Do you want me to leave again so you can look at it?”

I’m not sure if he is asking Quinton or me since I’m not used to having people talk to me when I’m with my husband. Nevertheless, I answer. “I don’t need to see it. I trust Quinton’s judgment.”

More importantly, I hate looking at the scar, the last physical reminder of what happened that night, of what Matteo did to me... what he took from us.

Normally, thinking of that night fills me with dread, and though I’m not feeling great thinking of it now, I also feel a huge relief knowing that I never have to look at it again. Once I have the tattoo, at least I’ll be more comfortable in my own skin. The bad will be washed away and replaced with something beautiful.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Q uinton

I REALLY DIDN'T THINK this through.

Aspen is sprawled out shirtless on the tattoo chair. Billy can't see anything besides her back, but even that seems too much. Even worse, he is touching her. I try to tell myself this is how it has to be. He can't tattoo her without touching her. Unfortunately, the primal part inside me doesn't care.

For the past few years, I have spent every minute of the day keeping Aspen safe. I don't let anyone touch her, talk to her, or even look at her. So this goes against everything I'm used to.

"Quinton? Is it okay?" Aspen cranes her neck to look up at me while the rest of her stays still, and I would swear Billy's starting to sweat. He'd better. He better know how to behave himself with her.

Is it okay? No, none of this is okay, but that isn't the question she's asking, and we both know it.

I stand beside him to examine the placement of the stencil, and I have to admit his design is brilliant. It will perfectly conceal her scar to where nobody would ever know it exists. "Yes. The placement looks good."

A careful choice of words. "I'm pleased so far." I make a point of glaring down at Billy when I say it, and although his

eyes are carefully trained on her back, I'd bet anything he gets my meaning.

“Great. I'll get to work now.” He sounds relieved. I'm sure the sooner this is done, the better for him.

“Come sit over here.” Aspen gestures to the wheeled chair near where she's waiting to get inked. “Come talk to me. I want to be able to see you.”

I know what she really means, what she's driving at. She has to sense what this is doing to me and wants me to calm down. She's asking for the impossible. How can I calm down when another man has his hands on what's mine?

There's a twinkle in her eyes, that little gleam I saw earlier. “You're enjoying this, aren't you?” I mutter once I'm seated, speaking to her but staring at Billy. He'd better hope his hands stay where they need to be.

“Getting tattooed?” Suddenly, she gasps, reaching for me, and I take her hand. “At the moment, not particularly.” Yes, because he's getting started, and the way she winces tells me how she feels.

I take her hand gently despite the dangerous heat beginning to boil my blood. At least he keeps his eyes on his work, but of course, he'll be in close contact with her throughout the process. My eyes are glued to him, following the direction of his gaze, even the way he breathes when he has to lean in especially close as he works on the intricate mandala.

“That's not what I was talking about,” I mutter, briefly meeting her gaze before my eyes dart back to Billy.

Chuckling softly, she gestures for me to lean in closer. “You know, this is kind of a permanent thing.”

“I know.”

“So maybe don't intimidate the poor guy so much he makes a mistake.” Her smile is loving, and that, plus the pressure from her fingers around my hand, manages to loosen the worst of my tension. She's right. I don't want him marring her perfection because I couldn't handle myself.

Still, I'm keeping an eye on this guy.

The only thing that keeps me going is reminding myself this is for her. She needs this; she deserves it. Something beautiful to cover up the ugliness. Since I played a part in how that ugliness came to be, I think I can suck it up and grit my teeth through watching a man touch her. I can do anything as long as it's for her.

She winces, and I stroke her cheek, offering a sympathetic smile. "You'll get used to it."

"I usually have a higher threshold for pain," she grits out.

Yes, because she's brave and strong, stronger than me. In so many ways, she's like the lotus currently being placed on her back. She's been through unfathomable shit but has come out even more beautiful on the other side. She never let it break her, none of it. Even when I made it my mission in life to break her down, she refused.

That's how I know she can get through this.

"I can't wait for everybody to see it." Her excitement makes me smile, even if she'd better hope she doesn't intend on flashing her bare back to everyone we know. "I bet Scar will love it."

"Don't go giving her any ideas," I warn, and she laughs gently. If I focus on keeping her laughing, I won't be so concerned about leaving her on display like this. There will never come a time when I'm comfortable letting others see and touch her. She's too precious for me to allow that.

"Right. I'm sure your dad would freak."

That gets me snorting because I can see it in my head. How he'd blow his stack if he thought I influenced my sister into having her back inked, even if the work was good. We Rossi men tend to be overprotective of our women.

"How does it look so far?" she asks. "Do you like it?"

"I think it's a beautiful design." I might want to tear Billy's hands off for touching my wife, but I can admit he exceeded my expectations with how he combined his three concepts.

“So long as you don’t go around showing it off,” I warn with a growl. I’m only half joking, something I’m sure she’s aware of. “Very few people will ever know this exists.”

“Anybody who sees me in a bathing suit will.”

Jealousy rears up in me at the idea. “Then we’ll only go swimming on private beaches or when I take you out on a boat.”

“What if I wear a dress cut low in the back?”

Now she’s deliberately throwing out scenarios intended to make me lose control—and she likes it. It gets her off to see me lose my shit over her. “What if you always wear dresses that cover your back instead?”

She rolls her eyes, giggling softly. “If you say so.”

It might not take as long as it seems for Billy to finish since, as far as I’m concerned, time is crawling. Every moment that passes ratchets up my tension a little more. Occasionally, he’ll glance up at me, and each time, it’s to find me watching him like a hawk. His hand shakes, but he steadies it before returning to the work. I catch Aspen watching me with a knowing gleam in her eyes, but she doesn’t understand. She never will.

“Wow, and Lucas went through this for every piece he’s had done?” she asks out of nowhere. Her father’s skin is a canvas that reflects the winding path his life has taken. “I can’t imagine him sitting still for this long.”

With a sigh of obvious relief, Billy turns off his equipment. He stretches, rolling his head slowly like he’s easing the tension in his muscles. “All done. Do you want to take a look at the finished product?”

“I’ll show her when we get back to the room.” Because he’s not going to spend another moment around my topless wife now that he’s finished. He steps aside when I take his place, looking down at his work.

I have to admit, it’s beautiful. And it suits her perfectly. “You look great,” I tell her since I notice the anxiety on her

features when she tries to look over her shoulder to gauge my reaction.

“It’s really sore,” she admits. “How long will it be sore?”

Billy opens his mouth like he’s going to explain, but I cut him off. “A few days, maybe a week. It depends on how careful you are not to lie on your back at first. I’ll take good care of you.”

Then I turn to Billy. “I’ll be cleaning her up. I know what to do.” I head straight for the bathroom while he gathers his equipment and wash my hands thoroughly before he takes my place without saying a word.

Smart guy. I don’t like having to explain myself.

“Stay there,” I tell my wife when it looks like she’s about to get up. “I have to wash you off. You’ll need to do this twice a day until you’re all healed up.”

“For how long?”

“Since when do you mind your husband touching your back?”

“That’s not how I meant it.”

I know, but she’s been teasing me all day. It only seems right for me to give a little bit of that back to her. “I might decide to make a habit out of washing you from now on. What do you think about that?”

She snorts, then hisses in pain when I begin to clean the fresh tattoo. “I think you’re looking for an excuse to touch me.”

“Since when do I need one?” It doesn’t take long before I couldn’t care less about teasing her. Not when the act of caring for her gets me heated. I don’t know what it is about her. It takes nothing to awaken the hunger I always feel when she’s involved. The touch of her skin—I’ve spent years memorizing its softness and smoothness. Exactly how to caress it to make goose bumps cover the surface. She’s a work of art created just for me, and it’s my duty to protect this perfection.

Once she's clean, I apply ointment with a gentle touch, then cover the piece with plastic wrap. "It won't be like this forever," I remind her, helping her out of the chair. Her bra might be a little much for now, so I tuck it into my back pocket. The sight of her body stretching, her muscles flexing, and her breasts lifting stirs my hunger again, and this time, it translates into the beginnings of an erection. I need this woman like I need oxygen.

"Let's get you into this." With one eye on the closed bathroom door, I help her into her shirt. She winces but shakes her head when I look at her in concern. Stubborn thing. A part of me wonders if she downplays her discomfort to ease my mind.

"Thank you for this. I would never have thought of it." She leans against me, gazing up into my eyes with nothing but pure love in hers. To this day, I don't fully believe I deserve it. How could she see me and love me like she does? Yet another piece of proof that she is truly meant for me.

I press a kiss against her forehead and take a deep breath, soaking in her unique scent. "Anything for you." I mean it with every part of me. I would move heaven and earth for her and not think twice.

There's another story happening below my waist, and of course, she feels it. The light in her eyes changes to something deeper, and she bites her lip. "Even this turns you on?" she whispers, wrapping her arms around my back and pressing herself tight against me. Her nipples are hard, brushing my chest now that she's braless.

"Everything about you does," I growl. "Let's get out of here and get you back to our place before I have no choice but to take you here and now."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*A*spen

I DON'T THINK I've ever walked the halls this fast—almost at a jog—when there's no emergency. Q is in that much of a hurry to get me alone again.

It's not that I can't relate. I want him, too, just as badly. Even with my back as sore as it is, that does nothing to cool the heat in my core or soothe the ache between my thighs. All it takes is the slightest touch, and I'm like Pavlov's dog, slobbering for its next treat. In this case, the treat is my husband. His hands, his tongue, his dick, and what they do to me.

And it's more than that. It's the feeling of connection. Every time we're together like this, our bond grows. It might seem like all we're doing is giving in to lust—and we are—but something bigger is at work. Something deeper.

And when he practically flings our apartment door open and hurries me inside, I know we will strengthen our bond again.

The door's barely closed when his hands are on me, sliding up over my hips, under my shirt to cup my boobs. "Watching me get tattooed turned you on this much?" I barely get the question out before moaning at the way he thumbs my nipples. They were already hard, thanks to my anticipation, and now every flick sends signals straight down to my throbbing clit.

“Everything you do turns me on.” He breathes into my mouth before claiming it with his. As always, I give myself over gladly because I know I’m safe. He’s my home; he is my life. We’re so close that we may as well be one person. One soul.

Every brush of his lips and sweep of his tongue undoes me a little more as he backs me across the room, my arms around his neck, moaning into his mouth before we bump up against the sofa.

An animal growl rumbles in his chest, and my knees go weak at the sound of his need for me. Right away, he hooks his fingers around the waistband of my pants and pulls them down in one swift motion before dropping to his knees.

I run my fingers through his thick hair, gazing down at him with love and want, fighting to see which one will win. I’ll never tire of seeing him like this, so strong and commanding but weak for me. Knowing I can bring him to his knees without trying. All I have to do is exist.

“You have no idea,” he growls against my skin, sending shivers up my spine. “Having to watch him touch you. Knowing his breath warmed your skin. It almost broke me.”

“I know,” I whisper, my voice shaky, legs trembling as he works his way closer to the place where I’m hot and dripping for him.

“Because I’m the only man who gets to see you like that. Right?” He looks up at me, and our eyes meet. The light flashing behind his eyes would take my breath away on its own but paired with his skillful touch, he leaves me fighting for every sip of air.

“Yes,” I manage to croak before he continues lapping at my sensitive skin, holding my legs in place. His fingers bite into my flesh, rough and demanding, leaving me walking the line between pain and pleasure.

He needs this. Needs to claim what’s his. I know him and love him enough to understand, just as I know there was never any question of who I belong to.

I'll always be his. We were meant for each other, and all the pain and fear and even trauma we've been through together has brought us closer. Brought us to this moment.

With a grunt, he pulls aside the crotch of my thong. It's wet, soaked through, and now he laps away what's left on my smooth, swollen lips. "Quinton!" I gasp when the tip of his tongue parts my lips and delves deeper, fluttering through my folds. This is hardly the first time he's eaten me, but that sudden, electric thrill never changes. It's like the first time every time.

My nails scrape along his scalp before I grab the back of his head and hold it close. He wants me. He's so hungry for me he couldn't wait until he reached the bedroom. Just the sight of another man touching me drives him wild. All of this goes through my head, along with so many other thoughts and feelings, and before I know it, I'm grinding my hips, bearing down on him. Eager, desperate for relief from the unbearable heat burning me from the inside out.

And all he does is grunt and growl, not bothering to hide how my taste affects him. When he adds two digits, pumping them in and out of my pussy, I go wild, bucking against him, the pressure in my core building and growing as he massages me inside while closing his lips around my clit and sucking.

Fireworks explode behind my eyelids in the split second before it all breaks, and I cry out helplessly, shaking from the force of an orgasm so intense there's a moment when all that exists is the rippling bliss racing through me from head to toe. I almost collapse with weakness, but he stands and lets me lean against him while he pulls his shirt over his head. I take mine off, too, and let the thong drop to the floor.

The sight of his naked torso lights my fire again—maybe it never went out. Maybe it's always burning in the background, ready to be stoked again. And it is by the feeling of his rippling abs, broad chest, and shoulders under my nails as he kisses me again, claiming every inch of my skin with his hands. And I give it to him gladly, all of me, knowing I'll always be safe. I will always end up melting in the heat we generate.

His erection is between us, and I move against it, savoring his helpless grunts. He grabs my thigh and lifts it, opening me up so he can drag his head through my wetness. I move with him, teasing him even while I'm teasing myself. Dragging it out, heightening the tension, knowing it will be so much better when we finally let go.

He groans into my mouth, fingers digging into my ass cheeks, his body trembling the way mine is as he turns me in place and bends me over the back of the sofa. "Lucky me," he grunts, scraping his short nails down my sides while I squirm and moan. "I get to look at this every time I take you this way. I get to watch it move when you do."

Before I can say anything, he drags himself through my slit again, and this time when he reaches my entrance, he plunges inside, driving deep, pushing me forward. "Oh fuck!" I shout, and he responds with a low chuckle before taking me by the hips and rutting me, forgetting everything about pace and rhythm in favor of taking. Fucking.

And I love it. This is what I crave. Letting go of everything, forgetting everything around us, and going wild with abandon. Pushing back against him, I claim him as he claims me. It doesn't matter what's going on anywhere else in this massive structure. Right now, it's just this. Our bodies connect, and the insane friction from his thick cock as it moves in and out of me until the air is full of the wet, sloppy sound of our bodies crashing together. Both of us breathe harder and faster, his fingers so tight against my flesh I know he'll bruise me.

"Who do you belong to?" he demands, moving fast enough that my boobs bounce hard enough to hurt. He takes them in his hands, gripping tight while he pumps into me like a jackhammer.

"You!" I howl, so close again. "Only you! Oh my god!"

"That's right. That's who I am. Your god." Yes, and I'm his to use the way he's using me now, the way he's asserting control after hours spent feeling like he had to give some of it

away. Reminding himself who I really belong to, heart and soul.

I welcome it, all of it, because it's right. That's how it's always been for us.

The feel of his hands on me, his cock inside me, all builds up until an explosion in my core sends shock waves of pure bliss radiating through me. "Quinton! Yes!" I sob, wracked with tremors, tears filling my eyes. "I'm coming!" Though I'm sure he feels it now that my muscles have tightened around him, increasing the pressure.

"Mine." I hear him over my ecstatic cries, his voice getting louder with every breath he takes. "Mine, mine."

He crashes against me one last time before I'm filled with the heat of his cum. He holds me in place, his thighs against my ass while he empties himself deep, his hot breath fanning across my shoulder. He's careful not to touch my tattoo, I notice, and even in the wild, shaking haze, my heart swells with love. Even now, he's so careful with me. It's one thing to fuck like animals, but at the core of it, there's nothing but love and tenderness in him.

At least when it comes to me.

This time, when he growls, I hear the difference. He's satisfied. He's calmed the beast in him, at least for now. "I will never get tired of you," he murmurs with love in his voice as he pulls away from me, and I feel an inexplicable sense of loss. I want him back even though I know it's impossible. He can't be inside me all the time, but that's when I feel whole.

"I hope not," I whisper, giggling. "Because we're kind of married. So you're stuck with me."

"I wouldn't call it stuck." When I turn around, he pulls me into his arms, careful not to hurt me. "Stuck isn't the word for it."

With my ear against his chest, the drumbeat of his heart fills my awareness. The scent of his skin, his cologne now mixing with perspiration. His gentle, tender touch. I'm in heaven. That's the only word I can think of to describe it.

“What word would you use?” I ask, running my fingers up and down his back while his heartbeat begins to slow as he relaxes.

“Lucky. I’m the luckiest man alive.” His breath stirs my hair before he kisses the top of my head. “Only this is the kind of luck I have to keep earning day by day. Because you are not a woman to take for granted, Aspen Rossi. Every day, I plan on earning you. And if that’s all I ever do with my life, from now until the day I die, I’ll consider myself successful. Just to know I earned your presence and your love.”

My heart is too full for words, my throat tightening with emotion while tears sting behind my eyes. If I could speak, I’d tell him he doesn’t have to earn anything. That I’m his and will always be his, forever. He’s got me.

For now, it’s enough to hold him and let myself be held. Some things can’t be said in words, anyway.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Quinton

WHEN REN BETRAYED US, I wanted to kill him for that. Now, I just want to kill him for hurting Scarlet. Looking at her sad face through the camera ignites the need to wrap my hands around my former best friend's neck all over again.

"I just wish everything would go back to normal," she explains. "If we could just find him—"

"We're trying, Scar. We haven't stopped."

"You haven't tried everything, though," she points out.

"We're not using you as bait. You can get that out of your head." Dad shut that stupid idea down immediately, but for some reason, my sister thinks I'll change his mind. Not in a million years.

"Did you have a good time on your trip?" Scarlett changes the subject.

"Yes, although we had a little unexpected run-in with Aspen's mom," I explain. My sister's eyes widen as I tell her the entire story.

"Wow." Scar takes a minute to process everything. "At least Aspen got closure. It sounds like the note was what she needed from her." I nod in agreement. "Crazy coincidence that you would run into her in the Swiss Alps, of all places."

“Crazier things have happened to us,” I point out. “Aspen got a tattoo,” I tell her, pulling out my phone to show her a picture of Aspen’s back.

“Oh wow, that looks amazing. Can I get a ta—”

“No.” I shake my head immediately. Scarlett rolls her eyes at me. “You’re too young for a tattoo.”

“You do know you are my brother and not my dad, right?” Scarlet frowns. “You are supposed to cover for me while I do reckless stuff, like get a tattoo. Plus, you got your first one when you were my age.”

“It’s still a no.”

“Ugh!” Scarlett throws her head back in frustration. “When did you become so lame?”

When my best friend betrayed me.

I keep that thought to myself, of course, but it remains fresh on my mind. “I’ll think about it. Maybe by the time you get here, I’ll warm up to the idea.”

“So what you’re saying is I have to talk Aspen into it.” Scarlet grins. And now it’s my turn to frown.

“We’ll talk about it later. I’m heading to the gym now.”

“You sound like Dad.”

I ignore that comment, especially knowing that she’s right. I am starting to sound like my father. “Goodbye, Scar. Love you.”

“Love you too.” I close the laptop and get ready for the gym, noticing how quiet the apartment has gotten. I step out of the bedroom into the living room and realize that Aspen is no longer here.

Just when I’m about to freak out, I see the note on the coffee table.

*Heading to the library. Will be back in a few hours. Love,
A.*

PS: Don't work out too hard. I have another little workout planned for us later.

I have half a mind to skip the gym and get her from the library for her special workout, but I know she enjoys being with her friend. I finished getting ready, then slide on my sneakers before heading out. At least I have something to look forward to now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*A*spen

WHERE THE FUCK are these stupid tests? This is a school filled with people in their late teens and early twenties. Lauren must have some tests flying around here somewhere. I dig my hand through the metal drawer, pushing boxes of gloves and gauze aside.

I knew I was in trouble when my period didn't arrive two weeks ago. I thought maybe give it another week, then I'd take a test. I wanted to be sure, but my period never came, so here I am.

I brush the long strands of hair from my face and peer around the room. I've looked everywhere, and still nothing. I huff out an angry breath and press my forehead against the cabinet. Tears prick at my eyes. Great, now I'm gonna cry again. This is a fucking nightmare. It's not like I can just drive to CVS and get one. We're in the fucking tundra of Alaska.

"Can I help you find something?" Lauren's voice catches me off guard. I slam the drawer shut and spin around to face her. She casually leans against the doorframe, her arms folded in front of her chest.

"Oh, hi..."

"Don't *hi* me. Tell me what you're looking for." Dr. Lauren doesn't seem mad, more annoyed than anything. I

guess that's a perk of being the headmaster's daughter.
"Aspen, come on. You know all you have to do is ask."

"Of course, I know. It's just... I wanted to be sure before telling anyone."

"Tell anyone?" She blinks, a silent question hanging in the air between us.

I force a shuddering breath from my lungs. Here goes nothing.

"My period is late, and I'm pretty regular, so I needed to take a pregnancy test to make sure my assumption was right."

A smile splits Lauren's face. "Oh, all you had to do was ask." She walks in the direction of the medicine cabinet, which I know is locked with a fingerprint code and password. It seems like a lot of security for a pregnancy test, but if I've discovered anything at this university, nothing is over the top. There is always a reason for a rule or stipulation.

Still, I find myself talking before I can stop. "You keep the tests in there?"

Lauren types her passcode in and then places her finger on the little screen.

"Yes. It's really surprising how often students have to come and ask for a test or Plan B. Unprotected sex is on the rise, and as you know, this is a school for the offspring of criminals." She pauses and opens the door to the cabinet. "It's better to know the things your enemies are up to and develop any type of blackmail you can." Turning, she places the white box in my hand.

Did she say what I think she did?

"Blackmail? Why would you blackmail them?"

"I wouldn't. But I do take note of who comes to me and for what. All that info is passed on to the higher-up people. If they see anything that might be discrediting or useful to them, then it's at their discretion to use that information."

All I can do is shake my head. I'm not really surprised, but at the same time, I am. So many laws are being broken here,

the government would have a field day in this place.

“So what you mean to tell me is that none of my information is secure or private?”

Lauren lets out a laugh. “Don’t act so surprised. You know as well as I do that nothing said or done in this place is *private*.”

That makes the anxious bubble in my belly bigger and the box in my hand heavier. I don’t want anyone else to know until Q and I are ready to tell them. “Would it be okay to keep this between us? At least until we’re ready to tell everyone?”

I know I’m asking her to do the opposite of what she’s supposed to do, but Lauren is trustworthy. Plus, she can always report the test later.

“Of course. That’s no problem, and if you’d like, you can go into the bathroom and take the test. I can help with the results if need be.”

I step from foot to foot nervously. I’m terrified that I might be wrong but also excited at the possibility. I didn’t know I was pregnant the last time, and things ended horrifically.

I know the same won’t happen now, but it’s just the fact that the past did happen, and letting go of it is something I haven’t fully mastered yet. Not that I’ll ever forget what happened or what I lost. It’ll forever impact me, but it doesn’t have to control me.

I nod, and she guides me toward the one-stall bathroom. My throat tightens. The stall door closes, and I force a ragged breath out of my lungs as I open the test. I’ve never had to take one of these before, so I read the directions.

It seems easy enough. I do my business and pee on the end of the stick before placing the blue cap on the end of the test.

All I can think about is Quinton’s reaction. I’m certain of the test results already, but I wanted to be sure. Now, I have to think of a way to break the news to him.

* * *

HE SHOULD BE BACK from his workout any minute now. I've paced our apartment ever since I got back from Lauren's office, clutching the test almost like a weapon I didn't want anyone to discover.

I pace like a caged animal. I'm not sure if I want time to speed up or slow down.

What's he going to think? I mean, we don't use birth control, so this was bound to happen.

Still, it's one thing to know you want something and another to actually have it happen. We've only been married two years and are still so young. What if he wanted to take more time for us? What if...

That's just it. I won't know until I find out. Otherwise, I could drive myself insane by asking all these questions.

I'm not going to tell him right away. Maybe I'll bring up the subject of children and family. Like I'm joking or something, speaking vaguely about what might happen in the future. Now that we're leaving Corium, it only makes sense to talk about the future. He doesn't need to know exactly why I'm choosing to bring it up at this very minute.

I just have to play it cool until I'm sure he feels like this is the right time.

And if he doesn't. If he seems sort of negative about the idea, I know I have to approach it differently. Maybe I could remind him of how the best things in life can't be predicted or planned. Like the way we met, the process of becoming part of each other's lives. Back in the beginning, I could never have imagined how we would end up in this place—married, happy, and on the verge of starting our family.

A baby. Our baby. No, it can't make up for the loss of that first baby, but this might be where we begin to heal from that. It's not like the pain is at the forefront of my life anymore, but there's still that faint sense of something missing.

Finally, we'll be whole again.

That is if he sees things the way I do.

I'm still wearing out the floor next to our bed when he enters the apartment. This is it. I have to play it cool. He is so good at seeing through me, after all. Sometimes, I swear he can read my mind.

"Here you are. What, are you all ready for me?" he asks with a wolfish grin. Because while it seems like he's always horny, he's never hornier than when he's fresh off a workout. I guess it's all the blood flowing and his heart pumping. My little note didn't help of course.

I look at him, and suddenly, everything I planned goes out the window. "I'm pregnant."

So much for playing it cool and feeling him out.

He goes still, staring at me without blinking. "What did you say?"

"Pregnant. I'm pregnant." I go straight to the nightstand and pull out the test, holding it up for him to examine. "I just took it today. I hope you're not upset. We didn't really talk about when we wanted to start trying for a family, and I know it's still really early in the marriage and whatever, but sometimes things happen when they do for a reason, right? I mean, I guess that's always the case—"

He takes my face between his hands, and I would swear there's light glowing from under his skin. "You're having a baby. Our baby. My baby." Like he's still not sure he can believe it.

Somehow, I'm able to speak even with my throat closed to the size of a pinpoint and my heart thudding against my ribs. "I am. At least according to the test. Are you okay with it?"

If I had any lingering doubts, they dissolve when he smiles from ear to ear. "How could I be anything but fucking thrilled?"

"You are?" I ask with a laugh of pure relief.

“Aspen! This is all I want! That one final piece that’s been missing. You’re giving it to me.”

“You kind of gave it to me,” I point out, laughing through my happy tears.

“We gave it to each other.” He pulls me in for a hug, wrapping me in his happiness and his love. “Thank you. Thank you.”

There are tears on my cheeks when he touches my face again, tears that transfer to his skin when we kiss. In that kiss is the promise of so much. Future, family, love. So much love.

There’s a wicked gleam in his eyes when he pulls back. “Come on.” He tugs my hand, pulling me toward the shower. “Let’s practice for when it comes time to make this little one a brother or sister.”

* * *

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ABOUT THE C. HALLMAN

C. Hallman is a *USA Today* Bestselling Author who wrote her debut novel in 2018 and has since published over 100 books in various romance subgenres. Her works have been on numerous bestseller lists and have been translated into 8 languages around the world.

Born and raised in Germany, Cassandra attended business school in her hometown before immigrating to America when she was only eighteen. At nineteen, she married her husband, who was active duty military at that time. Together, they traveled the country for years, before finally settling down. Now, she lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband of sixteen years, their three children, two dogs, and one hairless cat.

With a love for reading, that love slowly transpired into writing she put her fingers to the keyboard and started writing about the dark side of romance.

