



# JUST MR. LOVE

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF

**I can't risk this going further even if I want her so badly.** I gently return her hand to her lap.

"You know we can't."

"You really don't want me, do you?"

I do want her. We've never done more than kiss, but it physically hurts not to be with her. "I have imagined us having sex more times than I can count." Just check out my ceiling. "But we can't see each other again after today, and having sex'll only make it harder to let go."

"I'm sure you could figure out a way for us to be together if you really wanted to, Huff."

"I can't risk it, River." I get up to grab my phone. "It's too dangerous." There's my rage issue, and then there's my enemies' issues.

"Who are you calling?" she asks.

"Like I said, a cab. There's a motel in town."

"I'm not leaving. Not until tomorrow."

"You can't stay here." I want her too much.

"This might be the last time I see you, and even though I hate your guts for what you did to me, I don't want to waste a second of this time. I deserve a real goodbye, Huff."

I know she's right, and she knows I won't say no. "I need to cool off. Want to take a swim?" The sun is about to go down. It's the best time to swim across the lake to avoid any boats.

"Sure." She stands and takes off her shirt, leaving her in her bra. My mouth goes dry at the sight of her large breasts cupped into black lace.

"You're trying to torture me, aren't you?"

"Yep." She slides off her jeans, leaving on her black skimpy panties.

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## **OTHER WORKS BY MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF**

### **COMING SOON!**

Two Sticky Nuts (OHellNo #8) ← **Can't stop laughing at this cover!!**

The Immortal Tailor #2 ← **Evil fun coming.**

She's Got the Time (M.O. Mack, Suite #45 Series) ← **Stuck on this one.**

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**JUST MR. LOVE**  
**REVOLUVTION, BOOK TWO**  
MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF



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# CHAPTER ONE

“You went to River’s bedroom? You let her see you!” my brother, Kyle, yells over the phone as I pace the weathered dock behind my house. Location undisclosed.

All right. Fine. I’m in Mexico at a secluded lake near the border of Belize. They say the gods once lived here, but I’m no god. It’s where I’ve been hiding out the past seven months.

I keep my head down, I have my groceries delivered to my front porch each week, and I mostly stay on the property. There are a few small hotels and eco-resorts near here, but for the most part, the people who come to swim or fish on the lake are locals. Chances are slim they’ve become obsessed with me, like people in the US. Still, when I go outside, I wear sunglasses and a hat.

Why? Because the whole world thinks I’m dead, not to mention one hell of a special guy.

Just who am I? I used to be a shy, wimpy nerd. But today? Well, it’s complicated.

My real name is Hudson Ulysses Ferris, but my friends and family call me Huff. Others know me as Mr. Ultra Mega Love, who tragically “perished” seven months ago due to heart failure.

Nope. Not dead.

*Pfft. It was a lame nickname anyway. What’s even lamer is that they all thought I was a real-life superhero. One brave act and society labels you.*

“What the hell were you thinking, Huff?” Kyle snaps.

“I know. I fucked up.” I brush back my shaggy hair. I can’t really go into town to cut it, so it’s clippers. Grow out. Clippers. Grow out. Right now, I look like a surfer dude due to

my sun-bleached hair past my ears, though I'm anything but laid-back.

"I screwed up," I admit to my big brother. "I never should've gone to see her."

"No shit," he barks. "Do you have any idea of the crap I've gone through to make the world believe you're dead? Not to mention the guilt I put up with from Mom and Dad? They won't stop hounding me to arrange a visit. They have no fucking clue how dangerous it would be if anyone outside our family found out you're still alive."

*He's right.* I'd be hunted by every government and pharmaceutical company on the planet. The psycho chemist Morris, who created the drug that transformed me, was initially employed by a sports drink company called *Muscle Juice Potion*. MJP for short. Morris's performance-enhancing cocktail turned out to be highly effective but with major side effects. Exploding heart, for one. But only if you stopped taking the drug cold turkey. It also made people murderously aggressive.

Anyway, a lot of athletes at my university were hooked on it and died. I was unfortunate enough to be drowned by a bunch of dickheads in a sludge pond adjacent to the MJP factory. Apparently, I gobbled down a gallon of experimental batches from Morris's super-juice trials, plus whatever else was in that pond.

Honestly, no one knows what gave me the strength of a hundred men, the ability to travel with one thought, and the hearing of a distrusting mother. I can heal fast, too. It's why I'm so valuable. I'd make the ideal super-soldier. Or spy, weapon, Olympic athlete—pretty much anything requiring strength. And since MJP wanted to cover their tracks and disposed of all the byproducts in that pond, no one knows what was really in it.

I don't even think Morris, who's been on the run for as long as I've been in hiding, has a clue what happened to me.

“Huff,” Kyle says, “I’m going to fix this, but you can’t pull this crap again. River thought you were dead, and as hard as that was for her to accept, she was moving on.”

“How do you know?”

“We keep in touch,” he says matter-of-factly.

“You mean you’ve been keeping tabs on her.” A flaming ball of anger flares in my stomach. When it comes to River, I’m protective to a fault.

“I keep tabs on anyone who might go snooping.”

That would be River. Like Kyle said, it wasn’t easy for her to accept my death, but eventually she did.

Or had?

Going to see her in the middle of the night probably blew it. Wasn’t the first time I’d risked it either. It’s just that sometimes I miss her more than I love her. I know it sounds messed up, but it’s the truth. If I loved her more, I wouldn’t get near her. But I did. And she saw me.

*Fuck.* The look in her wide brown eyes. *No words, man. No words.* It was pure rage plus a bunch of other crap. Like, all the pain in the world mixed with a side of, “*Are you kidding me right now?*” I’d popped into her room, thinking she’d be in bed asleep, when she walked in the door, flipped on the lights, and literally said, “Fucking Huff. You’re alive. I knew it!”

She wasn’t happy, but how can I blame her? After being best friends since the second grade, we finally admitted we had feelings for each other right before I had to fake my death. It killed me to let her go, but all sorts of bad people would use her to get to me if they knew I was alive.

“So what do I do now?” I ask Kyle.

“You let me handle it. And stay. The hell. Away. From River.”

“Yeah. Sure. Okay.” I tilt my head toward the clear blue sky. Its magnificent color is lost on me. So is this tropical

paradise I call home. They say that time heals all wounds, but I've loved River since we were little. And as far as I know, that kind of love isn't an injury or a medical condition, so what's there to heal? I fucking miss her. She's everything to me.

"I mean it, Huff. I can't protect you if you start showing your face around."

He's right, but... "Where does this end, Kyle?"

"What do you mean?"

I kick at a loose board sticking up at the end of the dock. "Is this my life? Hiding. Cowering. Alone forever?"

Kyle growls with frustration. "How the hell should I know, Huff? I'm just trying to keep you safe. In a few years, maybe the world'll forget about you, and then we'll see."

That pretty much sums it up; my future is a giant black hole. Still, I gotta be grateful for Kyle and everything he's doing for me.

"Thanks for being here, bro." At least I get to fight another day. And I'm also free of Morris's drug. Took months to wean me off it so my heart wouldn't explode, but I made it. So did twenty-nine out of the forty students who'd been tricked into taking a different version of Morris's street drug—way more watered down than what I was exposed to, but still highly dangerous.

"Don't mention it," Kyle says.

"What will you say to River?" I ask.

"I'll tell her what she needs to hear. Hey, gotta go. We're back in session at one o'clock." Meaning, Congressman Kyle Ferris doesn't want to talk about it. He thinks he's a god because he was the youngest person in the history of our state to get elected to the role. Now he's twenty-nine, eight years older than me. Still thinks he's a god.

"Just keep me posted on River, 'kay?"



He ignores my request. “I’ll be in touch in a few weeks. Keep your head down, little man.”

*Little? Hardly.* The call ends, and my head spin begins. Why the hell don’t I have more self-control? I’m supposed to be superhuman. I have fucking powers! Yet I can’t keep it in my pants when it comes to River.

No, I didn’t screw her. *In my dreams.* No, really. I literally hallucinate twice a week, seeing her here with me. Then I snap out of it, and that urge to be with her drives me to check on her, like I did the other night. Not good.

I have to let her go once and for all.

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## CHAPTER TWO

I don't hear from Kyle for the next month, which is normal. Also normal is that I can't get River out of my mind. I'm wondering what Kyle said to make her believe she didn't really see me in her bedroom that night.

Does she feel like she's going apeshit and dreamed it up? Did she tell him to fuck off because she knows what she saw?

*Does any of this matter?*

Because I've already made up my mind. I have to put her behind me. I have to love her more than I miss her. *Can't be a selfish prick anymore.*

I spend the morning exercising—pushups, swimming two miles across the lake, sit-ups, and weights. None of it makes one shred of difference on my physique because my body is perfect. That's not me bragging. It's a side effect of my condition. I only exercise to calm my mind and drain away my aggressive energy. Not an easy task.

After my workout, I splurge and order a case of Pacifico beer and a pizza from the guy who's basically the local DoorDash, taking grocery orders or delivering takeout to locals from the main town about thirty minutes away. He only takes cash and charges ten percent. He also doesn't ask questions or give a crap who you are.

With my curtains drawn to keep out prying eyes—not that anyone comes around often—I'm knee-deep in beer and sitting on my brown, beat-up sofa, watching the national robotics competition, when my phone makes that special sound for Kyle. It's sort of a siren combined with a boat horn. *Bwowww! Bwowww! Honk, honk!*

I grab my cell from the coffee table. It's a text.

*Kyle: I'm sending a helicopter. Be ready in twenty.*

*Kyle's evacuating me?* The five slices of pizza I just ate bubble up my throat along with my six beers. My brow instantly gets all sticky with sweat. Blood rushes through me, sending pinpricks to my extremities. *What the hell happened? How was I found out?*

I hop to my feet and peer through the living room curtains. My small, cinderblock house is surrounded by thick jungle on two sides. The lake is to the back. Out front, there's a patchwork of flagstone nestled into the moist dirt, leading from my front door to a road. The flagstone is covered in sticky mud half the time because it rains a lot around here, but it's helpful for keeping track of who comes around. The delivery guy always wears flip-flops. Size nine.

I eye the path but don't see any new footprints. I go to the window in my tiny all-blue kitchen, and then to my bedroom with its single lamp on the nightstand and big fan in the corner. I peer out the blinds to check that side of the property. Looks clear, too.

Assuming the threat hasn't arrived yet, I quickly grab my black duffel bag from the narrow closet and put it on the unmade bed. I shove my clothes inside—jeans, tees, shorts. I don't own much, so it only takes a minute.

*Hold up.* I freeze with my hands on the bag. I have no idea where Kyle is going to relocate me. The Himalayas? The Arctic?

“Jacket. I need a jacket.” I have one that's been sitting in a bag under the bed, unused since I got here. It's too hot for winter clothes. Most days, I don't even wear a shirt. Fine. Or underwear. What's the point? I live in my swim trunks since I have to jump in the lake to cool off. No AC here, and it's fucking hot.

I rush to the bathroom and grab my razor, toothbrush, and deodorant. *Done. Ready.*

Panting and sweaty, I finish zipping up my bag and look at my watch. I have a few minutes to spare. Then I look down at

my bare chest. *Dammit. I need a shirt.* Probably makes sense to put on pants, too. I'll skip the underwear.

*Why start now?*

I unzip my bag, dig out my favorite red tee and slide on a pair of jeans. I push my feet into my black Converse and let out a sigh.

*There. Better.*

"I should eat something." No, wait. I'm full. And maybe a *liiittle* drunk. I metabolize alcohol quickly, so I should be fine by the time they get here. *Hold on. How will I know this is a legit extraction?*

Swaying from the beer, I grab my phone.

*Me: What's the code word?*

*Kyle: Ultra Mega Chicken*

"Funny, asshole." Ultra Mega Chicken is a character from an animated series I used to watch. Kyle always teased me about my TV shows.

*Me: Wrong*

*Kyle: Mama likes mambo.*

Correct. For the record, I don't know if Mom ever listened to mambo, but I picked the phrase because it's easy to remember. The counter code, the one I'm supposed to reply with, is even dumber, so I reply with a thumbs-up emoji instead. Kyle already knows it's me.

I immediately want to ask what the situation is—how I was found out, who's after me, and where I'm going—but I know better than to ask over text. Not safe. Kyle and I communicate using an encryption program that self-deletes in an hour, but Kyle warned it can be compromised. When we speak on the phone via a secure app, we're always careful never to discuss my location.

I zip up my bag once again and drop it over by the front door. I go out back, turn off the water main, shut off the

propane tank, and lock up. There are bars on all the windows and doors, so the place should be fine while I'm away, though I'm not sure I'm ever coming back.

I wait with my ear to the front door until I hear the unmistakable chopping sound of a helicopter off in the distance. Probably five miles out. *My mom-hearing is the best.*

I step outside, lock the door behind me, and head to an empty lot off the main road. It's our agreed-upon rendezvous location.

Minutes later, I spot the bird and stand back under a large mango tree as the blades whip the air around me, kicking up leaves and dirt. And a mango. *Ouch!* I rub the top of my head as my heart goes into overdrive, pounding louder than the helicopter's engine. *Thump! Thump! Thump!*

*Stay calm,* I tell myself. *Remember your breathing.* I can't get riled up. It's key to not becoming a raging murderer. Morris's drug might've left my body, but it changed me forever.

The black helicopter sets down in the tall grass, and two men in camo, holding automatic rifles, hop out, pointing their weapons at the surrounding area. A third man, the size of a tank with muscles almost as big as mine, jumps out and runs toward me.

I swallow hard. This looks serious, like there's a threat nearby.

Muscle Man wastes no time and sprints across the field in my direction, waving for me to start coming toward him.

"Mama likes mambo!" he yells, so I know he's been sent by Kyle.

Now I'm really about to feel stupid for choosing these security phrases. "Daddy loves disco!" I yell back with as much manliness as I can muster. Still comes out sad.

To my surprise, Muscle Man doesn't laugh in my face. Instead, he unclips a radio from his belt. "Chicken is in the

basket,” he says loudly. “I repeat, chicken is in the basket.”

I’m the chicken? *Kyle’s such an asshole.* I know he chose my code name.

“Sir, let’s get you out of here!” Muscle Man says, speaking directly to me.

I follow him to the back of the copter and get in. I’ve never flown in one of these before, but there are bulky black harnesses on every seat and tons of knobs and buttons all over the dashboard. Looks high tech. Aside from the pilot, there’s another armed man seated up front with a rifle crossed over his chest.

*Kyle sent five soldiers?* Seems excessive considering I can take care of myself.

The two men outside load in after me. In seconds, we’re up in the air, my stomach rolling from the motion as the tall trees below become broccoli sized. The turquoise lake below fades from view as we soar over it and head east.

*Phew.* A sense of relief washes over me because I made it out safely, but that’s stupid. I don’t know what I’m running from. And now that I think about it, if someone had shown up to my lake house, I could travel halfway around the globe in the blink of an eye. Kyle would just have to send me a photograph to show me where to go, and poof, I’m there. Something about this extraction feels...strange.

“Mind telling me what’s going on?” I ask Muscle Man, who’s seated next to me.

He keeps his steely gaze focused ahead. “You’ll be debriefed when we get there, sir.”

*Sir? A little formal, aren’t we?* “Just call me Huff. So, where am I going?”

“Don’t know your final destination, sir,” he says, refusing to use my first name. “We’re instructed to drop you at a private airport near here and get you on board the plane.”

*Oh great. This doesn't sound shady at all.* But I have no choice; I have to trust them.

*Actually, that's not true.* Again, I could still zip right out of here with one thought. Where would I go? It's difficult to pick a safe place when I don't know what the threat is, but I'm sure I could figure something out. There was a cabin my parents used to rent for us when I was little. I also know a little sandwich shop that makes really good pastrami on rye. Been dying for an excuse to visit. But if I leave now, I won't find out what's up.

Less than thirty minutes later, we're touching down on a concrete pad to the side of a landing strip and airplane hangar, all surrounded by lush green jungle.

We're immediately greeted by more armed men, also dressed in camo, who usher me away from the spinning blades of the helicopter. My nerves begin to tingle with restlessness because the entire situation feels panicky.

"Sir! This way!" A man with gray hair, wearing khakis and a white golf shirt, is waving by the door of the hangar. I have no clue who these people are, but I'm getting the impression they want it that way.

"Hurry!" He gestures for me to go inside and take the stairs to the waiting plane. The thing is huge. Jumbo-jet sized.

"I'm not boarding until someone tells me what's going on," I say.

"Sir, if you'd please—"

"Huff! Get your ass up here."

My eyes follow the length of the rollaway staircase to where Kyle's head is poking out of the plane's door. He's changed his hair color to jet black, and he has a spray tan. Weird, but still a welcome sight. I've never been this happy to see anyone.

He and I never really got along growing up. I was an introverted nerd. He was, and still is, a cocky, driven brainiac.

After our sister, Joy, was murdered over six years ago, the wedge grew even bigger between us. Between the whole family, really. Instead of pulling together, we each dealt with our loss in different ways. Me, I shut out the world completely. My parents and Kyle spent every waking second pursuing justice for Joy and pretty much ignoring me—the youngest child. Kinda messed me up.

Fast-forward to now, and I'm grateful that Kyle is the ambitious, power-hungry prick that he is. It's why I'm not locked away in some military dungeon being experimented on.

"I can't believe you're here," I say with a smile. I honestly didn't think I'd ever see him again. "What's with the black hair and tan?"

"Consultants said it makes me look more distinguished. And nice to see you, too, little shit." He waves me up. "Hurry. We have a lot to go over."

I climb the stairs, and he hugs me tight, clapping my back with one hand. He lets go and stares with a glint in his brown eyes.

*Crap.* I know that look. It means he's getting ready to sell me on something.

"What is it now? What's happened?" I ask.

"Before I say anything, promise you won't have one of your infamous freak-outs."

"I don't 'freak out,'" I argue. "I have a deadly rage issue." Staying calm is essential to the well-being of those around me.

Kyle frowns.

"All right. No freaking out, but at least prep me properly. How bad is what you're about to say?"

"On a scale of one to ten, it's a twenty."



## CHAPTER THREE

Kyle walks me to the middle of the plane, where a group of nine men are waiting. All older. All in suits or dress shirts. None of them look happy. Frosty frowns all around.

I instantly wonder why the hell Kyle is exposing me to so many people. Isn't it dangerous for them to see me?

"Who are they?" I ask Kyle.

"For reasons I'm sure you can guess, I won't be making formal introductions," Kyle says.

"Sure. I get it. Anonymity. Top-secret stuff." Only, they all know who I am. Seems one-sided.

"Let's go to the room in the back," Kyle says.

I hadn't noticed, but behind the rows of seats is a doorway. From here, I see a conference table and chairs. Reminds me of the *Air Force One* you see in movies.

I nod and follow the group in.

A tall, skinny man with a combover cut sits at the head of the table at the far end and points to a seat next to him. "You'll get a better view from here, Huff."

I take a seat, and everyone else sits to the sides of the table.

Combover slips a remote from his pocket, and a small projector drops from the ceiling. It's old-school. Or is it high tech? I have no damned clue.

"Twenty-four hours ago, we received a call from the French prime minister."

*Huh? French prime minister?* There's no possible reason in my mind as to why those words would relate to me.

He goes on, "It seems Morris is threatening to blow up Paris."

I burst out laughing. “Morris the chemist? They found that psycho?” I notice no one’s laughing with me.

“Just listen,” Kyle scolds. “We’re on the clock.”

I lift my palms apologetically.

Combover continues, “As everyone knows, Morris is a very skilled chemist when it comes to biological enhancements. He’s discovered a way to manipulate human DNA that’s baffled the scientific community.”

Morris gave up a version of his street-drug recipe before he went into hiding so that he could save his sister, Keni. Unbeknownst to him, she took the stuff when she was acting as his middleman. Middlewoman? Middleperson? *Sounds like orgy-speak.*

Anyways, Keni decided to become a customer, too, and Morris wasn’t happy about it. However, when he found out, he was in jail, arrested for doping half the football team with his poison. Like them, without more doses, Keni would die if she didn’t get her next fix. So Morris shared his secret sauce with a lab that could make a limited batch with very rare ingredients. Point is, I’m sure the government took blood samples from Morris’s victims in hopes of unlocking the secret to making more Huffs, even if what I was exposed to was something different: industrial waste from Morris’s many test batches plus whatever else was in that pool.

“Morris’s expertise is in super-steroids, not explosives,” I point out. “So why is anyone taking the threat seriously?”

Combover replies, “What has the French prime minister concerned is that Morris offered a little taste of what he plans to do.”

I raise a brow.

“Haven’t you seen the news? Morris is the one who set the Eiffel Tower on fire,” Kyle explains. “He used an unknown substance that can’t be put out. Not with water or conventional flame retardants, anyway. Morris says he’ll give us the

chemical to extinguish it if we play ball. Otherwise, bye-bye Paris.”

My brain produces an image of a giant bonfire burning in the middle of Paris while everyone stands around roasting marshmallows. Sounds kind of fun. Not the whole Paris-on-fire thing, though. That sounds pretty crappy.

“I haven’t seen the news,” I say, “but what’s this have to do with me?”

“Morris has given us twenty-four hours to produce *you*, or he’ll light up the rest of the city.”

*Morris wants me?* “How does he even know I’m alive?”

“Lucky guess,” Kyle says.

Combover adds, “He’s obviously well aware of your value and that we wouldn’t let you die so easily.”

My death was faked on TV in front of ten different reporters from ten different stations. Later, my family held a funeral and everything. To be clear, I *had* anticipated dying that day because I refused to take Morris’s street drug in order to prevent my heart from bursting. Its secondary side effect is the murderous rage I mentioned before. No way did I want to risk losing control and hurting River, my family, or someone else because I lost my shit. Not when I’d been a victim myself.

Blake, the quarterback on the university’s football team, was on the drug when he tried to drown me in that MJP pool. He would have killed River, too, if I hadn’t popped back to life all new and improved. Later, Blake felt so bad about what he’d done, he stopped taking the juice and let his heart explode.

“Okay,” I say, “so Morris wants me. For what?”

“We don’t know.”

Oh. That sounds comforting. “This doesn’t make sense. Morris knows I’m stronger than him. He can’t be stupid enough to think I won’t snap his neck.” I blink. *Did I just say that?* “I meant—that I’d handcuff him and hand him over to

the police. Or policia? Politzzi? Not sure how to say it in French.”

“He wants you sedated,” Kyle explains. “He’s provided instructions on where he’ll administer it.”

Are they nuts? “I’m not letting Morris shoot me up.”

Kyle knocks twice on the conference table to get my attention. “Huff, we need you to listen—”

I knock twice back. “No, Kyle. Just tell him I’m dead. Tell him you can’t give him what he wants.”

“We already tried that,” Combover explains. “It’s why he lit the Eiffel Tower on fire.”

“I’m not letting myself get handed over to that crazy asshole.” And after everything Kyle’s done to keep my existence a secret, I’m a little surprised he’s willing to hand me over so easily.

“We’ve got a plan,” Kyle explains. “We’ll send you armed with a syringe. We’ll create a diversion—a loud noise—and you’ll swap out his syringe with yours. You’ll only be sedated ten minutes tops—just long enough to convince him you’re out. Then we’ll track you and him back to his lab.”

“Why do you need to find his lab? Just catch the guy. Arrest him.”

“Morris will never tell us what we need to know. Does he have bombs planted around the city already? What sort of bombs? How do we put out that fire? We need access to his lab, notes, chemical inventory...”

They have a point, but how am I going to swap syringes without Morris noticing? This is the worst plan in the world.

“You’re not hearing me,” I say. “I’m not putting myself in that psycho’s hands for one second. Do you know how many lives he’s ruined? How many people have died because of him? And don’t get me started on this.” I wave my hand over my chest.

Kyle's face turns to his disapproving-father look with the scrunched brows and crinkled lips. "It's either that or we evacuate Paris, in which case, he'll probably light it up anyway. Two million people will die. Maybe more."

*Why are they asking me to do this? I'm no hero.*

"We'll have eyes on you the entire time, Huff," says Combover. "And the US government is prepared to grant you full protection if you do this. No one will come after you and try to study you like a lab rat. You'll be free to move around, be in public, live a normal life."

Why is the US government even involved? I know France is an ally, but something feels off about this—like there's more to the story they're not telling me.

Either way, I don't know how they'll keep me safe from the rest of the world. Sure, I could probably manage to protect myself on my own by staying on the run indefinitely, but what sort of life would that be?

I want to go back to college and study to become a lawyer. I want a home. I want to grow old with River. I want to lead a normal, boring life where no one cares who I am. How can the US government possibly deliver that? On the other hand, just having their guarantee that they won't nab me for experimental purposes is a nice start. I guess the question now is how legit is this offer?

"Who in the government is making this offer? Who knows I'm alive?" I ask Kyle.

"The president was informed, along with a handful of top officials." Kyle looks guilty all of a sudden. And he should.

"Why would you tell them?" I'm supposed to be a secret. Kyle has pounded it into my head. "*Stay hidden, you stay alive.*"

"I had to, Huff. They came to me yesterday about the threat and asked me point-blank if you were really dead. Once I heard how many lives were on the line, what choice did I have? But I did negotiate for your freedom up front."

I don't like it. He made a choice with my life and didn't bother consulting me. That's Kyle for ya.

“So what do you say, Huff?” Kyle prods. “Because we all know you can leave if you want, and none of us will ever find you if you don't want to be found.”

Yeah, but now a lot of people with power know I'm not dead. I'd be on the run the rest of my life. On the other hand, this is a chance to get some of my life back. I could be with River again.

“Fine. I'll do it.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

*This plan is so stupid.* For whatever reason, Morris wants me to show up at a place called Parc Monceau, a few miles from the flaming Eiffel Tower.

I can't come up with any logical reason for the meeting place or why he chose to threaten Paris in the first place, other than maybe the location is convenient? He fled the US, so France could be his new home.

For the record, he'd been arrested for dealing his deadly street drug, but then he was set free. At the time, his formula wasn't illegal since no one knew it existed. No law was broken. Not technically. It wasn't until a few weeks later that charges were brought against him for all the deaths he'd caused, but by then he'd skipped town with his sister, Keni. A lot of people in the US were looking for him, though.

"So this is the meet-up spot?" I ask Kyle, who's holding a photo of a pond with a semicircle of Roman pillars around the edge.

"Yes. And this goes in your pocket." He hands me a strange-looking metal tube. "It has a tracker inside along with your syringe."

"Where will Morris be? Where will his syringe be?"

"We don't know where he is, but he says the injection will be delivered to you along with instructions."

Again, this plan is lame. I'm only going along with it on the off chance I can get my freedom out of it, which means getting River.

Kyle adds, "Just be sure to take *your* injection and not his."

*Ugh. This plan is garbage.* Way too many things could go wrong. Also, Morris is crazy, not stupid, and we still don't know what he plans to do with me.

My guess? Drain my body of blood so he can remake the formula that changed me.

I look at the clock. I have five minutes to go. “Please tell Mom and Dad I love them, okay? And tell River I’m sorry for lying.”

“I don’t plan on telling her anything until this is over,” Kyle says. “No one knows this is happening.”

“What about the flaming tower of Parisian fun?” I ask.

“The public is being told the fire is a stunt for a movie being filmed—all special effects.” He produces a long black wig, sunglasses, and a tie-dye T-shirt. “Here, now put these on.”

“You want me to dress like a hippie?”

“Do you want to be recognized?”

“If I’m going to be free after this, I don’t see why not.” I won’t be a secret anymore.

“There are a lot of crazy people out there who’d like to get their hands on you, Huff, so until we have your security detail figured out, I suggest we keep your identity concealed.”

*Security detail?* He hadn’t mentioned that part of the deal, but whatever. “I just want the government’s guarantee they won’t touch me.”

“Of course.” Kyle claps me on the arm. “You ready?”

“Nope.”

“Thattaboy.”

We move outside the airplane hangar because I prefer to travel outdoors. Mostly because I’m not so sure what my limitations are. Can I travel through metal? Water? I’ve done glass and drywall, but that’s about it.

I look down, and my hands are shaking. I don’t want to mess this up. It could mean the difference between seeing River again—kissing her, holding her, being punched in the



balls by her because I made her think I was dead. But I know she loves me more than friends, and I'm hoping she'll forgive me.

*I can handle anything. Just as long as I have her.* I look up at the clear blue sky, noting how it seems a little bluer now. Maybe because I have hope.

“Be careful, Huff. And text me once you take out Morris,” Kyle says.

I blink. “Take him out?”

Kyle stares—flat lips, narrowed eyes. “What did you think you were going to do once you lead us to Morris’s lab?”

I’m a fucking idiot sometimes. Well, not an idiot—because I had a four-point-oh GPA in school, and I hardly tried—but I am naïve sometimes. Definitely too kindhearted for my own good. My mind doesn’t instantly jump to scenarios where I have to engage in violence. *Or murder.* But of course that’s what they want me to do. They want me to *kill* Morris.

Did I really think the entire plan was about me getting put to sleep for ten minutes and then asking Morris to politely abort his evil plot?

I shake my head at myself. “Kyle, I’m not sure I can kill another person.”

He grabs me by the shoulders and squeezes firmly. “It’s either him or you, Huff. Not to mention the millions of people in Paris. Babies, children, the elderly included.”

I stare, still unsure if I can end another person’s life.

“Puppies and kittens will die, too,” he adds.

Cats are okay, but dogs? I love dogs. Always wanted one. “I’ll rip his head off.”

Kyle smiles. “Good. And don’t forget your wig.”



I’m dressed in my long black wig and green-and-red tie-dye shirt. I keep my jeans and Converse. Kyle hands me the photo

of the meet-up spot, and I start preparing to do my thing.

Basically, I envision being somewhere, and suddenly I'm there. I have no clue how it works. How does a human body travel at the speed of thought? Do I turn into vapor and whoosh through the air? Do the cells in my body communicate with the particles around me, and the particles just get the hell out of the way, creating a sort of vacuum that pulls me through?

Trust me, I've had a lot of time to think about it. I've read every book on astrophysics and quantum physics I can get my hands on, but I've yet to find a theory that comes close to explaining how I'm able to overcome the g-force, let alone how I propel myself at two thousand miles per second. That's faster than any supersonic aircraft, but much slower than the speed of light at one hundred eighty-six thousand miles per second.

Could I go that fast?

I'd need a destination to travel to first, and I'm not about to test out the moon. A little dangerous without a space suit.

"All right, it's go time. Be careful, Huff." Kyle slaps my back, and I close my eyes, visualizing the new location.

Suddenly, the air around me feels cold and damp. When I open my eyes, I'm definitely in Paris. It's dark out, and couples are strolling along the walkway behind me.

I stand under a streetlamp that casts an orange hue over the scraggly bushes and trees surrounding the small pond with columns. It's actually pretty here. I'd love to come back some day and sightsee. That is, if anything's left of Paris after this is all over with.

I look over my shoulders and scan the surrounding trees. Kyle said there would be people watching from various positions around the small park, but I don't see anyone. Maybe they're hiding in the branches?

I slide my hand in my pocket and grab my tube, popping off the cap. I don't know what to expect, but I have to be ready

with my syringe.

I glance at my watch. *Two minutes to go.* I turn my head in the other direction, looking for any sign of Morris, and spot the top of the fiery Eiffel Tower peaking over the buildings in the distance.

“Jesus. That’s pretty impressive.” The flames are a funny blue-and-gold color that remind me of those little lamps you find under chafing dishes, the kind they have at fancy buffets.

“Hello again, Huff.”

I turn my head, and Morris is standing one foot in front of me, but he looks different. Kind of like...me? He’s about six inches shorter, but his muscles are huge instead of scrawny. Even his brown hair looks thicker. He must’ve taken something. *Uh-oh.*

He grabs hold of my arm and then *whoosh!* We’re standing in a dark, empty warehouse. A propane lamp is sitting on a small table next to a wooden chair. There’s a filled syringe on the table. *This isn’t his lab.*

“What the hell, Morris.” I’m about to split when I remember I’m supposed to kill him. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* I don’t know if I can.

Morris immediately takes ten steps back. “I bet you’re wondering why I wanted to see you.” Morris points to the chair. “Have a seat.”

“No thanks.” My mind floods with images of tearing off his head. If I can get to him fast enough, I might be able to do it. “I see you figured out how I got this way.” He’s ripped from head to toe and moves just as fast as me.

“No. I only have half the formula. Mine wears off.”

Oh. Too bad.

“Which is why I need a sample of your blood,” he adds.

Just as I predicted, he’s after my blood, but why else would he want me here? Not for my witty humor.

“Sure. Come and get it,” I say. I need him within arm’s reach to snap his neck.

He eyes the tiny table. “First, inject yourself with the sedative, or I’ll blow up Paris.”

I scoff. “Like I care. French food is the worst. So much...” I can’t think of a French dish off the top of my head, so I say, “Bread.” And make a sour face. Silly, because who doesn’t love bread?

“You say that now, but wait until you see the countless faces of the dead on the news.”

I don’t react. “Why are you even here, Morris? You could’ve picked a city way closer to home.” Also, he could’ve kidnapped someone I care about, like Kyle, to blackmail me. Why go through all these theatrics?

He stares for a long moment with his twitchy brown eyes. “Keni wanted to live here. It was her dying wish.”

My heart drops. I used to have a crush on his sister, Keni. Red hair. Big green eyes. The most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen besides River. Keni turned out to be a psycho bitch because she took Morris’s street-drug concoction. Still, she was hot, and what red-blooded guy doesn’t mourn the loss of a beautiful woman? Even the crazy ones.

“She’s really dead?” I ask.

Morris nods solemnly. “Just last week. I can’t bring myself to leave the city. She loved it so much. It’s why we came here to live after everything happened.”

So there’s no way he’d burn it down. “Then I guess you should stay here. Cherishing her memory and all.”

“I would, but I made a promise. On her deathbed, she asked me to find a cure.”

“Cure?” I ask.

“For you.”

“Me?”

“Despite what you thought of Keni, she really liked you. She never forgave herself for how she treated you or that my drug ruined so many lives.”

Keni played the part of drug dealer, so I could see why.

He goes on, “Everyone who survived is successfully off the drug, but you. You’re forever changed. She asked me to give you your life back.”

Give me back my weak, wimpy body? Or take away my powers? I’m not sure which he’s referring to, but I’ve never once discussed, pondered, or hoped I’d ever go back to my old self. The truth is, I’m not sure I’d want to. It’s a question for another day. In the meantime, something about this situation smells rotten.

“What about you, Morris? Why do you look like that?”

He glances at his chest. “Oh, well, I was trying to crack the code—you know, be strong like you, but that was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before Keni got sick.”

“And how exactly did she get sick?” I ask.

Morris stares, and I can tell his mind is churning.

“This is all a bunch of bullshit, isn’t it?” I say. “You’re just trying to get me to feel sorry for you so I’ll give you my blood. Keni’s probably somewhere safe and sound right now, drinking a latte and eating a Croissan’wich or le Big Mac.”

“Fine.” He throws his hands in the air. “You caught me. Keni always said I couldn’t lie my way through a bobsled.”

*Huh?*

He continues, “But think of it, Huff. If I could crack the code and become like you, you and I could change the world.”

“You mean change *your* world by selling the formula to the highest bidder.” Morris was always after money. So why else would he want the Huff recipe?

“If I can stabilize the formula and prevent the whole heart-exploding stuff, then yeah. What’s wrong with benefitting from our discovery?”

*Our?* “As far as I’m concerned, I’m just a happy accident. Unless you ask my parents.” I pause. “That came out wrong. They definitely wanted me. I was just born really small and wasn’t expected to survive.”

*Why the hell am I telling him this?*

I straighten my back so he knows I mean business. “You’ve caused enough damage to all the families who lost their kids. I can’t understand how you even live with yourself.” He knew exactly what he was peddling to those people. Strength and endurance in exchange for money. The fact that they became his pharma-hostages was a beneficial side effect in his mind.

Suddenly, I realize I’ve said too much. He needs to think I’m on his side so I can get close enough to kill him. “But there is one thing I want. One thing only you can give me in exchange for my blood.”

“Name your price.”

It has to sound believable. It has to be something I’d really want and only he can provide. I need him to let his guard down for two seconds so I can crack his neck. “I want the formula—the complete formula.”

“Deal breaker. You might sell it on your own.”

I already said I wasn’t in it for the money, so if I insist, he won’t bite. “Okay. Then I want enough for my friend. But only after it’s been thoroughly tested and proven safe. No repeat injections. No exploding heart.”

His eyes light up, and he shakes a finger at me. “You want a sidekick.”

“My reasons aren’t your business.”

“You’re right; they’re not. But who doesn’t enjoy juicy drama?”

*Me. That's who.* “Can we get on with this? Do we have a deal or not?”

“Yes. We have a deal.” He points to the chair. “I promise you’ll only be out for a few minutes.”

“Morris, I’m not letting you knock me out.”

“Where’s the trust, Huff?”

“Would you let me make you unconscious and take your blood?”

“Fair point.” He pulls a square packet and an empty syringe from his back pocket. “You can take your own blood. Use the pad to disinfect the area first. Don’t want to contaminate the sample.”

This plan also sucks. *Maybe I’ll draw my blood and then pounce on him at the handoff.*

“Sure. Okay.” He sets the empty syringe next to the other one on the small table and backs away.

I walk over and snatch it up. “I’ve never done this before,” I say, hoping he might volunteer to show me. *Come closer, Morris. Just need to kill you.*

“You point it toward a vein in your arm, push it in, and pull back the plunger. I only need a few drops.”

Man, I hate needles. I’m talking hate-hate. I think because when I was a preemie, I was stuck like a pig repeatedly. I don’t remember any of it, but subconsciously, the brain stores all our threats and dangers.

*You can do this, Huff.* Then maybe I can fake passing out. He’ll have to come closer to grab the syringe with my precious blood.

I take the packet and tear it open, swabbing a spot on my inner arm where several plump blue veins are exposed near the skin. I grab the syringe with my shaking hand. My heart feels like it’s about to give out.

*Breathe, breathe, breathe.* I plunge the needle in and pull back the plunger until a bit of red appears in the cylinder.

*Oh no. Blood...* Suddenly, the room starts spinning. My vision closes in. The small amount of light turns to black.

The last thing I hear is, “I’m on your side, Huff. We’re going to be good friends.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

“He took your blood and got away?” Kyle says, pacing just outside the airplane hangar back in Mexico. The sun is about to go down, and those men in camo are nowhere to be found. Where’d they all go?

“I wasn’t expecting to draw my own blood, okay?” I’d woken up a few minutes after passing out. Yes, from the sight of my own blood. *What a wimp.*

Kyle shakes his head, thoroughly disappointed.

Me, I’m getting annoyed. “I risked my life, Kyle. I was completely alone with Morris. No army. No help. No—”

“You have superhuman strength. You have powers.”

“Yeah, and so does Morris. Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask.

“We didn’t know he’d made progress with his formula.”

“Fine. Whatever. That’s not the point,” I argue. “I have no training for this kind of stuff. Eight months ago, I was still living with Mom and Dad, getting ready to leave home for the first time.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that the mission was a failure.”

“You know what? Fuck you, Kyle. I’m not in law enforcement or the military. I’m just a guy who fell into a super-Slurpy and came out with big muscles, incredible speed, and a monster cock.”

“You just had to throw the cock thing in my face, didn’t you?” he sneers.

“First, I would never throw my dick in your face. You’re my brother. Seems a little wrong. Second, you’re not hearing me. I’m still the same old Huff on the inside, but you sent me to save an entire city and kill some guy.”

Now that I'm saying it out loud, I don't know why I agreed to it in the first place. *Stupid plan*. I guess I wanted to prove to myself I could be the hero everyone thinks I am.

"I have no business running around playing Superman, Kyle."

"Well," he snaps, "that's the problem. You think this is all just one big role-playing game." He takes a long pause. "Being a hero isn't a costume or a job or a title, Huff. It's just something good people do when they're in a position to help."

The guilt of his words slam into my stomach. The day Joy died—beaten to death in the girls' locker room—I was just down the hall. River came running, saying something was going down, but instead of bolting to the gym to help Joy, I just stood there arguing with River. I told her she was worrying for nothing, and that Joy could handle herself when really I was too cowardly to confront Joy's attackers—some girls on the cheerleading team. I worried that their boyfriends would kick my wimpy ass, because they'd done it before.

I gave in to my own fear instead of taking action, and it's a decision I'll regret for the rest of my life, even though I don't know if I could've changed the outcome. The point is that I never even tried. I sat on my skinny hands. *Never again*.

"I know how to step up and help, Kyle. When River was attacked at her sorority house, I stopped the guy, and I nearly lost my life for it. I also stepped up when the roof of that hospital collapsed and left a bunch of people trapped inside." It was during a hurricane near my old campus. "I have no problem helping others. But you sent me to kill a person, and there is a big difference between helping and killing."

"Except when there's not."

This is typical Kyle. Nothing's ever good enough for him. "Golly gee, Kyle. Sorry I didn't plunge my hand into Morris's chest and rip out his beating heart to present to you."

"This isn't a joke."

“I get that, but tell me this: Where’s Morris now? What happened to Paris?” Because I gave Morris what he wanted. Crisis averted.

“Yes, Morris sent us a message saying everyone’s safe. For now,” Kyle admits begrudgingly. “But he left the Eiffel Tower on fire.”

That must be some chemistry trick. “Well, at least it looks hella cool.”

Kyle narrows his eyes. “No. Not cool. Morris said the Eiffel Tower is a reminder not to fuck with him. And now that he has your powers—”

“Temporary powers.”

“It’s only a matter of time before he makes them permanent. And then what, Huff? What happens the next time Morris wants something? He’ll just hold another city hostage. Or what happens when he figures out how to make more Huffs?”

*Shiiit.* Kyle is right. One hundred percent. But he wasn’t there. It’s not easy to look a person in the face and then end their life. Also, Kyle isn’t afraid of needles.

I swallow hard. I have a string to pull on that might lead to a solution. How? I’m not sure just yet.

“I know that look on your face. What aren’t you telling me?” he barks.

“Morris thinks we’re going to be friends.”

“Excuse me?”

“I gave him my blood, so now he thinks we’re buddies. And he promised to give me a dose of the formula once he perfects it so I can give it to River.”

I instantly know I’ve made a mistake in telling Kyle because his eyes do that thing where he’s looking at me but doesn’t see me. His mind is plotting and scheming something.

“Kyle, whatever you’re contemplating right now, don’t.”

“But this could be good. If he figures out the secret Huff-sauce, we could give it to a trained soldier. Or an entire army.”

“No, Kyle. Absolutely not. Haven’t you watched, like, every fucking sci-fi movie on the planet with that trope? Never ends well.”

“This isn’t a movie.”

“Which makes it worse. The second one of those soldiers is captured, and his or her blood is studied, our enemies’ll make their own army of Huffs, and then we’d have to make new and improved Huffs.” It’ll be Huff-ageddon.

I suddenly think of River and how unsafe she’d be living in a world full of men who could do anything they like to her. And if you think I’m being paranoid, the night I was changed, she was attacked by a guy on the football team. I stopped him. Later that night he tried to kill me, and she was next on his list. All because he was hopped up on Morris’s juice.

Now imagine how people would react if they were exposed to the crap that did *this* to *me*. The only reason I’m not running around in a constant roid rage is because I’ve worked hard at staying calm. I meditate, exercise, and practice staying in control. Otherwise, I’d turn into turbo-Dexter. Also, my heart could explode. Or not. Really, no one knows what would happen now that I’m fully detoxed.

“The other side of the coin,” Kyle says, “is that we’d have the greatest army in the world.”

*Is he for real?* “For a smart guy, you’re a fucking idiot. Morris has every intention of selling his formula to the highest bidder, and there’s no guarantee that’ll be the US.”

“Unless you become buddies with Morris and convince him to give it to us.”

*Is he insane?* No one should have the formula.

Suddenly, my purpose has never been clearer. I really do have to stop Morris before he figures out the rest of the recipe.

*I have to kill him.* And then I really do have to die. Otherwise, this won't end. River will never be safe. Neither will my parents or Kyle. As for the rest of the world, no one will ever sleep again at night, knowing someone like me can zip right into their house at any time. No locks or alarms can stop me.

*I need a plan.*



I tell Kyle I'm on board so he'll get off my back. I'm supposed to let him know once Morris reaches out, and then try to buddy up to him.

*Nope. Not happening.* Really, I'm planning to... Okay, I don't know what I'm going to do exactly. Part of this whole thing requires playing it by ear. What I do know is that I have to work myself up to killing Morris. I can't fail next time.

"I'm sorry, little guy," I say to the squirrel I caught in a cage just outside my house on the lake. The furry brown critter squirms in my hand, squealing and snapping.

"This is for River," I tell it. "You don't know her, but she's a really good person. And her eyes are...dark and...well, kind of like yours." I notice the squirrel's tiny little brown eyelashes and adorable whiskers poking out from its cheeks. The speckled colors of its black and brown tail are really kind of cool, too. *Awww... He's so soft.*

"Sonofabitch! I can't do it." I open my hand, and Mr. Squirrel hops down in the dirt. Just before it disappears into the thick green jungle, it turns, gives me a look, and makes a mean little squeal sound.

"Did you just tell me to fuck off?" The thanks I get. Or maybe it was calling me a pussy for not having the balls to kill it.

I walk around back and plop down in my foldout chair, resting my face in my hands. "What am I going to do?" I can't throw in the towel so soon. This is important. I need to be able to kill Morris the next time I see him. *For River.*

Maybe I should start smaller. Kill a few bugs first. Work my way up to a squirrel. Then I can kill something really close to a human, like a dog. *No. Never. Maybe a cat?*

“Hi, Huff,” says a soft female voice.

I turn my head, and River is behind me, staring with her big brown eyes. Her long black hair is up in a ponytail, and she’s wearing a snug pink T-shirt that shows off her large breasts.

I want to marinate in this mirage. I never want it to go away. But it always does, leaving behind a gnawing hollowness I can’t shake. That’s usually when I give in and visit her in the middle of the night.

“Go away. I’m not doing this anymore.” I turn back around and stare out at the water.

A few moments pass, and I turn my head, tempted for another glimpse. When I look, she’s gone just like before.

*I can’t live like this anymore.* Then again, I don’t have to. I just need to take out Morris and then get rid of myself. Sad, but true.

I grab my fishing pole, which is leaning up against the house near the back door. I put on a rubber cricket and toss the line in the water. I’ve never caught anything before because I suck at fishing, but if I want to protect River, I’m going to have to get serious about all this murder stuff. Fishing feels like a safe place to start.

“Huff, did you really think you could hide from me forever?” says that familiar soft voice.

“Go away.” I start reeling in my line.

Something pokes me in the back of the head.

I freeze. *My mirages haven’t done that before.* I jerk to my feet and slowly turn my head to find a set of furious dark brown eyes and frosty pink lips.

“River?”

She pulls back her fist and punches me right in the stomach. “How dare you!”

I double over with a gasp. This isn’t a mirage.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“I’m sorry I punched you, but aren’t you supposed to be super-strong now?” River says, pacing back and forth in my measly little living room with a beige tiled floor, while I’m sitting on the beat-up brown sofa, trying to catch my breath.

The problem isn’t that she socked me, it’s that I’m going into the “red zone.” She has no clue how much I missed her, what I want to do to her. All the good and dirty things we never had a chance to do after confessing our love. The other problem is that my heart’s going into overdrive. I have to stay calm.

“I am strong, but you caught me off guard.” I sit up straight and inhale deeply. *I got this. I’m calm. I’m not going to fall into a roid rage.* “How the hell did you find me?”

“Kyle. I threatened him.”

“With what?” And why the hell didn’t he warn me?

“I said I’d go public with...” she starts screaming, “the *fucking* news you’re still alive, Huff!”

I twist my mouth to one side. I don’t actually know where to start. Mostly because she’s going to disagree with my choice to fake my death. I can’t blame her, but I can’t ignore reality either.

“If I’m alive, you’re not safe, River. There are people who’ll come after you to get to me.”

She stops pacing and walks over, shaking an angry finger in my face. “I didn’t ask you to protect me.”

“But I did it anyway, and you know why.” She was there the day Joy died. She knows the guilt I carry for not running to my sister’s rescue. “I won’t ever turn my back on the people I care about again.”



“So, basically, it’s all about you.” She folds her arms over her chest. I try not to fixate on the swells of her large breasts. She just really does it for me. Also, I missed her. Especially her smile.

*Still missing it.* “That’s a pretty one-sided way to see it, River.”

“What’s one-sided is you dropping dead in front of me on live TV and having to see your body in the morgue and then going to your goddamned funeral. What’s one-sided is that I had to go through all that pain and heartbreak because you made a choice for *me!*” Her eyes tear, and the guilt gnaws away at my gut. I know exactly what it feels like to lose someone you love. It tears your soul apart.

“I’m sorry. I really am.” I stand up and wrap my arms around her. She feels so tiny in my arms. Wasn’t always like that.

She pushes me away, her voice cracking with sobs. “Why, Huff? Why not just tell me the truth?”

My original plan was to die for real. Kyle was the one who had me injected with Morris’s street drug to prevent my heart from imploding, not that he was sure it would work. When I woke, he gave me the guilt trip of my life (i.e., How could I even consider dying after all Mom and Dad went through when they lost Joy?) Then he told me about all the people who wanted to get their hands on me. Even the government. That was how he convinced me to play dead. Now I wonder if he kept me alive for another reason. He clearly sees my condition as an opportunity.

“Honest, Riv? I would do anything to keep you safe, so that’s what I did.”

The pain in her warm brown eyes is almost too much. “But you didn’t keep me safe. You hurt me more than anyone ever has. I loved you.”

*Loved?* I guess I shouldn’t be surprised after what I put her through. What’s even worse is that I’m going to have to hurt

her all over again.

“You shouldn’t have come here, Riv.” I press my hand to her soft cheek.

“So that’s it? I travel all this way, switch planes five times, take three cars, wear a disguise, and walk ten miles—all without a phone so I can’t be tracked—just to come and see you. Now you just want me to leave?”

*No phone? Rough.* “I’ve never been happier to see anyone, Riv. And if it were up to me, you’d never leave, but you don’t understand the situation.”

“Then explain it.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” she snaps.

She already knows I’m alive, so that cat’s out of the bag. But how’s she going to feel when I tell her I’m planning to kill Morris and then off myself for the betterment of humanity? I’m a weapon that shouldn’t exist.

“You don’t need to get mixed up in all this shit, River.”

“So you think I can’t handle it, that I’m just some,” she throws her hands in the air, “weak woman who needs a big strong guy to protect her. That’s what you actually think of me.”

“No. I think you’re...amazing. And strong and intelligent and super-hot.”

*What the hell am I saying?* I shouldn’t be reminding myself of all the reasons I fell in love with her.

I continue, “But there’s nothing you can say to make me put you in harm’s way. You need to stay away from me.”

She stares silently, whisking away a stray tear. “So, basically, you love me, but it’s not enough.”

I’m planning to die soon so she can live in a safer world, so yeah. It’s not enough. “My love for you isn’t more

important than your life. But what were you expecting me to say when you showed up here? Did you think I'd beg for forgiveness and ask you to take me back? Or that we'd find a way to be together now that you know I'm still alive?"

She looks away.

*Oh.* So that was what she expected. *I'm a dick.* The last thing I want is to make her think she's not worth fighting for. She needs to understand that I value her life and happiness over my own.

I take her soft hand. I want to say something to make it all better, but all I've got is the truth she's asking for. Maybe I shouldn't come clean, but she's right about one thing: I have to treat her like the strong woman she is.

"Morris perma-lit the Eiffel Tower on fire," I blurt out, "and he held Paris hostage so that I'd give him my blood. He's almost figured out how to make more of me, and now he has what he needs to complete the job. And worst of all, Kyle wants him to succeed. Our government wants an army of Huffs."

Her eyes go wide. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Haven't they ever seen *The Bourne Identity* or *Deadpool*? The whole super-soldier thing never hunts. Always goes sideways."

"Right? That's what I said." See. This is why I love her.

"You have to stop Morris, Huff."

"I know."

"So what's your plan?" She seems a little too excited about all this.

"I think Morris wants him and me to be allies." I leave out the detail that I negotiated for some formula for River so she could be my sidekick because that was just a ploy. I'd never let her take that garbage drug.

"What does that mean?"

“I’m not sure because he also wants to sell the formula to the highest bidder. Oh, and he took some of his developmental concoction, so he’s ripped *and* completely nuts.”

“This is bad, Huff. Very bad.”

“I know. And it’s why the second he contacts me, I have to kill him.” I pause. “Then I need to get rid of all his work.” I look her in the eyes. “All of it, Riv. Every last drop.”

She stares up at me, and then I see my words click in her head. “Oh. For fuck’s sake. Not this again.”



## RIVER

I admit, when I was on my way here, I wasn’t sure what would happen. The only two things I knew were that I had to see him again and then scream my lungs out for his cruel, messed-up choice to make me believe he was dead.

Yeah, okay, I get why he faked his death to the world, but like I told Kyle, I’m not the world. I’m his best friend and have been since the second grade. That makes me like family, and if Kyle and his parents were in on the secret, then why not me? Aren’t I trustworthy enough? Don’t I love him as much as they do?

At least, I used to.

As for the potential threat of someone using me to get to him, I understand that, too. But I’m not the only person Huff loves. His parents and Kyle could also be used as leverage. My point is that I was left out in the cold, heartbroken and mourning for months for no logical reason.

Then there’s the other stuff: my heart kept telling me he was still alive, while everyone around me kept saying I had to let him go.

Even today, my own parents keep threatening to have me locked up in a mental hospital because I refuse to accept Huff’s death or seek professional help. I just didn’t see the

point when I was only listening to my heart, and in my mind it didn't need curing. It just needed answers. If Huff was truly dead, then someone needed to explain a few things...

For example, on the day Huff "died," I watched him collapse in the hospital stairwell. Huff had just delivered a three-month supply of Morris's "muscle juice" so everyone who was hooked on it could buy more time while the doctors looked for a long-term solution. Huff knew he'd been exposed to a super-concentrated, bastardized version of the formula but refused to take the drug even if it could save his life. He was worried he'd lose control and hurt me.

And who could blame him?

Blake, this guy who went to my college, claimed to be in love with me, but after a few months of injections, he became a violent monster. Huff witnessed Blake sexually assault me firsthand. And while Huff arrived just in time to stop the worst from happening, seeing Blake attack me must've left a scar on Huff like it did me. But for Huff, who never got over the violent murder of his sister Joy, Blake's attack meant something different. It was a moment Huff'd been dreading for years: confronting his ghosts.

My point is that we've both been through some pretty heartbreaking stuff, so why would he do this to me? And how could Huff ever believe I'd buy his fake-ass death when we have a connection that goes beyond normal?

Also, I'm not dumb. I knew something was up the moment they wheeled him out of the ER that day, covered in a sheet.

Someone please explain why men in scrubs would be running, *not* walking, a dead man out of there? What was the hurry if Huff were truly gone?

And just why were there so many news crews and reporters at his funeral? Because Kyle wanted the world to see that his brother was dead.

It smelled like a big, fat hoax to me.

All this leads to my final point, why I'm really hurt. After years of hiding my feelings, I finally confessed I was in love with him, and Huff claimed he loved me back. It was this magical moment I'd dreamed of for years. I believed that Huff, who knew me better than anyone, whom I'd shared my most private thoughts with, was my soulmate. So when he says he'd do anything for me, I can't wrap my head around why he wouldn't trust me with the truth. Honesty was always the cornerstone of our relationship. Faking his death and letting me go through all those tears and anguish is a betrayal I can't live with no matter how much I love him.

"For the record, Huff, you're right. I did come here expecting some groveling, but I never planned to get back together with you. How could I when what you did was worse than lying. It was...cruel."

"River," he sits on the couch, "I did it to protect you."

"See. That's the difference between you and me. I never thought it was my job to save you, Huff. I felt it was my job to love you unconditionally and be by your side no matter what. Hudson River. One body of water."

He drops his head in his hands and presses, his thick biceps flexing. They remind me of melon halves. I still can't get over how big he is—the thick neck with pronounced Adam's apple, the wide chest, and...well, the monster cock. Holy crap, it's huge.

Still, he is and will always be my Huff—sweet, kind, and smart (most of the time). I don't care if he looks like a menacing weapon.

He drops his hands. "You don't understand how dangerous I can be. I take precautions to stay in control and not give in to the rage, but it's there—always festering just beneath the surface."

*Excuses. Excuses. Excuses.* "Ohhh, stop it! You'd never hurt me physically. You're just using all this crap to make yourself *feel* like a hero—look at me, I'm Huff. I'm saving the

girl I love,” I whine, mocking him. “The truth is that you’re a fucking coward, Huff! Because a truly brave guy would fight for us. He’d fight for *me*. He wouldn’t run or hide or let anyone get between us. But you? You’re not even willing to lift one finger, which is ironic because the last time I checked, if anyone could protect me, it would be you.” I shake my head in disgust. “You’re no hero, Huff. You’re just a big, fat pussy who doesn’t deserve me. I honestly don’t know why I loved you in the first place.”

Suddenly, his head whips up, and his bright blue eyes are turning dark. Something’s shifted. “Take that back,” he snarls.

I step away. He gets up off the couch and steps forward.

Maybe calling him a pussy wasn’t such a smart choice. “Huff? You okay?”

“No. You keep talking and pushing and fucking with my head, but who the hell are you? Some dumbass chick who’s had everything handed to her.”

*Ah. I get it.* This is like the time Huff tried to run me off after he thought he’d killed my attacker at school with a simple thought. The autopsy later determined it was Morris’s drug that caused the heart attack, but Huff believed he was killing people with his hate, so he pushed me away.

“The tough-guy act isn’t going to work this time, Huff. So cut the crap.”

His lips curl, and the veins in his neck bulge. “I’m not acting, River. You should go. Now.” He says *now* like it’s an “or else” situation.

I step forward and slap his face. “Don’t you fucking threaten me.”

He blinks, and his face turns from a bright red to a normal shade of golden brown—he’s got a great tan going. “I’m sorry. I-I don’t know what...” He turns and disappears into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

I gasp and cover my mouth. *Holy shit*. He wasn't putting on an act right now?

A frosty dread spikes through my stomach. He really was about to hurt me.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

## HUFF

*I can't fucking believe it. I came this close to losing control with River.*

I sit on the edge of my bed, hands shaking. That was seriously messed up. The sooner I'm dead, the better. *Breathe. I am calm. Breathe. I am calm.*

Ten minutes later, there's a light knock on the door.

"Is it safe to come in?" River asks.

"No. You can't be here."

She opens the door anyway. "But my flight home isn't until tomorrow."

"There's a motel in town. I'll call you a cab."

She's quiet for a long moment. "Huff?" she says calmly. "I know you would never really hurt me."

"How?"

"Because you'd stop yourself before anything bad happened."

I let out a slow breath. "Well, I don't know anything." She had to slap me to snap me out of it.

River leans against the doorway. "I don't blame you for what just happened, yanno."

I nod but don't look at her. I can't. I'm ashamed. I'm supposed to protect her, but I'm her biggest threat. My mere existence is a danger to her life.

"And *you* shouldn't blame yourself either," she adds. "It's that crap in your body. I read that it heightens adrenaline and testosterone production."

She's talking about the other drug—the one the students at our university were exposed to. I'm sure whatever was in that pool is even worse.

She walks over and sits next to me on the bed. "I'm sorry this happened to you, Huff. I feel like it's all my fault."

Ridiculous. "How can you say that?"

"I pushed you to come to my university. I made you go to that party."

*The party* was where Blake attacked her. I stopped him, and later that night, he hunted us down and tried to drown me in that pool.

"If anyone's to blame, it's Morris and Keni. Not you," I say. "They created monsters. Me included."

"You're not a monster. You're my Huff." She looks me in the eyes with tenderness I don't deserve.

She has no idea how much I want to kiss her and test out my new dick. Yes, I'm thinking about sex right now. I'm a guy. Also, I've been practicing being gentle and not removing the paint from the ceiling. *God, I hope she doesn't look up.*

"Do you remember that time we went trick-or-treating as the Hudson River?" We wore dark green shirts and pinned trash and plastic fish to us.

"How could I forget?"

"I really wanted to go as a taco so I could be the tortilla and have an excuse to hug you all night."

She laughs. "Hudson Ulysses Ferris, you dirty, dirty boy."

"I always liked you, Riv. Always."

"How come you never said anything?"

Because I felt lucky just to be friends with her. She never cared if I was a geek or her female friends gave her shit for hanging out with me. We made each other laugh. We had

adventures together. “Come on. Look at you. You’re smart, beautiful, funny—way out of my league.”

“I am, aren’t I?” She smiles with a chuckle. “I always liked you, too, but I didn’t want to ruin our friendship. Especially because I couldn’t see us working out.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Remember when I told you that Krissy May wanted you to ask her to the eighth-grade dance, and you said you didn’t believe me?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why I never pushed for more. I was telling the truth, but you couldn’t accept that someone might think you’re cute—which you are. You always have been. Those big intense blue eyes. Your pouty lower lip. The jaw and chin.”

“Naw. I was a scrawny dork.”

“Everyone was a dork, Huff. Remember my psychic phase in the fifth grade?”

I laugh. She and I were so close, we’d finish each other’s sentences, but she was convinced she could read people’s minds. She started wearing this blue scarf over her forehead and charging fifty cents at recess to do readings. She got every single one wrong and had to refund their money. Eventually, she moved on to making friendship bracelets.

“I always thought you should’ve stuck with it, Riv. Maybe started your own reality show with those Bigfoot hunters.” I wave my hand through the air, reading the invisible billboard. “What Is Bigfoot Thinking?”

“Har, har. My point is we were all silly kids with pimples, weird hair, and braces.”

“Not you. You were always so beautiful.” Her warm brown eyes, her smooth tan skin, her cute little ass. I could stare at her all day.

“Trust me, I was just as awkward as you were. But you could never see the smart, funny boy that I did.” She shrugs. “I figured someday you’d grow up into a hot, hot man and find yourself, and maybe then we might...you know, end up together.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s why I’m so hurt over this whole thing, Huff. I would have been there for you. I would have—”

“Dropped out of school and gone into hiding with me?” I scoff. She knows I would never let her do that.

“I dropped out anyway.”

“But you’re going back.”

“Probably,” she says. “I mean yes. Yes, I am. But this past year’s been tough.”

It kills me that her future’s been derailed because of me. “Promise that no matter what, you’ll go back, get your degree, and live the life you’ve always dreamed of.” She was studying psychology and wanted to help others.

“That’s the problem. I can’t see a future without you in it.” She gazes into my eyes with a look of deep affection, and now I can’t hold back. The urge to touch her, hold her, and do dirty things to her is almost too much to handle. Being separated has left a deep mark.

I lean in to kiss her, and she meets me halfway. I’m relieved she still wants me after all the shit I’ve done.

Our mouths press lightly. Her lips are soft and warm. She smells and tastes amazing. *Floral*. Okay, and maybe a little sweaty after all those flights and walking here, but still amazing.

*What the hell am I doing?* I pull back. “I’m sorry I did that.”

“I’m not,” she whispers and slides her hand on my leg, launching pulses of heat through my body. “Keep going.”

I can't risk this going further even if I want her so badly. I gently return her hand to her lap. "You know we can't."

"You really don't want me, do you?"

I do want her. We've never done more than kiss, but it physically hurts not to be with her. "I have imagined us having sex more times than I can count." *Just check out my ceiling.* "But we can't see each other again after today, and having sex'll only make it harder to let go."

"I'm sure you could figure out a way for us to be together if you really wanted to, Huff."

"I can't risk it, River." I get up to grab my phone. "It's too dangerous." There's my rage issue, and then there's my enemies' issues.

"Who are you calling?" she asks.

"Like I said, a cab. There's a motel in town."

"I'm not leaving. Not until tomorrow."

"You can't stay here." I want her too much.

"This might be the last time I see you, and even though I hate your guts for what you did to me, I don't want to waste a second of this time. I deserve a real goodbye, Huff."

I know she's right, and she knows I won't say no. "I need to cool off. Want to take a swim?" The sun is about to go down. It's the best time to swim across the lake to avoid any boats.

"Sure." She stands and takes off her shirt, leaving her in her bra. My mouth goes dry at the sight of her large breasts cupped into black lace.

"You're trying to torture me, aren't you?"

"Yep." She slides off her jeans, leaving on her black skimpy panties.

I drink in the sight of her hips and the curve of her waist. "You're an evil girl."

She struts out into the living room and points at the back door. “Lake’s that way?”

I nod.

“See you there.”

I look up at the ceiling. “God help me.”



## RIVER

*What this guy does to me.* I’m so pissed off and hurt I could punch his rock-hard abs a thousand times, and it still wouldn’t put a dent in my anger.

But sitting here with Huff again after losing him makes me want to forget all that and just...touch him. Smell his skin. Kiss his lips. I literally crave the warmth of his body on my fingertips. He’s not dead, buried ten feet under. He’s breathing and talking and standing shirtless right here with me.

*How am I ever going to let him go again?*

But I have to. No matter the outcome of this thing with Morris, Huff seems determined to put our lives on separate paths. He doesn’t want to fight for me, for *us*. So I’m not going to waste my life, waiting for him to realize how special our relationship is. If he doesn’t see by now that this friendship, our love for each other, is *epic*, then he doesn’t deserve it.

And I don’t use the epic word lightly. I’ve had crushes and boyfriends. But with Huff, it’s like...he’s my delicious topping. Not a missing piece of my soul. Not a piece of my heart. Because I’m already whole. Nothing broken about me. But when he’s around, my life is just...well, it’s like eating ice cream. Deep, decadent chocolate ice cream. I could eat it and be perfectly happy. But Huff is the whipped cream, caramel goop, and nuts. He takes wonderful to a new level. And that’s what makes us epic. My love for him was never needy or codependent. It was always the topping. Our lives are better together.

So if he doesn't understand I'm willing to take the risk and be with him because what we have is special, then fine. It hurts like hell, but I have to be a grown-up about this. I can't force him to believe we might actually stand a chance if we worked as a team to find a solution.

As for me, I'll never stop thinking about what we could've been together. And I'll always be pissed at him for giving up instead of fighting for us. But I refuse to waste my life, begging him to put aside his fear and to trust in us like he used to.

Which leaves me with one last thing to do: say goodbye. For real this time. Because I'm not about to go through another year of mourning, even if he figures out how to stay alive and out of the hands of the powers that be.

So that's that. Tonight is the end of the road for us, and if he doesn't want to have sex with me, what can I say? It's just further proof that my feelings for him were always stronger. Because no way could I say no to him. In the back of my mind, it was always Huff I'd end up with.

*It's time to let go of childish fantasies.* I'm a woman now, almost twenty-two. I have my whole life ahead of me.

I walk to the edge of the dock and look out across the still lake, willing myself to stay strong even if this whole situation hurts. The sun is just about past the horizon behind me, casting dark shadows over the turquoise waters.

"Don't worry. That's a deep spot. No rocks or anything," he says.

I bob my head and dive in. The water is warm, but still soothes away the heat of this place. When I come up for air, Huff dives in and resurfaces a few feet away.

"What do you think?" he asks.

I think I'd like him to kiss me again, but he's right; we can't. And I shouldn't push myself on some guy who doesn't believe we can make it to the finish line, that we could find a way to be together.

“I think the place is beautiful,” I say, treading water.

“Not as beautiful as you.”

“Don’t, Huff. I’m not your yo-yo.”

“Sorry. Can’t help it.” He treads next to me. “You know, when I was little, my family and I would go on these summer vacations in the mountains, and I’d never leave the cabin. Not to hike or swim or ride horses. This place reminds me of how much I missed out on—what I can’t get back.”

“You mean memories with Joy.” He worshipped his older sister, and I did, too. She was smart, feisty, and didn’t care what anyone thought. When it came to protecting Huff, she was like a mama bear. She never backed down.

“Yeah. That’s part of it. We were all together, my parents weren’t crazy sad, and Kyle acted like less of an asshole. I should’ve made more of an effort to be part of my family.”

I feel sorry for Huff because he still hasn’t learned from his past. *I’m right here, and you’re not making an effort.* “So why won’t you fight to keep what you have left? Or are you just going to wait until the rest is gone, too?”

He gives me a look. He’s not even breathing hard. Meanwhile, I’m panting.

“Want to try something fun?” he asks, changing the subject.

“Errr...sure.”

“Put your arms around my neck.”

I paddle over and press my chest to his back. Skin on skin. *Oh God. He feels good.*

“Hang on.” He dips his head under the surface and starts swimming. Suddenly, I’m gliding through the water. It’s like riding a warm wave in the middle of the lake. It’s so damned weird. And so much fun. I laugh and hang on.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

After our swim, Huff and I sip cold beers with lime wedges, we roast hotdogs on a little grill he has outside in the back, and we talk about all the crazy crap we did together growing up—climbing the garage roof of my parents' house and jumping into a pile of couch pillows below. Mom was super angry. Then there was our impromptu ten-mile bike ride to the county fair at eight o'clock at night so we could buy cotton candy. We threw it all up on the Gravitron—that ride where you spin and stick to the wall. We were eleven. Both our parents were super-angry that time. And then there were our super-secret sleepovers at Huff's. Super-secret, because my dad is super-strict and would never, ever have allowed me to have a sleepover with a boy. But Huff and I had our ways. Mostly, I'd sneak over to his house and come through the back door.

We would play games, like D&D or war. We'd read comics—Huff always liked the weird ones. I always liked Marvel or *MAD*. We'd talk, sneak snacks from the kitchen, and then fall asleep on his bed. I think his parents knew when I was over because they'd make extra noise in the morning, preparing coffee or breakfast. His room was on the second floor, so I'd have to tiptoe down the stairs, hang a left into the living room and go out through the laundry room. I always loved our sleepovers because it felt like we were in our own bubble, insulated from the world. For those few short hours, everything was perfect.

One time, I kissed him when he was asleep, and I think that was the moment I knew. "Huff, I'm going to marry you someday," I told him. He didn't hear me, but I didn't care. I felt it in my heart.

*How wrong I was.*

Well, like all those nights we'd slept side by side and I'd escape in the morning, today is no different except for this one

being the last.

I open my eyes. It's morning now, and Huff's body is wrapped around me in his bed, one strong arm curled around my waist. His mouth is pressed to the back of my neck, where his shallow breaths tickle the fine hairs.

I stay frozen, fighting the urge to turn around and kiss him—maybe slide my hands under his T-shirt and glide my fingertips over his chest and abs, too. Maybe I'd explore further, and he'd wake up to do the same.

My core rolls with heat as images of the two us, naked, fucking, wash through my head. So many times I've fantasized about what it would be like to have sex with him, a guy I'm completely comfortable with. Zero inhibitions. After his transformation, I couldn't stop having sexual dreams. Especially after I saw his cock. It pushed my curiosity and lust over the edge.

*Do it, River. Turn around. Touch him. Kiss him.* I know I shouldn't, but maybe this time he won't say no, and I want to be with him just once.

I slowly twist in his arms, careful not to wake him, but my lust quickly turns to sadness. I can't believe I'm saying goodbye to him, my Huff. *I just got you back...*

I drink in his handsome face with golden-brown stubble and angular jaw. I commit the shape of his light brown eyebrows to memory. I study the details of each golden eyelash fanning out over his cheekbones.

*God, I'm stupid.* I'm searing his image into my head when I've already decided to let him go. What I should be doing is looking away.

They say that the only people who can break your heart are the ones whom you've gifted a piece to. In my case, Huff doesn't own my heart—I do—but he definitely has an all-access pass. He always has. Maybe he always will. But I won't have a shot at a torment-free life if I don't try to break this

bond—this *thing* between us—that's been there since childhood.

With tears in my eyes, I carefully slide away from his warm body and stand over him, my heart breaking. I lean over and kiss his soft lips, lingering just long enough to soak in their warmth. “I love you. Goodbye.”

I grab my purse and shoes, and I slip out the front door. I gulp down a sob as I push my bare feet into my pink Converse and hike up to the main road. I want to go back. I want to shake him hard and tell him to wake up. Not from his sleep but from his blindness.

How can he give up on us so easily? I'm a big girl and accept the risks of being with him.

But this is the story of us.

He's blinded by fear, while I see possibilities. I see what we could've been.

I flag down a rusty, smog-spewing bus on the two-lane road, heading into town. I speak Spanish but pretend not to. I don't want to talk to anyone right now. I just want to hold it together and get through what comes next: forgetting Hudson Ulysses Ferris.



## HUFF

My eyes fly open the moment I hear the front door close. I rush to the window and spot River hopping on one foot, trying to get her pink Converse on.

I run to the door and stop, my hand twitching with the urge to twist the knob. I want to tell her not to go. I want to say I'll do whatever it takes to carve out a space for us in this world, but I can't do it. She'll always be collateral damage waiting to happen.

I drop my hand from the doorknob and return to the window, watching River disappear up the muddy path. I know

she'll be okay. Her future is bright because she's bright.

Me? I've got another path to take.

I glance over my shoulder at the back door. "You know what you have to do, Huff," I tell myself.

I go outside and grab my fishing rod. Time to kill stuff.

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## CHAPTER NINE

I've finally worked my way up to a small boar. It screamed. It bled all over my jeans. I may have cried a little. Fine, I sobbed like a complete jackass, but at least I finished the job.

I then dressed the animal, following a video I watched online, and dropped the pig with an old man about a mile up the road who has a smokehouse. He doesn't know me, and I don't know him, but his jerky is legendary around here. I figured if anyone would know what to do with the meat, it would be him.

All I can say is that I have a new appreciation for all the slices of pepperoni I've eaten on my pizzas over the course of my life. Meat isn't just a product found in a grocery store. It had a life once. Not a new fact for me, but it never felt real until now. Weird, I know.

Also weird? I haven't heard any news about Morris. Maybe it's been harder than he thought to perfect the formula. In any case, I've appreciated this extra time to hone my murder skills.

I've also been texting with Kyle for a few weeks, trying to set up a visit with Mom and Dad. I want to explain, face-to-face, my choice to end my life. Not that they'll ever understand, but I want them to at least hear my reasoning. After I kill Morris, I can't fall into the wrong hands.

Of course, Kyle doesn't know what I'm planning. Only River knows.

*River...* I sigh. Kyle didn't say much about her visit other than he made sure no one followed her and that he had no choice but to let her see me. *She plays a mean game of hardball*, he'd texted.

*Don't I know it.*

It's the end of the day, and I've read through my list of new medical studies related to the "Morris survivors." Nothing helpful. I've also been keeping tabs on all the conspiracy theories about the Eiffel Tower's perma-flame. (Act of God? Gimmick to entice tourism? Vandalism?) People aren't buying it's related to a movie.

*Good for them.* Always question what you hear in the news.

Finally, I finish the last few chapters of an ebook I got on *The History of Genetic Mutations: Man's Experimental Chemicals*. Pretty frightening stuff, though, now I understand that Morris's work was based on almost a hundred years of nutjobs trying to create superhumans. World War I was kind of the kickoff to a never-ending science experiment. The question is, what was a company like MJP, which makes sports drinks and performance-enhancing supplements, doing with Morris? Why hire him?

His online bio, which was circulated by almost every news site last year, shows he wasn't a food scientist. His areas of expertise are chemistry and molecular biology. So if MJP employed him for product development, they were trying to create more than protein shakes. They were up to something, and Morris was helping them. Until he hit a breakthrough.

His sister, Keni, once told me that Morris was fired after he experimented with his new "supplement" on people, but I also heard the rub had to do with the fact that Morris wouldn't share his formula with MJP. They fired him for it, and he branched out on his own, planning to open his own company. Dealing his deadly street drug was his version of raising capital.

I open my email and see there's an alert from one of the science weirdos I follow on Substack. He's obsessed with Morris.

*What? LA is being held hostage for five billion dollars?*

I read on, and the author of the article says that an inside source claims the same insane chemist who killed “all those college students” with his heart-exploding drug last year has poisoned the city’s drinking water.

My mouth drops open.

I grab my cell and dial Kyle, who answers immediately.

“Why are you calling? What happened?”

“Is it true? Did Morris poison an entire city?” I ask.

“How do you know about that?”

“Mr. Sci-Fi.”

“Who’s that?” he asks.

“Just some nerd like me who tracks—you know what? Never mind. Is it true?”

“Yes.”

*Oh shit.* “How the fuck did he make such a large batch?”

“We think he chose Paris to make us believe he’d been out of the US this entire time. Now we know he purchased an industrial fertilizer company and probably made millions of gallons of his drug. We believe he dumped a portion in the LA Aqueduct. We’re trying to track the rest.”

And, of course, his drug is extremely new, which would make it difficult to detect.

But why would Morris do this? He went through so much trouble to get my blood. “His plan changed. Why?”

“What are you talking about?” Kyle asks.

“Morris claimed he wanted to figure out the recipe that made me, right?” I say.

“Yeah.”

“So why blackmail LA for money when he planned to sell his Huff recipe?”

“Maybe he needs it to buy more ingredients? I don’t know, Huff, but I have to go.”

“Listen to me. Morris wanted to sell his Huff formula to the highest bidder. I think this move means he couldn’t figure it out—he’s trying to get money another way.”

“Huff, we know.”

“You do?”

“We believe whatever he’s missing wasn’t in your blood. MJP holds the key ingredient. Morris wants it. Plus five billion dollars.”

“Or what?”

“Or he’ll poison Dallas next,” Kyle snaps.

I frown. “What about LA?”

Kyle is silent. Too silent. And from my experience, that means something.

My mind races. Millions of people took Morris’s drug via their tap water. *The whole city will be hyped up. They’ll feel invincible.* I gasp. *And then they’ll crash in one week.*

“They’re all going to die, aren’t they?” There’s no possible way for us to produce that much of Morris’s juice to re-dose the entire LA population every week for three months—the time it takes to wean a person off the drug without their heart exploding.

To be clear, the batch I got a hold of for the students at my university was made with a very rare compound—an extract from the pituitary gland of the white rhino, which is almost extinct. We know Morris used a synthetic compound in its place, but no one knows what it was, so the formula he gave us can’t be produced again. Especially not in bulk quantities.

“This is all my fault,” I mutter. “I should’ve killed Morris when I had the chance.”

“I have to go. Text you later.” Kyle ends the call.



I'm going to be sick. If I hadn't been such a pussy, Joy might still be alive. And now, millions of people will die. All because I couldn't take the life of one evil bastard.

I have to find Morris. He made a mega-batch before. He can do it again.

But what will he want in return?

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## CHAPTER TEN

For the next two days, I'm glued to my computer, hoping to find a needle in a haystack—Morris's location—because my pleas to Kyle go unanswered. If they'd just tell me what they know about Morris's whereabouts, I might find him.

All I know is the clock is ticking, and for whatever reason, the same powers who were supposed to guarantee my safety after I complied with their request to meet Morris in Paris are now giving me the cold shoulder. Even Kyle's shut me out.

Why?

I want to give Kyle the benefit of the doubt, since it's possible he has a good reason, but I can't come up with one. Something doesn't feel right.

More than anything, I really wish I had River to talk to. She could always see reason where I couldn't. But I can't lean on her, and I can't *not* try to help all these innocent people. This wouldn't have happened if I'd taken care of Morris. But no. I'd stood there telling myself that I needed the right moment. Morris had to get closer to me. All BS. I could've taken him down if I'd wanted to.

*So what now, Huff?* The clock is ticking, and Los Angelenos have no clue some of them will die, they only know the city has gone bonkers—not so unusual, really. But I don't know where to start looking for Morris.

A very risky idea plows into my head. *If I can't go to him, maybe I can get Morris to come to me.* I just have to warn my parents and River first, because if I do this, their necks will be on the line, too.

I log into my app with the encrypted calling feature and dial Mom.

“Hello?” she says.

I almost can't speak. It's the first time I've heard her voice in over eight months. It reminds me of home.

"It's really good to hear your voice, Mom."

"Huff?" Her voice cracks. "Is that you, baby?"

"I need to see you and Dad. Where are you?" I ask.



I zipped to my parents' new house over an hour ago. They bought a place in Texas in some private community by a lake. It's your basic track home, but it's cute. My mom has a nice garden out back, and Dad has a workshop for his projects.

We spend the first twenty minutes hugging and trying to get Mom to stop hyperventilating. They knew I wasn't dead, but Kyle told them they'd never see me again. "*For their own good,*" he'd said.

"So your plan is to go public." Dad paces their living room, which reminds me of our old one because it still has Mom's favorite bookshelves stuffed with knickknacks, photos of us as kids, and a little memorial statue of an angel for Joy. Their old overstuffed floral couch is here, too.

*God, I missed them.* I can even smell the faded scent of Mom's signature cooking—usually something with bacon. Quiche, spaghetti, salad. She puts bacon in just about everything. It's a miracle my dad isn't a brick of solid lard.

"Yes," I say, sitting on the couch. "I found a reporter who'll do the interview."

"What's Kyle say? Is it safe?" Mom nibbles her thumbnail while sitting next to me. I look more like her with our dirty-blonde hair and blue eyes. Kyle looks more like my dad with darker features.

"This is one hundred percent my choice, guys. Kyle has no say." I don't want to tell them what's been going on with Kyle. It'll sound like I'm throwing him under the bus when I have no solid proof he's up to something.

“Huff, this sounds risky.” Mom reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze. The gesture only cements the fact of how homesick I’ve been. Not that this is the house I grew up in, but being isolated from family has made it ten times harder to deal with the aftermath of my transformation. Other than a few calls with Kyle, I’ve been on my own, trying to accept my life is changed forever.

“It’s risky,” I admit, “but someone has to try to save these people.”

“Like you did the people in Paris,” she says. “We’ve never been prouder.”

“Kyle told you?” I ask.

“He tells us everything that’s going on. You must be heartbroken about River. Poor, poor girl.” Mom shakes her head remorsefully.

My entire body tenses. “What about River?”

“Kyle said you knew,” Dad tells me.

“No. I don’t.”

Mom and Dad exchange worried glances.

“Her parents had her locked up,” Dad says.

*What?* “Why?” I stand, ready to fly out of here and go get her.

“After she visited you a few weeks ago, she was inconsolable,” Mom says, sounding forlorn. “She finally broke down and told her parents she saw you. They still think you’re dead, so they didn’t believe her.”

*Fuck.* My rage starts percolating.

Dad chimes in, “Kyle said it was best to let her get help so she could move on from you.”

Percolate turns to rage. I’m about to lose control. *Breathe. Breathe. Breathe...* I’m going to hurt someone.

“I have to go.” *How can they fucking lock her up? How could Kyle keep this shit from me?*

Something inside snaps. This charade and hiding were meant to protect the people I care about, including River, but now it’s made her life even worse. It’s one more reason to move forward with my plan to deal with Morris.

“I’ll be back later,” I say.

“Where are you going?” Dad asks.

“I’m going to tell the world I’m still alive.” Anyone who wants a piece of me can come and get it. I’m not hiding anymore. “Then I’m going to find River. You two be careful, okay? And stick to the plan.” They need to send me a pic everywhere they go and make sure they keep their location apps active on their phones. This way, if anyone messes with them, I can be in there in a split second.

They nod, both knowing that I’m about to change everything for all of us.

“Are you sure about this, Huff?” Mom asks.

“I’m done sitting on the sidelines, and I want to be able to see you guys anytime I feel like it.” I’m realizing just how important family is to me now that I’ve been separated from them.

Dad claps me on the arm. “We would love that, Huff. You be careful, too.”



“So, Mr. Ultra Mega Love, are we hearing you correctly? You faked your death because you feared for your family’s lives?” The reporter, Luna Satori, shoves the microphone closer as we stand on the Malibu pier, tourists snapping photos. She doesn’t seem fazed that I’m back from the grave.

“Please just call me by my first name.”

“As you like, Ultra.” She leans in and whispers, “But I think your full name sounds better.”

*Not what I meant.* “Can we get on with this?” I whisper back. “I have a real-life villain to catch.” Not to mention I need to free River. I mean, hopefully this interview will do the trick because her parents’ll see she’s not crazy. Though, it’s not like I’m about to let her rot one second longer than she has to in the loony bin.

“So, Ultra, what made you decide to come out of hiding now?” Luna has inquisitive hazel eyes that drill right through you. She wears her light brown hair in a short bob that makes her look older than she probably is. I’m guessing she’s twenty-seven or eight?

“Two reasons, Luna: I need to speak with the chemist who helped create me. I’ve been studying my condition, and I’ve found a breakthrough,” I lie. “It might lead to a possible cure, and I need to know if it’s safe.”

*That should bait him in.* See, the fishing’s paid off.

“You think you’ve discovered how you were transformed?” she asks. “This is big!”

“Yes. But my second reason for speaking with you is that I have a message for the world.”

“Go on. We’re listening.”

I look directly into the camera. “If anyone, and I mean any government or their agents, if any group of people, for any reason whatsoever, come after me, my family, or any person I care about because they want to blackmail me, use me, make more like me, then they need to know I’ll come after them. And not just them, but everyone they cared about. Their families, their friends, and even their pets. Goldfish, hamsters, dogs, cats, little reptiles, or colorful birds—”

“I think we get the point,” she says.

“Oh, sorry.” I shake my head and return to my menacing demeanor. An act, of course. “I won’t rest until everything they love is destroyed. And while I am sure I can be taken out—eventually—they need to ask themselves how many of their loved ones and furry friends I’ll get to first.”

Luna steps back, fully extending her arm to hold the microphone to my mouth.

“I’m not a violent man, Luna,” I say. “I’m only addressing the sickos who’re thinking of using the people I care about to get to me.”

She doesn’t look relieved. Fine. Whatever.

I look back into the camera. “You know who you are, and I’ll come for you if you threaten the people I love. All I need is a photo of where you live, and I can be there in a blink of an eye. So stay the *hell* away from my family and friend.”

“You mean friends?” Luna asks.

“I only have one, and she knows who she is.” Damn, I sound like a loner, but I’d rather have one incredible friend like River, loyal AF, than a hundred shallow friends who don’t give a shit. I want people I can trust in my life. Okay, and who won’t make fun of me for my sad taste in TV shows. Or my love of robots. “Sadly, Luna, I have more enemies than friends these days, and I want them all to know I’m done hiding from them.”

“It sounds like you have some serious foes out there, Ultra. Should we give you a new name? Mr. Revenge? Mr. Justice, perhaps?”

“Just Mr. Love.”

“Well, you are *just*, but you don’t sound so loving,” she replies.

I flash a confused look. “I am to the people who matter. I’m all about the love.” I point into the camera. “But if you’re an evil motherfu—*bleep!*—then I’ll show you a different kind of love.” I push my right fist into my left palm and grind.

Luna’s hazel eyes go wide, and she turns to address the camera. “Well, you heard it here first: Just Mr. Love is alive and well and ready to rumble. This is Luna Satori with channel one, reporting live from Malibu.”

The cameraman stops filming, and Luna waits until he's back to the van to start talking. "Just Mr. Love, can I say something off the record?"

"I didn't mean you should call me Just; I mean, I do believe in justice, but—"

"I think you're really missing out on a big opportunity," she says, cutting me off.

"What do you mean?"

"Look for yourself." She points her pink manicured finger at the excited crowd gathering around us, taking videos and pics. "The world is falling into chaos. People have lost trust in the government, in big companies, and in each other. *You* can bring everyone together. You can give them hope for real change."

What's she smoking? "You must be thinking of the other guy with the red cape." I'm not wearing one now, but I did before my "death." River asked me to do it. I figured she might have a kink I didn't know about, so who was I to say no?

"Just Mr. Love, you can be a real-life superhero. You're larger than life. Do you know what that means to people?"

"Call me Huff," I say, making another attempt to get her to stop calling me Just. She has no clue who I really am. "Luna, I am a regular guy who was subjected to some nasty chemicals and survived. That's it."

"We both know that's oversimplifying it. You're a modern miracle. And who's to say this wasn't fate?"

*Someone had a little too much wheatgrass after yoga this morning.* She strikes me as one of those California New Agey types. *Bleh.*

She adds, "And I appreciate why you put on the tough-guy act. Can't be easy knowing there are people out to hurt your family in order to get to you. But you're clearly a good guy."



She's right. I'm also not much for violence. It took killing twelve fish to work my way up to a mouse. Sure, the mouse was getting into my cupboards back at the lake house. I still felt like crap when I saw the mouse's tiny head all smooshed like a ripe strawberry. What can I say? I'm a lover, not a fighter.

"I do prefer being nice over being an asshole," I admit. "But I meant what I said, Luna. If anyone harms the people I care about, I'll kill them." I'm only being half truthful. I mean, yes, I will defend their lives any way I have to, but would I go straight to the kill option? I'd probably break a few pinky toes first. Those suckers are sensitive, and anyone who's stubbed ol' pinky toe knows it. Or maybe I'd superglue them naked to a very tall building after covering them in birdseed—a nightmare I once had that still haunts me.

*So many beaks...* A cold shudder runs down my spine.

Luna smiles with a curious glint in her hazel eyes.

"What?" I ask.

"I like you."

I'm not used to getting compliments from pretty women. I've been in hiding since the change. "Err...thanks?"

"I mean it. You're this strange mixture of hot and sweet with a dash of scary. You're also genuine—a rarity around here." She pulls a business card from her slacks. "My cell number's on there. Call me sometime. Drinks. Coffee. Friendly chat. Sex. Whatever you want, I'm game."

*Wow.* Well, she is beautiful, but I'm in love with the girl back home. Not that River still lives in my hometown. Also, she's currently locked up, so she's not even at *her* home.

"Thanks." I slide the card into my jeans pocket.

Luna turns and starts walking toward the parking lot and news van. "Oh, and if you need me to send out more public announcements, just say the word."

I nod. It's actually good to have her in the chute. I found her by doing a little research online. She wrote a bunch of articles about me after I "died." She said it was a shame the world lost me so soon. She said that people like me are born to change the world.

But is she right? Is this my calling?

Seems like something a narcissistic asshole would assume.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Speaking of narcissistic assholes, it doesn't take long before Kyle's calling to chew me out for my "stunt," but here's the thing: He never mentions being worried for the people of an entire city. All he talks about is how I've completely fucked his career.

*What the hell, bro?* Millions are about to die. In my humble opinion, their lives are a bit more important than his paycheck. Frankly, it seems extra shallow, even for him, so I add it to the list of things that aren't making sense.

Then, when I make it clear I'm not going to sit by and let evil shits dictate how I live my life or threaten the people I care about, Kyle loses it. "You've fucked us all, Huff! You've put everyone we know in jeopardy by going public."

"Here's what I don't understand," I say. "You offered a deal to let me live out in the open if I helped with Morris. So how did you plan to keep Mom, Dad, River, even yourself safe once the world found out I was still alive?"

"We-well, we were going to-to—that's not the point, Huff."

My heart sags with the truth. "You never intended to let me be free, did you? It was a ploy to get me to help you." I can't believe my own brother would do this. "Were you going to let the government take me?"

"How can you say that? I'm your big brother. I've always protected you."

"No, you've always looked out for your career. It's why you want me to help Morris make more people like me."

"Doing what's best for our country is important, yes. But I would never use you, Huff. I'm genuinely insulted. I would put my life on the line for you."

*He's lying.* I know he is. In fact, I'm beginning to think he's been manipulating me from the start—separating me from River, family, hiding me from the world.

“Why didn't you tell me about River being locked up?” I ask. I'm guessing he didn't want her blabbing to anyone that I was still alive, like she blabbed to her parents.

He's silent for a long moment. A red flag. He's thinking up an excuse. “I didn't tell you because I thought it would upset you.”

“So you were just looking out for me again,” I say with an edge. “I gotta go.” I don't know what he's planning, but I know that looking out for me isn't it.

“Huff, wait. What're you going to do?”

“That's no longer your business, *brother.*” Jerk.

I end the call and dial River's house. Her mother picks up the phone immediately.

“Hi. It's Huff. I want to know where River is.”



Turns out that River's parents were *not* in the process of having her released from psychiatric care, but her mom wouldn't say why. She simply said she was relieved to hear I wasn't dead. When I asked if I could visit River, she told me to call the hospital and ask when visitors were allowed.

Why wouldn't she know? Hadn't they been visiting River? There was something strange in her voice—a rigidness or unfriendly vibe. I've known River's parents almost my entire life, and one thing they've never been was cold.

It only ignites my urgency to see River.

I find a photo online of the facility, Clover Care Hospital, just outside of...*Baltimore?* River's mom said Kyle helped them find the facility, but it's pretty far. River's parents are currently in the Midwest. It's one more piece of evidence that Kyle was up to something.

I zip to the front door. The facility is in a large medical complex with a dozen or so buildings. This one is gray, sterile, and anything but welcoming.

It's early evening by the time I go inside, and I'm greeted by a man in a black shirt with a four-leaf clover on the shirt pocket, sitting at the reception desk.

Doesn't look so lucky to me. He has the face of a sour turd.

"Hi, I'm here to see River Thompson," I say to the man.

"I'm sorry, but visiting hours aren't until tomorrow from ten to two."

I plant my hands on the desk, barreling down on him with my fucking-dare-me look. "It's urgent. I need to speak with her."

"You'll need to come back tomorrow," he says firmly.

He's not intimidated by me, and I sense he's about to call security.

Time to double down. "Go ahead. Call everyone you've got. Dial the Marines for all I care, but I'm not leaving without seeing River."

Just then a guard comes around the corner. He's wearing a khaki brown uniform and has an XL donut holder. Yes, I mean his stomach.

"Carl, this gentleman is refusing to leave," says reception guy.

Carl the security guard looks at me, and his eyes light up. "It's you! Mr. Ultra Mega Love! I'm a huge fan."

I wave, unsure how I feel about having fans. "Just Huff."

"Just Huff. I like it! Though, Mr. Ultra Mega Love does have a ring to it."

*Why are people so hung up on Just being in my name?* I shake my head while Carl pulls out a pen and small notepad

from his shirt pocket.

“Can I get an autograph?” he asks. “It’s for my sister. Her best friend’s daughter was one of the students you saved.”

The reception guy looks thoroughly confused. “You know him?” he asks Carl.

“Don’t you watch the news? This is Mr. Love—oops. My bad. *Just Huff*.” Carl points to me.

Desk guy shakes his head no.

I take the pad from Carl’s hand and sign my name—*Huff*—before giving it back.

“Hey, Carl,” I say, “think you can help me out? My best friend is locked up here because she told her parents I was still alive. They didn’t believe her.”

“Anything for you, man.” He flashes a toothy smile.

“Carl,” desk guy objects, “you can’t let him—”

“You gonna stop him, Mike?” Carl chuckles. “Cuz Just Huff here can crush his way through any wall. He can travel at the speed of light.”

“Well, not light,” I say. “That’s one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second. I’ve only clocked myself at two thousand.”

“Man! You’re fuckin’ awesome, dude. Gonna name my first kid after you.”

“You want to name your kid Huff?” What’s the matter with him? It’s a horrible name.

“Naw, man. If it’s a boy, Ultro. If it’s a girl, Ultra.”

His kid’s going to hate him. “Wow. Thank you? Hey, don’t want to be rude, but can I see my friend now?”

“Absolutely.” He looks at desk guy. “Which room’s his friend in?”

“Thirty-four,” desk guy growls.

“I’ll show you the way.” Carl gestures to follow him.

My heart starts racing. I can’t wait to see River, but more importantly, I want to make sure she’s okay.

I follow Carl through a maze of brightly lit hallways until we get to her room. He unlocks the door with a key card and says I can go in.

“Why’s she locked in there?” I ask.

Carl ignores my question. “I’ll be out here if you need anything.”

I step inside the beige-everything room—walls, tile floor, bed linens. River is sitting in a chair, facing the wall.

*No window?* “River?”

She doesn’t respond.

I walk over and crouch in front of her. Her warm brown eyes are glassy orbs. “What did they do to you?” My heart sags seeing her like this. She’s staring through me like I’m not even here.

Why did her parents bring her to this place? I know they want what’s best, but River was never one to lie or make shit up. They should’ve known she was telling the truth about me.

“I’m getting you out of here.” I stand and scoop her in my arms. I’ve zipped with her before, but I’ve never gone through walls carrying another person.

I maneuver my hand to the doorknob and pull. Carl’s standing there suddenly looking nervous. “Are-are you taking her out of here?”

“What’s it look like?”

“But you said you just wanted to see her.”

“And?” I ask.

“If you take her, it’s kidnapping.”

I laugh. “Then they can come get me. But to be clear, she’s not crazy. She never should’ve been locked up.”

“I hear she tried to kill herself,” he whispers.

My eyes twitch. That can’t be right. “I’m taking her anyway.” I head for a door marked *Emergency Exit*. The alarm goes off as I leave, and once we’re outside, I zip to the front door of my lake house.

I unlock the security bars and go inside, laying her floppy body on the bed. She’s mumbling something, but I can’t understand.

“Riv, what was that?”

She mumbles again.

“I don’t know what you’re saying. Try again.” I lean over her, putting my ear to her mouth.

“About fuckin’ time, ath-thole,” she mutters.

I smile. *That’s my girl*. “You rest. I’m going to order some groceries.” I can’t stay long because I need to be somewhere public and very visible. I’m hoping Morris takes the bait and comes looking for me. But at least River’ll be safe here for a few days. I hope.

“River, did you really try to hurt yourself?” I ask, standing in the doorway.

She stares catatonically at the ceiling, and part of me is thankful she’s out of it. I really need to paint that ceiling.

“Okay. We’ll talk once those nice, calming drugs wear off and you’ve had something to eat.” I go to the living room and text my standard order to our local delivery guy—milk, bread, eggs, etc. I get my stash of cash from under the sofa and put some in an envelope under the welcome mat.

Then I go out back and turn on the water and gas. I’m just about to tinker with the hot water heater when my phone vibrates.

I pull it from my pocket.

*Kyle: Where are you?*



*Me: Why?*

*Kyle: Turn on the news.*

I fire up my dish and flip to the news channel. The screen is flashing red: *Alert – Shelter in Place Issued for Los Angeles*. The scene streaming is utter chaos—people burning buildings, throwing bricks, fighting in the streets.

“I didn’t know it was an election year,” I say to myself.

The ticker on the bottom of the screen reads: MAD CHEMIST RELEASES DEADLY POISON IN LA WATER SUPPLY. MILLIONS WILL DIE IN THREE DAYS.

*Oh. Shit.* Who leaked this?

I call Kyle, who picks up immediately. “So you saw it.”

“Yeah. What the hell happened?”

“Morris saw your appearance on the news and called your bluff. That’s what happened. He probably figured out it was a trap. So...great job.”

I’d like to talk to Kyle about his *great job*—lying, manipulating, etc., but now’s not the time.

He adds, “Morris has doubled his price. He wants ten billion *plus* the data sheets for every chemical MJP dumped into that pond.”

That’s a tall freaking order. “And if you don’t?”

“He claims he just poisoned Atlanta.”

“What happened to Dallas?” I ask.

“He knew we’d be taking measures to prevent him from tainting their water. Now we have five hours to comply, or he’s going to inform Atlanta that they’re all going to die.”

*Christ, man.* Morris is playing “take no prisoners.” From the looks of what’s going on in LA, just the mere hint of their water being poisoned won’t be good. People are completely going apeshit.

“He also lit the Empire State Building on fire and took full credit,” Kyle adds.

“What the *hell* is the matter with this guy?” He’s the biggest attention whore I’ve ever met. Sadly, he’s also the smartest person I’ve ever met. Not a good combo.

“He wants us to know he’s serious,” Kyle explains. “Also, he wants you eliminated. He took that interview as a threat, and since he doesn’t need you any longer...”

“Kyle, I’m not going to fake my death again—”

“No one said anything about faking, Huff.”

Takes a moment, but I catch on. “Dude. For real? They want to let him kill me?” I’m not sure who *they* are, but I can imagine the list: feds, governor of Georgia, Empire State Building fan club.

“What am I going to do?” I mutter, to myself.

“You’re the genius who went public and tried to draw Morris out.”

I tilt back my head. This is all happening because I didn’t kill Morris when I had the chance. “You have to tell me where he might be. Tell me what you know.”

“Why?”

I’m hoping that despite all of Kyle’s lies, this just might be a common goal. “I need to take him out.”

“Think you have the balls?” Kyle asks.

“Yep. Two big ones. Probably way bigger than yours, but who’s measuring?” *Me, that’s who.* Kyle always tries to stomp on my self-confidence, but I’m done. As they say, Rome wasn’t built in a day, and the same goes for men. So now’s the time to start construction.

“Aren’t you the funny little man, Huff,” he says with a bite. “I’ll tell you on one condition.”

“What?”

“Now that word’s gotten out about the LA situation, certain interests are demanding we find an antidote.”

I know more than the average person about chemistry. The drug Morris gave the greater LA population causes the adrenal glands to go into overdrive, which heats the body two-point-five degrees, thereby allowing for an increase in oxygen content in the bloodstream. Everyone knows that water molecules expand with heat, and the water in our bodies isn’t excluded from that fact. That hyper-oxygenated blood triggers a volume increase of almost five percent, turning your body into a pressure cooker.

Extremely high blood pressure is just a milder effect.

On top of that, the drug triggers the body to generate an unnatural amount of testosterone. The effect is stamina, strength, bigger muscles, and severe aggression. And massive roid rage.

If the drug is stopped cold turkey, the heart stops pumping at the artificially elevated pace, due to the lack of adrenaline, meanwhile the volume of blood remains elevated. The heart can’t cope with the massive pressure and basically bloats. Then...*boom!* The arterial walls rupture. The heart basically becomes a bottleneck inside your own body.

My point is that there is no cure, no antidote, other than a slow decrease of the drug so the levels of adrenaline and oxygen drop at a gradual pace.

“Kyle, I’m not an expert, so I’ll keep an open mind, but it’s impossible to find a cure that fast.” So what’s Kyle’s angle here?

“Exactly, you’re not an expert.”

I shake my head even if he can’t see me. Wasn’t I the one who figured out how to get people off this stuff safely? “I’m the only person who’s really studied this.”

“Not true. We’ve had the brightest minds in the world examining Morris’s street drug.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I just said.”

If they’ve been studying the drug, then they must’ve taken some of the batch I got my hands on, which was only enough for forty people for three months. They robbed someone of their dose. “Who didn’t get their dose, Kyle?”

“That isn’t your concern.”

*Like fuck it’s not.* “Only twenty-nine out of forty students survived. Would it have been higher? Thirty? Thirty-one?”

“Huff, you’re off topic here. You’re not an expert, but the people who are might be able to create an antidote, which would make Morris’s threats useless.”

“And if they do figure it out? How can they produce enough of this stuff in time to help that many people?” The answer is they can’t. The only option is to find Morris and make him produce enough large batches to give *some* people a chance to come down. Maybe we can’t save them all, but we have to try.

“If we don’t figure it out in time, then they’re no worse off,” Kyle says.

“Unless you tell me where he is so I can talk to him.”

“Give us your blood, Huff, and I’ll make sure you know what we know.”

“Didn’t I already give you some a few months ago?” After I first transformed, Kyle secretly got me in to see a bunch of doctors to help monitor my heart as I slowly detoxed. They took vials and vials of my blood, claiming it was to run tests to check my health.

“It wasn’t enough. They need more.”

*Ah. So there it is.* “They” need more. I bet they’ve been running experiments this entire time, probably trying to crack the code on how I transformed.

“How do I know you’re not just going to use my blood for other things, like Morris is doing?” I ask.

“You’ll have to take my word for it, Huff. It’s either that or stand by and do nothing while millions die.”

Kyle is trying to back me into a corner, taking advantage of my good nature. Sadly, it’s working. Especially when I consider they already took my blood before and have my DNA along with X-rays and MRIs. Every inch of my body’s been measured and examined, for “my health.”

*They probably know the size of my asshole.* So what’s one more pint of blood, just on the off chance he’s telling the truth? “Fine. Sure. You can have my blood.”

“Huff?” River calls out from my bedroom.

I turn my head. She’s sitting up, rubbing her tired eyes.

“I have to go,” I say, not mentioning River’s with me. If Kyle doesn’t know yet, he will soon. “Text me the address and a photo of where you want me to go.”

“I’ll send it now, but are you sure you’re going to come? The clock is ticking.”

“I’ll be there.” I end the call and inhale deeply. It feels like the world is piling every single brick ever made on my back. The question is, can I stop Morris before I break?

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## RIVER

Through a hazy lens, I stare across the room at Huff, who's standing in the doorway with a worried frown on his handsome face.

"What took you so long?" I ask.

His angular jaw goes rigid. "I only just found out you were committed." He pauses, his blue eyes intense. "Did you try to kill yourself?"

"No. Absolutely not. Your fucking brother told the hospital that."

"I should've known." He shakes his head in disgust.

"Why would he do this to me?" Stressed beyond words, I push my hands to my face and exhale. These last few weeks have been a nightmare. I don't even know what drugs they were pumping into me half the time.

Huff walks over and sits on the bed. "Kyle's up to something, Riv. He lied to my parents and said I knew you were in the hospital. He told them it was best to leave you there because you were unwell."

*I can't believe this.* "I told my parents the truth—that you were still alive—and they didn't believe me. But only because they called Kyle and asked him point-blank if you were really dead. He convinced them you were."

"I think he wanted to stop you from telling more people I'm still alive." Huff shakes his head. "I'm really sorry, River. I keep making a mess of everyone's lives."

"Define mess," I say.

"Kyle fucking with your life. Also, I had the chance to kill Morris in Paris and didn't do it. I wanted to, but I just..." His

shoulders drop.

*Is that what he feels guilty about?* “Kyle isn’t your responsibility, Huff. And you shouldn’t feel bad just because killing doesn’t come easy to you.”

“Morris poisoned LA’s drinking water. Now he claims he’s done the same to Atlanta. Millions of people are going to die.”

*Oh God.* “Yep. You shoulda killed him.”

“Which is why I have to make things right.”

I reach for his hand and give it a gentle squeeze. It amazes me how even his fingers look ripped. “How can I help?”

“You need to stay here and rest.”

That’s not much help. “Not going to happen, Huff. Tell me the plan.”

“Riv, I don’t want to get you sucked into this.”

I’m already sucked in. “Are you still planning on doing *it?*”

“Doing what?” he asks.

“Removing yourself from this planet.”

“I don’t know.”

My stomach twists into an angry knot. “You’re an idiot, Huff. Seriously.”

“Thank you.”

“No. Really. While I was at that facility, forced to do therapy and group sessions, you know what I couldn’t stop thinking about?”

“What?”

“Our last conversation and how you were determined to throw in the towel—on your life, on me, on us—”

“Well, that’s all changed.” He raises his chin proudly.

“Has it?”

“I went public. The world knows I’m alive.”

“Really?” This is big news.

“I realized exactly what you’re saying, Riv. I thought staying in hiding was the only way to keep everyone safe. But after this disaster in LA and Atlanta, I know I can’t do that. I have to stop Morris. I have to find him.”

He finally wants to fight. It’s a miracle. “And?”

“I have no leads, but Kyle does.”

“That’s great.”

Huff looks deflated.

“Isn’t it?” I add.

“He won’t tell me anything unless I give him more samples of my blood. He claims they’re going to try to find an antidote for Morris’s drug, but I know he’s lying. At least partially. My gut tells me they think they finally have a way to reverse engineer me.”

“Well, Sam says always follow your gut.”

“Who’s Sam?” Huff asks.

*A guy you could learn a lot from.* Samuel’s unafraid of the world, speaks his mind, and fights like hell for what he believes in. He’s originally from Spain, where my parents met, and speaks fluent Spanish.

“He’s a friend I met at Clover,” I say.

“*He?* So Sam’s a guy.”

Yes, and he listens to me. He’s smart and caring, too.  
“Yeah. So?”

Huff shrugs in that special way when he’s really bothered but wants to hide it. “What is he at Clover for?”

Long story, but basically Sam’s mom’s new boyfriend turned out to be not such a good person. Sam had a little fist-to-fist talk with the douchebag and then ejected the guy from his mom’s place. The boyfriend pressed assault charges, and



since there was no hard evidence to back up Sam's or his mom's claim that Douchebag hit her, the judge gave Sam the choice between two months at Clover for his "anger issues" or six months in county jail.

*Poor guy.* Not that he whined or sulked for one second in group. He calmly stated the facts: "I defended my mom, and if that means I have to be here for eight weeks, then so be it."

*So calm. So strong. Sigh...* I met him my first week at Clover. We ended up chatting right away and really clicked.

Then, about five days after I got there, one of the staff—Buck, a male nurse—cornered me in my room. I screamed as he threw me to the floor. He said I had to suck his dick, or he'd make sure I spent four weeks in the "fluffy white room."

Sam heard me yelling and flagged down one of the female nurses. They came in just as Buck was tearing out clumps of my hair. Sam pulled the guy off me and beat the shit out of him. For that "offense," Sam was placed in the violent offenders' wing of the clinic. When I found out, I went apeshit, and they sedated me. Again.

*Oh, Sam...* I need to get him out of there. And, frankly, Clover needs to be burned to the ground. I got lucky that I evaded a full-scale sexual assault for the second time in my life, but what about the other women at Clover?

"So?" asks Huff. "Why was your friend Sam at Clover?"

"That's really not my business to discuss, Huff."

He narrows his blue eyes.

"Stop it. Okay? Sam's a good guy. Better than you in some ways." The only problem is that I love Huff—it's something I'm trying to get over. *He's not good for me.* Sam says so.

"Why do you think that?" Huff asks with a short tone.

"Because you always put me last." I hold up my palms. "Not complaining. Just stating the facts." Something I learned from Sam. You can say the truth—good or bad—and not make it about bragging or getting sympathy. The truth is what it is.

“How can you say that?” he asks. “All I think about is you—what I can do to make sure nothing bad happens. Ensuring you get to live your dreams. I always put you *first*.”

*Wrong.* He only thinks he puts me first. Like a typical male, Huff gets an idea in his head of what’s right, but he refuses to listen to the people around him who are supposedly benefitting from his magnanimous decisions.

But here’s the truth: The night I was attacked less than a year ago by Blake, Huff did show up to stop him. For that, I’ll be forever grateful. But from that point on, it’s like Huff stopped hearing me. *Really* hearing me. All of a sudden, he was obsessed with being my savior.

Example: Later that night, Blake and his buddies nabbed us just outside the dorms. They drove us to these secluded woods, and Huff got it in his head to martyr himself: “*Do what you want to me, Blake—I’ll even help you, but leave River alone.*”

In Huff’s head, it was his way of saving me. But during the drive, one of Blake’s friends, who sat next to me in the backseat, was texting his girlfriend—a sorority sister of mine. He literally said that Blake just wanted to scare us. Blake was terrified I’d go to the police and press charges for the assault incident.

I wasn’t about to let Blake off for what he did, but when I tried to tell Huff, he ignored me and kept babbling to Blake about giving his life to save me. Huff was the one who gave Blake the idea to kill him. Huff convinced Blake he could get away with it.

That was when everything went sideways. Blake tied a huge rock to Huff’s neck and pushed him into that pond. The rest is history, but since then, Huff hasn’t stopped trying to rescue me and martyr himself.

*I don’t need a hero, I need an equal, a man who sees me as his partner.* But with Huff, he thinks that unless he makes the ultimate sacrifice, I won’t understand how much he cares.

Wrong. I know he cares. But killing himself isn't the way to show it.

To me, showing you care means sticking it out. Being there by my side. Fighting for the life we both want. In my opinion, those things prove you love someone. It takes dedication and perseverance to get through tough times.

But dying? That shit's the easy way out.

*We all eventually die, Huff. Don't you get it? We. All. Die. Someday.* And then that's that. Our time is over. So why not do everything possible to live life while we can? Why not use every resource we've got—mental, spiritual, medical, financial, and social—to spend our finite number of days with the people who're worth our love? Why not fight to leave this world a better place than we found it?

I mean, it's just like Sam said: What the hell do we have to lose if death is the worst outcome, and it's going to happen anyway?

“Huff, I appreciate that you care so deeply for me. But I want a life with someone who gets it.”

“Gets what?”

I inhale slowly and gaze into his eyes. “Love is everything.”



## HUFF

*Love is everything?* I crinkle my nose. *What? Is she a Hallmark card now?* “So what's your definition of love?”

“I don't know, Huff.” River shrugs. “But I can tell you what it's not. It's not abandoning the person who loves you most over and over again.”

“So you're judging me for trying to keep you safe?”

“I'm not judging you.” River shakes her head at her lap, her long dark hair falling around her oval face.

“Aren’t you? Because it sounds like you don’t want me in your life because our definitions of love don’t match up.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. We don’t match up, and now I’m starting to believe we never will.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you refuse to listen to my definition,” she says.

“But I just asked, and you won’t define it.” I can’t believe we’re arguing about this. I love her. I’d do anything for her, including facing my demons, committing to learn from my past mistakes so she doesn’t end up dead like my sister, and putting her life before my own. “All right. Here’s my definition of love: It’s sacrifice. It’s being terrified that you’ll lose someone. Love is everything good in my life and knowing just how special those things are. It’s wanting to protect them.” Or something like that.

She slowly nods.

“What?” I say.

“Where am I in that definition, Huff? Because you just talked about a lot of things, but you forgot the part where you take into consideration what the other person needs. If I’m so damned special, why not include *my* feelings?” She inhales slowly with a sharp exhale. “Sam thinks you’re incapable, that our relationship has always been about you.”

*Sam? What the hell does he have to do with us? And why’s she confiding in him about our relationship?*

River continues, “It’s something I’ve only recently begun to understand. You look to me for support, for friendship, for love, but the moment I ask for anything, you don’t listen. I never wanted you to protect me. I didn’t want you to sacrifice your life for mine. I wanted to fight and for you to be by my side, not treat me like a child who’s your responsibility. Get it?”

“Did Sam say that, too?” I ask bitterly.

“Sam listens to me, and he’s helped be realize a lot of things about myself. If you did the same, we might not be having this conversation.”

I clamp my lips together, physically restraining my idiot mouth from speaking before I’ve had a chance to think. I don’t like the fact that this Sam person has injected himself into her head, but River’s smart, and she’s usually right about this kind of stuff—especially my blind spots—so I can’t dismiss what she’s saying because of him.

After Joy died, I was forced to live in self-perpetuated isolation. I felt guilty because I didn’t try to save her, and my family was too busy grieving to notice how alone I was. Later, I started at a new high school, but I saw everyone as people who “just couldn’t understand” or couldn’t be trusted.

Fast-forward to college, and nothing really changed. River pushed me to come to her university, and I was determined to make a fresh start, but my past followed me. I was still Huff, the little brother of Joy who was murdered. All about me. My past. My pain.

So is it true, do I only think I’m being selfless when in reality I’m only doing what *I* think is best?

River pats my leg. “I know your heart’s always in the right place, but it’s not enough for me, Huff.”

“I get it. I have to change. I’m just not sure how.”

“Huff, let me ask you this: What does change look like? I mean, if you could cook up your perfect life, what would be the ingredients?”

“Easy. I get to be with you. I finish my law degree and fight for all the people who went through what my family did.” Joy’s killers avoided responsibility for years. We finally got justice, but it was a long battle that nearly destroyed all of us.

“That’s it? That’s all you want?” River asks.

“I wouldn’t mind keeping this body. Being able to lift buses with my pinky and never needing a plane ticket again are pretty cool.”

“But what about the quality of your life, Huff? Is it low-key? Is it busy and always in the public eye? Do you want more than you can handle, or is everything manageable?” she asks.

“I want peace in my life, but I want to know my existence has meaning. I want to fight for what I believe in, but I don’t think the cost should be the lives of everyone I love.”

“So you want to be with me. Check. And if you can treat me as your equal, then you have me. Just requires you to listen and weigh in my needs, too. Next, you want to be a lawyer. Good. All you need is a university who’ll take you. With your GPA, that shouldn’t be a problem. So check that box, also. Hopefully, that’ll lead to helping people you feel empathy for, so let’s assume that works out. Next is your body. I can’t see it changing after eight months, which I can’t say disappoints me. You were attractive before, but the added terrain is pretty nice. Granted, I’d take you either way. So that just leaves the quality of your life.”

“Just that?” Seems like a big hurdle.

“It’s like Sam told me: if you want peace here,” she presses her hand to my heart, “then you have to find it here.” She points to my head.

*Sam again.* I’m going to have to meet this guy and punch his head. I really don’t like that he’s had an influence on her. Who is he?

River adds, “Ultimately, it’s up to you, Huff.”

“How’s it up to me,” I say, “when I can’t control Morris any more than I can control the weather?”

“Exactly. You can’t control if some madman holds a city hostage. You can’t change the fact someone will always be out to do you wrong. You can’t change any of that. So what? Are

you really going to let them ruin your life and rob you of every opportunity to be happy? No. No you won't.

“So here's where you sit.” She holds up her hand, counting down with her fingers. “You get to decide your quality of life. You're in control no matter what comes. You have me as long as you take my needs into account. You can go back to school and finish your degree if you want because no one's stopping you. So, as far as I'm concerned, the only thing standing in the way of your perfect life is *you*.”

“I can't run off to go back to school and walk away from this disaster I created with Morris.”

“Yes, you can. Because Morris created it, not you. He gave those drugs to people at our school. He decided to hold Paris, LA, and Atlanta hostage. Not you. Just...walk away, Huff. Don't give him what he wants.”

“But people are going to die, River.”

“Do you believe Morris can produce enough of that stuff to keep millions of people from dying for three months?”

“No. Not likely.” He was probably working for months to make the batches he put into the water. It had to be a lot of juice.

“So then don't try to find Morris and risk your life to kill him—something he'll be expecting. Just walk away from this, Huff. Live. Be with me.”

I see her point. She doesn't want me dying on a hill I can't conquer. But the other part of me can't just sit back and do nothing.

“I know that look on your face, Huff.”

“I'm not going to fart.”

“What? No. I meant that you're not convinced, and if you're not convinced, then it's because you're not hearing me.” She squeezes my hand. “This is what I need from you, Huff. I need you to let all that go. I need you to stay. And if you love me, you will.”

Part of me gets what she's saying: She can't have peace of mind if I put myself in danger. On the other hand, she's never been this selfish before. It's not a bad thing, because being selfish every once in a while is necessary. We have to take our own needs into account. But this is out of character for River. She's always been a give-until-it-hurts kind of person. It's why she wanted to study psychology. Nonetheless, I have no choice but to take her words seriously. People change. People grow. I know I have.

"I do love you. I really do, River, but—"

"Then show me." She bats her eyelashes and rubs my leg. "Show me you can really put me first the way I need you to. Don't go after Morris. No more trying to be my hero and risking your life. Just...be with me. Have a life with me."

River has always been there for me. Always. And she's never asked for anything. At least, not like this. I can't help wanting to give it to her. I love her with everything in me. "Okay. I'll stay. I won't go after Morris."

She leans in and throws her arms around my neck. I feel the tension melt from her body. She turns her head and pushes her lips to my mouth.



## RIVER

I know I laid it on thick, but like Sam told me, I have to start asserting myself—tell Huff exactly where I stand. Because after everything I've been through, I don't have it in me to keep doing this. So if Huff wants to be with me, then he can't run around martyring himself for lost causes.

*Morris is a lost cause. Huff can't stop him. Use my love to make him see the truth.*

Yes, I'm horrified by what Morris has done, but neither Huff nor I can change it. And, if Huff tries to kill Morris, Morris'll be expecting it. He won't go down without a fight, and guess who sucks at fighting?



Huff.

He might be strong and fast, but so is Morris if he's been taking this new formula. And Huff has never really learned to fight.

Now imagine him trying to kill another living person?

Huff won't likely survive, and I'm not going through this mourning crap all over again. I'm done. Done. Done. Done!

So if he wants to show me love and really protect me, then he needs to stay alive. Yes, I understand there are no guarantees and no one lives forever, but Huff can't run into burning buildings anymore.

*And he agreed. Just like Sam said he would.* I really don't know what I'd do if I hadn't met him. Sam's opened up my mind in so many ways.

Relief washes through me, like a warm elixir. I finally feel like I can let go and open my heart to Huff the way I've wanted to for years.

Our mouths mingle as we sit on his bed. He pulls me closer by my waist. The heat of his body is intense, like he's radiating sunshine.

*Woo. Talk about hot!* I pull away. "Huff, I want you. I want us to finally be together... But promise you're done with being a hero. Swear you won't run off on me again."

"You want to have sex?" His blue eyes are lit with greedy excitement.

I nod.

"I promise I'll always be by your side, River."

"Good." I kiss him. "Because that's all that matters: you and me together, Huff."

He kisses me hard and then reaches into his drawer in the nightstand. "And I have these." He produces a gold packet that says XXXL on it. "They hold up. I tested them. A few hundred times."

Oh boy. That's a lot of hand action. "Have you...with anyone before?"

"Can we not talk about that right now?"

So he hasn't. I'm going to be his first. It's actually kind of sweet.

"Are you sure you want to, River?" he asks.

I stand from the bed and pull my shirt over my head. Then I slide down my sweats. He has no idea how much I missed him after he died. I regretted not being with him when I had the chance.

He stares with a lustful gleam in his eyes, and I watch with fascination as the front of his jeans tent.

"Can I see it?" I ask.

"You want me to just whip out my dick?"

"If you're going to put that thing inside me, I want to know what I'm in for." I saw his cock once, and it was pretty damn big. I need to refamiliarize myself with it.

He stands up and removes his shirt, revealing his hard, bulging pecs and rippling abs. I honestly don't think I've ever seen a man as perfectly formed as him.

He unbuttons his jeans. "Here you go." His dick springs forward, and my mouth drops.

"Um, that's a little bigger than I remember."

"Because you've never seen it hard," he replies.

I swallow down a lump in my throat, eyeing the girth and length. Some of its going to need to stay outside on the porch.

"Riv? This is really getting awkward. You're just standing there staring at it. Is that drool coming off the side of your mouth?"

*Huh?* "Oh. Sorry." I wipe my lips with the back of my hand. "I'm just trying to imagine how that's going to feel."

"Good. I hope."

*Yeah. Sure. Okay. I can do this.* I step forward, still in my panties and bra, and press my mouth to his while taking his shaft in my hand. He jerks from my touch but then begins kissing me harder. He likes what I'm doing—light strokes, playing with the tip.

The anticipation is oddly erotic. The valley between my legs begins to heat and tingle. I'm starting to pant a little.

I continue stroking his dick, which is sandwiched between our heating bodies. He slides his hand down and cups my breast, kneading gently. I want him to take off my bra and play with my nipples. Why won't he?

"You don't need an invitation," I whisper. "Take off the rest of my clothes."

He smiles with an oddly arrogant gleam in his eyes. It's sexy and mischievous.

*Wow. Could it be?* Could it be that the bedroom is the one place where Huff is confident? Because he doesn't seem uncomfortable at all.

He quickly reaches behind me and separates the clasp. I think he broke it, but oh well.

He works down my panties, and I step out of them, trying to exude confidence. He's never seen me fully naked before.

Huff pulls away and inspects me while I resist the urge to cover myself back up. I want to take this next step. I want to be vulnerable with him.

Huff's Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. "Wow. You are...fucking beautiful, Riv."

I'm relieved that he likes what he sees. *Now it's my turn.* I walk over to the nightstand where he's left the condom out and hand it to him. "I want to watch you put it on."

I get onto the bed and prop myself up onto my elbows. I don't know why I'm asking him to make a little show of it. Maybe I'm still second-guessing doing this. *Just take it slow... No need to be afraid of his massive python.*

He slides his jeans down to his ankles and steps out of them. I watch his biceps flex into massive mounds as he works the condom over the giant cock marbled with throbbing veins.

*You love snakes, Riv. You love snakes,* I chant to myself.

“Come over here,” I say, wiggling my finger.

He crawls up the bed, and I spread my thighs for him. I can tell that seeing my entrance triggers something in him because all of a sudden, his muscles look bigger, harder, pulsing.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yes.” He leans forward, capturing my mouth. His chest is warm and hard against my breasts, but he keeps his weight off me with his arms.

We kiss some more—sloppy and urgent—and I run my hands down his arms, appreciating the firm muscles before reaching for his ass. It’s perfect and hard. Soft, too. I want him to push inside me. I want to know if we fit like I think we do.

I urge his hips toward me, but he doesn’t budge.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“I’m trying to stay in control, and you’re not making it easy.” He smiles.

“Well, if you come too fast, we’ll just have to do it again later.”

“I meant the other kind of control.”

“Oh.” His heart. His emotions.

“Take your time, then.” I lie back, and he grips his shaft in his hand. He pushes the crown between my slick, heated folds, and I buck with pleasure. I watch his chest rising and falling with quick breaths.

I’m not sure this is a good idea. He doesn’t look like he’s in control. His face is red, and his muscles are taut. “Huff, we can do other stuff if you’re not ready.”

“Oh, I’m fucking ready.” He locks eyes with me. “I’ve been ready for you my whole life.”

My heart melts with his words. It feels so good to be here. Right here. Not just together physically, but on the same page. “I love you,” I say.

“And I love you.” He pauses, just gazing at me.

“So are we doing this? Or are we just going to stare awkwardly at each other?”

“Yeah. Sorry. We’re definitely doing this.” He firmly positions the head of his cock at my entrance and nudges in an inch. His eyes are locked on the spot where our bodies join.

I feel him push in another inch, then another.

All of a sudden, this extremely awkward, not-romantic moment turns the corner. “Oh Christ, that feels amazing...” The friction, the pressure—it’s hitting all the right buttons down there.

“You ready for more?” His voice is gravelly and charged with tension.

“Yes.”

He pushes in another few inches, and I’m lighting up. My heart’s pounding. The walls in my pussy are throbbing. I feel like maybe I’m the one who’s going to come early. “More.”

He drives in a few more inches until he’s pressing against the entrance of my womb. I feel his hot dick throbbing and pulsating inside, but he’s barely moving.

My fingers grab hold of the sheets to my sides. “Fuck, it’s like you’re a giant vibrator, Huff.”

“I didn’t know it could do that.”

“Well, don’t stop!” I look down, and he almost completely fits. I’m kind of amazed. Also, I am ready to orgasm, and he’s not even moving. *How is he doing that?*

“Are you good?” he asks.

“Yep. Yep. So good.” I throw my head back, and he slowly glides out before thrusting back in again, stealing my breath. *Oh God.* It’s like being fucked by a huge, warm, vibrating dick.

He pulls out slowly, like he’s savoring the act of penetrating me.

“Stop that. Just fuck me,” I demand.

“I can’t, River. I have to stay in control.”

“Okay, but move some more. Please. You feel amazing inside me.”

He does as I ask and thrusts again. I reach for his ass and pull him deeper. It’s like a drug, having him pushing against my walls, stretching me and filling me all the way.

Each time he enters, the base of his shaft vibrates against my clit, pushing me closer.

“I’m going to come,” I whisper.

“Not yet,” he tells me.

“Yes. Now.” I’m already there. The tingles have turned into deep undulating waves of need and pleasure.

I grab for his neck and pull his mouth to mine. My breasts smash against his hard, sweaty chest, and our scorching-hot bodies meld together. He starts moving with sensual, smooth motions of his hips, and I meet him in this perfectly synced rhythm.

My sex locks down, and then I explode with wave after wave of mind-racking carnal bliss. I’m coming so hard, my vision blurs. All the while, his steaming-hot dick is massaging and quivering against my clit.

*Finally, a superpower I can get behind!*

I’m almost over the hump, my orgasm releasing me from its wickedly blissful grasp, when Huff leans with his hips and stops moving. He growls like a bear, and that’s when I feel him come.

I mean, really feel it. Hot liquid gushes out of me while he's still inside.

*Oh shit.* My eyes go wide. *The condom broke.* "Huff."

He's still coming, his dick twitching. He can't hear me, and if he could, what would it change?

A few long moments pass, and his panting body liquifies with relaxation.

Still inside me, he lifts his chest, propping himself up with his arms. He looks me in the eyes, and there's a proud smirk on his face. "My dick vibrates. And I lasted longer than you."

Oh boy. He's in for a shock. He didn't even notice the elephant in the room, and no, I'm not talking about the size of his penis.

"Yes, you did. And you also came inside me."

He stares for a moment. "You mean that's not all you?"

The wetness down there? Come on. "What kind of porn have you been watching?"

He pulls out and bows his head, inspecting the rubber ring around the base of his still hard member. He peels it off, and it looks completely shredded. "River, the condom broke."

I flop back on the pillow. "Yes, I know." And the horrible thing is, I want to have sex with him again. Like, right now. It was incredible.

I get out of bed and use the bathroom to clean up. I'm deliciously swollen and a little raw, but I'm still aroused. Pretty much, I'm the Fourth of July at 8 p.m. I can't believe it, but Huff's a god in bed. *I need him again.*

I walk into the bedroom, where Huff's sitting on the edge of the bed, still naked, still at full mast. He looks worried.

"Hey," I say. "Everything okay?"

"What do you want to do?"

"About?" I ask.

“The condom-failure situation,” he says.

I straddle him, pushing my pussy against his dick. “I’m thinking I want you back inside me.”

“But...you’re not worried that I’ll get you—”

“I don’t think the risk is going to get much higher.” He’s already come inside me.

“Then yeah, I’d like to do it again.”

“Do you need to wait?” I ask, wondering if he’s going to go soft.

“I can keep it up for hours.”

I’ll take his word for it. I smile and raise myself up, positioning his head at my ready entrance before lowering myself down. I sheath his warm smooth cock inside me. I take my time, rocking my hips, working him in and out, wondering if I’ll ever get enough. The vibrations, the delicious pressure of his thickness, the way he fits.

Before I know it, I’m coming again, and he’s flooding me with cum. Like the last time, I’m left totally wrecked, but needing more. *So, sooo good.*

We fuck for five more hours—him taking me from behind like I’m an inmate who’s dropped the soap. Me riding him like he’s the last pony on earth. He fucks me against the wall, leaving cracks in the plaster. The last time we go at it, he takes his time and gently coaxes one last orgasm from me.

Still, I want more.

*What’s going on?* Why do I feel like I’ve just been given the most addictive drug on the planet?

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### HUFF

*Jesus Christ!* I never imagined River would be an insatiable hellhound in bed. I'm almost ashamed that I can't keep up with her. And here I was, worrying that I'd behave like a seventeen-year-old and ejaculate just from the sight of her large plump tits with those golden-brown nipples. *So fucking hot.*

And what about my dick? Who knew it could do that? It's never happened before, and I'm wondering if it's because I was with River. Either way, I'm feeling proud because she came first. And then she came again. And again. And again. Demanding more. It's morning now, and I'm covered in sweat. I'm praying she wants to sleep.

"Huff?" she says with a needy voice.

I jump from bed. "You're hungry, too? I'll make breakfast. Great idea!" The groceries were delivered last night somewhere between fuck number two and three. "How about scrambled eggs with cheese, potatoes, and spinach." *Jesus, please tell me there's still some Gatorade in the cupboard.*

River sits up in bed, a sheet over her sweaty body. "I was thinking we could—"

"No!" I point to her. "I have to eat."

She shrugs coyly. "Then how about after?"

"I need to sleep. And my dick is—"

"Still hard?" Her eyes latch onto my erection.

"Yes, but I can't help that." It takes a while to come down. "River, I need rest. And aren't you starting to think this isn't normal?"

“Absolutely. I’ve never had anyone make me come ten, fifteen, twenty times in a row.” She flips her long dark hair over her shoulder proudly. “And I’m ready for more.”

*More?* “Are all women like this?”

“Hungry for you?” Her eyes narrow. “They’d better keep their fucking hands off you, or I’ll kill them.”

She doesn’t sound like she’s joking. “River, I’m going to make us some food, and we’re going to drink a few gallons of water. There’ll be no more sex until we talk.”

I don’t have any extra clothes here because I packed up what I owned and brought them with me in the extraction, so I grab a towel from the bathroom and wrap it around my waist.

I go to the kitchen and hear the shower running a few minutes later.

“Thank God.” I hope she’s running the cold water.

I crack open some eggs, chop a little onion, wrap a potato in a paper towel and pop it in the microwave. I’ll throw in some spinach and cheese at the end along with my diced potato.

While I’m cooking in my tiny all-blue kitchen, my mind can’t stop worrying about River’s insatiable need. I should be basking in the glow of losing my virg—I mean, having sex with the girl I love for the first time.

I’m about to add my egg mixture to the onions when a pair of soft hands slide around my midriff.

“Miss me?” River asks.

I jump, nearly slapping her in the face with my spatula. “Are you done with your shower already?”

“Uh-huh...” She bobs her head, a lustful expression in her brown eyes.

“River, we need to eat.”

“Eat later,” she snarls. “Sex now.”

“What is wrong with you?” I step to the side, away from my frying pan and from her.

“Now!” She lunges, knocking me to the floor like a cheetah attacking prey.

*Oh shit.* I think River’s trying to have her way with me. I carefully pry her off my chest and pin her to the floor. I outweigh her by a ton, and I’m hella strong, so she’s not a threat, but now I’m really worried.

“Get off me! And get in me!” she yells.

“No. I’m not having sex with you!”

“You’d better or...or—I’ll run out of here and find someone who will!”

“Well, you’re completely naked and pretty hot, so I don’t think you’ll have trouble finding someone, River, but why would you want to fuck a complete stranger?”

“I don’t! But I will.”

“Listen to what you’re saying, Riv. Something’s the matter. You’re acting really aggressive.”

“Shut up and fuck me!”

*Jesus.* I can’t believe I finally get what I want—River in a lusty frenzy over me—and it’s turned into a nightmare. “Riv, I love you, but I’m not going to have sex with you again. Not until we figure out what’s happening.”

Suddenly, a terrible thought hits me. Maybe there’s something in my cum. Maybe my body never fully detoxed. There was no real way to test every single part of my body—muscles, organs, etc.—when I was weaning myself off Morris’s drug. But what other reason is there for her behavior?

*Oh crap.* If I’ve exposed her, does it mean her heart’s going to give out if she doesn’t get her next fix? *I might have to keep fucking her to keep her alive.* That or get a hold of Morris’s drug.

“Hi, Huff,” says a deep voice. “Sorry to interrupt playtime, but I’ve got some unfinished business with you.”

I look up, and Morris is actually hovering over us. He grabs hold of my arm and takes me.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Morris! What the hell?” We’re standing in a rocky canyon somewhere hot, barren, and dry. Could be Death Valley. Could be the Middle East. Not that I care. *Not staying.*

I’m about to zip back to River when Morris starts yelling, “Wait! Give me two minutes.”

“What do you want?” I suddenly remember that he wants me dead, and I’m supposed to kill him. *It’s time. I have to do it.* I just wish I weren’t wearing a white bath towel with a semi-chub. *Awkward.*

I’m about to lunge when he holds out his hand defensively and says, “I never poisoned those cities!”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really. I didn’t do it. How could I?”

“Maybe you used your big evil brain? Same one you used to kill a bunch of people at my university?”

“Fair point. But it would take ten million gallons to dose LA’s water supply.”

“I saw the news, Morris. Everyone in LA is looting, burning buildings, going totally crazy.”

He looks at me all funny.

“Yes, I know—not so unusual for LA, but the entire city?” I say.

“The government leaked the story. That’s what the public’s reacting to. They all *think* they’re going to die. I’m being blamed.”

“Why would the government leak that?” It’s created chaos.

“They’ve been after me for months, Huff. Me and Keni. I don’t know how they tracked us down in France, but they did. But I wasn’t home when they raided us, so they took Keni.

Ever since, I've been going back and forth with them. They want me to figure out how you were made in exchange for Keni's life. But I can't do it. I've tried every possible variable and relooked at every test batch I dumped out into that pond. I can't figure out what transformed you, Huff."

Good. "So what about my blood? And the demand for MJP's records? Where'd that land you?"

"I was only trying to buy more time. For Keni."

So they were red herrings. "Why not tell me what was going on when we met in Paris?" Oh. I know. Because he's a psychopath.

"I thought if I could entice you to my side with money and a promise to change the system that's been hunting you down, you'd be more likely to help. Your brother's a powerful man. He's the one who had Keni taken."

Kyle is in on this? Why am I not surprised?

"I get that you won't ever trust me, Huff, but I swear it's the truth. Just ask your brother. They took my sister. They set you up to go to Paris, where I was supposed to kidnap you."

"Wrong," I say. "They sent me there to *kill* you."

"They knew you wouldn't have the balls."

"*What?* I have...all right, I didn't then, but I've been upping my murder game, so don't underestimate me now, Morris. Also, I don't believe you."

"You should because I'm the only reason you're still alive. They sent you to Paris so I could dissect you."

"They gave me a mild sedative so they could trace us back to your lab."

"They *lied*. What they gave you would have knocked you out for hours. They were playing you, Huff. All they care about is the recipe to make more people like you. World domination."

My mind starts replaying pieces of that day in my head. Something about it felt off—the overly theatric extraction, not to mention their crappy-as-fuck plan. It didn't make sense.

*Is it possible Morris is telling the truth?* Kyle was pissed when I returned from Paris, but maybe it wasn't because I failed to kill Morris. Maybe I wasn't supposed to return at all.

But would my own brother have me killed? Part of me doesn't want to believe it. The other part knows what he's capable of. He's a "win at all costs" sort of guy.

"So why didn't you sedate me?" I ask.

"Like I said, by then, I already knew I couldn't deliver what they want—a stable formula. My only option was to turn the tables on them. After I got your blood in Paris, I told them I finally figured it out, but unless they returned Keni—alive and well—then I'd sell to someone else."

"So where does that leave things now?" I ask.

"They've shut down all communications and made me infamous. Which makes it a thousand times easier for them to find me." He pauses. "They want that formula."

My mind reels as more of the pieces fall into place. Kyle stopped keeping me in the loop, and refused to give me info on Morris's whereabouts. Is it because Kyle knows Morris isn't playing by their rules anymore, and he's afraid I'll find out what they're really up to?

Also, Kyle was really pushing for me to give them my blood.

*Oh shit.* I never went. I got all distracted with River. I don't have my phone on me since I'm just in a towel, but I bet Kyle's been calling, wondering why I didn't show. I'm glad I didn't. Kyle was probably going to have his people chop me up. They probably think that if Morris could figure out the recipe with a little of my blood, then maybe they could too with just a little more effort.

*God, this is so messed up.* That is, if Morris is really telling the truth.

“Where’s Keni now?” I ask.

“I don’t know, Huff. Kyle still has her. But I’d give my life to free my baby sister and...” Tears form in his beady brown eyes. “I promised her a better life. I promised her I’d always protect her.”

I understand his guilt, but... “Why am I here?”

“I have a plan.”

“For?”

“To get Keni free. To stop them from ever making more of you, and to let us both go.”

“But do you really deserve to be free, Morris? I mean, come on, dude. You’ve littered your brick road with dead bodies.” He deserves to spend the rest of his life in prison. He’s probably around thirty years old, so that would be a very long time behind bars.

“Fair ’nuff. All I really want is for Keni to be able to live her life, finish school, fall in love.”

I don’t agree. Keni belongs behind bars, too. But right now, I’m more worried about what Kyle’s up to. “So what do I have to do?”

“It’s time to shine a light on their bullshit.”

“You mean exposing Kyle?”

“And everyone else involved.”

I hate it. I really do. But if Kyle’s guilty of everything Morris claims, then he’s made his bed.

“I’ll consider helping you,” I say, “but I need a favor first. I need you to make one more batch of your street drug—the one you gave the football team.”

“Why?”



*Because I think I poisoned River with my man-juice.* And I don't think I can keep having sex with her every two minutes to keep her alive. "Never mind why. I just need it."

"I'm sorry, Huff, but there's just no way. It's impossible to get a hold of some of the ingredients now—someone's been buying up all the synthetic norepinephrine, which I need in highly concentrated form."

That's one of the chemicals released by the brain during exercise. "Why would someone be buying it all up?"

"Maybe because they're trying to remake my street formula."

"You think it's Kyle?" I ask.

"Don't know. I've been too focused on the formula to recreate *you*."

"Do you have more of your test batch?" I ask.

"Why?"

Because maybe it's better than nothing. If River is hooked, she's going to die. *Unless I keep fucking her.* Not such a horrible thing, but impossible to sustain. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Yes. I can get you some of what I've been using, but, Huff, you need to know that aside from it being temporary, the side effects aren't good."

"What are they?"

"Gout, diarrhea, insomnia, constant asshole itching, sweating, burping, hallucinations, panic attacks, rashes, feeling invincible, hairy knees, tingly belly button, rapid blinking, Tourette's, and...my mouth tastes like raisins."

So, basically the same as every other prescription med on the market. "How about your heart?"

"You mean, will it explode if I stop taking it?"

I nod.

“Oh-ho-ho, yeah.” He laughs. “Pop! Like a balloon. Not one of my lab rats made it past two days without their booster.”

“What about lowering the dose gradually?”

“Nope. They’ve needed a full booster every time.”

“So why the hell did you take it?” I ask.

“I told you, I’d do anything to get Keni back. I thought I could flash over to her and set her free, but I’ve been unable to figure out where they’ve taken her.”

“I see.” I exhale sharply. Fuck, so his temporary Huff juice isn’t going to help River. I have no choice but to tell him what’s going on. I need a solution. “Morris, is there anything else you can formulate to get a person off your wonderful collection of drugs? Specifically, the one that made me?”

“I don’t know what made you. And why would someone else need to come down off it? What aren’t you telling me?”

I swallow hard. “I, uh, think the chemicals are still in my…” I point to my groin.

“In your dick?”

“No, in my semen.”

Morris blinks. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

“No. I slept with River, my best friend, and she started getting really aggressive and,” I lower my voice, “she tried to have her way with me. I was fighting her off when you nabbed me in the kitchen.” I pause. “By the way, how did you find me?”

“Your brother told me where you were before Paris. He wanted me to grab you from there, but I talked him out of it. Told him it would be too risky. We had to get you asleep if we wanted to keep you from running.”

“Really? Kyle told you?”

Morris nods. “He’s a real asshole. Sorry. Can’t help you with that.”

No, he can’t. I’m just...really...wounded, I guess. “Can you help with my friend?”

“Sounds like she’s just really into you. Congratulations.”

“No, Morris. It wasn’t like that. She doesn’t want to eat or sleep. She just wanted to keep having sex, and after five hours straight, it still wasn’t enough.”

Morris narrows his eyes, noodling on something. “Did she exhibit unusual strength?”

Now that I think about it, she did tackle me to the floor. Also, when we were having sex, she held a handstand for thirty minutes. “Yes. She wasn’t nearly as strong as me, but she was definitely exhibiting extreme stamina.”

“I can’t believe it. The chemicals never left your body. The key was right there in your balls all along.” He steps toward me. “You gotta give me some.”

“No. Back off.”

“Huff, I need your cum!”

I put my hand over my crotch. “Get away from me, man.”

In my mind, I involuntarily think of somewhere safe. Somewhere I can go to get away. I blink—and I’m standing in my parents’ living room, but fucking Morris is latched to my arm.

“I’m not leaving without your cum, Huff!” he yells.

My parents, who are eating popcorn and watching TV, look up from the couch, mouths gaping open.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Thanks for the extra clothes, Dad.” He loaned me his red and white checkered shirt and a pair of black sweats. My mom found a pair of my old Converse in a box in the closet.

“And thank you for the coffee, Mrs. Ferris,” Morris says to Mom.

“Anytime, sweetie.” She smiles.

“Look, guys,” I say, “I really have to get back to River. She can’t be left alone in her current state.” God only knows what she’s doing right now—maybe having her way with a tree or making good on her threat to go bang a few strangers in town.

My stomach clamps down on itself. The thought of anyone touching her makes me sick. And furious. And jealous.

“But, son,” Dad says, “I think Morris is right. You really should give him some of your *secret sauce*. It could be the only way to find a cure for River.”

“And for you, too, Huff,” Mom adds. “Wouldn’t you like to get your life back? Be normal again? Live in peace without the world chasing you?”

Maybe. Maybe not, but Morris is just going to hand over the formula to Kyle in order to get Keni back. Then what?

“Morris, did you say you had a plan to get your sister freed?” I ask.

“Who has your sister?” Mom asks.

“Kyle took her,” I reply.

“What!” Mom reaches for her phone.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m going to make your brother give her back!”

“Mom, don’t tell him anything! He can’t know we’re here \_\_\_”

Too late.

“Kyle, this is your mother,” she growls like it’s a threat and starts rambling away. “I just heard about what you’ve been up to. I want you to give that young man’s sister back this instant! And you stop using your brother for all your political warmongering stuff. He is not your lab rat. I’m very ashamed of you, Kyle.”

She listens for a moment.

“Yes, your brother is here with his friend Morris,” she says.

“He’s not my friend,” I protest.

“Thanks,” Morris says.

Mom goes on, talking to Kyle, ignoring me and Morris. “Well, Huff says you’re trying to kill him so you can make more like him, but I don’t believe you’d hurt your baby brother.”

She goes silent, listening.

“Oh.” Her mouth flaps. “But you can’t possibly mean tha \_\_\_”

Silent, listening.

“All right. I’ll tell your dad.” She ends the call.

“What did he say?” I ask.

She looks at Dad. “Kyle says hello.” She turns to me. “And yep, he said he would absolutely sacrifice you for the greater good of the country.”

“W-well, that’s outrageous! Let me talk to him!” Dad holds out his hand, but Mom sets the phone on the table.

“I think he’s too far gone, honey. He’s turned into a power-hungry monster.” Mom looks at me. “Huff, sweetie, give

Morris your semen.” She looks at Morris. “You can find a cure, yes?”

“I’ll try.” Morris nods eagerly.

“Mom, you don’t understand,” I protest. “If Morris figures out how I was transformed, he’ll—”

“I’ll save River,” Morris interjects. “And if you’re no longer needed by Kyle and the government, they’ll leave you alone. Plus, I’ll get my sister back.”

I don’t say anything at first. Helping Morris doesn’t feel right.

“Huff,” Morris adds, “sooner or later they *will* find out how you were made—whether it’s getting their hands on you or working with the blood samples they already have, they will figure it out eventually. So why not save River and Keni?”

He’s probably right. Kyle isn’t going to give up.

“What makes you think you can fix River?” I ask.

“If I have a stable, complete formula, it changes everything. I just need to know the active ingredients to figure out how to neutralize them.”

“You have no choice, Huff.” Mom grabs my hand. “I can’t lose you, too. And I’m sure River doesn’t want to die. Give him your man-goop.”

*Man-goop?* This is beyond surreal, but maybe they’re right. I have to help River.

I sigh. “Fine. Get me a cup.”



I do my business in the guest bathroom, which was nearly impossible. Does anyone know how hard it is to jerk off when your parents know what you’re doing and are in the other room?

*The shame...*

But I thought of River and all the good-n-dirty stuff we did last night, and it all worked out. Morris took the sample, holding it like a precious, magical ring, and zipped out of there, promising to come find me after he worked out the formula.

In the meantime, I have no choice but to keep River alive with my dick.

*God, can this get any weirder?* The only thing keeping me calm is that Morris thinks I won't have to "dose" River more than once a week.

I'm game for once a day, maybe twice, but he says it might make it more difficult to cure her if she's pumped to the gills with...me.

I say goodbye to my parents and zip to the lake house, planning to get the hell out of there. I have no doubt that Kyle is going to try to come for me after I didn't show.

I looked up a few islands we can stay at in Brazil where you mostly camp or rent out a small cabin on the beach. Cash only. Mom and Dad gave me a few thousand dollars, and I can always zip back to them if I need more. I hate relying on them like this, but it could be months until Morris figures out the formula and a way to get River a cure. In the meantime, we'll need our privacy.

I zip to my all-blue kitchen, feeling a little more confident about room-to-room travel now that I've zipped straight to my parents' living room.

"River!" I call out the moment I arrive to my kitchen.

*Oh no.* The frying pan I was cooking with earlier is on the floor, onions everywhere. The flame is still burning. I've been gone about an hour.

"River?" I call out and walk to the living room. The front door is wide open. "River!" Please don't tell me she's gone on a humping spree.

I quickly make sure she's not in the bedroom, bathroom, or out on the dock. "River!"

There's no sign of her.

*Wait. What the hell is that?* I can hear the fading sound of a helicopter.

*Shit.* I run inside and find my phone on the nightstand. There're twelve missed calls from Kyle and fifteen texts.

The last one says: *Choose. River or yourself. Call me when you make up your mind.*

Kyle knew I was going to bail on him, so they came for me. Instead, they got River.

"I'm going to kill him. I'm going to kill my brother."

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kyle probably has no idea that River's been tainted by my bodily fluids and could die if she's not "taken care of," so I have to think this through and get her freed quickly.

I stand there in my living room, feeling the deep rage inside growing like a hot ember, but I have to keep my cool. I have to think with my head, not my anger or my heart, which is currently screaming to rescue her at all costs.

*No. No martyring. You promised her, Huff.*

If I go to Kyle and give myself up, something I'm absolutely willing to do, I have no doubt I'll end up dissected. Fine by me except that I made that promise to River. She asked one thing from me. One. And that was to stay alive and be with her.

I have to find a way to get her back.

*Options, Huff. Think options.* Morris is working on cracking the complete formula. If I tell Kyle, will that help me or entice him to work harder against me?

Answer: He'll probably work harder to catch me. *Possibly make me masturbate around the clock to supply his team with material if they catch me.*

Nasty. That right there crosses all sorts of lines.

If I tell Kyle about River's condition, will he feel sorry for her or use it against me?

Answer: Definitely use it against me. Also, he'll find out about my powerful Mr. Love-juice, which leads back to lots of sperm samples.

Again, too many lines crossed there.

My only options are to bluff—tell him I'm done with River, and she means nothing to me—or to appeal to his sense

of reason.

*Kyle has no reason. He's gone mad, so that leaves bluffing. I grab my phone to text him.*

*Me: You can keep River. Bitch is crazy. Should've left her at the psych ward.*

Next comes the second part of my plan. I do a quick search on my phone: *Best place to spot celebrities. Rodeo Drive.*



*Where the hell are the paparazzi and celebrity-gawking tourists? The Beverly Hills streets are basically empty, and most of the stores are boarded up. People still think they're all going to die. My plan is a complete bust.*

For this to work, I need a raging amount of publicity. Kyle has to see me out in public, not a care in the world.

“Hey, are you Mr. Ultra Mega Love?” Some old guy holding a camera and wearing plaid shorts walks up. “Can I get a photo? No one else around.”

*Geez. Thanks.* “Sure. Why not?” All of two people will probably see the image, but whatever. I raise the sleeve of my checkered shirt and flex.

“Did you bring your cape?” he asks.

“No.” I only wore it once for River.

“Oh.” He walks away.

*Great.* What's a guy got to do around here to get some major buzz?

I suddenly think of Luna, the reporter.

I dig my phone from my pocket and give her a call.

“Well, if it isn't my favorite hero-in-denial.”

“I'm actually in LA, not Egypt,” I joke, trying to be charming.

“Umm...”

That was a flop. I have no choice but to shoot straight.  
“Hey, I need your help.”

“Anything for you.”

“I need to know where I can be seen—you know, out having fun.”

“The entire city’s in lockdown. Haven’t you been paying attention to the news?”

“I’ve been a little busy.” *Having lots of sex, getting nabbed by a chemist, and jerking off at my parents’ house.*

“Well, no one is having fun right now. Though, I *am* crashing a super-secret end-of-LA party tonight. I’m bringing a news crew and reporting on it.”

That sounds perfect. “Can I tag along?”

“Maybe. What do I get in return?” she asks coyly.

“What if I told you that the mad chemist didn’t poison LA or anywhere else?”

She gasps. “You’ve been talking to him?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you have proof of what he’s saying?” she asks.

“No one is going to die tomorrow because of his drug. That’s proof, right?”

“Not really. The city’ll be up in flames before then. But why would officials lie about it?” she asks.

“It’s a long story, but what if I can get the chemist himself to give an interview and explain everything?”

“Ohmygod. Can you?” Luna sounds like she’s on the verge of a squeal.

Morris gave me a number where I can reach him. “I can try.”

“And all you want is an invite to this party?”

“I need you to be my date tonight,” I add.

“Date?”

“Yeah. And I need the world to see you and me *together*.”

“Together how?”

“Kissing,” I explain.

“Tongue or no tongue?”

*Uhhh...* “I guess tongue? It has to look convincing.”

“I’ll do it if you tell me why. And I want details.”

I give it some thought. Just in case things go sideways on me, it might be good that someone else knows the full truth about what’s going on. The race to make more Huffs.

“Where do we meet?” I ask.

“The club is called the Randy Unicorn. Be there at seven. I’ll text you the address. Oh, and you’ll need a suit, but don’t worry. I know a guy downtown who can hook you up.”

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hands down, that was the strangest tailor shop I've ever been in. The tailor had this little white dog that kept staring like it wanted to eat me, and there was this huge moth that kept following me around, trying to get in my pants.

Anyway, I have my suit—black, sleek, fits like a glove—shiny black leather shoes, and a bright red tie with white and blue stars. Very patriotic. I feel like a million bucks, except for the fact that River is being held prisoner.

It's what I've always feared: River being used as leverage to get to me. I just never expected my own brother to do the using.

I hope my plan to become a very public superhero works. Kyle needs to see that if he wants me, he'll have to come for me. No more hostage situations. No more playing this game their way in the shadows. I'm making the rules.

I show up to the building downtown and wait out front for Morris. I told him I need to see him right away.

As I'm waiting, people wearing really formal duds or outrageous outfits—togas, a beehive hat, a vampire costume—are filing inside, giving me side looks like they recognize me but can't recall from where.

“Hey. What's so urgent? I'm in the middle of centrifuging your cum.”

I turn, and Morris is standing there in a white lab coat with little beige splatters all over it. Kind of reminds me of pancake batter.

“What happened to you?” I ask.

“Little accident with your cup, but I was able to scrape off what I needed.”

“That's my...?” *Gross.*

Morris looks me over. “Nice suit.”

“Thanks. It’s for this party.” I jerk my head toward the entrance.

“Well, it was nice of you to invite me, but as you can see, I’m in the middle of something.”

He thinks I want to party with him? “Well, too bad you can’t join me, but since you’re here, I need you to go public and tell everyone you didn’t poison the city’s water, that it was all a lie.”

“Why do you want me to do that?”

“Because Kyle took River, and I need you to give an exclusive interview to a friend of mine.”

“I’m not connecting the dots, but I don’t have time for this, Huff.” He points to a clump of man-goop on his lapel. “I have hours of chemical analysis to complete.”

“Morris, I need you to do this for me. River’s life is on the line.”

“You think anyone’s going to believe me if I tell the truth? I’m a wanted man. And a criminal.”

He’s a bad person, too. The worst, actually. “Which is why I’m questioning my decision to work with you.”

“We do make a good team, though. Right?”

No. “We are not a team.”

“That’s too bad because if we were, I’d give that interview to your friend.”

*Ugh.* “Fine. We’re a team. Happy now?”

“Which one of us is the sidekick?” he asks.

Huh? This guy is nuts. “I am. I’m the sidekick. Will you give the interview now?”

“I always wanted to be a sidekick,” Morris pouts.

“Okay. You’re the sidekick,” I growl.

He smiles like he's genuinely won a prize. "So where is this friend?"



Luna shows up twenty minutes later and nearly pisses herself when she sees Morris. She's so stoked to get the interview with the mad chemist, she doesn't even notice what's all over his lab coat. Thank God.

Instead, her cameraman gets rolling, and she jumps directly into questioning him about the mass poisoning being a hoax. Morris tells the world how my brother was the mastermind of a conspiracy to make an army of Huffs. When Morris tells Luna that they're holding River and his sister hostage, Luna's red lips part and just kind of hang open. I'm not sure if she doesn't believe him or if she's in shock.

"Morris, can you tell us if the other rumors are true? Are you the person behind lighting the Eiffel Tower and Empire State Building on fire?"

He proudly lifts his chin. "Yep. Pretty good trick, huh? But don't worry, the fuel only lasts for a few months. And I made sure it was only a little toxic. The first formula I came up with caused hair loss and genital warts. This one only makes your toes fall off—but just the tip."

"Oh...that's so, uh, great?" Luna's face crinkles up. "And what about those kids from the university? Did you really sell them poison?"

Morris shrugs. "Well, not on purpose. I'm a chemist. Sometimes we get things wrong." He scratches the side of his head like he's working something out. "Oh, wait. That's not true. I definitely knew they'd die if they stopped taking my drug."

I'm pretty sure this moment has sealed Morris's fate forever. The public will definitely see him as a terrorist, murderer, and psycho, even if he didn't poison anyone's water.

The interview wraps up, and thankfully, he leaves out the part about my sperm holding the key to how I was made.

After Morris zips away, Luna and her cameraman just stand there staring at the empty spot.

Oh! “I forgot to mention that Morris has abilities like mine now,” I say. “But don’t worry, it’s only temporary.”

Luna’s eyes go wide. “You’re telling me that crazy fucker can travel anywhere in the world in two seconds?”

I nod.

“I need a drink.”

I follow Luna and her cameraman into the event. The venue is spectacular with balconies overlooking the dance floor, gold inlay moldings on the ceiling, and lights everywhere. It’s noisy and packed, so we find a quieter corner to talk after we score some blue cocktails with unicorn straws they’re passing around.

I take a sip. Tastes like spicy bubblegum. *Bleh.*

“So how do you think that went?” I ask Luna, setting my drink on a small table in the corner.

“Best interview of my life. Honestly, I’m thinking I don’t need to cover this story about the party. I should be back at the newsroom, editing.”

“You’re leaving?” I ask.

“I need to get the word out that millions of people aren’t going to die.”

Good point. “You think the public will believe Morris?”

“I don’t know, but he was pretty damned honest about everything else. He’s crazy, but he seems truthful.”

She waves her camera guy over and turns back to me. “So let’s get the shot of you and me making out so I can get out of here.”

I bob my head. “Okay. Um...”

I’m about to ask her where she wants to kiss, when she throws her arms around me. Her tongue is so far down my



mouth, I'm pretty sure she's licking the blue stuff in my stomach. It's nothing like kissing River, but okay. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

She pulls back and smiles, her red lipstick smudged all over her face. She hands me a cocktail napkin. "Red's definitely your color. I'll post the kiss online in a bit. It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Huff." She struts out of the club with her cameraman.

I'm left there with a wet, red mouth, wondering if any of this plan is going to work, when my phone vibrates in my pocket. *It's Kyle.*

He has no clue what I'm up to yet, but either way, I put on my game face. "Hey, I'm at an awesome party. Want to join me? So many hot girls."

"Shut up, Huff. I'm not fucking around. River is—"

"You can keep River. I don't want her. Haven't you seen the way she acts, man? Totally crazy. I bet she's been screaming nonstop for me, right?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Who knew she'd be so clingy after I banged her. Yanno? But women just can't get enough of the Huff and my massive cock. Not that you'd understand, *little* brother," I say, trying to throw him off his game. He thinks he's in control. *Not anymore.* "Look, Kyle, I gotta go. Can't keep the ladies waiting. Oh, but hey, I found out everything from Morris—all the lies and your plan to have him kill me from the start. And you know what? Don't care. I don't care about you, River, or anyone because you're all just fucked in the head, and I'm a goddamned superhero. I have powers. I can go where I want, when I want, and no one can stop me, bro. So have fun playing your little games. I'm done. Oh, and Morris also spilled the beans to the news. In a few hours, the world's going to know you took his sister and River as hostages, all to make more Huffs. They'll also know you guys made up the poisoned-water story.

“So, basically, you’re fucked, Kyle. All those people who had their businesses burned down, all those people who jumped off bridges and killed themselves because they thought they were going to die anyway? How do you think the world is going to feel about the lives you ruined all just to trick me into being your prototype?”

“You have no proof, Huff.”

“Morris gave a public statement, and you’d be surprised how credible he sounds.”

“He’s a madman, and everyone knows it,” Kyle says dismissively.

“Yet you forced him to work for you because you thought he was the only one who could recreate me.”

“He’s still crazier than a barrel of monkeys, not to mention he’s a wanted murderer.”

“You tried to have your own brother killed, Kyle. You have River locked up right now because you *still* want me dead. I’d say that puts you in the same barrel as Morris, and I’m willing to go public, too.”

“No one will believe you either, Huff, because society sees you as a threat. A freak. In fact, I’m working on getting a bill passed, making you an outlaw—the Anti-Genetically-Modified Persons Act.”

He’s making me illegal. That’s interesting. “I guess that’s supposed to scare me?”

“The bill will make it illegal for anyone but the US government to modify people’s DNA and turn them into weapons. Any persons who are modified are subject to seizure. No rights. No protection under the Constitution. You might as well be from another planet. Basically ET. Turn yourself in, Huff, and I’ll make sure you’re given a painless death.”

*Jeez, what a fuck nut.* “What happened to you, Kyle? What turned you into such an evil cunt? Wait. Hold on. Let me guess. You’ve twisted your work in your mind and believe no

sin is too great because you're saving people in the long run. You believe you're the hero in your own story. But really? You're just like every other evil politician, willing to sell out anyone—even your own family—for power. You're the villain, Kyle, but not just in my story. You're the villain in *everyone's* story.”

“Goodbye, Huff. Enjoy being a fugitive for the rest of your life—what's left of it.”

He ends the call, and I'm feeling pretty damned proud of myself. I recorded the entire conversation, and he just basically confessed to everything. *Point for Mr. Love!*

Will it make a difference? Maybe not for me, but I hope for River. It'll be difficult for Kyle to keep her now. He'll want to discredit me in any way possible and prove River is somewhere safe. Will he let Keni go, too? She's a wanted fugitive like Morris, so I'm not sure.

I sigh, feeling a little messed up over this situation, but I didn't create it. I didn't turn Kyle into a coldhearted asshole.

*Funny, how did I end with too much heart, and he ended up with none?* I think of Joy and how she was always a bright light in my life. When I was down, my sister's smile picked me up. She always knew just what to say. She was pure-hearted. Since her tragic death, I've put her on a pedestal, but not in a bad way. Her memory reminds me of whom I admire and whom I don't.

I suddenly catch a whiff of her strawberry shampoo in the air. I look around the club. I know she's not here, and my mind is playing tricks, but I swear I can smell her. I press my hand over my heart. It feels warm and calm all of sudden. Maybe she's always been right here, watching over me.

“Hey! Are you Just Mr. Love?” says a pretty woman in a hot pink sequined dress, pulling me from my thoughts.

I almost correct her, but I don't care anymore. I have bigger issues than a problematic hero name. “That's me, just and full of love.”

“Can I take a selfie with you?”

“Sure. Why not?” This is exactly what I came for.

She stands close and snaps one off. “Thank you so much! Hey, guys! Over here!” She waves a group of her friends over. “It’s Just Mr. Love!”

Suddenly, they’re all lining up for selfies. This is great. Kyle’s going to see pictures of me all over social media. It’ll only help to sell my story—that I don’t care about River, him, or any of his BS. I’m not his toy anymore.

After a few minutes, celebrities are coming up, wanting to take photos with me, too. It’s pretty amazing. I’ve always wanted to meet Ivor Stretton, from the *Fast and the Forgetful*—a really hilarious movie about this guy who always forgets his keys in the middle of a heist. I also meet Kady M., who’s one of the prettiest actresses in the world, in my humble opinion. Her work in *Espresso Panties* was the shit.

I spend hours mingling, drinking, and dancing. I’ve never been social. I’ve never been to a club. I’ve never been around so many friendly, beautiful, famous people, and they all want to talk to me. This is awesome.

It’s almost midnight when the patrons stop dancing and start looking at their phones. Everyone’s talking frantically.

I pull out my phone, too. Twittster is exploding with the interview Luna just posted. I wait to see how the crowd reacts. Are they going to believe Morris? Or are they going to keep believing it’s the end of the world for millions?

People start looking over at me. Smiles. They’re all smiling.

I go back to my phone and scroll through the interview. I read the subtitles because the music is too loud: “*The world has been waiting for a real man to step up and fight for us all, and I’m here to tell you that Mr. Love is all in—a real life superhero.*”

My ego gets all pumped. Then I notice that our kiss is also trending. Millions of views already. And everyone's hailing me as a hero for uncovering this massive government mindfuck.

For the first time in my life, I feel proud of myself. I didn't run. I didn't martyr myself. I told the truth. Mostly. And I stood up to a powerful, corrupt bully.

Maybe being Mr. Love really is my destiny.

I go outside to call Luna. "Hey, good job with the story."

"Thanks. Couldn't have done it without you."

"How would you like another bombshell?" I ask.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I wake up the next morning on someone's couch, unsure of where I am. Looks like a swanky house with colorful art, gold-and-white upholstered Deco furniture, and bamboo floors. I look down at my body. My shirt is off, and in its place, I'm wearing a black trash bag. *Huh?*

At least my pants are on. A good sign. To my side on the floor is an empty champagne bottle.

I sit up, rip the bag off, and hold my pounding head. My mind starts dishing up slices of last night's fun. I called Luna and told her I'd recorded my conversation with Kyle, so she texted me a pic of her house and had me to come over. I showed up, and we listened to the whole thing together. She was so excited to have another juicy scoop that she wanted to celebrate. I didn't object. Last night felt like a big win. My only regret was that River wasn't there. I have to be patient and allow my plan to work.

*Kyle won't want to keep her now.* He'll want to distance himself from every accusation.

I squeeze the sides of my head again, trying to stop the pounding. "Owww..." I must've had a lot to drink if I'm hungover.

I get up to find a bathroom and pass the kitchen. I see five empty whiskey bottles on the counter next to my phone.

Now I remember. Luna and I were doing shots, and then she wanted to take a bunch of selfies. Then she asked me to take my shirt off, and she posted our pics online. I didn't object—more proof to Kyle that Huffys don't give a fuck.

"Hey..." Luna shuffles into the kitchen, looking like hell.

"Good morning," I grumble.

“Nothing good about it,” she mutters and goes for her refrigerator.

“What happened last night? Besides the fact I drank like it really was the end of the world?”

“We didn’t fuck, if that’s what you’re asking.” She pushes her hand through the top shelf, looking for something.

“I wasn’t.” Though, she is beautiful. Athletic, petite body. Full lips. Big hazel eyes. Any guy would be tempted to make a move on her.

“You kept going on and on about River. I had to make you drink more so you wouldn’t start zipping around the Pentagon, demanding to get her back.”

“Wow. Thank you for that.” I completely forgot.

“Would have been a nightmare for you, considering what your brother’s trying to do. What an asshole.”

“Yeah. My parents aren’t so happy with him right now.”

“Your parents? What about you, Huff?” she grumbles.

“I’m not happy either. I loved my brother. I trusted him. But what can I do? He chose power over me.”

“Not just *you*, he chose it over your life.” She grabs a bottle of green stuff. “Want some?”

“No, thanks.”

She shrugs and grabs a glass from her cupboard. “Anyway, we’ve got your recording going live today. By tomorrow, Kyle’ll be the fugitive.”

“I just want River freed.”

She fills her glass and turns. “But then what? I mean, what if Morris can’t find a cure for her?”

Oh. So I told her everything last night. I’m not sure that was a smart move. If word gets out that my balls hold the key to more Huffs, my boys won’t be safe.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “It would mean she needs my *help* to stay alive.”

“And if Morris *does* find a cure? Are *you* planning to take it?”

“If you’d asked me a few months ago, I would’ve said yes. But these past few days, I think I’m starting to like the new me.”

“So you’d stay just as you are.”

My phone vibrates on the counter. It’s Morris. “Speak of the devil.”

I answer the call. “Hey. What’s up?”

“I got it! I figured out the missing component!”

So fast? “What is it?” I ask.

“I can’t tell you,” he says snidely.

“Morris, I’m not going to sell it.”

“But they might get to you. They could torture you for the answer.” Morris’s voice sounds a little odd. Frantic. Deeper.

“Morris, are you okay?”

“Never better! Stronger. Faster. More alert. But I do feel like killing someone. Is this normal?”

*Oh shit.* “Did you take the formula?”

“Yes. And my blood work proves it’s stable. I just have to figure out the correct dosage to maximize the effects without killing...killing...ki-ki—”

“Morris?” The call is still connected, but he’s not speaking. “Morris, if you can hear me, text a photo of where you are.”

“What’s going on?” Luna asks.

“It’s Morris. He took his new formula. I think something’s wrong, but I don’t know where he is.”

Luna’s eyes go wide.



“Morris. Morris!” I say. “Text me where I can find you.”

There’s no reply.

I look at Luna, who’s turning paler by the second. She knows like I do that this is bad.

“I think he’s dead,” I say.

“Dead?” She covers her mouth.

“Yeah, and he has the finished formula.”

“You mean the cure?”

“Not sure. Do you know anyone who can trace this call?” It’s a long shot because Morris is smart and wouldn’t make it so easy to find him, but it’s worth a try.

“I do, but it’ll take days.”

I groan toward the ceiling, still holding my phone to my ear. “Morris, you psycho fuck. Why would you take the formula?”

Okay, if he can’t text me, maybe I can take a photo of Luna’s kitchen. I snap off a picture of her refrigerator and send it off.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“If he can still see, maybe he can get here.”

We both start looking around the kitchen, waiting for something to happen. But even if Morris gets to me, I’m not sure I can help. It sounds like he took too much, and fuck if I know what’s in the formula.

“Look!” Luna points to the floor. Morris is lying there, panting, gripping something in his hands.

“Call 911,” I say and then crouch over him. “Morris, can you hear me? What do I do?”

His face is turning bluer by the second. I’m about to start CPR when he opens his hand. In it is a glass vial.

“Free...Keni,” he mutters, and then his eyes go empty.

I start chest compressions and breathing, but after five minutes, I know it's not going to help. His heart probably exploded.

"The paramedics are here," Luna says quietly. "You should go, Huff. They might not be alone, and Kyle's probably looking for you."

I stop CPR, saddened by the empty look in Morris's quirky face. He really was a crazy bastard, but he was a genius at chemistry. Without him, there may never be a cure for River.

I slip the vial into my pocket.

"You really need to go," Luna urges, heading for the front door.

"I'll call you later." I don't even know where I'm going. Not to the lake house. Not safe. Neither is my parents' place. Where I really want to be is with River, but I won't know if my publicity stunt and the leaked phone call worked until later today. Possibly tomorrow.

I decide the best place to go is that island in Brazil. Hopefully, they'll have internet so I can keep tabs on the situation.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*This place is beautiful.* Powder-soft sand, warm blue ocean, and waterfalls all over the place. The cabin is one of ten on the private island, but this one's perched on a small peninsula with a private cove. The cabin has two floors, with a loft bedroom upstairs and a kitchen, bath, and living space downstairs. It's rustic but comfortable with more modern conveniences than I would've imagined. I've got it for the month.

*I can't wait to bring River here once she's free.* We can take a few weeks to decompress before jumping into what happens next. Whether or not that bill passes, I'll always be hunted unless I decide to reveal that I've got Morris's final work of art, which, by the way, I put in a very secure place, buried so it stays a constant temperature. Not hot. Not cool.

For the next day, I anxiously monitor the news bombs going off over Morris's death and how Kyle, a sitting congressman, was plotting to kill me.

The spin and conspiracies start immediately. Was Morris killed by the US government? Was the tape of my conversation with Kyle even real? Where is Mr. Love?

But the story that's grabbing the most attention is my love affair with Luna. #MrLovesLuna.

I hope River figures out none of it's true, but that's not my biggest concern right now. I just have to get her back.

The next day, I haven't heard a thing about River, so I call Luna on my encrypted app to see if there've been some rumblings online that I missed. It goes to voicemail, so I call Mom next. Maybe she's been talking to River's parents.

"Oh, Huff. It's just terrible!" Mom says the moment she answers.

"What?" I say, thinking it's going to be about River.

“The FBI raided our house, looking for you. Kyle says we’ll both go to prison if we’re caught harboring you. He’s on the warpath after you released that conversation.”

*He’s out of control.* “Well, you don’t know where I am, and I’m not going to tell you, so there’s nothing they can accuse you of. Have you heard anything about River?”

“No, that poor, poor girl. I told Kyle he’s a monster and has no choice but to stop this nonsense and let her go, but he claims he’s innocent.”

“Innocent?”

“Yes. He said she’s still locked up at that place. What’s it called?”

“Clover? She’s at Clover?” I ask.

“That’s the one.”

“I gotta go.”

“Huff, be careful, sweetie. Your brother isn’t himself anymore. We think he’s snapped.”

Snapped? More like he was ass-raped by a power-hungry demon who made Kyle his man puppet. “I’ll be careful, Mom.”

We end the call, and my heart starts pumping like crazy. I’m about to lose it. I can feel the anger pushing up from my stomach, into my chest. If Kyle had River locked up in that place, then I know two things. One, they’ve sedated her again, and two, this is a trap.

If I were them and wanted to trap me, I’d be ready with guns. They’ll kill me without a thought and then dissect me.

*Not if I tell Kyle that Morris cracked the code, and I have the only vial.*

No, no. If I do that, I might get away with River, but he’ll use Mom and Dad to get that vial. My best option is to do a little surveillance tonight. Zip in and zip out a few times.

Figure out where they have River. If I'm lucky, I can avoid Kyle and his men altogether.



*Holy shitballs. That's a lot of feds.* I zipped to the rooftop one building over from the hospital to get a look around the medical complex. It's nighttime, but from this vantage, I spot fifteen cars stationed at various spots surrounding the hospital.

Did they think I'd come on foot?

But if there are fifteen cars outside with two agents each, I can only imagine how many are inside. Fifty? Eighty? My chances of getting in and out aren't good. Now I really don't know what to do because as far as I know, I heal fast, but I'm not bulletproof.

I zip out of there back to my island hideaway and try Luna again.

"Huff! Ohmygod," she answers. "My house was raided by the FBI today."

"Let me guess; Kyle threatened you with being arrested for harboring a fugitive."

"That, and he wasn't happy about the leaked conversation. He said, and I quote, 'I'm going to make your life a living hell, and when you finally die, I'll make your hell so hot, you'll be a sizzling pork rind for the rest of eternity.'"

"Original."

"I'm sure he's watching my house and work, and all my lines are tapped. Even this one, so be careful what you say."

"I'm really sorry I got you into this, Luna."

"I'm not. It's been great for my career, and I really meant what I said, Huff. You are exactly what the world needs right now—someone to stand up to all the Kyles."

"I don't know anymore. Every time I think I've got a handle on the situation, it gets worse. Everyone I know and care about is under attack." Just like I predicted.

“Nobody said it would be easy, babe, but that doesn’t mean you’re any less important to the world.”

“All I see are a bunch of people online, fangirling over our kiss.”

“You need to take a better look.”



## LUNA

What’s *with* this guy? I mean, there’s being humble, and then there’s being blind. Does Huff really not have a clue what he’s started here? He’s become a damned movement. #JustLove #MrLoveJusticeJunkies #MrLoveDateMePlease #IwanttolickLove #UltraMegaLoveForever.

People are sick of the corruption and powermongers, and the fact that Huff would expose his brother’s disgusting behavior speaks to his braveness.

Huff will never know a moment’s peace for as long as he lives, and the fact that he’s fighting to stay alive while also keeping himself out of the hands of the warmongering establishment? It’s inspiring. He’s fighting for all of us, and in today’s world, it’s beginning to feel like a rarity.

Add to all that his corny name and smokin’-hot body? Seriously. Has he taken a look in the mirror lately? The kissable lips are the only thing soft about him. He’s ripped from his chiseled jawline and handsome face down to his toes. It’s not a surprise that the world is putting its full weight behind love. *Just Mr. Love.*

I can literally see this scandal—which exposed his brother’s unconscionable actions, allowing millions of people to believe they were poisoned—turning Huff into something so much more. Not a movement, but a revolution. Against tyranny and hate. Against overreaching governments. Against anyone striving to rob the masses of peace of mind and freedom. Because, at the end of the day, that’s what this thing is all about.

The government wants Huff so they can make more. Men obedient to them. Think of the consequences. At first they'll say it's justified to protect our national interests. But when other nations are subjected to our army of Huffs, which will no doubt include spies, saboteurs, and agents, they won't be happy or feel secure.

At home, anyone who questions if this is the right move for humanity will be crushed. Fear will become our new religion, and there'll be no one to stop them. Because no one can stop someone like Huff from coming into their home in the middle of the night and taking them away for one wrong word. Or taking their children because of their "wrongthink." We'd be living in constant fear.

Until one day...some other country figures out how Huff was made. Then it'll be our country dealing with the repercussions of revenge. More fear.

The point is, Huff has become a symbol. Not of the doom to come, but of hope, of standing up to the doom. Because he's on our side, and that makes us feel invincible. He is the people's superweapon.

"Huff," I say, "I'm not here to be your shrink, kiss your ass, or inflate your ego. You gotta figure out what your place is and what it means to you. But I'm telling you right now that you've created a ripple that's turned into a wave, and that wave is about to change everything. You can't stop now."

"Thank you," he says dryly. "I absolutely called so I could feel the weight of humanity on my shoulders."

"Oh, grow up. This is bigger than you, so you're just going to have to grow a pair and cope."

"And again, I thank you for the talk. This is 1-800-shit-on-my-life, right?"

"Okay. Sorry. Why did you call?"

"If they're listening, we should talk in person."

I look down at my pink flamingo jammies. I just got ready for bed, but what the hell? He's seen me in worse outfits. I literally dressed in a trash bag the other night when we got hammered. I told him I was going to talk to the monster (barf) and needed protection because I drank too much. He laughed hysterically and took off his shirt and tie to join me with his own Hefty.

"Kitchen," I say, so he knows where to find me.

Suddenly, Huff is standing next to my refrigerator, looking, well, hot as usual in jeans and a white T-shirt that stretches over his broad chest. He looks a little red up top. His face resembles an apple.

Before I can ask what happened, he's got me scooped up into his arms. Suddenly, we're standing on a beach lit up with tiki torches in front of a beautiful two-story cabin.

"Holy crap. That was incredible," I say, my heart beating with adrenaline.

He shrugs like it's nothing. "Thought we'd be better off talking here."

"What's going on?"

"Kyle put River in a psychiatric hospital. It's a trap, and there's no way I can get to her. There're agents everywhere, and I'm guessing they're armed to the teeth."

"You think they'd shoot you?"

"What do they care if I'm dead or alive? They just want to pick me apart and figure out what makes me tick."

"As any evil empire would," I say dryly.

"Unfortunately, I'm not bulletproof. At least, I don't think I am, and it's not something I can easily test."

"So what can I do to help?"

"Go inside? Start filming and asking questions? I just need a distraction so I can get to River."



“If the place is surrounded, they’re not going to let me anywhere close.”

“Are you sure?” Huff asks. “Because maybe as a member of the press, you could get in there easier than I could.”

I shake my head. Huff has no idea how much I want to help him, but I can’t see Kyle or his cronies letting me in. Then there’s the whole thing about risking my cameraman’s life along with my own.

“I’m sorry, Huff, but if we storm in there with cameras, at best we’ll be arrested. At worst, we’ll be shot. Likely, Kyle will detain us on bogus charges.”

I instantly see the look of frustration on Huff’s handsome face, his strong jaw working.

“Why are you starting to look like a ripe tomato again?” I ask.

“It’s a side effect. When my emotions get too intense, my body starts to heat up, and I lose control.”

“You mean you kill people?”

“Fuck no,” he snaps. “I mean I want to. I want to get violent, but I always stop myself.”

“Is it hard to do?”

“Just mind over matter. I have to practice meditation and breathing a lot.”

Interesting. “Well, I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to help you with River.”

He bows his head. “Yeah, I think this point goes to Kyle. I gotta give him what he wants.”

“Which is?”

“The formula. Morris’s vial.”

*Is he crazy?* “Absolutely not, Huff! You can’t ever give him what he wants, no matter the cost.”

“What am I supposed to do? Leave River in there? If I don’t see her soon, she’ll die.”

Huff means if he doesn’t fuck her, she’ll flatline. What a messed-up relationship.

So my choices are: (A) let Huff hand over the vial to get River back and watch humanity implode. (B) Let his childhood sweetheart flatline. Or (C) try to storm the hospital and end up in a government gulag with my cameraman.

“Huff?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s the vial?” I ask.

“Why?” he asks defensively.

“Because I vote for option D.”

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# CHAPTER TWENTY

## HUFF

“Are you out of your fucking mind, Luna? I am not injecting you with the formula.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll probably kill you.”

“A risk I’m willing to take,” she argues.

“Why?” I ask.

“Who wouldn’t want to travel anywhere in the world with a mere thought? Or be able to lift cars?”

“Your heart will explode if you don’t get the dose correct. Look at Morris. He made the stuff, and he couldn’t even get it right.”

“Yes, but he was taking that other concoction, too. Who’s to say that’s not what overloaded his system?”

She’s crazy. “Exactly! Who can say? And let’s pretend for a second that the initial dose doesn’t kill you. To keep you alive, we’ll have to give you more and gradually reduce the dosage so your heart doesn’t explode. We don’t know if we have enough for that.”

“We also don’t know if it’s more than enough.”

*Huh?* “Luna, the stuff in that vial isn’t even the same juice I used to come down.”

“That’s my point. The other formula was much, much weaker than what you were exposed to.”

“Yes, but—”

“So then, theoretically, this vial is closer to what *you* had. Super-concentrated. We’ll have more than enough. We just

need to make sure the dose I get is extremely small. Start from there.”

“No, Luna. Just, no.” I’m not going to play a part in killing her.

“Huff, it’s not your choice.”

But it is. It’s my choice whether or not to give it to her. “Why do you even want this? You’ll be pursued the rest of your life. You might even become illegal soon.”

“Why do *you* want it, Huff? Because you said if there was a cure, you weren’t sure you’d take it.”

“Well...well...because it’s better than going back to who I was.”

“And maybe I’ll feel the same,” she argues.

“You’re successful, ambitious, brave, and beautiful. You’re nothing like I was.” I instantly recoil. I do think she’s all those things, but I don’t want her getting the wrong impression. I *love* River. I always will. It means absolutely nothing if I find Luna incredibly attractive.

I exhale slowly. “Luna, you don’t understand. I was... weak and afraid, and no one respected me. I didn’t even respect myself. And the moment I tried to stand up for someone I loved, someone was there to knock me down. I don’t want to return to being that guy everyone shits on. I can do good being like this.”

“So why wouldn’t I want the same, Huff?”

“Because it comes with a steep price. Look at where River is. Look at what Kyle did to my parents and to you.”

She plants her hands on her waist and whooshes out a breath. “Fine. Fine. I get it.” She nods. “But if you really mean what you say and want to help others, then changing me is your only choice. It’s the right thing to do.” She grabs my hand. “You can’t do it alone. No matter how strong or fast, you’re stronger with a partner. And who are you going to trust to be that person? Morris?”

“He’s dead.”

“Exactly. Because he was a crazy, murderous fiend. But you know I’m not, Huff. I believe in you, and I can be trusted.”

Can she? Because this shit changes people. Well, maybe not Morris. He was still the same crazy bastard when he died. But I changed. Some might even argue the drug changed Kyle, too. He saw “precious” and wanted it for himself.

Luna adds, “This is the only way to rescue River. I can put on a nurse’s uniform and zip into the hospital—somewhere they’re not watching. Kyle’s men won’t be looking for me. I can find River and get her out.”

Fuck. I hate that her plan makes so much sense. “But if I inject you, and you die?”

“Then I die doing exactly what I wanted—putting my ass on the line to fight for what’s right. It’s why I became a no-holds-barred journalist.”

I don’t want to do this, but I’m out of options unless I go charging into the hospital alone, hoping I find River and then hoping we don’t get shot.

“You do understand you might end up looking like a bodybuilder, right?” I ask Luna.

Her eyes light up. “As long as I keep my big tits.”

Interesting wish. “Fine. I’ll give you the formula, but please swear you won’t haunt me if you die.”

“I’ll only be your constant shadow if I live.” She holds up her palm. “Swear on my life.”

“Very funny,” I say dryly.



I have to do the unthinkable and lift a few syringes from a local pharmacy. I didn’t want to risk being seen, so I got in and out and back to Luna.

We're sitting in my beachside cabin on the porch overlooking the ocean. There's a little rattan love seat and a coffee table made from driftwood. The sun is about to come up, and the wind is warm, blowing across the stretch of white sand, pushing a row of palm trees to one side. It looks like they're dancing, bending in unison, then springing upright again.

Luna is quiet for once, and though I don't know her well, I can sense the uneasiness in her.

"You're sure about this?" I ask, holding the needle in one hand and an alcohol pad in the other.

She stares out at the ocean. "It's weird, Huff, but I know everything's going to be fine."

"How?"

"This isn't the place I see myself dying."

I don't see myself dying ever, even if I know it's coming someday. "Where do you see it happening?"

She stares at me, and I notice how the hazel color of her eyes is really a mixture of browns and green ribbons swirling around her irises. Really beautiful.

"When I die, I see myself surrounded by my children and grandchildren," she says. "I see them smiling and hugging me. I see myself at peace."

There'll be no peace for her if she takes this drug. "You know they won't stop coming after you if this works, right?"

"I know." She nods solemnly. "But maybe that's why I see myself at peace. I fought back. I fought for them. My kids, their kids, all our kids."

It's as good a purpose as any, but what do I know. "Ready?" I ask, uncapping the needle.

"Yep."

"I'm giving you one drop to start. It's the smallest dose I can go with."

“Let ’r rip, Huff.”

My shaking hand hovers over her soft skin, and I pause, looking at Luna’s pretty face. “If this kills you, I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you.”

She laughs. “We just met.”

I know she cares, she’s passionate about doing good, and she’s honest. “Yet I somehow know I’m lucky to’ve met you.”

She leans in and plants a kiss on my lips. I’m about to pull back, but she might die in a minute here. Plus, her lips are soft, and I can’t claim I’m not attracted to her. She’s sharp, outspoken, and brave. But...I love River.

Luna pulls away, and she licks her lips. “You taste incredible.”

“Watermelon Trident. I stole some from the pharmacy when I got the syringes.”

She laughs, and I take the moment of her distraction to plunge the needle.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## LUNA

“Ouch!” I cup my hand over my arm. “Motherfucker! That hurt.”

“You okay?” Huff’s vivid blue eyes focus intensely on my face like a child waiting for Jack to spring from his box.

I move my shoulder in circles, massaging the injection site. “It burns, but it’s starting to tingle.”

He pulls out a notebook and writes down: *Morris’s Huff Recipe*, along with my name, dosage amount, injection site, and time of day. “Okay. Just...keep talking. And whatever you do, don’t leave, all right?”

“Sure.” Where am I going to go, anyway? Not like I just won the Super Bowl and Disney’s calling. I took a potentially fatal drug.

Huff whips out his phone and starts recording with one hand, ready to jot with the other. “Tell me what you’re feeling?”

“Stop that.”

“I need to make a record of this for future analysis. I’ve given you exactly point-zero-five milliliters—the equivalent of a drop of water. Describe anything you feel no matter how small.”

I wait while he stares. Ten minutes, thirty, forty minutes go by.

“Huff, I don’t think it was enough.”

“Be patient,” he orders. I can tell by the veins in his arms that he’s on pins and needles. I am too, but he’s much more intense.



“Didn’t you say you transformed in a few seconds?” I ask.

“Yes, but it almost killed me.”

“So then I’m good. Stable. Give me another dose. We don’t have all night.”

“Luna, just wait a little longer.”

I know for a fact nothing’s happening. “Wait for what, Huff? For River to be gang-raped at that hospital?”

“Why the hell would you say that? You’re trying to back me into a corner and make me choose between your life and hers.”

“Sorry. That sucked of me. It’s just that I’m all nerves right now. Am I about to die of cardiac arrest? Or am I going to be the woman who’ll stand by your side until the end?”

*Shit. Shit. Shit. Why did I say that?* I know he loves River. It’s why I’m doing this.

Maybe this stuff *is* affecting me. Because the truth is, I do want more than to simply help Huff. He’s sweet and incredibly sexy, but he’s strong, too. Best of all, he doesn’t even see it. Pure humility. And to me that’s incredibly attractive: the guy who has no clue what a catch he is. A big ball of fierce man in a down-to-earth wrapper. He’s the sort of guy I’ve dreamed of my entire life. *He’s not an anti-hero. He’s the perfect hero.*

But I can’t force him to feel something for me, and I won’t manipulate him. If he and I are meant to be, then it has to happen on both our terms.

Right now, he loves his childhood sweetheart, and she needs help. I’m all in. For him. For her. Because it’s right.

“River’s meant to be by my side, Luna. I hope you know that.”

I nod. “I do. I didn’t mean what I said—not like you think,” I lie. “I just want to have your back so you can fight these twats. That’s all.”

“And I kinda love that about you.”

*Love that about me?* My heart starts beating like a rabbit on the run. *Thump, thump, thump, thump!* A million beats per second.

“Something’s happening,” I mutter.

He grabs for my hand—but his fingers pass through mine.

I lock eyes with him, terrified. “Huff, what’s happening?”



## HUFF

Right before my eyes, Luna’s fading. “No.” I try to shake her shoulders but can’t get a solid grip. “Don’t you dare. You stay right here or so *fucking* help me!”

Helpless, her eyes dart from my face to our hands. She’s slipping away, but to where?

“Huff? What’s...what’s happening...?” Her voice is meek and faint, riddled with desperation. I want to help her, but I don’t know how.

“Just look at me,” I say. “Think of being here. Nowhere else, Luna. Here. Me. You.”

“I’m...trying...” Her voice disintegrates with the rest of her until she’s completely gone.

“Luna! Don’t go!”

I sit staring at the spot where Luna was, unable to move. Maybe I’m here for an hour? Maybe two. What’s *fucking* with me most, besides the guilt of injecting her or the fact that I don’t know what happened, is that I actually miss her already.

The thought of having her by my side gave me a glimpse of the future—surrounded by people I love. I saw her and me working together. It was just a glimpse, but it gave me a taste of what could be. And then, in the blink of an eye, she’s gone. Just...gone.

“And it’s all my fault.” My gut feels like it’s weighed down by a block of ice-cold concrete. Once again, I fucked up

the life of someone I care about.

I inhale deeply and clench my fists. I have to stop dragging people into my messes. I have to accept that I am, and will always be, alone in this.

It's up to me to get River out of Clover. If it means I have to kill a bunch of people to do it, then so fucking be it. I really don't care, but I'll fight them all on my own.

I pull out my phone and pull up Clover's website. *Look at all the facilities. So healing.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After a quick trip to the tactical-gear section of my favorite hunting store, I review my plan one more time. I've memorized various rooms shown in the hospital's online brochure. This way, I can zip to different locations inside if I need to. There's a meditation garden, a cafeteria, a library, and a sauna room. The only problem is that I don't know the exact layout. I only know there are one hundred and fifty rooms.

My plan is to enter through the sauna and find the employee locker room. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to grab a uniform or lab coat. Once I have that, I'll quickly check out each area of the hospital. Any sign of Kyle's men, I'll zip out, but I'm hoping to avoid any confrontation.

I slide on my bulletproof vest and take a deep breath. My hands are shaking. My chest is heaving. My heart is pumping, on the edge of a rage. I have to use that anger to fuel me through this. Speed is my only weapon.

*Ready, set, go!* I zip into the sauna room, expecting to see dudes in towels. Maybe even women. But it's cold, moldy, and empty. Looks like it hasn't been used in years. Slowly, I open the door to the adjacent locker room. It looks like this is where some of the employees change, because I see stacks of neatly folded blue scrubs.

*Bingo!* I grab an XL and slide them on over my bulletproof vest and jeans. Then I grab some guy's badge just sitting in his unlocked locker. This is actually too easy.

I casually make my way out to the hallway, expecting to see FBI agents mulling around or staff hurrying around, but everything's quiet. A nurse walks by and jerks her head at me, not even noticing I don't belong here or that I'm wearing a badge that's turned around.

I pass by one of the nurse stations and notice a clipboard sitting on the counter. I grab it and scan the sheet. It's a list of patients, and one says Samuel Moreno, Room #43. Is this the same Sam River mentioned? If yes, he might know where she is.

I take the clipboard to appear more official and use the fire escape route map on one of the doors to locate his room. I scan my badge to get inside and leave the door ajar.

“Sam?” I whisper to the man under the blanket. “Sam?”

He doesn't move.

I go over and pull down the covers.

Lying there is River, wrapped in some guy's arms. They're clothed, but I don't care.

My rage is instant and uncontrollable. “What the fuck?” I yell.

“Here! He's here!” some guy yells just outside. I hear shots hit the metal door. One goes right through the glass window and zooms past my head.

*Fuck!* I grab River's arm and zip out of there, going to the cabin on the beach.

Disoriented, River screams as I plant her ass on the porch.

“What the hell, Riv!” I yell, my face burning up along with the rest of me. My heart's pounding. I want to kill someone. I want to tear down everything. *Where's the Eiffel Tower when you need it?*

“Huff?” She blinks. “What—how—how did I get here?”

“You fucked that guy?” I point north, like that's going to mean something.

She shakes her head like she's trying to wake herself up from a bad dream. “Sam. Ohmygod! Where's Sam?” She hops to her feet. “You have to get him out of there, Huff.”

“No.” Doesn’t she see what’s happening? I’m going to have to leave her here. I’m seconds away from a blind rage.

“Please, Huff! I had one of the nurses sneak me into his room last night. He’s not doing well. They keep him drugged and—”

“Did you fuck him?” I yell.

“That stopped being your business when you abandoned me,” she snarls. “You let Kyle take me, and I was losing my mind because of you and all the stress I’m under.”

I can’t see straight. “I have to go.”

River’s mouth closes. I see the look in her eyes. She can’t believe I’m leaving her here alone in this place, but I have to.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I need to cool off. I’ll be back.”

Just as I’m about to zip off and punch a few mountains, she yells, “Get Sam! Don’t you fucking come back here without Sam!”



Three hours later, I’ve officially become an environmental terrorist and knocked down a few acres of Amazonian trees. I figured it was better than ripping off people’s heads, specifically River’s. I couldn’t get the image out of my head of her lying there with that guy.

I’m calmer now, back in control, but I’m barely maintaining composure. *I left her for a few days, and she hooks up with some other guy?*

Then there’s the fact that Luna disappeared. Where did she even go?

*This is such a fucking mess.*

I consider going back to River, but I’m not ready to face her yet. I’m not ready to face how I failed her again and how she was going crazy after we had sex because I poisoned her. I’m not ready to tell her that in all likelihood, she’ll need another fix, or she’ll die. I’m not ready to hear that she was so

traumatized by being taken by Kyle that she felt the need to seek comfort in the arms of another guy.

I am only ready for one thing.

I zip to my parents' house. It's three in the morning, so I try not to make noise. I find Mom's address book and then search the internet for a photo.

I close my eyes and envision going to Kyle's. I have a score to settle with my brother, and it's time to end this.

I blink, and I roll my eyes. *Figures*. Kyle's DC townhouse is pretty posh, complete with security cameras and motion-activated floodlights. The question is, is he home?

I go right up to the door and ring the bell. I'm not here to be sly, sneak attack, or draw him out. This shit's happening man-to-man. Face-to-face. Out in the open.

After a few moments, the lights upstairs come on. "I know you see me, Kyle. Get out here and face me like a man, you pussy!"

Nothing happens, so I yell, "I'm going to rip off that tiny dick of yours and shove it up your asshole, you motherfucker! Get down here." He thinks he can kidnap River, threaten my parents, and try to have me killed, and I won't have something to say about it? "Kyle! You sack of shit! Come out here, or I'll come inside."

Suddenly, I hear an elderly woman's voice echo from the window. "Son, there is no Kyle here. You have the wrong house."

"Oh, isn't this one-one-three Jefferson Circle?"

"No. This is Jefferson Place."

*Oops*. "Sorry about the noise, ma'am."

I pull up my phone and try again, this time with the correct address. I zip straight there, but after ringing the bell, I can tell no one's home, so I leave a note: *I'm coming for you, Kyle*,

*and there's nowhere you can run. I sign it with a little heart. That's right, Just Mr. Love has you on his shitlist, buddy.*

I'm about to go back to River when that nagging feeling in my gut acts up. She begged me to get Sam out of Clover. He's the last person I want to help, but fuck me, I kind of have to. I've put River through so much already, and leaving him there isn't going to make things better between us.

*God, I'm such a sucker.* I rip off what's left of my scrubs after lumber-therapy and check that my bulletproof vest is secure. I visualize Clover and zip right into Sam's room, but Sam isn't in it.

"Great." I open the door to look for him—and I'm greeted by a wall of men in camo with guns. They're all facing away, getting yelled at by Kyle.

"You find that girl! And then you find my fucking brother and kill..." Kyle's voice trails off the moment he notices me standing there. The men turn, reaching for their weapons, but freeze like they're unsure what to do. Shoot me? Run? Surrender?

"You actually came in person to see I'm killed properly?" I say. I don't know why I'm surprised. Kyle was always the guy who wanted to be at the center of attention.

"Want a job done right, gotta get your hands dirty," he replies.

"Dirty is the perfect word to describe you, Kyle." I know I can take him. I can go right around these guys, come up behind him, and snap his neck.

*Do it, Huff, I tell myself. Do it.* He tried to have me killed. He still wants me dead. He took River. He had my parents' house raided. He terrorized millions of people with his poisoned-water hoax. Kyle is a bad, bad man.

*I can do this. I can kill him.* I zip around the men and grab hold of Kyle.

I don't know why, but I take us straight to Joy's grave.





“Fucking Huff! Take me back,” Kyle yells.

“Or what, Kyle? What will you do? Put Mom and Dad in jail? Have me locked away for experiments?”

It’s dark out, but I see the subtle look of worry in his hard facade. He’s realizing he’s stuck here without help. He’s at my mercy.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “but some things are more important than you, Huff. It’s a lesson you’ve never been able to learn.”

I point to Joy’s headstone. “You mean like how after she was killed, you used her death to gain notoriety? Or how you made a name for yourself by becoming a media whore?”

“I had a calling I couldn’t ignore.”

“You used her death to launch your political career. You never cared about getting justice for Joy.” In fact, when we went after the girls who killed Joy, their families offered thirty million dollars to settle out of court. Kyle wanted to take it. He tried to convince me and my parents, too. But if we had, we would’ve been banned from speaking about Joy’s death, and they would never have to admit any guilt. I was the one who convinced my parents not to settle. Eventually, the girls, now women, went to prison.

“What do you want from me, Huff?”

“I want to know why you’re doing this to me. I never asked for this. I never threatened anyone.”

“But now you have, haven’t you? You did it on live TV, which only proves my point. Sooner or later, you’ll become a threat to society. Someone’s got to protect the world from you.”

“I only threatened anyone who came after the people I love. I just didn’t know that person would be my own brother. Why, Kyle? Why did you turn on me?” As I’m speaking, I realize something important: “This isn’t different than Joy, is it? I’m just an opportunity for you. More publicity. More

notoriety. More political clout. Kyle, the man who stopped the dangerous Mr. Love.”

“And the man who’ll make the US the most powerful country in the world.”

Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for a solid military. Arm the fuck out of our country for all I care, but this isn’t about that, and Kyle knows it. His patriotism is a front. “Stop the bullshit. You just want to figure out a way to leverage me for your own political gain. You could buy a lot of favors if you knew how I was transformed.”

“I’m not falling for that trap again, Huff. I know you’re recording me.”

“I’m not.” And it’s the truth. “I just want to understand why the brother I looked up to, who was supposed to protect me, turned out to be the one person in the world who wants me dead.”

“You need to grow up, Huff, and be a man.”

*That’s his answer?* I look at Joy’s headstone. “I’m glad she’s not here to see what a piece of shit you turned out to be, Kyle.” I look at him. “But I’m here. And I’m going to stop you.”

He laughs. “Stop me how? You already tried to make the world believe I’m an evil prick, but no one believes you. The media’s already calling the recording a fake.”

I step closer to him, lowering my voice. “I’ve got the formula, Kyle. Morris completed it before he died, and I have it.”

His mouth falls open.

I continue, “And I’m going to use it to make more people just like me. In fact, I already have, and you won’t have a clue who they are.” I smile sadistically. “You’ll never be safe, Kyle. Not ever. We can come for you anytime, anywhere, and there’ll be nothing you can do to stop us. So back the fuck off. Leave Mom and Dad alone. Stop pursuing me, River, or

anyone else associated with me. You do that, and I'll let you keep your life. But one wrong move, Kyle, just one, and I'll tie your legs together and rip off your balls.”

“I'm not afraid of you.” He laughs.

“Wrong answer.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Huff! Sam!” River runs from the cabin into Sam’s arms. I’m not okay watching them hug. Not even a little, but I know I did the right thing by going to get him. Whatever happens to her and me, Sam didn’t cause it.

“Are you okay?” she asks Sam, who’s a tall guy with darker features—black hair, olive skin, dark eyes. Yeah, I guess he’s okay looking too. *Fucker.*

“I’m okay,” Sam says. He looks a little out of it. I found him restrained in one of the rooms downstairs in the hospital. Funny, after I took Kyle, the feds completely evacuated, and a massive search for him began.

I try not to smile. Kyle’s going to be found at exactly 9 a.m. when the zoo opens. Unless the lions get to him first. It’ll kind of depend on how much screaming he does. Sucks having your legs tied together in a knot and being stuck in a tree. *Gonna take years for those legs to heal.*

River turns to me. “Thank you, Huff.”

I shrug like it’s nothing.

“Sam, I need to talk to Huff alone,” she says.

Yes, we probably need to get some things out of the way.

“There’s food inside, and feel free to use the shower,” I say to Sam. “Clean towels are in the closet.” I can get him some clothes later, too, but right now, I need to know what’s going on with River.

“Thanks. I think I’ll lie down for a minute. Let this shit wear off.” He disappears inside.

I point to the small love seat on the porch.

River sits, and I take the spot next to her. The sun is just coming up over the horizon.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

River shrugs. “I’ve been better.”

“Where did Kyle take you?”

“I don’t know. They put a bag over my head and threw me in a cell. I screamed for you for two days. They had to sedate me. Then I woke up back at Clover.”

I wince. “I’m really sorry, River.”

She turns to fully face me. “Where did you go, Huff? You swore you’d stay.”

“I know, but Morris nabbed me, and by the time I got back, you were already gone.” There is way more to the story, of course. “River, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“You mean how you cheated on me?”

“I didn’t cheat, Riv. I was trying to keep my promise and not martyr myself to get you back.”

“So you went clubbing with celebrities, partied all night, and hooked up with that reporter woman, Luna? Kyle showed me everything. Looked pretty fucking pleased with himself, too.”

“I had to make him believe I didn’t care about you so he’d stop using you as bait.”

“You did a pretty good job of convincing the world.” She looks away.

“I’m sorry, River. I really am.”

“So you’re saying all those late-night selfies and reels you posted with Luna at her place were staged? You weren’t really drunk and having fun?”

I didn’t know Luna posted everything. “I’m not going to lie. I had fun. But you were never far from my thoughts, Riv.”

“Swear to me. Swear on your life that nothing happened between you two, that she means nothing to you.”

I should ask the same of her about Sam, but honestly, I'm almost afraid to. I don't want to hear the truth.

"I swear," I say. "She means nothing romantically. But River, that's not what I need to talk to you about. When we had sex, the reason you got so crazy wasn't stress. It was the chemicals in my semen."

She makes a sour face. "Ew. Really?"

"I didn't know."

"So is that why I felt like my head would explode if I didn't get you back in bed?"

I nod.

"Am I going to change now?" She looks terrified.

"I don't think so. There was only enough in my semen to make you addicted and aggressive and a little stronger."

"So, like the crap Morris was selling to all those students?"

"I think, but I'm not sure."

She presses a hand to her chest and starts panting. "What am I going to do? Can I detox like you did?"

"Morris was working on a cure for you, but he died."

"Died?" Her brown eyes go all wide.

"He finally figured out how I was transformed, but the crazy asshole took the drug, and his heart crapped out. He took too much, I think."

She hangs her head. "Oh no. Oh no. I'm going to die."

"Well, not if you and I, you know, keep having sex. It would be like giving you the drug, so to speak." The only problem is that I'm not sure it's a solution. Not after seeing her with Sam. Does she love him? I can't understand how she'd drop me so quickly. It doesn't make sense.

"But how come I stopped needing you after a few days?" River asks.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“It was like a switch was thrown, and I just stopped wanting you.”

“I don’t know.” Did the effect wear off on its own?

“So what should I do? I mean, my heart could stop, or I could be fine.”

“I wish I knew, River. I tried to get Morris to make some more of his street formula, but he couldn’t get a hold of the ingredients. All I have is a vial of the final formula that made me.”

“Maybe I should take some.”

“River, no. It’s not safe. Morris died from it.”

“But then my only options are to wait and see if I die or keep having sex with you for the rest of my life—always wondering if I’m days or hours away from dying. It’ll make me completely dependent on you.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?” We love each other, right? Or are we over?

“Yes, Huff. It would.”

“Because of Sam.” It’s the obvious reason.

“I’m not going to lie. He’s become special to me, but this has nothing to do with him. The issue is I can’t trust you. After everything I saw, everything you’ve done.”

“River, I never betrayed you.”

“I was being held hostage while you were out rubbing elbows with movie stars, like Ivor and Kady. And let’s not forget all the lies. You made me think you were dead instead of trusting me. It broke me. Then you told me to take a hike because you were going to kill yourself. And *then* you promised to fight for us and stay by my side, but you didn’t. You went off to save the world and left me behind.” She sighs. “You’ve hurt me too many times.”

She knows why I did all those things, but I can't ignore the fact her heart's been broken over and over again. After a while, people just stop caring about why they were hurt. They just want the pain to stop. I know. I've been there.

The question is, will she give us another chance? Because I'm willing to stick things out like she asked. I don't want to lose her, even if it means giving up everything else.

"What if I told you I won't leave again," I say. "No more saving the world. No more playing hero. It'll be just you and me and no one else—"

"Huff!" Luna appears right in front of us, wearing a black tank and yoga pants, looking rather muscular.

River jolts in her seat, and so do I.

"Jesus Christ!" Luna spouts excitedly, jumping up and down in the sand. "It worked! It worked! I'm just like you."

"You're okay..." I whoosh out a breath, relieved. "I was just about to go looking for you."

Luna marches over. "You wouldn't have found me. For some reason, I decided to go to Costco. I think I was imagining their muffins, because I was lying in a pile of them when I woke up."

I stand. "How about everything else? Any other symptoms? Heart palpitations? Anger?"

"Nope. I'm ready to go save the world with you." Luna goes in for a hug, and that's when it hits me.

I can feel River's seething anger.

Slowly, I turn my head. River's face is an angry red; her fists are balled.

"River, I can explain. Luna doesn't know what we just talked about and—"

River stands and points at Luna. "You made her your sidekick, Huff!" River yells. "Your fucking sidekick! And she



can have the drug, but I get your dick to stay alive. How convenient!”

“Yes, but—”

“But it’s just supposed to be you and me, *right?*” she says rhetorically. “Isn’t that what you just said? No more hero. Just the two of us.” River stands. “We’re done, Huff. Done. Do you hear me?”

River goes inside the cabin, and I follow her up the stairs.

“Sam, it’s time to go.” She starts shaking him.

“Why won’t you let me explain, Riv?” I say. “A lot happened and—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’m leaving. I never want to see you again.” River tries to wake Sam again.

“But what about your heart?” I say. “What if you’re still hooked on—”

“What? Your cum?” She laughs bitterly. “Well, good thing it won’t matter because my heart’s already broken. Thanks to you.”

Sam starts rousing. “What’s going on?”

“You still have that friend’s house we can go to?” River asks.

“Yeah. We can stay there while I hire a lawyer to keep us out of Clover.”

River looks over my shoulder at Luna, who’s now standing behind me. “Can you take us there?”

“River, I’ll do it,” I say.

“No. You keep your fucking hands off me.” River pushes past me. “See you outside, Sam and Luna.”

*I can’t believe this. I just can’t win with this girl.* All sense of reason dissolves from my head, replaced by anger, frustration, and, well, fucking everything!

I follow River downstairs and outside to the beach. “You know what, Riv? Fine. I accept your decision. Because no woman in her right mind would be pissed off at me after everything I went through to get you back while keeping my promise to not martyr myself. I went through hell for you, and you won’t even listen to what I have to say.”

“No, Huff. *I* went through hell. Again and again and again. But still you’ve managed to make it all about you for the hundredth time.”

“At some point, my life does need to be about *me*, River, and I’m not going to say sorry for it anymore. I’m not here to bow down and grovel at your feet. I’m not here to make Kyle an international star. I’m not here to be anyone’s bitch.”

River stares, and I can tell I’m losing my temper. I can’t afford to.

I look at Luna, who’s standing on the porch, watching worriedly while River and I go at it.

“Luna,” I say, “I gotta take off. Please take River and her new boyfriend wherever they want to go.”

“Where are you going?” Luna asks.

“To punch some trees.”

“Not cool. But okay.”

I zip out of there and take out my anger on innocent foliage once again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

By the time I get back, Luna is eating a cheeseburger and fries inside the cabin at the little coffee table in the living room.

“Hi,” I say.

“Ohmygod, Huff. This is amazing. I just thought of this diner I used to go to as a kid and *poof!* There I was ordering takeout. This is incredible.”

“Yeah, well, just remember that when I try to detox you.” I take a seat across from her.

“Are you sure that’s necessary?” she asks. “Because I feel great!”

“I went into cardiac arrest. Took months of smaller doses before I could safely stop.”

“It’s just strange that Morris wouldn’t have fixed that bug.”

I shrug, not wanting to talk about him.

“Fry?” Luna asks, a little too cheery for my mood.

“No, thanks,” I say glumly.

“Hey, don’t worry, Huff. Just give River time to cool off. She’s been through a lot. She’ll come around.”

I don’t think so. “I’ve known her most of my life, and she’s never shut me out like that. I think it’s really over.” And I can’t stop feeling guilty. And then angry. And then guilty again. Everything she’s been through—the pain, the heartache, being kidnapped and drugged—wasn’t easy. *I feel like I broke her. I broke us.*

“Well, you did tell her to pound sand. But that was after she kicked you to the curb—”

“I don’t need a replay.”

Luna pats my hand with her greasy digits. “You still have me.”

“Thanks.” I do appreciate what a good friend she’s becoming.

“So what’s the plan?” she asks.

“I don’t have one.” Later, when I’ve had some time to process, I’ll tell Luna everything that went down with Kyle. But for the moment, “You need to go home and act like nothing’s happened. No one can know you’re like me.”

“What about my body?”

“Just wear baggy clothes for a while and tell your friends you hired a personal trainer. Make the change look gradual.”

“What about your brother? Think he’ll be suspicious?”

“I don’t think he’ll be bothering you for a while. I’ll tell you about it some other time.”

“Huff, you can tell me now. I’ll listen.” She sets down her burger. “I meant what I said before. I’ve got your back.”

“I know. Thank you. I just need some time to figure a few things out.” Mostly how I lost River so quickly. After all these years, she was so ready to turn her back on me. Part of me can’t accept it. It’s not the River I know, even if she’s been through a lot.

“All right. My cue to leave you alone,” says Luna. “But, Huff, I’m here for you. I mean it.”

“Thanks.”

She stands and grabs her burger, wrapping it up with her fries in the wax paper. Must be pretty good if she’s not willing to leave it behind. “You’re a good guy. Don’t let her get in your head, okay? She’s alive because of you.”

I nod.

“See you in a few days?”

“I’ll stop in.”

Luna disappears, and it doesn't even faze me that she's just traveled halfway around the world in two seconds, holding a half-eaten burger. Totally normal.



*One month later...*

"I've had some revelations," I tell Luna while we're sitting at the café she loves in Rome, overlooking the Palazzo Farnese with its "historic murals and inlaid gold ceilings"—I googled it. I appreciate how she's constantly exploring (discreetly) interesting places to meet up because we think her house might still be under surveillance.

She sips from her tiny espresso cup, wearing a yellow sundress and white sandals, looking like a happy tourist. "Can't wait to hear it."

"I'm going back to finish my degree, and then I'm applying to law school."

"Seriously?" She smiles, tucking a lock of brown and gold hair behind her ear. "That's great news!"

It is. Even better, Kyle's officially under investigation. I was contacted by a few men from the government who claim Kyle and his cronies were acting on their own. Major powerplay with lots of moving parts. Thankfully, though, it turns out there are still a few rational people left in power who absolutely do not want more Huffs. They understand the broader implications. *Good news.* Though, it creates a different issue: Luna. And the vial I have. They can't find out about either even though chances are they will eventually. *Just a question of time...*

Until then, I've been given assurances that as long as I cooperate with Kyle's investigation and don't pose a threat, I'll be left alone.

Do I believe them even if I went to the White House and heard it from the horses' mouths?

Nope. Pure. Horse shit.

My guess is that they know they're better off being on friendly terms versus threatening me or making me their enemy. But I know a day will come when they'll either want a favor or turn against me.

In the meantime, I have to push forward with my own plans. Despite how things ended with River, she was right. My life, my happiness, and my future are heavily weighted on my decisions. I can either allow my situation to stuff my head with fear and ruin my life, or I can take ownership of the things within my control.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Huff?" Luna asks. "I mean, wow. Living out in the open like a regular guy?"

I sip my creamy latte. I can't lie; Luna and her Italian haunts have ruined my taste for Dunkin'. "If it doesn't work out, it doesn't. But I have to try. Being a lawyer is what I've always dreamed of."

"What about Kyle?"

Luna knows about the threat I made to Kyle and how I disclosed I have the formula. I don't think he's done with me yet, but the fact there are more of me out there is keeping him quiet for now. He knows that it doesn't matter if he's locked up (with two broken legs). I can get to him anywhere, anytime.

"I'm not going to live my life being afraid of my brother."

"That's right," she proclaims. "Should be the other way around." Lula finishes off her espresso and places the cup on the saucer, her eyes lingering on the table for a long moment. I can tell something's on her mind.

"What's wrong?"

"I have to tell you something. I hope you won't be mad, but I couldn't say no."

"You're not going public, are you?"

"No. Hell no. I'm not crazy. But River and Sam reached out. They've filed multiple lawsuits against the government, Kyle, and Clover."

I hate hearing the words “River and Sam.”

Luna goes on, “They asked me to document their journey. River thinks they’ll be safer if they stay in the public eye and do weekly updates.”

“So like a vlog or something?”

“Actually, I talked to a couple of producers. They’re willing to pay big bucks for the rights to their story. Kind of a reality TV thing. They want you to be a part of the show, Huff.”

I tilt my head. “What is in that coffee?”

“I’m serious, Huff. The producers think that if they can tell your story, too, it’s going to maximize the audience.”

“No. Absolutely not.” I have zero interest in becoming that sort of celebrity, and I don’t know why Luna would ask me to. “You should say no. What if people find out you’re like me?”

“River and Sam promised they’d keep my secret. And I trust them.”

*Big mistake. Trust no one.* It’s the one thing I’ve learned through all this.

Luna continues, “Huff, I respect whatever choice you make, but the more people who hear about what happened to you, to her, to your family—all the lies and threats—the better. The world needs to know the truth and how corrupt those people are. They wanted to kill you because you were the victim of an accident. They kidnapped your girlfriend. And still no one knows what happened to Keni.”

True. We still don’t know why MJP hired Morris either. “Yes, I get it. Lots of questions still out there. Don’t care.”

“You don’t care about seeking justice?” Luna asks.

“Doing a reality show isn’t justice. Changes nothing.”

“It will be when I’m done with them.” Luna wiggles her brows. “Huff, what do you have to lose now? Everyone knows

about you. This way, you can get the facts out there so people aren't afraid."

"Are they? Afraid?"

"No. They love you..." She reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. "Mostly. I mean, there are some people out there who think you're the anti-Christ, but don't worry about them. I'm sure they're harmless."

Yeah. Right. Harmless. "I'll think about it," but I probably won't other than to come up with an argument to talk Luna out of it.

Suddenly, Luna looks very serious. Scared even.

"What?" I say.

"There's one more thing—well, two, really. River told me she's marrying Sam."

I stare across the table, my heart pumping like a drum. "What the fuck?" Those two hardly know each other.

Luna adds, "She's pregnant, Huff. It's yours."

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**Hello, my superheroines (and heroes)!**

Wow! What the heeek is up with River!!!? She used to be so nice! Something feels amiss there, right?

And why were her parents acting so “rigidness or unfriendly” toward Huff?

Also, who is this Sam guy, really? He seems to have a pretty strong hold over River. Suspicious!

And where the heck is Keni? Is Kyle really done with Huff? I still can't get over what an evil jerk he turned into. It's like Huff's world has gone completely insane! Maybe there's a reason?

So many questions! And only one more book to go. *Mr. All Out of Love* is planned to be written soon, so be sure to check my newsletters for the pub date.

Check for INFO here: [mimijean.net/books/mralloutoflove](http://mimijean.net/books/mralloutoflove)  
OR. . . If you want an alert, sign up to my very infrequent newsletters here: [GET MIMI UPDATES.](#)

In the meantime, I have **FREE signed bookmarks...**



**STEP ONE:** Email me at [Mimi@mimijean.net](mailto:Mimi@mimijean.net)

**STEP TWO:** Provide your complete shipping info (include the country if you're outside the US).

**STEP THREE:** If you wrote a review for *JUST MR. LOVE*, thank you for taking the time to support my work! Be sure to provide a link or screenshot. I will do my very best to include a magnet, though, no guarantees. It's first ask, first get, and I do run out! But, as always, you will get a big THANK YOU from me either way.

**STEP FOUR:** Give me about 3–4 weeks. I'm pretty slow at getting mail out, but I do get to it. I send email confirmations once they go.

Thank you for continuing to read my insane books. I can't do this without you wild, crazy readers!

WITH LOVE,

*Mimi*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all the hardworking professionals who help turn my books from Sad Man to Super Man! Haha! LD, Kylie, Jaycee, Kelli, Pauline, and Paul. You're all Ultra Mega Amazing.

To my family: Oh, stop. You know how I feel. 😊

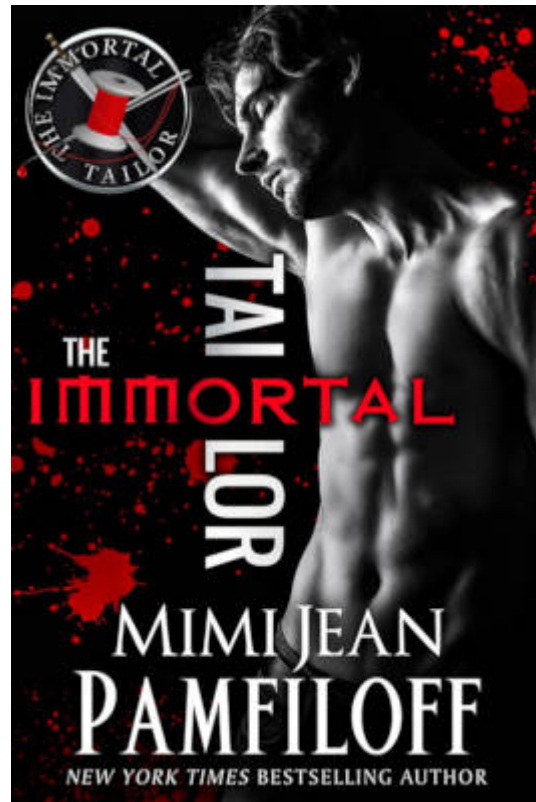
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# CHAPTER ONE

“Come on. Hug me. Just one little squeeze?”

Damien Greystone set his fabric shears on the table and glared at the white furball with golden eyes. “No. And stop begging. I fed you last week.”

Damien returned to cutting out what would become the sleeve of a classic gray tweed coat, made by hand. The *correct* way. As his father and his grandfather had done before him. Being a tailor wasn’t merely a family trade, it was an art, and this workshop was his sanctuary.

Along the walls, handmade oak drawers—some shallow, some deep—were filled with reams of fine fabrics and every color thread imaginable. An adjustable mannequin stood in the corner between towering piles of boxes he lacked space for in the overflowing stockroom next door.

In some ways, his store was a reflection of himself. Organized yet chaotic.

“Damien, come on,” whined the tiny beast, twitching his white whiskers. “I’m huungry. Sooo hungry.”

Damien growled with frustration, knowing exactly how this argument would end: Him getting annoyed to death and losing another day’s worth of work. “If I do this, Bonbon, you must promise to leave me alone the rest of the week. I have three suits to finish on top of this coat. And no more wetting the goddamned floor or leaving your ‘little treasures’ in the fitting room.”

The small beast jumped up on its hind legs, dancing in a circle. “Yes! Yes! Deal!”

“Fine.” Damien removed his black apron so as not to cover it with white fluffy fur. He set it on the sewing table and opened his arms. “Come on then, Bonbon.”

Bonbon jumped into Damien's arms and slumped against his chest, groaning with delight. "Hmmm...delicious. Now stroke my ears, you dirty prick."

Damien shook his head. "You have a vile mouth."

"Fuck off. Now rub. A deal's a deal, buddy."

Damien massaged the soft little ears between his fingers, loathing every second of it.

"Adorable Chihuahua," said a female voice.

Damien swiveled toward the doorway leading from his workshop to the storefront. Standing there was none other than Cimil, the Goddess of the Underworld. Today she had her flaming red hair neatly braided back, and she wore an unflattering camo outfit with army boots. Entirely suspicious. Cimil generally dressed in wild, sparkly outfits meant to annoy or distract her enemies.

"Cimil, welcome back to Greystone and Sons. Always a pleasure. I assume you are here to be fitted for your new winter solstice tutu?" A bizarre *summer* tradition for the insane deity.

Damien set down Bonbon, his love-sucking demon, playing it cool. By order of the gods, demons had been banished back to their realm. They were known troublemakers. But Bonbon had saved his life once, and it felt wrong to rat him out. While the demon realm was supposedly a fun and lively place, it lacked a steady food source for Bonbon's particular subspecies, who fed off affection. In fact, to Damien's knowledge, love-sucking demons were practically extinct. Yes, Bonbon was one of the last. And yes, he was a bottomless pit of need, always begging for attention. Not so dissimilar to a real Chihuahua.

Bonbon gave Cimil a growl as he trotted past her to seek refuge in his little bed at the front of the store. Damien had hand sewed it from a tuxedo shirt, even adding a little bowtie on the corner.

“No, I am here for another reason. A serious one,” she said, her voice stern.

Why was Cimil speaking like that? Where was the twang? The sass? The odd little nicknames she infused into her sentences, such as “cupcake,” “man treat,” or “shitfabrains”?

“How may I be of service?” Damien dipped his head, a sign of respect. “*Always treat the customer like a queen or king,*” his father used to say. But Damien didn’t kiss ass because he needed the money. Playing the role of a well-mannered gentleman was the only thing preventing him from going off the rails. Deep down, he was anything but civilized.

“I’m going to shoot straight with you, D-Man. We have a situation, one that requires your expertise.”

“Another naked clown party?” He hoped not. It would mean sewing a bunch of hideous sparkly hats. He was a damned tailor, not a costume designer.

“No. The circus left town last month, but I believe my sister, Ixtab, paid you a visit recently?”

*That’s what this is about?* Ixtab, Goddess of Suicide, had come into his shop looking very...well, normal. No black lace over her head or Morticia dress. Instead, she had worn flip-flops and a yellow summer dress. “Greystone,” Ixtab had said, “we need you to sort out a situation. You will call my brethren, set up meetings, and get the details. I will be on vacation. Permanently. Good luck.” Ixtab then turned and left, getting into a car with some man who kissed her wildly. The two made out until a cop came by and urged them to take it to a hotel.

“Yes,” Damien replied. “Ixtab came by, but to be honest, I thought she was talking about some sort of wardrobe situation.” Like the time Cimil had proclaimed everyone in her “family” (aka, the gods) was to wear crotchless pants. Damien had done what any good tailor would do: ignored her. Crotchless pants were entirely a personal choice.

“Well, I am sorry to inform you, Greystone, that this situation is *mucho más importante*.” Cimil maintained a stone-cold gaze with her turquoise eyes. Something was definitely wrong with her. “As you may have heard, my unicorn, Minky, fucked a hellhound named Mittens. Apparently, this is a supernatural no-no. Like filling Twinkies with lard or sprinkling pubes on your friends’ cereal. But the result of their union was more than a stomachache. It caused an explosion that removed all immortal energy from the planet. Beings such as fairies and unicorns were sent to the Underworld. Anyone who was once human—vampires and demigods, for example—reverted back.”

Strange. He hadn’t heard anything about this event. So then why was Bonbon perfectly fine? And, from what Damien could tell, his own curse had not gone anywhere either. The darkness inside him was as toxic as ever.

Cimil added, “The only beings spared from the blast were the immortals without physical bodies. Ghosts, for example. And those strange little creatures who steal your car keys and hide them when you’re in a hurry.”

*I hate those.* “Goddess, may I ask, and please do not take this the wrong way, but if what you say is true, then how are *you* still here?”

“Ah! Well, the initial blast nine months ago sent us gods to the Underworld, too, but we escaped through a secret demon portal in the Underworld’s janitor closet—a long story. Unfortunately, the journey reshuffled my and my thirteen brethren’s powers. Demon portals are very nasty. Sort of like a blender that smells like raw sewage. Now I am the Goddess of Death and War.”

*Cimil has Votan’s powers? Not good.* Votan, like the other male deities, was seven feet of battle-ready ruthlessness. Damien recalled the first time he’d fitted him for a tux. Even with Damien’s height, six feet and three inches, he’d had to use a stepladder to take Votan’s measurements. His point was



that Votan had been born for the role of leading the gods' army. Cimil was, well, Cimil. Crazy as fuck.

"I am sorry to hear of your predicament, goddess, but how can I possibly be of help?"

"Cut the crap, Greystone. We know who you are—armed forces, bounty hunter, supernatural weapons expert."

That wasn't exactly true. He'd served in *an* army long, long ago. Think muskets and swords. As for being a bounty hunter, that was also a stretch. He'd hunted the occasional creature, but he'd been more of a hunter of information. Supernatural weapons, though? Yes, he knew about those. But why were the gods snooping into his past?

"I also know about your other little secret," Cimil said.

Did she mean Bonbon? He hoped not.

"Which *that* are you referring to?" he said, playing dumb.

"You were once a fixer."

*Phew.* "Oh, *that that*." Damien reached for his apron and grabbed his shears, getting back to the tweed coat. He did not want to anger Cimil—always a bad idea—but he'd hung up the weapons long ago. And for good reason.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, goddess, but I am no longer that man. I tailor suits, shirts, and the occasional pair of extra-large underpants for the God of Wine, but my killing days are over."

"I'm not asking you to kill. I'm asking you to *fix*. We need you to do some digging and figure out how to reverse the effects of the blast, you being a supernatural weapons expert and all."

He shook his head. His fixer days were over, too. Roughing people up, finding their vulnerabilities to silence them, extortion, and making people (or creatures) disappear. Yes, he had been good at it. Playing the thug came naturally to a man like himself. But going back to that dark place in his life? Never.

“I have no one to look after the shop,” he said coldly. “And I have orders to fill.” At one point, he’d had several employees working in the shop, but one bad apple had put an end to that. Now he worked alone.

“Ah, I figured you’d say that. Which is why I have the perfect person to help you out.” Cimil snapped her fingers.

In strolled a five-foot-three woman—auburn hair, mid-twenties, size eight—wearing torn jeans, biker boots, and a beat-up leather jacket. It was ninety degrees outside here in downtown LA. Judging by her clothes, she was attempting to make a statement: *“Stay away. I am afraid on the inside and do not want you to get too close.”*

Interesting.

“Hey,” said the woman, smacking on a wad of gum. “MF. Niceta meetcha.” She extended her hand.

*MF is her name? As in motherfucker? He hoped not. Terrible name.*

Damien shook her hand. “A pleasure.”

“What’s with the butler getup, dude?” MF asked.

Damien glanced in the mirror mounted on the wall to his side. Clean shaven, neatly combed light brown hair, immaculately pressed white shirt, and black slacks. Today he had on a vintage olive-green tie with golden paisleys to match his hazel eyes. Hardly a butler. *More inconspicuous cursed tailor with a dark past and a proclivity for violence. But who’s judging?*

Apparently, MF was. *Rude.*

“What is with the bitch getup?” he replied bluntly.

The sound of snorting exploded from the other room. Demons loved conflict.

MF snarled and looked at Cimil. “I’m not working for this sad bag of dicks.”

*Butler or bag of dicks? Make up your mind, woman.* “I see you attended etiquette school in a public bathroom, which is why you and I are in agreement, MF. You cannot look after my shop.”

He turned his attention back to Cimil. Had he persuaded her to bark up someone else’s tree? Because there wasn’t a chance in hell he would be taking this job.

“Give us a sec, MF,” said Cimil, waving her out of his workshop.

“I’ll go pet that cute little dog.” MF headed to the front of the store.

*Yes, you do that.* She’d soon find herself with a splitting headache and a craving for chocolate—the result of having one’s endorphins leached from their body.

Damien stared at Cimil expectantly, aware that he had to hold his ground but tread carefully. Cimil was not known for being a kind goddess, and she got downright nasty when she didn’t get her way.

“I didn’t come here just because of your background, Greystone. I know about your curse.”

How had Cimil found out? He thought no one knew except for himself and the woman who’d cast it. “All right. And?”

“*And* it wasn’t your fault, you know. *She* made her choices. Which is why if you do this one favor for me, I’ll help you end the curse.”

Damien did not want to discuss “her” or what had led to his curse. It wasn’t anyone’s business but his own.

Besides, he knew Cimil was full of shit. He’d spent years researching his curse. There was no cure, and even if there were, he deserved his fate: immortality. But not the fun kind. Watching the world move on while he remained alone, frozen for all eternity, was maddening.

“Well,” he said, “I thank you for the offer, but I am not interested, so I will politely decline. May I interest you in a

new pair of lederhosen while you are here?” He hoped this would distract her.

“No. I have fifty pairs already, and my hubby, Roberto, banned me from adding more to my collection. Closet’s getting full. You know, with all the shoes, dresses, and people-pets I have shoved in there.”

*People-pets?* He cocked a brow. “A shame.”

“Well, marriage is like life: it’s all about compromise. Which is why you’ll do as I say.”

“That is not a compromise.”

“Isn’t it?” Cimil folded her camo-covered arms. “I agree not to send you to the Underworld, where Minky my unicorn will use you like a blow-up sex doll in the pokey-pokey room, and in exchange, you will find out how to bring back all the immortals who were banished from Earth in the blast.”

*Pokey-pokey room?* That sounded unpleasant. Especially because he suspected he would not be doing the poking.

She added, “And before you give me another one of your excuses, Greystone, I know about the demon.” She flashed a cold smile. “Take the job, or I’ll tell my brethren you’ve been breaking our no-demon rule.”

*Fuck.* He dropped his head, forcing himself to maintain his gentlemanly façade. There was no use fighting her now. She had him by the cufflinks.

“I will do this favor, Cimil; however, I want something in return. I want you to find a mate for Bonbon.” Cimil and her brother Zac, the God of Temptation, used to run a dating agency for immortals. They weren’t particularly good at it, but Cimil had a way of making things happen.

“You don’t want your curse broken?” Cimil asked. “I think even *she* would have forgiven you by now. Maybe you should try the same.”

*Maybe you should butt the hell out of my life.* “Bonbon is getting quite old, and I would hate to see him live out his final

years in my shop. Also, he pisses on the floor. And wants to be held all the time.” Not really Damien’s cup of tea.

“You are one complicated *hombre*, D-Man, but okay. It’s a deal.”

They shook hands.

“Where would you like me to start?” he asked.

“I would say start with you, but I already know why you were unaffected by the blast. So start with the demon. Nothing happened to him. Why?”

Damien wanted to ask why his curse hadn’t been affected, but Cimil never did anything for free, including giving information. *Always strings. Always.*

“Bonbon won’t be of much use,” Damien pointed out. “His faculties aren’t what they used to be.” In fact, some days, Bonbon actually believed he was a Chihuahua. Other days? A race car driver. Damien always had to keep his car keys out of reach.

“If you say so,” replied Cimil skeptically. “Then your first stop will be visiting a woman who claims she was assaulted by a tiny, winged creature. Apparently, it tried to crawl up her privates while she was trying on swimwear at a mall.”

*A sex fairy?*

Cimil continued, “Go find the woman, and see if she was telling the truth. If yes, maybe you can track down this naughty little winged perv. It could be the key to getting our immortals back.”

He highly doubted that was possible. If what Cimil said was true, that a unicorn and hellhound getting frisky caused a blast that spanned the globe, the energy had to have been immense. A supernatural nuclear bomb. There was no coming back from such a powerful force, in his opinion.

“And Damien?” Cimil added. “You cannot fail. I need my husband back the way he was. He’s far too squishy and human now. It’s all wrong for my spirited lovemaking.”

Her husband was a vampire. Or used to be. “I will do my best.”

“We will be expecting an update in three days. I’ll text you the location along with the details on the fairy sighting. Oh, and if I were you, I’d be nice to MF. She cuts off people’s ears if they twist her panties the wrong way.”

“Excellent,” he said drably. “I’ll go remove the customer comment box now.”

Cimil saluted him, threw an invisible rifle over her shoulder, and marched out.

Moments later, MF entered the workshop, blowing a bubble with her pink gum. “So, you gonna train me or what, Jeeves?”

Damien narrowed his eyes. He could not leave his store in the hands of this poorly dressed savage. Perhaps he could call in a favor from one of his friends to watch the shop for a few days. He knew a few people who at least spoke properly.

“You look like you might have a headache coming on.” He dug a ten out of his billfold and handed MF the money. “Buy some chocolate on the way home. We’ll start in the morning.”

She snatched up the ten. “Naw, I’m good. But I got stuff to do anyway. See ya in the morning.”

She marched out, leaving him perplexed. What could possibly have inspired Cimil to bring this woman of poor breeding to his shop?

“Hey, man. I got nothing from her,” Bonbon said, appearing next to Damien’s perfectly polished wingtips. “She was even rubbing my tummy. Got close to my cock, too. Which, hehe, you know how much I like.”

Damien shook his head. “You are vile.”

But this was very interesting; MF had been unaffected by a love-sucking demon. Perhaps the woman was hiding much more than feelings of insecurity.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MIMI JEAN PAMFILOFF is a *New York Times* bestselling author who writes insane plot twists that will have you burning through the pages. Whether it's Romance, Suspense/Thriller, or Fantasy, there are always big heroes to root for, smart and resourceful heroines, and a ton of heart-pumping excitement in every story.

Mimi lives with her extremely patient husband (“Be right there! Just one more page, honey!”), two pirates-in-training (their boys), and their three spunky dragons (really, just very tiny dogs with big attitudes) Snowy, Mini, and Mack, in the vampire-unfriendly state of Arizona.

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