

STEEL REAPERS MC



BULLET

ZAHRA GIRARD

Bullet

Book One in the Steel Reapers MC

Zahra Girard

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Foreword

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Love,

Zahra

Prologue

Jackson

Four years ago

Covered in grease, in sweat, in the stink of exhaust, I meet the devil on my doorstep.

He says, “You’re not worthy of her.”

Those words raise my eyebrows, because that’s not something you hear every day. But I’m not surprised. Because the second the one who says that pompous phrase to my face shows up in the parking lot of my dad’s garage, I know he is going to be trouble. Not just because of the look of his face, which on its own is a full-on provocation to bloody violence, but for the guns in the hands of the two barrel-chested bruisers walking in lockstep behind him.

Until this moment, I’ve been happy. No, more than happy—excited, proud, and in love. Because *she’s* supposed to arrive soon and there’s an important question burning in my heart. A very important question.

But I have a sinking feeling that’s no longer happening. And that has me in the type of mood that could lead to those gun-toting bodyguards having to make some brutal decisions.

“Yeah, I know that already,” I respond. “Know you’re not worthy of her, either.”

Which is true. She’s worth more than either of us combined. Easily, without question.

“Oh, I know her worth. Know exactly what I paid for her, and I will get every cent of value out of her.” He chuckles as if I should find it funny, as if it’s not the creepiest thing I’ve heard in a long time, as if I don’t want to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze until the veins in his eyes burst and he’s spitting drool and blood all over my grease-stained hands.

“You’re the fiance, right? Alexander Covington?”

He nods, folding his hands casually in front of him as he stands beside me, eyes on my father’s garage in a way that makes me want to puke up last night’s pizza—pizza that I enjoyed with her—right at his feet. All over his loafers. Hell, I’d puke on his fucking perfectly pressed, immaculately creased pants, too. Then, if those gorillas weren’t standing behind him, I’d bury a fist in his crotch—because a man like him doesn’t deserve a fair fight—and then tear his throat out. “I am.”

“Took you long enough to find out about me. For all the things she says about you, she never called you out as being stupid.”

He laughs. It’s not an actual laugh. It’s a self-satisfied imitation of a laugh that makes me sick. “Oh, I knew about you from the beginning.”

“You’ve been letting the woman you love run around with another man this whole time? What, you been away on a four-month business trip?”

“I don’t love her. I just own her.” He says it so casually, like it isn’t fucking mystifying that anyone could say that about Maddy Sinclair. Just thinking that name puts more of a jolt in my heart than all the adrenaline in the world. “She’s a means to an end, and your little fling was just a convenience for me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She’s been very well behaved since she met you. You’ve kept her happy. Docile.”

“Funny that I’d want to keep someone I love happy. Funny that it sounds like that concept is fucking alien to you.”

“Watch your tongue,” he says. A small inclination of his head is all it takes to make one of the gun-toting gorillas step forward.

“Watch yourself,” I respond. “You’re on my property.”

“Your father’s property.”

“Either way, I’d be within my rights to beat you and your two babysitters until you’re bleeding and begging for mercy.”

“You know who I am. You know if you touch me, hell like you cannot even believe will rain down on you and everyone you love.”

“So, why are you here? If you’re going to ask for tips on how not to be a fucking psychopathic asshole, forget about it—you’re a lost cause, so get the fuck off the property.”

“I’m here because I found out she loves you,” he says. It’s slow, halting, as if that single word—love—so hates him it rebels against being formed by his tongue.

“Yeah, I love her. Is this going to be a man-to-man thing where we fight for her affection? Because I’d love that. Call off your dogs and let’s settle this.”

“I also know she was supposed to meet you here today.”

“Was?” I blink. Maddy is due here in less than two hours, just before sunset.

“Obviously, things have changed. Because you’re going to change them. I know she is hoping to run away with you. That can’t be allowed to happen.” His tone is both gloating and maddeningly businesslike. As if he’s proud of something mundane, like getting a good price on caviar or whatever the fuck rich people like him care about.

“Oh, it can’t, can it?”

“Not unless you want me to send Victor in to visit your father. Not unless you want your family home foreclosed on. Not unless you want every friend and loved one you have within the entire state to meet with considerable misfortune. Not unless you want her to get hurt. You see, I have someone watching her right now, though she doesn’t know about it, largely because that man is watching her through the scope of a rifle. I came prepared, Jackson Reid; I’ve made it my business to know everything about you ever since you put yourself in my business; I know every name, every address, everything there is to know about everyone you care about.”

“What do you want?” I say, my teeth grind as rage fills my gut and my fists clench. In my mind, I wonder if I can get to this asshole and rip his throat out before his bodyguards can make a move.

As if he can read my mind, the rich man nods to Victor, who begins walking slowly toward the entrance to my father’s garage. There’s a radio playing inside the shop, loud music spilling out the open bay doors—Iron Maiden, *The Number of the Beast*, one of my dad’s favorites—and my dad won’t hear a damn thing until it’s too late because he’s listening to the music at the appropriate, deafening volume.

“I said: what do you want?”

Still, the rich prick says nothing. Just smiles malevolently at me while his bodyguard walks even closer to my father’s shop. In just seconds, Victor will be inside and my dad—the only family member I have, ever since my mom died years ago—will be dead. Murdered without even a chance to defend himself. His blood will pool to mix with oil and grime on the concrete beneath the 2009 Toyota 4Runner he’s currently got up on the lift.

Victor stalks forward. His gun is no longer held in a limp grip at his side, but in a ready grip, his finger hovering over the trigger.

“What do you want? Tell me,” I say with a harsh, harried voice. “Tell me what you want.”

Still no answer.

Still Victor moves forward.

In just a blink, my father will be dead.

“Please. Tell me what you want.”

He laughs. It’s not happy, not joyous—it’s mocking. It fills me with more hate than I’ve ever imagined. I don’t just want to kill this man; I want to torture him; I want to make him scream and cry and beg just for me to finish the job. I’ve never felt this way about anything before—the hate I feel for this man, for Alexander, is as strong as the love I feel for Maddy.

It's agony saying that one word—*please*—but it's worth it because it makes Victor stop.

Alexander allows himself a second to gloat. To stare down at me how only someone like him, someone raised with all the money in the world and none of the fucking humanity, can manage.

It makes me feel small. Petty. Murderous.

"I was beginning to wonder if someone as low class as you even knew that word. Good boy." He chuckles.

"So, what do you want?"

"It's not what I want. It's what I demand, Jackson Reid. See, I bought Madison Sinclair—she's mine. Not to share, not unless I choose to share her, but to possess wholly and completely. That can't happen with you around. So here is your choice: either leave town immediately, permanently, and do so without a single word to her or anyone you know, or you can watch me slowly tear apart the lives of anyone you've ever cared about."

"You want me to disappear without a trace? To let everyone think I'm dead?"

"This is your choice. I'm perfectly happy to torture and kill you and everyone you love. I just want you out of her life."

Alexander goes quiet then, watching me with that smug smirk on his face.

I go quiet, too. Thinking. About a lot of things: about whether I could kill him in time; about whether I could make enough noise over the sound of the radio to warn my dad; about whether anything I do would even matter against someone with as much wealth and influence as Alexander Covington—but mostly I think about her: Maddy. Her smile, her brilliant mind, her hopes, her dreams, her love. Could I bear even the risk of anything bad happening to her?

No. No, I can't.

“Disappear?” I say again. Not so much a question to him, but to myself. Can I really do it? It’d be better than putting all the people I care about through the worst that Alexander and Victor can imagine, but not by much. Everyone I love, everyone that loves me—especially her—will be left with that painful question: why? Why did I disappear? Why did I leave so suddenly, so painfully, without even having the decency to say goodbye?

They’ll always wonder.

They’ll always hurt.

And, eventually, those that hurt the most will have that feeling turn into hate. Like Maddy.

Eventually, she’ll hate me.

Alexander knows this; he’s counting on it.

He smiles, as if my thoughts are clearly written on my forehead. “Disappear. Or suffer.”

I have no options; he knows it; I know it.

But it doesn’t make it any easier to say the words, knowing the hurt that I’ll inflict on so many people. Especially her.

As my lips form those words, two certainties settle in my heart. First, that I will never stop loving her, no matter how much time passes.

And second, that my hate for Alexander Covington will never die.

“I’ll disappear.”

Chapter One

Madison

In a vast sea of people, I am drowning.

Drowning while surrounded by excitement, ambition, potential.

Drowning because I am absolutely terrified of the future.

Everyone here is about my age—all young and nervous, all with brighter futures than mine. Some aren't as young as me; there's a handful of people in their thirties and forties who also mingle among us, but my eyes gloss over them; it's the two older women in their sixties that catch my attention. They stand out from the crowd with their confident presence, even if they're distracting in the way they chat with each other. In fact, they seem to be having a better time than anyone else here. One of them wears a dazzling smile as she chuckles at something the other says and she holds a bubbling glass of champagne in each hand. Meanwhile, the dean drones on with his outline of how the graduation ceremony will go.

For me, it will be wonderful and terrible.

It is a new beginning, and an ending in the most awful way. Today's event is only practice, prep work for the actual graduation, but I still feel as anxious as if I'd been asked to give the commencement speech and then shoved out on stage, seconds later, naked. With my parents in the front row, gleefully live-streaming it to everyone I've ever known, half the East Coast, and all my future employers.

I shudder just thinking about it.

And shrivel inside, thinking about what my mother's reaction would be to seeing my tattoo. It's in a place that she'll never see, except in those terrifying nightmare visions where I'm stark naked.

But if she ever should ever learn of it, the repercussions would never end.

“You okay? You’re buzzing. Like you’re some ghost about to blip out of reality,” says a voice to my left. Elena. My best friend.

“I’m fine. Just really excited. I can’t believe graduation is just a month away,” I say. “Now, shut up. I have to pay attention to the dean’s notes. He’s announcing the marching order, so it’s important.”

“Bet you anything it’s alphabetical. It’s always alphabetical,” says a voice to my right. Ashley. My other closest friend.

My friends, Elena Rivera and fiery-haired Ashley Miner, flank me on each side, radiating energy and anticipation. No, they’re more than just friends—they’re my greatest supporters and as close to me as my family.

As the dean wraps up his relentless, important droning, Elena leans over to my ear.

“Drinks later?” She whispers.

From my right comes Ashley. “Definitely, you’re doing drinks with us, Maddy. I have a contact, someone you should meet, and I can ask him to come out with us tonight. He’s a friend of my guy. He’s connected. Could get you one of those paid internships you’re always asking about. He owes me.”

“Owes you cause you had sex with him?” Elena hisses across me, grinning wickedly.

“Whatever it takes to get ahead,” Ashley retorts. “Sometimes you got to give head to get ahead, or so that saying goes.”

Elena gasps playfully. “You unrepentant slut.”

“He was hot. The attraction was mutual. I’d do it again, too. He liked to reciprocate, and he really knew what he was doing down there.”

I lean forward, inserting my face between the two of them. Some of Ashley’s wild, flaming red hair tickles my nose and nearly makes me sneeze, but I suppress it just in time. “Will you two quit talking about sex? And of course I’m in for

drinks. I'm done with almost all my coursework. All I have left is revising my thesis, and even that is going well. So I want to celebrate until my brain cells are begging me for mercy. First round of shots is on me."

Both Elena and Ashley giggle, but then Ashley tugs on my sleeve. I look at her, and see her eyes fixed off to the corner of the auditorium. It only takes a second to see what she's looking at. Or who she's looking at. My stomach twists itself into a knot in the most unwelcome way.

"I didn't think he'd show," Elena says, noticing my gaze and giving me a consolatory pat on the shoulder. "Sorry, Maddy."

"This isn't his type of thing. Being supportive, I mean," I add. "I wonder why he's here."

"Still looks handsome, though," Ashley says. "Even if he's a dick, at least he's not an ugly one. And he keeps himself clean. Ugly dicks are just gross. And ugly, unwashed dicks are the worst of all."

I sigh. It's true. Alexander Covington, my husband-to-be-but-not-by-my-choice, is anything but unattractive. Standing in the crowd, wearing his bespoke Italian suit, Rolex that costs more than a car, with his dark blond hair immaculately combed and restrained by just the right amount of pomade, Alexander Covington may stand among the crowd, but he stands above it, too. Every inch of his six-feet-and-change appearance reeks of filthy rich power.

He catches my eye and makes an abrupt 'come on' gesture.

I frown at him.

He frowns back, deeper.

"Should I ignore him?" I voice aloud.

I'd love to. Just to watch the apoplexy overtake his face with a deep shade of enraged purple. Maybe his eyes would bug out. Oh, maybe he'd have an aneurysm and die.

Wouldn't that be grand?

It really would.

For all of a minute. Just enough time for me to dance in victory and then call my parents to tell them that the greatest hope of saving their real estate business just spontaneously died.

“Yes,” Elena says. “Ignore his ass. Come out with us. You don’t owe him shit.”

That last sentence comes out far less convincing than the rest of them. She knows my financial situation—and that of my parents—as well as anyone.

“Don’t,” Ashley says. Her eyes seem glued to Alexander, and there’s a small, uplifting quirk to her lips that I know, from many nights out together at the campus bars, happens only when she’s envisioning her next conquest.

“Why not?”

“Do I really need to elaborate? You’re the one with the degree in money studies.”

“Quantitative Finance,” I say. “And no, you don’t need to elaborate.” The math regarding my family’s need for Alexander Covington’s money is so basic that anyone familiar with negative numbers could figure it out. Also abundantly clear is my fiancé’s impatience; Alexander makes another ‘hurry up’ gesture and conspicuously raises his left hand and taps his watch. “It’s pretty blatant.”

The dean finishes his speechifying, and the crowd breaks up, most everyone heading for one of the several side tables where the caterers have set up free glasses of wine. I glance at the tables in longing, wishing I had a drink, but Alexander has smartly positioned himself right next to those same tables. To seek salvation in wine is to damn myself to his company. At least here I can ignore him for a little longer.

“We could sneak out,” Elena says. There’s a note of urgency in her voice; she knows I don’t want to marry Alexander, and she dislikes him nearly as much as I do. “You know he won’t do anything about it except bitch and moan. Yes, your parents need his money, but don’t forget, he needs you, too. Maddy, you’ve got power in this relationship.”

I roll my eyes. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

Elena snorts. “Your grandfather’s name is on the Costa Oscura Public Library. And your parents’ name is on one of those donor brick things at the hospital with a serious baller amount of money on it.”

I shrug. Those are all from times when my family had actual money, instead of a real estate business made up of a couple of rickety old over-leveraged properties that are all less than a year away from being repossessed by the banks.

“So I have a name,” I say. “So what?”

“A name that people respect. A name that Alexander and his family desperately need, because everyone knows they’re just a bunch of rich bitches,” Elena says.

“They are bitches...” I murmur.

“You know you want to come out with us,” Elena says.

“I do. I really, really do,” I say.

“Shit, he’s coming this way,” Ashley hisses.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the crowd parting before Alexander as he strides toward us, a crumpled, determined look on his face. It’s an ugly look. And even Ashley’s normally thirsty appearance softens a little as she catches sight of it.

I have only seconds to decide whether to make my escape.

Tonight could be my chance to make an actual connection, to make inroads on my career, instead of being dragged to whatever torturous event Alexander has in mind; probably some publicity event or business dinner meeting where my presence is required to humanize his demonic ass.

“Let’s go—drinks, shots, internship. All of it,” I say, and I grab Elena and Ashley by the hand and drag them toward the nearest exit. “Run!”

Sure, I’ll not actually be able to escape Alexander for good. At the end of the night, I’ll still be his languishing fiancée, but I want one night of freedom. One chance to pretend I’m a free

woman about to graduate with a great degree and an opportunity to make my own way in life, instead of simply being a bargaining chip in some business deal between his ultra-rich family and my desperate parents.

“Go, go, go,” Elena cheers me on as we race as a trio through the crowd, weaving through the maze of bodies to throw Alexander off our tracks.

It’s working.

It’s actually working.

I’m going to escape my cold-hearted, handsome, filthy rich, awful fiancé for a night. Laughter breaks my lips and I squeeze both Elena’s and Ashley’s hands tighter.

I make it out of the hall. Laugh in glee.

The fresh air hits me like a slap in the face, and I take a deep, grateful breath.

“You’re a genius,” Ashley says. “A genius. You did it.”

I have my friends, the cool night air, a chance to be free and live my life for a night; no fear of Alexander’s wrath, no fear of my parents’ disappointment, nothing except freedom, friends, and maybe a career connection that’ll lead to me having some measure of respect for myself, all things I so desperately want.

“But he’s going to come after us,” Elena says. “We should hurry.”

“Duh,” Ashley says. “But we’ll be long gone by then. We can drink, dance, maybe even get ourselves some hot guys. We’ve got an entire night to be free, ladies.”

The three of us break out into a run again, racing toward the parking lot.

There are a handful of cars in the lot, mostly belonging to the catering crew and the dean’s staff. Also, there’s a gleaming white BMW M5. No doubt Alexander’s, though I don’t recognize it, so it must be one of his new toys.

I hurry over to Elena's beat-up old Corolla, but she grabs my elbow before I can get in.

"You know you can't hide from him forever," she says. "At some point, tell him what you really want. Don't keep letting him walk all over you. Stick up for yourself, Maddy."

I shrug.

"Let's not talk about that. I just want to have a fun night with my friends and whoever Ashley's mystery hookup is. Please?" I give her a puppy-dog face. "Can we save all the other talk for another time?"

"You're not gonna get in trouble, are you?" Ashley asks, coming up beside us. "Cause we aren't letting you go home sober."

"I will not get in trouble," I say. "He'll just get pissy, that's all."

"It's actually okay if you get in trouble," Elena says. "At least it'll be a good trouble. You need to show him he doesn't completely control you."

"I know he's not the best guy in the world, but you know, if you ever think about leaving him, know that we're here for you," Ashley says.

It's half-hearted, but I don't blame her for that. I've half-heartedly dreamed about leaving Alexander for years, ever since my parents set up this arrangement—my hand in marriage for the Covington family saving them from financial ruin. I agreed to it because I love my family and can't bear the thought of seeing the despairing look on my mom and dad's faces if their business were to actually fail and they were to lose everything that my family built over generations. I'll take a crappy marriage to save my family.

I slip into the front seat, Ashley into the back, and Elena gets into the driver's seat, her keys ready in her hand. She slips them into the ignition and her gutless car—a car that shakes so much I always think I'm having a seizure any time I ride in it—squeals to life.

“I know. If I ever leave him—which I won’t—then I’m happy to know I’ll always have you two.” I pause. “But I’m still going out with you guys. I will not stay away from—oh shit!”

Elena suddenly slams on the brakes and all three of us bounce in our seats. Her eyes are glued to the rear view mirror, wide, frozen.

I follow her gaze.

There’s a shadowy figure blocking our car from leaving the parking spot.

But, though his face may be obscured by the night, there’s one thing that’s clear as day: the gun that he is pointing right right at us.

Chapter Two

Bullet

I wake up in a hospital bed, my body weak, riddled with pain, and adorned with a bullet hole. The memories of the brutal attack and the men who sought to end my life flash through my mind, grim faces, some familiar, some unknown, all ones that I'll never forget. Each one a wannabe reaper. The memories bring back the pain of the bullet wound in my abdomen, which even painkillers from my IV can't fully ease. It throbs in agony.

But out of everything, what hurts the worst is knowing that one of those reaper's faces will soon kiss her.

I have to get out of here.

Because I don't have the time, and though the doctors here at the hospital may have saved my life, if they keep me here, they'll be responsible for my death, too. The men who tried to kill me will soon learn they weren't successful and they'll be coming looking for me.

If I want to save her, I need to get out of here. Now.

I turn to the nurse checking my vitals. She has brown hair, sparkling hazel eyes, and a kind smile that glimmers even brighter as I move. A friendly face. Someone I can trust. I hope.

I mumble something to her; the words don't sound familiar to me, they're just noisy intentions that come out in a garbled cloud of consonants and vowels, and I realize I must be more drugged than I realized. That, or nearly dying and coming back to life has fucked me up on a deep level, even though my mind feels crystal clear.

"What are you saying?" She says. "Talk slower. Take a deep breath. You can do it."

I pause momentarily, gather my thoughts, my strength, and enough coherent words to form a sentence. "Go. Need to go."

"You need to go? Like, to the bathroom?"

“No. Go. Leave.”

“What? Why?” She says. “You can’t leave.”

“They’ll try again.” I reach to remove my IV, but she grabs my wrist and stops me. She’s strong, and I’m weak. I relent.

“Who? The person who shot you? I can call the police. You’ll be safe here.”

“No cops... They can’t help. They’re not safe...”

Her eyes widen, and she takes a step back from my bedside.

When she releases me, I try again to take out my IV; stopping the drugs will bring on the pain, eventually, but I need to be clear-headed, which means I can’t have my veins full of morphine.

She stops me again. Her grip is so much stronger than mine. “You need to lie back. You need rest.”

“I need to leave... No one can help me...” I whisper.

“You’re really set on this? You really think the cops are involved?” She says.

I mumble. “Can’t trust anyone...”

“Not true,” she says, shaking her head. “There is someone who can help you. But he will not like it. He will not like you, either. In fact, he doesn’t like most people. But if there’s anyone who can keep you safe, it’s him.”

“Who?”

“My man. Rook.”

I stop struggling, both exhausted and confused; I’d expected her to mention the police again, not this. Instead, I lie back in bed, focus on taking deep breaths and steadying myself. “Rook? What kind of a name is Rook?”

She smiles. It’s a smile that warms me, despite the chill that lingers in my body from being on the edge of death. “It’s his road name. He was in the Army Rangers, then when he got out of the military, he joined an MC. That’s a motorcycle club, in case you didn’t know. Then, well, stuff happened. Even

though he'll grumble about it, he'll help you if I ask him to. Would you like me to call him?"

Already, my head feels like it's clearing. "Will he help me get out of here?"

"Why are you so determined to leave? You really need medical attention. Even though you're out of immediate trouble, because our surgeons here are excellent, you need time to recover."

"Because the men who shot me will come looking for me," I say, my words coming slowly, taking every bit of strength I have. "Soon." The urgent press of time sends a surge of energy through me and I reach again for my IV, and I even find the strength to push the nurse back half a step. Grunting, I get the IV out and slip my legs over the edge of the bed and stand. For half a second, I stay upright before everything—my knees and the world—wobbles and I fall to the floor with a heavy thud.

Instantly, the nurse springs into action and helps me back into the bed. Working quickly, she re-inserts the IV and I'm right back where I started, only completely spent and with my vision swimming.

"What's your name?" She says.

"Jackson."

"Jackson what?"

"Jackson Reid. Why?"

She grabs my chart and holds it close enough to my face where I can see it.

"Well, Jackson Reid, I'm Eliza Stewart. It's nice to meet you, even if the circumstances aren't great—I always love meeting new people—and I have some good news for you: your chart just says 'John Doe' since there wasn't any identification on you when those people found you floating in the harbor. No one knows who you are, which means you have a little time. Now, you look like you nearly killed yourself just trying to get up, so I would really like it if you could cooperate, stay in bed for a moment, and let me get Rook here."

I nod.

Even that makes my head spin and the world go dark for what feels like a second. But it must be longer than that because the next thing I know, there's a man built like a brick shed and wearing a leather jacket standing next to my bed and glowering at me like I've just told him that my mom used to own the same motorcycle as he does, until she got rid of it for something with more power.

"You're Jackson?" He says.

"Yes."

"I'm Rook. You're not getting anything more than that, other than the bare minimum amount of my help that's required to keep your dumb ass alive. Be grateful that the woman who is my sky, stars, and sublime sunrise wants to help you, because if I had my way, we'd dump your wounded ass down the garbage chute and let nature take its course. "

"You mean you'd let whoever tried to kill me come and finish the job?"

"If it happens, it happens."

"Rook, be nice," Eliza says reprovngly. "Have you eaten? You're extra grumpy right now."

"I ate. I'm fine. It's Jackson here who put himself in the position to get shot. You know, Jackson, part of being a man is accepting the consequences of your own fucking stupidity. Course, you may not be old enough to be a man yet."

"Rook..." Eliza says.

"Yes, dear," Rook says. He clears his throat and, with great pain in his voice, continues, "So, why is it you're here?"

"I got shot," I answer, plainly. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Don't get smart with me, kid, or I'll put another bullet in you to match the one in your abdomen. Only, I'll make sure the job gets done right," he snaps.

"Why the fuck are you so angry?"

“Because I had my feet in the sand and an ice-cold sixer at my side when I got called to take care of your dumb ass. Wouldn’t you be pissed at having to put down your beer and babysit some braindead child?” Rook rants. Eliza lets out an audible huff and Rook clears his throat again. “Who shot you, and why did they shoot you?”

“Some men who work for Alexander Covington. They shot me because I was trying to help Madison. She’s his fiancée. He’s abusing her.”

“Abusing her?” Rook lets out a string of profanity that makes my heart rate monitor skip a beat. “God damn it. Why the fuck did you have to say that?”

“We have to help him, Rook,” Eliza says. “And her.”

“I know that, my love. Why do you think I’m so upset?” He crosses his arms and looks at Eliza. “How long ago was he brought in?”

“Hours ago. Four, maybe six, I’m not sure.”

“How busy has the hospital been today, sweetheart?”

“ICU’s been quiet, dear, but emergency surgery and the ER’s been busy.”

“Good. That means we have a little time. We have to hope they were busy enough to delay calling the cops about the little dipshit here being out of surgery and available for questioning.”

“Language, Rook,” Eliza cautions.

“Sorry, love,” Rook breathes a slow sigh and then kisses Eliza on the cheek. “I’ll tone it down. I’m just upset about losing a day on the beach with some beers. You know how it is.”

“I know. I know you like your ‘me’ time, but we have to help Jackson out.”

“You’re right as always, my heart. Is he stable enough that we can move him?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t recommend it,” Eliza says.

“I’ll be fine. I just need to rest. Just for a minute. Then I have to get to Madison,” I say, moving again, trying to stand, and drawing a disapproving look from Eliza. “I have to save her. With or without your help, I’m going.”

Rook rolls his eyes at me. “You think you’re some brave hero, going to shrug off having a bullet in your gut so you can run off to save the lady you love? A young lady who also is engaged to someone else? You’re dumber than you look, kid, which is saying something.”

“I’m well aware of the fact that there’s a fucking bullet in my gut, but Madison’s life is at stake. Can’t you see that? If I don’t act now, if *we* don’t act now, she’ll be trapped in a suffocating marriage with a man who beats her. Is that what you want?”

“No one wants that,” Eliza says. “Do we, Rook?”

Rook snorts and glares at me. “You think you know what’s best for her? You’re just an idiotic boy who’s playing out some childish fantasy. It’s reckless and foolish.”

I shake my head. Then I try to stand again, even though my legs scream at me and my head swims due to pain and blood loss. One way or another, I’m getting out of here and I’m getting to Madison. Every second I stay in this bed is a second that she gets closer to being trapped with that abusive nightmare, Alexander. “I don’t care. I don’t care if I die, I can’t let her suffer because of some arranged marriage. Help me get out of here, Rook.”

“If you keep yapping, I’m more likely to see if there’s an empty surgical suite around here that I can borrow and cut your fucking tongue out.”

“Rook...” Eliza says, then she turns to me. “You stay here. He’ll help you once he gets all his grumpiness out. Just ignore him until then. I’m going to go get you a wheelchair, so we can move you without doing any damage. Then you’ll have to sign some papers that you’re signing yourself out against medical advice.”

“Fine. Thank you, Eliza,” I say, grateful that she’s here to serve as a buffer against Rook’s excessive grumpiness. If she wasn’t, I bet there’s a fair chance Rook would just hold a pillow over my face until I stopped thrashing and then head back to the beach to finish his beer.

But she only gets halfway to the door when something in the hallway catches my eye and forces me to call urgently out to her.

“Stop. It’s already too late.”

Chapter Three

Jackson

“That man is here to kill you,” Rook says. It’s not a question. He just knows from a glance out the window of my room.

I nod, my fists clenched around the bars of the bed railing and the heart rate monitor strapped to my chest sounding so fast it’s nearly one continuous beep.

“That’s Victor Stone. He’s the head bodyguard for the Covington family. Does their dirty work, too.”

“He looks like the type to love that shit. I’ll go take care of him,” Rook says. He says it so casually for someone about to take on a mountain in the shape of a man, but then, Rook is pretty damn big himself.

He only gets half a step before Eliza steps in front of him, blocking him from the door.

“Rook, I love you, I know you’re stressed and you want some release, but I won’t have you murdering anyone in my hospital.”

“With a morgue in the basement, it’d be so damn convenient,” he grumbles. “Shoot him in his head and then shove him down some chute. Simple. Easy.”

“No one is killing anyone in my hospital. Not you, not this Victor Stone guy, and not you either, Jackson,” Eliza says. “Besides, that chute thing isn’t how it works. We don’t just shove the bodies in a tube and let the people in the basement sort it out. That’s gross and disrespectful. There’s an entire process, and they get covered in a sheet or in a body bag and wheeled down there on a gurney and... Oh my, I think I have an idea. We’ll make Jackson into a dead body.”

“I love when you come around to my way of thinking,” Rook says. “Get me a pillow. I’ll finish him easy. Hold still, Jackson. Don’t fight it.”

“Not in the way you’re thinking. Stop being so bad.” Eliza rolls her eyes at Rook and then turns to me. “Do you trust me? I can get you out of here, but it’s going to involve some injections and some makeup.”

My eyes drift from Eliza to Victor, who is still in the lobby accosting a different nurse this time, and back again. We have a minute, maybe two, at most, before he finds my room and then Eliza’s rule about no murdering in the hospital gets broken.

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“You really don’t. But you’re my patient and my rescuee, and I believe you should have informed consent before I do anything to you. Though really, your choice is to either let me help you or that giant gorilla out there is going to get really violent, which wouldn’t be fun for any of us.”

“OK, do what you need to do,” I say. “I trust you.”

“Rook, dear, I’m going to need you to buy us some time. Can you go out there and get in that ugly giant’s face and make sure he doesn’t come in here for a couple of minutes? If you need to get a little nasty with him, that’s okay, but try not to destroy anything, please.”

“On it,” Rook answers and leaves. The door hasn’t even shut behind him before I hear him bellow, “Hey, you. Yeah, you. You’re the pervert I saw lurking around the playground.”

Eliza lets out a relieved sigh. “I’m glad he’s out there. He needs some release for his energy, and I’d rather it be that Victor than you. Now, here’s what we’re going to do, Jackson: I’m going to give you an injection that’ll partially sedate you. It’ll slow your heart rate and drop your body temperature. It’s risky, but everything on your chart says that you should be able to handle it. Now, if you don’t want me to do this, let me know, but it will make things more difficult for both of us.”

“Do it.”

In seconds, she has a syringe in hand and she places it into the IV. Then something cooling flows into my blood. The

world spins at half speed, turns a shade of muddy gray, and my need to breathe suddenly disappears.

“Focus on breathing, but do it slowly. Now, I’m going to cover you with a sheet. I need you to lie still until I tell you it’s safe. No matter what. Anyone who looks at you needs to believe you’re dead. Fortunately, and I’m sorry to say this, I won’t have to use any makeup on you, because you look a little rough and already believably dead. I don’t mean that as an insult. Really, it’s a good thing. So, please lie back and relax while I turn you into a corpse.”

She’s the most cheerful mortician, even humming what sounds like a Spice Girls song as she wraps me up like some mummy. I have no idea how she ended up with a perpetually angry man like Rook.

Thirty seconds later, I’m covered in a bed sheet and floating in some medically induced half-coma while Rook viciously berates Victor Stone in the hospital lobby, calling him all manner of aggressive, sex pest names.

“OK, Jackson, it’s time for the fun part: lying calmly in your bed, wrapped in your blanket, while I wheel you through a room where the man I love may or may not be beating someone senseless. Just stay calm and don’t move, no matter what. I’ll have you out of here in no time.”

As she wheels me out of the room, I can hear the commotion—Rook’s voice getting louder and more aggressive, Victor’s voice growing more irate. I can’t believe this is happening. I’m being wheeled out of a hospital, pretending to be dead.

Eliza is moving quickly and confidently, wheeling me down the hallway with ease. I hear us pass by several other patients and nurses, but no one stops us, except to say a passing hello to Eliza, who responds with a bubbling greeting every time. I go entirely unnoticed, as if I’m invisible, which is exactly what we need right now.

As we approach the elevator, Eliza hits the button and we wait. The commotion grows louder behind us, but she doesn’t seem to be worried. She’s humming that same Spice Girls

song again, like everything is perfectly normal. It's both comforting and unnerving at the same time. Finally, the elevator doors open, and Eliza wheels me inside. We're alone, just the two of us.

The doors close, and we descend.

"Okay, Jackson, we're almost there," Eliza says, still cheerful. "Just stay dead a little longer, and then you can be alive all you want. You're doing an excellent job, by the way. You've been very corpse-like this whole time."

"Thank you," I mumble, my drugged tongue hardly forming the words and the sheet over my face distorting them even further.

She tuts her tongue. "Corpses don't talk, remember?"

I nod, a quick, short motion, even though I'm not sure she can see me under the sheet. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I can feel the sweat on my palms forming so thick that drops are squeezing through my fingers and soaking the bed beneath me.

Then the elevator dings and the doors slide open with a mechanical swoosh.

The bed rolls.

Then stops, suddenly.

Eliza's voice rises in confused alarm. "Who are you?"

Another voice answers. Not Victor's, but just as fearsome, just as deadly. "Step aside, nurse, and let me check what's under the sheet."

Eliza's voice firms. "I can't let you do that."

There's the unmistakable sound of a gun's hammer being cocked.

"You can and you will, unless you've got a death wish."

Chapter Four

Jackson

Eliza is resolute.

“You’ll never make it out of here before hospital security and the police get you. Are you that willing to risk your life just to peek under a sheet at a dead man?”

It’s impossible to sit still under this sheet as Eliza faces off with the man holding the gun. Her voice quivers, yet there’s a current of steel beneath the nerves. I don’t doubt for a second that she’s ready to face down this man until her last breath, just to keep him from checking under the sheet.

No wonder Rook loves her so much; she’s got a kind heart and an iron rod in her spine.

The man chuckles darkly. “I don’t need to worry about no cops. And your hospital’s pissant security... fuck, I could take them all out just by whipping them with the gun I’m packing down here.” His voice deepens, burns with a sick heat that fills my throat with vomit that I have to swallow down to keep from spewing all over myself. “Wanna check it out before I put a bullet in your head, nurse? You might be a bitch for standing in my way, but you’re pretty enough that I’d fuck you before I kill you.”

Eliza snorts. “You just won’t give up, will you?”

“You show me yours, I’ll show you mine,” he says. “That’s the only way you get an easy out from this, nurse.”

“Fine, just a quick peek, because I don’t want anyone to get hurt. You included.” She says sweetly. Then, with a slow tug, I feel the sheet slide off my face and the chill hospital air touches my face.

I hold utterly still. Not breathing, not moving, willing even my heartbeat to hold off until this creep with a gun has had his fill of looking at me.

“Shit, he looks all fucked up.”

“He is dead,” Eliza says coolly. “Now, are you satisfied?”

“Not yet. There’s still the matter of you and me, sexy.”

“I am so flattered. Honestly. But there’s just one problem with that,” she responds. Her voice sounds firmer, certain. Confident, even. “And it is a serious problem.”

“What’s that, gorgeous?”

“My man would definitely not like that.”

“Your man ain’t here. It’s just you, me, and that dead body.”

There’s a sigh from Eliza. And a smile in her voice. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

“Wha—?”

“Hey dick, no one wants to see your puny cock,” Rook snaps.

There’s a solid thud. A punch that impacts with tooth-breaking force, and the man goes down in a heavy heap. It’s followed by several more thuds as Rook delivers a lesson the other man will never forget.

“Thanks, honey,” Eliza says. “But you can stop beating that man to death. We’ve got to go.”

“Fine,” Rook snorts. Then he tugs on my sheet. “Thanks for sticking up for my woman, Bullet Boy. Sitting on your useless ass while all this shit is going down... What kind of man are you?”

“He’s supposed to be dead, Rook. He did just fine,” she says.

“He will be dead if he pulls that shit again while you’re in trouble.”

“Rook, be nice. And you probably shouldn’t call him ‘Bullet Boy.’ It sounds like you’re making fun of him. We’re supposed to be helping him, not making him feel bad about himself.”

“It’s intended to bug his lazy ass. If I hadn’t been here, that piece of shit could’ve done more than accost you, and I won’t

have that, dear. I love you too much.” There’s a moment of silence, and even with the sheet over my face, I can feel unspoken conversation pass between them. That, and more than a few wet kisses. “But, fine. I won’t call him ‘Bullet Boy.’ How about just ‘Bullet?’ It can serve as a reminder of what I’ll do to him if he ever lies on his lazy ass again when someone’s threatening you.”

“Bullet? Yes, that’s better. I know how you motorcycle guys love your road names. Bullet it is,” Eliza says. She tugs on the sheet and gently taps my cheek. “Is that OK with you, Bullet?”

I’m drugged up, gutshot, nearly drowned, full of stitches, hurting like hell, and just had one of Covington’s men come within seconds of finding out I’m still alive and shooting me while I’m wrapped in a sheet—all I can do is nod.

Guess I’m Bullet, now.

Which is better than Bullet Boy.

And a hell of a lot better than dead.

“Now, listen you two, because this next part is critical: Rook, you need to keep Jackson under his sheet until you’re outside, and then you need to take him somewhere safe and remote and then text me the location. I have to go back to work and figure out how to fudge his paperwork, so no one suspects anything. I’ll meet up with you both as soon as the shift is over and I’ll bring supplies with me to make sure we can keep Jackson alive in case anything goes wrong. Everything clear, Rook?”

“Clear, my love.”

“And you’re going to be nice to Jackson?”

“Yes, dear.”

“You promise? I’m not playing, Rook. I want you to treat him with respect.”

There’s a sound of shuffling and Rook’s answer comes out military-sharp, “Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s better. The service exit is just down the hall and to the right. No one ever comes down here, except for deliveries,

and we don't have any scheduled for today. You boys play nice, OK?"

I mumble something approximating a 'thank you.'

"Yes, dear," Rook says. The bed resumes motion, though the movement is far less gentle, and several times the bed roughly bumps into the wall. Each heavy bump is followed by Rook chuckling quietly. We make it a short distance down the hallway before I hear Rook whisper in a low voice, "You're in deep shit, Bullet Boy. You're lucky the woman I love likes you, because that's the only thing keeping you alive right now."

"She's nice," I croak from beneath the sheet.

"That's a fucking understatement. She's a fucking angel, that's what she is. The fucking gorgeous personification of grace and kindness. So you be respectful, because the second her grace for you expires is the second your bullet-riddled ass is done for. You got that, Bullet Boy?"

"It's Jackson. Or Bullet."

"Oh? What are you going to do about it?"

"Tell Eliza."

"Fuck you, Bullet."

A door opens, closes, and I feel fresh air tickle my skin through the sheet.

Seconds later, it's pulled from me and I breathe in the clean, crisp air. Gratitude at being alive floods through me, along with a mountain's worth of frustration and anger—Madison's still trapped with that abusive monster, Alexander Covington.

How am I going to get her free from him?

And when she finally sees my face again, after all these years, after the heartbreak I put her through, how will she react? Will she understand why I did what I had to do? Or will she hate me?

"Wake up, Bullet," Rook says just seconds before the gurney collides with a dark four-door sedan. I grit my teeth as

the collision sends waves of pain shooting from me. The man really is such an ass. Carefully, he opens one of the back doors and then slips his arms around me and lifts me, barely grunting as he hefts me. The man is like a titan, a titan who definitely wants to kill me the second his girlfriend decides I'm not worth it. Should I buy Eliza flowers? Send her chocolates, maybe with a note that says, 'Please don't let your monster boyfriend kill me?' "Don't get any ideas by the way I'm holding you. Don't even make eye contact."

Not-so-gingerly, Rook sets me into the back seat of the car and I sprawl out to get comfortable.

"If you bleed on anything, you're paying for the detailing," he says.

Without another word, he starts the car, and we pull out of the parking lot and onto the main road leading away from Costa Oscura General Hospital. I watch the large, multi-winged building slowly fade away into the distance.

I'm alive, but what now?

How am I going to get Madison away from Alexander?

My mind circles that singular thought in much the same way it's circled Madison all these years, ever since I broke her heart and left her with a lifetime's worth of questions. Questions that I can't give her the answer to without invoking the genuine risk that she—and other people I care about, like my father—wind up like I am now. Or worse.

"You alive back there?" Rook says, scoping me through the rear view mirror.

I grunt, shift in my seat. "I am."

"This girl you took a bullet for, she's living in your head and has been for a long time, hasn't she?"

"Yeah."

Time and the road stretches on as Rook drives in thoughtful silence.

"I understand where you're at, Bullet. It just so happens that the woman living in my head, occupying my dreams and my

fantasies, is the same one that gets into my bed every night. If it can happen for an ex-Army asshole like me, it can happen for you. Eliza and I will make sure we get you there,” Rook says. His eyes drift to the road for a moment, then back to the mirror. To me. “This girl, does she feel the same way about you? Because our help—Eliza and mine—ends if this is some stalker thing.”

My eyes go to the window, to the coastal countryside speeding by.

How does Madison feel about me? When she looks at me, will her eyes be like they used to be—full of so much love that I can hardly believe it—or will they be filled with hate?

“I don’t know. It’s been a while,” I say, pain in my heart echoing the pain from the bullet wound in my gut. “A lot has happened since then. If she doesn’t love me, I won’t force anything, if that’s what you’re wondering. I just want to get her away from that monster. Get her safe. Free.”

More silence. More thoughtful staring straight ahead from Rook. I get the unshakable feeling that he’s digging into emotional depths that he doesn’t share with anyone outside of Eliza.

“You’re not so bad, Bullet Boy,” he says, his lips quirked almost imperceptibly upward.

“Thank you. You’re not too much of an asshole yourself, Rook.”

“Don’t go pushing my generosity, Bullet Boy.” He grunts, presses the accelerator, and the countryside becomes a blur. “So, this Covington guy... he’s got some muscle behind him. Money, too, from what I gather. You got an idea about how we can get your girl away from him?”

“Her name’s Madison. She’s more than just ‘my girl.’ She’s important.”

“What’s your plan to get Madison away from the rich asshole? Hell, Bullet, do you even have a plan?”

For a few seconds, I’m quiet, thinking. My first plan—which really wasn’t much of a plan, more just showing up

outside Covington's house, raging and ready for a fight, and getting ambushed by his security before I could even set foot on his front yard—is what put me here in the first place.

But then it hits me.

A smile creeps over my face.

“Yes, I've got a plan.”

Chapter Five

Madison

“Elena, I want you to turn off the car, take the keys out of the ignition, and hold them up so he can see them,” I say. My voice is steady; this isn’t the first time I’ve been through this routine. “Do it carefully and don’t worry, he won’t hurt you.”

I keep emphasis off that last word, though it takes effort; there are things I want to tell my best friends, but can’t, won’t, because of the danger it could put them in. They know me better than anyone, but they don’t know the dark depths of my impending marriage.

“How the hell can you sound okay with this, Maddy?” Elena says, voice high-pitched, fluttering between frightened and furious. “He is pointing a gun right at me.”

“Because I know Alexander. This is all just some stupid show. Just turn off the car and hold up your keys, and I’ll take care of the rest, okay?”

Behind me, there’s an audible sigh from Ashley as Elena complies and holds up the keys. I may sigh, too, but blood is pounding too hard in my ears for me to be sure. Elena’s always been my fiercest defender and there’s a part of me that wouldn’t have been surprised if she shifted her car into gear and ran over Alexander’s bodyguard.

“Now what?” She says.

“Now you stay here, and I go out there,” I say. My voice still doesn’t quiver, though my heart is shaking like a leaf in a hurricane. It does this a lot lately; every day that my graduation gets closer, every day that my wedding becomes more of a frightening, fully realized nightmare, my shaking strengthens. It sickens me. When I was a young girl, caught up in those silly stories that portrayed romance as some fairy tale fantasy, I thought your heart could only quiver out of love, that it was some near-divine sensation that told you that you’d found your true match. Alexander’s vile lessons have taught me that there are other things that can make your heart quiver,

like revulsion, hatred, terror. And the emotion that is currently quaking the mass of muscle and veins that sits in my chest is the exact opposite of love—negative love, to put it in math terms.

It is fear; it is loathing; it is a powerful push to run away, to drop my name, to wantonly abandon my family's needs in order to live free. Yes, I'd be poor and alone, and I would be unable to work in the field that I want—finance—but I'd be free.

I flirt with those desires nightly.

I'm flirting with them right now, as I step out of the car with Elena's frantic protests ringing in my ears. Run.

I face the man with the gun, smile at him.

He won't hurt me.

That's something that only Alexander does, and only when we're out of sight of everyone else. It's something I let happen because, in a girlish, immature way, I once thought I loved that handsome, intelligent, and black-souled man. I once thought I could change him. How naive I was.

"Hey, Carl," I say.

"Madison," he responds. "He needs you."

We say little more than that. We both know the drill. It's a script that's developed between us over multiple nights like tonight. Thankfully, this is the first time my friends have seen it, so it should be easier to explain away as some emergency.

Which it is. Because who else has a fiance that will send armed thugs to retrieve them?

Yet I can't allow it to be seen by Elena and Ashley as an actual emergency, as something to get worried about, because then they'd try to break up my upcoming marriage and that would throw my family into financial hell.

So I put on a smile that I've practiced many times before, one that says everything is okay, and I beam it at Elena, who looks a little less frightened, now.

Then I look back at Carl.

“Where is he?”

“His car. Waiting for you.”

“What is it this time?”

“An important meeting. That’s why we came to pick you up. Something that he needs you there for.”

To humanize him, probably. No, definitely. An impossible task.

“My fiance wants me at a meeting? With who?” I say.

“Sally Graham. Covington Corporation business, mostly. But he’s also feeling her out for that later political stuff he wants to get into. He says it’s essential you be there.”

I nod.

That’s why he needs me—he’s meeting with a woman. Which means I’m definitely there just to humanize him; to smile, to hold his arm, to laugh at the right times, to talk about how supportive Alexander has been about my pursuit of higher education—despite the fact that I had to kick, scream, and claw to be allowed to delay our marriage until *after* my graduation just so I could actually get my degree—and make him look like anything other than the power-sucking and soulless creep that he is.

“Lead the way,” I say. “Just give me one second to say goodbye to my friends.”

“Hurry.”

I put extra brightness into my smile, enough that I hope it’ll overwhelm any doubts that Elena or Ashley might have about my state of safety, and then I open the door.

“Hey, so there’s this thing that I actually forgot about... so I can’t go out tonight,” I say.

“What does he want from you now?” Elena says, voice like an icy razor.

“Seriously, Maddy? You don’t want to meet my guy about that internship? What the hell? I thought you were all over getting the hookup so you can actually have a career after college,” Ashley says.

“This is my mistake, guys. I’m really sorry. I promised Alexander I’d go to this dinner thing with him. But it’s going to be good. I’ll make some connections there. Also, I promise if it gets out early enough, I’ll text you and we can still meet up, okay?”

I want them both to smile and nod; I want them both to accept my lies.

They do.

Without smiling.

They’re my friends. They know me well enough to know when I’m lying. They also know me well enough to know when I don’t want to be called out on my lies. When I can’t be, because I just can’t take the truth.

“Good night, Maddy,” Elena says.

“Take care, girl,” Ashley says.

I shut the door on them and turn to Carl. “Take me to him.”

Our steps clatter together over the hard pavement of the parking lot toward Alexander’s waiting car. With every step, I think about what I really want as I get closer to that time—graduation—where so many people head off, degrees in hand, to chase their deepest needs and highest dreams. All I have is a nightmare waiting once that degree hits my hand.

A nightmare.

The door to Alexander’s car swings open.

Through the dark maw, I see the shadowy outline of my future husband waiting for me.

“Get in, Madison.”

Chapter Six

Madison

Weeks later

Graduation is so close I can taste it.

Only a couple weeks and a thesis paper stand between me and my diploma. It's knowledge that sits sweet on my tongue, something that I've yearned for an aching long time, and yet laced with bitterness and bile because of what must come after.

"Are you ready? The car will be here in three minutes and we can not afford to be late. We absolutely must be there in time for makeup, for my speech preparation, and I will not allow anything to not go to plan tonight. You included. I know how you like to play your little games, and I've been exceptionally tolerant of them, but nothing is going to prevent me from getting up on that stage, as scheduled, and giving my TED Talk."

I suppress a sigh, smooth my dress, and disguise an eye-roll by checking my mascara.

"No games, dear," I say, using the word and hoping for the millionth time that maybe the magic of self-deception will take effect and I'll actually recapture some of that spark I first felt for Alexander, back when I was young, before I knew better. "We'll make sure you're there to meet Chad just in time."

"It is not 'Chad,' Madison. It is Chadwick Wexler. Knowing his name is important. His Futurism Freedom Foundation is one of the key Silicon Valley political activist groups, and having this connection and his influence behind me could be key when I eventually launch my political career."

"Yes, dear."

I check my eye makeup again to protect myself against the consequences of a noticed eye-roll.

“Are you ready? Your eyes look fine. Stop messing with them. It’s time to go.”

“Ready.”

“Finally. The car is here. Any more makeup you need to do, you can do it on the road. Let’s go.”

With that, he grabs me by the wrist and I’m dragged out of our bedroom, down a winding, carved wooden spiral staircase, beneath a crystal chandelier, through a foyer as expansive and expensive as many people’s entire houses, and out into a driveway so long you’d need binoculars to see the end of it. Birds, elegant seabirds that nest on part of the beach front property that abuts a nature preserve here in Costa Oscura—a preserve that miraculously shrunk by a few acres when the Covington family decided they wanted to build an addition to their property—caw and soar above us.

Secretly, I hope one of them will shit on Alexander. I’d love to see a thick, gloopy chunk of bird shit dribble down his face.

Maybe even get in his mouth.

I can only imagine how he’d scrunch his handsome, disgusting face in revulsion. He’d probably vomit, too. Oh, and the tantrum he would throw, all while cursing the heavens for having the temerity to dump feces in his mouth.

Don’t laugh, Maddy. Don’t laugh.

Alexander opens the car door for himself and slips in the back. An expectant look tells me to hurry. He doesn’t scoot over, just stares at me impatiently, so I go around the car and open the door for myself. This is something I only have to do when we’re alone. When we’re in public, when people and cameras are watching, he’ll be the perfect, loving gentleman.

“Let’s go, driver,” he says. “How long until we reach the theater?”

I stare out the tinted windows as we pull away from the house and exit the long driveway onto the quiet country road that leads into Costa Oscura. Ocean waves crash against the pristine black beach beneath the bluffs on the other side of the road. Trees, gnarled oaks, mostly, line the road as we head

toward town, and then the freeway. As we pass one oak tree, I see a man on a motorcycle, with his face obscured by his helmet and tinted visor, his form concealed beneath leather riding gear. He's holding his cell phone in two hands. He must be photographing the vista. I feel a pang of jealousy as we pass him by; what I wouldn't give to be free like that—to be able to spend my day just enjoying nature, taking pictures, even though I don't really care much for nature or photography, but to be able to do it simply because I might want to is so immeasurably tempting. I'll never have that freedom.

“Traffic on the freeway is clear. We should be at The Herbst Theatre within an hour, sir,” says the driver. His name is Leonard, though I'm certain that Alexander doesn't know that. To Alexander Covington, unless you're perceived as an equal, you don't have a name, only a job title that describes your usefulness to him. The only reason he even knows my name, much less uses it, is because he needs my last name for his own purposes. My family's reputation in Costa Oscura, even though we no longer have the money that we once did, is more than worth its weight in gold. The Covington name, on the other hand, is appreciated by the public about as much as a getting your identity stolen.

“Good. See that we make it there in forty-five minutes. Anything less is failure, driver.”

“Yes, sir,” Leonard says as he takes the turn onto the freeway.

I roll my eyes at the tinted window.

Something catches my eye, makes me blink.

It's the same motorcyclist as before. With the same dark helmet, same dark leather, riding at the same speed as our car, just one lane over and half-a-car behind us.

I frown, straighten in my seat. That's odd.

“There will be press at this event, Madison,” Alexander says, his tone icy. “You need to be on your best behavior. You'll need to be present, too, for the entirety. No trying to sneak out, no other incidents like that little escapade a while

ago at your graduation practice. It is important we are photographed together at all times except, of course, when I am giving my talk on the Evolution of the Modern Business Leader. Madison, are you listening?”

“Yes, dear,” I answer. I turn my head to look at Alexander and see something curious over his shoulder, through the tinted window glass.

Another motorcycle.

Same dark leathers, same dark helmet, riding at the same speed as our car.

My frown deepens, but I keep my thoughts to myself. If I say anything, I know Alexander will just tell me I’m being hysterical. That, and he’ll accuse me of trying to detract from his ascendant moment with my ridiculous observations.

But when a third motorcycle joins the other two, swooping in from traffic to match our speed, and all three of the riders reach into their leather jackets to draw out guns, then I point and raise my voice, “Look out.”

“Madison, if this is another one of your stupid—”

“Oh fuck,” the driver says, his eyes following my finger, and he spins the wheel in alarm, sending us swerving into another lane and forcing one motorcycle to careen out of our way.

“Driver, get us out of here this instant,” Alexander demands. “I have an important TED Talk to give tonight and I refuse to accept this delay.”

The other two motorcyclists pull in line with the front of the car and both lower their guns, taking aim at the hood. One of them is huge, looking like a monster underneath his leather, and the other is leaner, still muscled, powerful, but he looks less like Bigfoot in a leather jacket. The leaner one gestures, points at a spot on the hood, and both of them take aim and fire. Bullets puncture the hood and smoke and fire erupt from the engine.

The car shudders.

I scream.

Alexander glowers, smashing his fist into the window. “This is intolerable. Fix it now, or I will fire you.”

“Fuck, sir, I’m sorry, but they’ve fucked the engine,” the driver says. A steely, screeching whine breaks out and the car begins to shudder and shake. “We have to pull over.”

Alexander’s face contorts with rage and frustration. He turns to me, grabbing my arm forcefully. “This is all your fault! If you weren’t so damn insolent, we wouldn’t be in this mess!”

I try to pull my arm away, but his grip is too tight.

“How is this my fault?” I shout back at him.

“You must have done something to anger someone. Your little antics always come back to haunt us.”

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore his accusations.

The driver pulls over to the side of the road, and the three motorcyclists come to a stop behind us.

They dismount their bikes, guns still in hand, and advance towards our car.

“Fuck this. Fire me if you want, but I’m out.” The driver opens his door and takes off running, leaving us alone and vulnerable.

“Stay here,” Alexander orders me as he opens the car door. “I’ll handle this.”

I watch from the safety of the car as Alexander approaches the three men, trying to reason with them. That he would find bravery in this moment of all moments leaves me speechless. Or maybe it’s not bravery, maybe Alexander just believes everyone—these gun-toting bikers included—is so far beneath him they have no choice but to obey. But they don’t seem interested in talking. The huge one takes a step forward and punches Alexander in the face. He stumbles back, clutching his nose, as the other two men circle him.

Then the leaner one throws a punch that catches Alexander right on the chin and sends him flat on his ass. A second punch follows, then a kick to the chest. This looks almost... personal. But why?

My heart races as I contemplate what to do. I could try to run, but where would I go? I'm stranded on the side of the freeway with no idea how to defend myself. Then I remember something someone taught me years ago.

His name was Jackson. We met when I was eighteen, right after a dinner party that my parents threw to tell me about our family's looming financial failure and how they needed my help in saving everything they'd squandered. I'd been so shaken by their proposal—shaken, and ridden with guilt that I knew would overpower me and make me accept their proposal, because guilt and love are so strongly intertwined and such a lethal combination—that I'd taken off on an aimless drive, and I drove and drove and drove until I ran over something and caught a flat tire in a bad neighborhood. A really bad neighborhood. I was scared, alone in the dark, and seeing threats in every shadow.

Until he rode by.

Jackson Reid.

My brief summer fling with true love, with freedom, with a life of reckless potential, with a man so below my social station that even the mere mention of our flirtation would give my father a stroke.

Jackson saved me that night. Fixed my car, gave me a ride to a bar where the bartender overlooked the fact that I was obviously underage, bought me a drink, and actually listened to my plight. Listened. For once in my life, I felt heard.

Felt heard, felt appreciated, and I fell hard.

He taught me a lot that summer. Including how to use a gun.

I put that knowledge to work. I reach under the seat and retrieve the small pistol that Alexander keeps there for protection. I've never needed to use it before, but now seems like a good time to start.

I step out of the car, gun in hand, and approach the three men with my weapon raised.

“Leave us alone,” I shout. “I know how to use this.”

My heart is in my throat, choking me, choking my words, but my intent is clear—I’ll fire if I have to.

The leaner one looks at me long, with focus. His helmet is still on. It’s impossible to judge what he’s thinking, but I’m pretty sure I know every thought running through his criminal mind and I want no part in whatever business he’s got planned.

After a moment, he turns and levels a hard kick at Alexander’s midsection, making him grab his ribs and moan in deep pain.

Then he advances toward me.

First one step, slow, then a second. His arms held out wide, his gun in a loose grip in his right hand.

“Don’t,” I warn him, the gun shaking in my hands. “Don’t do it. You stop right there. I will shoot.”

He doesn’t stop.

In that moment, all the possibilities race through my mind. I see what happens if I pull the trigger. I see what will happen if I stay here with Alexander—the endless public events until our wedding, followed by a lifetime of being nothing more than a name, a line item on his resume, locked away in a gilded cage.

Can I really shoot someone?

Maybe.

If I have to.

Because these three men clearly have nothing good in mind for me. They just ambushed and shot at a car on the highway. They’re clearly violent, evil. Do I really want to know what they plan to do to me?

The approaching biker is just steps away.

My hands are shaking.

My heart is racing.

My time is up.

Screaming, I shut my eyes and pull the trigger.

Chapter Seven

Bullet

With a scream and a flash from the muzzle, she fires.

The bullet grazes my shoulder, leaving a stinging, bloody line behind. In front of me, Madison stands still, her hands shaking, the gun still pointed in my general direction. She's holding it just like I taught her. Though I taught her to have her emerald green eyes open when she shoots, this time I'm grateful that she forgot that part of our lesson.

Behind me, I hear Rook howl with laughter.

Even hear him mutter the words 'Bullet Boy' under his breath.

Beside him, Marcus—my closest friend since I was five years old and just learning to ride a bike—bursts out laughing. "Bullet Boy? Is that what you called him? That your superhero name, or what?"

Maybe there is something to my road name. I get shot way too much for comfort.

Angrily, I throw a look at him over my shoulder and then turn my attention back to Madison. Somehow, she's grown more beautiful in the years since I left her. Somehow, all those pictures I've seen of her don't do justice to how stunning she is; chestnut brown hair that frames her elegant features in loosely curled waves, fine cheekbones, a dimple on her chin, lips made for kissing and for smiling, a smile that always seemed brightest and proudest when she was explaining to me some subject—no, many subjects—that I didn't understand, but which always seemed to be in her wheelhouse. Back then, she was as smart as she is beautiful, and I'd bet that's the case now, too.

"Madison, will you put the gun down?" I say, taking a gamble that the sound of the surrounding highway will be enough to keep Alexander from hearing me. He cannot know that I'm still alive.

“Who said that?” She says. Carefully, she opens one eye, gun still pointed in my general direction, gripped tightly in shaking hands.

I put my hands on my helmet and lift it, just a little, enough to reveal my face to her. After a smile and a wink, I cover myself again.

Her jaw drops. “Ja—”

I raise my finger in a shushing motion and her lips clamp shut before she can reveal my identity.

Then I beckon for Rook to come to my side.

“Get on the bike, Madison,” he growls, pointing to my motorcycle.

After a long look at me, one that seems to pierce through the tinting of my motorcycle helmet and into my heart and mind, she nods. Does she know she’s been in my heart every moment since I left her?

She climbs aboard my bike.

My heart stutters at the sight of her, wearing a black dress that hugs her curvy ass, a dress that’s slit up the side to show her long, tanned legs, as she slides onto my motorcycle.

“Let’s go. We got what we came for,” Rook bellows the order.

I get on the bike in front of her and she clenches her thighs tight to me, holding on just how I taught her. My heart hitches in a way that I thought it never would again. Not since I broke hers. Not since I tore mine in two to save her life.

Marcus whoops, laughs and cranks the accelerator, making his bike scream like a banshee as it pulls off the shoulder, spraying gravel and smoke. Rook follows. Slowly, angrily, as is his style.

Then I follow.

With a wild grin on my face underneath my helmet.

I’ve just kidnapped the woman I love.

The woman I love... who's engaged to one of the most powerful men in the state.

A man with an army of bodyguards willing to break laws and necks to do his bidding.

A man who will unleash hell to take back the woman he considers his stolen property.

From this moment on, everyone I care about is in mortal danger.

Chapter Eight

Madison

At some point, I wonder if I actually died during the car ride—maybe I had a heart attack when I got in next to Alexander, as the approaching doom that is my graduation hit me like a meteor-strike of stress and ruptured my heart, or maybe the car crashed during the drive, slamming into a barricade and driving a huge chunk of concrete through my skull—because what I am seeing, what I am experiencing, the man that I am holding on to for dear life as we scream down the highway at nearly supersonic speeds, absolutely cannot be real.

Can it?

The last I remember of Jackson Reid is that he was a young man, a young man who was supposed to meet me at a special spot, who was then going to ferry me away from the developing nightmare of my life and take me away somewhere, anywhere, where we could live together, free. How can that young man be in front of me now? After everything he's done to break my heart and break his promises?

Yet he's back.

Back in the most confusing, inexplicable, heartbreaking way. And he's kidnapped me.

When the winding road we're following finally makes its way to an abandoned lighthouse that looks like it is ready to crumble into its component pieces and join the rocks and sand of the surrounding bluffs, a place where the air splatters my face with salt and sea and cold spite, the motorcycle stops and Jackson slips off, sliding up the visor on his helmet to smile at me and then extend his hand to help me down. I pause, looking at that hand, feeling even more like I must've died on the highway because there's no way this can be real.

Nothing else makes sense.

How else do I explain my dead ex-boyfriend coming back to life?

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” I say.

Another biker, the one who’s built like a gorilla made of bricks, laughs.

“No, you’re not dead. Yet. In fact, if I put my money on who’s going to die first in this mad fucking enterprise, it’d be your Bullet Boy.”

“Bullet Boy? What does that even mean?” I say, looking at Jackson, who now has a frustrated tilt to his shoulders.

He removes his helmet, revealing the same ruggedly handsome features I remember from years ago, only now with a little age to harden them and more than a lifetime’s worth of pain and sadness in his eyes. His unkempt, dark-as-night hair whips in the breeze and he frowns at the larger biker before turning his cobalt blue eyes on me. “It’s a nickname. A road name. He’s trying to make it into Bullet Boy when, really, it’s just Bullet.”

“Why Bullet?”

“Because I keep getting shot,” he answers.

“It’s either ‘Bullet Boy’ or ‘dipshit,’” the big biker adds. “You’re lucky you got a choice. Most people don’t.”

“It’s true,” the third biker adds. “You don’t get to pick your nickname. It’s just given to you.”

“Marcus, why are you taking his side in this?” Jackson says.

“It’s just common sense, man. You know I got your back, always have, always will, but there are some rules you just don’t break. This is one of them.”

“Then just call me ‘Bullet,’ alright?” Jackson says. He rolls his eyes at me, and though I’m roiled with confusion and feel intense anger simmering in the background of my heart, I can’t fight the heat that his soul-sucking blue eyes inspire in me. “Come on, Maddy. Let’s get you inside.” He looks to the sky, which is growing darker by the moment, and right now, is full of ominous storm clouds that roll directly toward us, threatening rain and thunder. “Weather’s going to turn. We should get inside before it does. The lighthouse isn’t a perfect

shelter—the roof leaks in places and the walls weep sometimes—but it’s better than nothing. We got a spot made up for you that’s safe, dry, and comfortable.”

I take his hand. When we touch, I shiver and a jolt runs through me that stirs old nerves, old synapses, and it reminds me what it’s like to touch someone that’s so close to you, or was so close to you, that at one point you forgot where you ended and they began.

Jackson leads me into the lighthouse.

I take a deep breath; salt, sand, freedom tickles my nose. It’s cozy in here. The walls are brick and concrete, stained dark with decades of rain and sea air, but there’s no hint of mold or mildew. It’s clean. There are blankets, a cot, candles, a radio, several plastic boxes loaded with rations, large jugs of water stacked against a far wall, there’s a card table and chairs, everything necessary to make this abandoned, falling-down-old structure a home.

Home.

That thought jolts me back to awareness. Home means family. My family. My responsibilities. My future.

“Nice, right?” Jackson says. There’s pride in his voice. He clearly put a lot of work into fixing this place up. Some of the little touches, like how nicely the cot is made into a bed, with military-straight sheets, extra pillows, and even an electric blanket hooked up to a portable power unit, show genuine love and care.

There’s something deeply romantic about it. Something deeply entrapping about the way he’s looking at me, too, and how the heat in his voice is an invitation to shut myself in this cozy hideaway and forget about everything in the world while I lose myself in his lips.

It is a temptation that calls to that young girl inside me; eighteen, frightened, running from her problems and getting in over her head with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks.

I have to put that part of me to rest. I have to fight it. Because that young girl has some very adult problems and her

way of doing things is not the answer.

“What the fuck are you doing with all this?”

His face falls. “Maddy, what do you mean?”

“I mean, you need to let me go.”

“Let you go? I’m rescuing you.”

Behind me, I hear the larger one say, “Bullet, you really know how to put the shittiest plans together.”

Jackson ignores the larger one.

I do, too. The responsibility for my plight sits squarely on Jackson’s broad shoulders.

“Rescue me? You call this a rescue? You shot up the car I was riding in and abducted me in the middle of a freaking highway and then took me to some weird, crazy-ass old lighthouse. This isn’t a rescue. This is a kidnapping. I can’t afford to be kidnapped, because I have finals, my thesis paper, and I have to graduate, and I have to…” The sheer weight of all the things I have to do crushes my chest and cuts off my words. I take a long breath, look into his vivid blue eyes, eyes that burn with the strongest case for staying and will ruin everything in my life if I let them. “Take me back. Please.”

“Back to him? Alexander? That asshole is fucking poison. He hit you, Maddy. I’ve seen the proof. If you go back to him, he’s just going to kill your fucking dreams and, hell, who knows, he may even kill you one day. You know his family has buried bodies all over town. They’re criminals and killers. I won’t let you go back to that.”

My lips set in a line so firm it hurts.

My hands clench into fists so tightly my knuckles pop.

I glare into his eyes.

“You think you can just do all this without my consent? That you can just rip me out of my life with no regard for my responsibilities, for the things and people that are important to me, and I’ll just be fucking *grateful*? You had your chance years ago, Jackson Reid, and you fucking blew it. I was ready

to run away with you and you abandoned me to reality. I learned from that heartbreak. I grew up. As a grown up, I have shit in my life that is important to me, and I'm not about to give it all up because of some foolish fucking boy who thinks he can just waltz back into my life without so much as a 'sorry' for all the pain he's caused me and who expects me to be excited to light my life on fire just to run away with him."

Jackson's eyes flash, deep blues that catch fire with rage and passion.

"What life? As Alexander's little trophy? You know he's never going to let you do anything for yourself. He owns you. If you go back, he'll lock you away and only trot you out when it's useful to him. You won't be a person, Maddy. You'll be a possession."

His words hit so close to the truth that tears rip themselves from my eyes.

Yet he does not know how right he is; he doesn't know the deal my family made. Which is why I have to go back. It's why I have to resist this ill-timed, ill-conceived, tempting promise of his.

"Fuck you, Jackson Reid. Fuck you. You have no fucking clue what you're talking about. What happens if I stay here with you, huh? I give up my degree? Something I spent four years of my life working towards, just gone like a puff of smoke? And I'll have to give up my family, too; my mom and dad, who have been there for me whenever I needed them, which is more than I can say for someone else I know who abandoned me when I needed him the most. Is that what's supposed to entice me so much? The affection of some cocky, brain-dead boy who struts back into my life and thinks he's some glorious hero who's finally going to fix everything for me? Fuck off. Let me go."

"If Alexander loved you, if your parents loved you, if you loved yourself, you wouldn't go back to him. You wouldn't give up. You wouldn't accept this terrible engagement. No, Maddy. Instead, you'd fight for what's important to you—your freedom and your education," he growls. "We both know that

the second you go back is the second you become nothing more than a fucking tool for Alexander Covington. You're not a person to him. You don't have any value." I flinch, take a step back, and Jackson advances on me. "You want to know the saddest thing? It sounds like you actually believe that about yourself, too."

"Shut up," I whisper.

"But I value you. I think you're worth something, whether or not you believe that about yourself. I won't let you go back and throw yourself away for whatever ridiculous, self-sacrificing reasons you have. You're worth more than that."

"Jackson, please..."

"Anyone who really loves you would support you. They'd want you to be better, to have better. Not this shame marriage as a pathetic trophy wife. What you're allowing yourself to be is so beneath you, and I will not let that happen."

"Please stop," I whisper. The words come out a choked sob. My heart aches and my throat clenches shut in pain and heartbreak.

"Stop? I will never give up on you, Maddy."

I want him to shut up, to stop poking that deep, pained, insecure part of me that echoes every single one of his accusations. The part of me that knows I am selling myself out, that knows that I won't have any freedom or future in my marriage to Alexander.

So I make a fist and I swing, hitting Jackson hard in the face.

Then I turn and run for the door.

There's no plan in my mind, nothing more than an urge to get out and somehow find a way home. Even if I have to run through the wilderness, I just want to get away.

A hand lands on my shoulder. Grips me. Holds me in place. Turns me around and brings me face-to-face with those accusing blue eyes.

“I won’t let you do this to yourself. You’re staying here,” Jackson says.

Marcus steps forward. “Buddy, I think she’s had enough. She gets it: you care. But can’t you see she’s hurting? Ease up a little.”

“As if I’m not?” Jackson snaps. “You know what I went through for her.” His hand goes to his midsection, to a spot on the right side of his body. “That’s why I can’t give up.”

My eyes narrow. What he went through for me? What is he talking about?

“Not saying you give up, buddy. I’m saying you compromise. Give her something. Be better than that Alexander jerk.”

The two of them talk in low voices. Two men uninvolved in my life until this moment, talking as if they can decide my future, as if they have the right.

But no matter what they say, I won’t give in to them. There’s no way they, or anyone else, can make me give up my life for some silly fantasy. Even if it comes in the form of the boy I once loved so much that the thought of him made my heart want to burst.

Carefully, I reach for the small gun I carried with me from the car, which they overlooked in the commotion of my kidnapping. Or maybe Jackson believes that, just because I know him, I’d never use it on him.

I draw it, aim it, keep my eyes open, and say, “Jackson, whatever you’re planning on saying, save it. Shut it. All of you stay right where you’re standing. Don’t make any moves. I’m leaving.”

Step by careful step, I back toward the door to the lighthouse.

Every one of my senses alert, my fingers vibrate with the electric determination to pull the trigger and fire a lethal shot if that’s what I need to do to get free.

Because I will not be kept captive.

I will not abandon my family, my degree, or my life.

But as I back away, sound touches my hyper-alert ears: tires crunching on gravel, followed by the sound of a car door opening and closing, and then footsteps coming closer.

There's more of them.

More kidnappers than just Jackson, Marcus, and the big biker.

I'm going to have to fight my way out.

There's a jiggle on the door handle.

A creak as old hinges move.

Just in time, I whirl to aim my gun as the lighthouse door opens.

Chapter Nine

Madison

“Maddy, stop,” Jackson cries out, just as my finger freezes over the trigger at the sudden sight of a startled woman wearing a nurse’s scrubs standing in the doorway. “Don’t shoot her. Stay, just hear me out.”

I lower my gun, because there’s no way I’m going to shoot this woman, and so I turn back to Jackson and raise the gun at him. As I turn, I see the large biker has a gun out and pointed right at me, though the gun lowers a little once I aim my gun at Jackson. Was he only going to shoot me if I threatened the nurse? What is going on here?

“Why shouldn’t I go?” I say.

“I never meant to hurt you. Not back then, not now. But I didn’t have a choice. All I’ve wanted is to keep you safe, even when it’s cost me so much.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” How can he claim he’s looked out for me when the defining feature of our relationship is that he let me down? What has he sacrificed for me, except for the weeks we wasted together before he broke my heart?

As a way of answering, he moves his jacket aside and lifts his shirt, revealing an ugly red wound that’s still healing into a scar.

“What is that?” I say, my voice a raspy whisper, shaken by the sight of something so visceral and brutal. Why would he show me this?

“Your fiance did this to me. All because I tried to check on you.”

“You’re lying,” I say.

“He isn’t, Madison,” says the nurse behind me. She still hasn’t moved from the doorway, and when I look at her over my shoulder, I see her hands are folded calmly in front of her, as if this doesn’t unnerve her at all. “They found Jackson

floating in the harbor several weeks ago with a bullet would in his abdomen. It's a miracle he survived. A miracle and the work of some very talented surgeons. I work at Costa Oscura General. He was in my ICU. And the day he arrived, some men that work for your fiance showed up and tried to finish the job."

My grip on the gun wavers.

"I don't believe you." Yet I can't keep a note of doubt out of my voice. It wouldn't be beyond Alexander. He's ruthless. "He wouldn't do that."

"It was after that event you went to in San Francisco a few weeks ago. Some conference that Alexander gave a talk at. Pictures came out, and I saw one. I know you had a black eye that night. I know he hit you."

My lips quiver. "You knew?"

I can't believe it; I'd worked so hard on the makeup getting ready for that night; makeup to cover the consequences I received for asking to skip a conference where I'd do nothing but humanize my monstrous fiance. Instead, I wanted to focus on my thesis paper and finish the night with a few drinks with my friends. His reply was a backhand and a biting comment that told me to remember my place in our relationship. I thought I'd done so well covering up the bruise. Even Alexander said so, and he's never sparing in his criticism of me, especially involving things that could reflect on him.

But someone noticed.

Jackson.

"Maddy, I know every angle of your face better than I know my own. Every part of you. Even after all these years, I never forgot it. I see it all every time I close my eyes. The second I saw that photo, I knew. The bruise on your face, the fear in your eyes, the cockiness in his... It was as clear as day what he'd done."

The gun goes lower. I'm pointing it at the floor, yet my finger is still near the trigger, ready.

"Tell me what happened."

“The second I saw that picture, I took off. I came to Costa Oscura. Rode right for Alexander’s house. All I could think about was calling him out for what he’d done to you.” He looks down, a pained, wry smile briefly flashes across his rugged, lifeworn features. “It didn’t work out like I planned.”

“What did he do?”

“They caught me before I even made it up the driveway. I wasn’t subtle. They weren’t gentle,” Jackson chuckles. It’s an action that makes pain spread across his face. “They beat me. Alexander watched. Directed them. Then Victor put a bullet in me, and they dumped me in the harbor. He thought I was dead, but I held on long enough for someone to find me and bring me to the hospital. Then Alexander’s men came looking for me. They wanted to finish the job, make sure I was dead this time. That’s when this angel here stepped in.” He nods towards the nurse. “She saved me.”

I stare at the nurse, taking in her calm demeanor and kind eyes.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t even know who you are, but thank you so much.”

“I’m Eliza.” She smiles faintly. “It’s my job to save lives.”

“She’s damn good at it, too,” says the big biker.

“Thank you, Rook, but let these two have their moment,” Eliza says.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rook responds.

I blink away the tears in my eyes, though all that does is to make room for more tears to roll in. The boy I love, the boy who broke my heart, is now a man who came back for me, who nearly died because of me.

“What do we do now, Jackson? If I even stay—and I don’t know if I will, because you hurt me so much, so very much; for years, I thought you were dead and now you just come back like it’s nothing, like it isn’t torture—what do we do?” My voice is rich, burns with heat and hate, with love and loss. “What can I do? What can you do? Alexander, his family, they have so much money, so much power. What do you have other

than a couple of friends and a crappy lighthouse? How do I know you won't break my heart again? Because I refuse, absolutely refuse, to let you do that. I would rather die than go through that pain again. I would rather marry Alexander than suffer again at your hands."

He looks to the ceiling, and the eyes that return to look at mine are a blue shade of heartbreak. "I know I hurt you. But I still care for you. That's why I came back: to give you the freedom that I promised you before. I'm not asking you to care about me the way you used to... To love me..." His voice hitches, the words jagged, damaged. "All I'm asking is for you to trust me. I can get you free from Alexander, and you'll never have to worry about him again."

"If you want me to trust you, you'll need to give me more than just words."

He frowns, though I don't understand why; I'm a finance expert. Understanding risk is second nature to me, and after everything he put me through, asking me to trust him again is about as sure of an investment as trading Bitcoin pegged to the value of Beanie Babies.

"You want to know the plan? Fine. Alexander needs you. You're valuable to him, though he doesn't know just how valuable you really are. We're going to hold you for ransom. A big ransom."

"How much?"

"Not nearly as much as you're really worth, because that amount of money doesn't exist. But enough that, when we give you your share—the biggest share—you can give some to your family and disappear with the rest and never have to worry about working again." He gives me a smile that's both inviting and confident. One that reminds me of the rebellious boy who romanced me beneath the midnight moon and promised me the world—freedom, rebellion, love. It tugs at my heart in the most unwelcome way. "What do you say, Maddy? Will you be my hostage?"

It's insane.

It's reckless.

Because, even though he was shot by him, Jackson Reid doesn't fully understand just how dangerous Alexander is.

But that smile.

And those eyes that promise me the sun, moon, and stars... They're impossible to resist.

"I'm in."

"I knew you would be." His smile grows. Confident, but premature.

Because I know what I'm doing; I raise my eyes to stare into his, unblinking, steady.

"But I have terms."

Chapter Ten

Bullet

“You have terms? What terms?”

Rook snorts and mutters. “This isn’t how kidnappings work, girl.”

“Hush, Rook. They’re doing their best,” Eliza admonishes. “Let them handle this.”

“Fucking kids, fumbling at this kidnapping like a couple of virgins under a blanket.”

“Be nice,” she hisses.

“No, you’re not getting my cooperation or my gun, not until we reach an agreement. And, yes, I have terms,” Maddy says. Her eyes flicker to Rook and then back to me. Her fingers idly tap the gun in her hand. “Because, unlike what Rook seems to think, this is more a negotiation than a kidnapping. Kidnappings involve an implied threat toward the victim, a promise of violence, or even murder, if their demands aren’t met. I know you’re not going to hurt me, which makes this a business deal. And, when it comes to those, I know what I’m talking about.”

She stands straight, confident. It’s frustrating as hell that she’s resisting when I’m just trying to do the right thing for her. Marrying Alexander is a gigantic mistake, and she knows it. Yet, I’m proud of her, too. Proud of the confidence in her voice and the steel in her spine; Maddy’s grown from the scared young woman I met years ago, a girl who was shaking and afraid of her future and the fact that her car had broken down in a bad part of town.

“Fine, Warren Buffett. What are your terms?” Rook snaps.

I give him a sharp look, as does Eliza, and he grumbles something that might be an apology.

“What are your terms, Maddy?” I say.

“College is important to me. More important than you know, Jackson. I had to fight so hard just to go, and I won’t let you or anyone else take my degree away from me. Do you understand that?”

“I get that it’s important. What do you want, Maddy?”

“To finish it. I have a thesis paper I need to complete. I need to—”

Rook interrupts with a sharp laugh. Marcus laughs, too.

“You’re fine with being kidnapped, as long as you can still go to class? What are you smoking?” Rook says.

“Maddy, that’s too risky,” I say. “Someone could see you, then this entire thing will be blown.”

She shakes her head. “It’s a risk you’ll have to take. Besides, you’re overestimating just how much interest Alexander and his family have in me attending school. Or in my life. Or even in me, period. They don’t know what classes I have. Alexander has only once come by the campus. They don’t know my friends. They just don’t care, because I’m a name to them. That’s it.”

“He doesn’t care? How the fuck could he not care?” The way she says it all makes me clench my fists and I’m tempted to ram it into the wall.

“All he wants is my name. He wants to run for office—governor, state senator, honestly, I don’t remember, because every time he rants about his aspirations, I end up thinking about statistics or something else more interesting—and all I am is some achievement he thinks he can stick on his resume, a name that will dull the sharp feelings so many people in the area have toward the Covington family. Sharp feelings that are, frankly, justified. The Covingtons suck.”

“Bullet, I’m getting the impression these Covingtons are some real fucking assholes,” Marcus says. “However it shakes out, I think we should help Maddy purely for the sake of fucking over these rich bastards.”

“I think I agree,” I say as I grin at Marcus. Then I look back at Madison, at the determined set to her lips; lips I ache to kiss,

to make moan like I used to before our worlds fell apart. “You know this is crazy, right?”

“Crazy or not, this is non-negotiable. Call me Buffett if it makes you feel better, but I am not budging. In fact, if you don’t give this to me, I will make your life absolute hell.”

“I like her,” Rook says. He’s having way too much fun; there’s a twisted grin on his normally grumpy face. “She’s making you squirm, Bullet Boy.”

She is. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Maddy. The barely healed bullet wound is proof of that, but her demands are absolutely too risky; one wrong move, and not only would she be recaptured by Alexander, but he and his men would finish off me and everyone else in this room.

Maddy’s eyes narrow, and she advances toward me.

“You owe me, Jackson,” she says. “After everything you’ve done to me, and everything you’re doing to me right now, you owe me this.”

“Do you know what would happen if you got caught?”

“Do you know what will happen to me if I don’t do this? I fought tooth and nail with my father and with Alexander just to go to college. I have plans, I have dreams, I have ambitions, and if you think you can make me give them up, you are sorely mistaken.”

My eyes leave hers for a moment. I see Rook staring right at me, his face unreadable, but I know what he’s thinking: you kidnapped her, you need to take control. When my eyes go to Marcus, I see the same look on his face. Even Eliza seems to urge me to remind Madison just who is in charge of this kidnapping.

“It’s not happening. You’re staying here where it’s safe. As for college, you can write to your professors, tell them you’re taking an emergency leave or whatever you have to do. You can finish your degree next year.”

“You’re just like Alexander,” she snaps. Her eyes flare into bewitching green fire, her mouth curls into a seductive snarl. Even enraged, she’s the most beautiful woman on earth.

“Thinking that you can control me, that I don’t have free will, that I’m not a person with a life of her own... it’s pathetic. Pathetic and small-minded. What? Am I just supposed to meekly accept your orders during this insane enterprise? Is it not supposed to bother me you’ve literally ripped my life to pieces for a second time?”

“Maddy, calm down. Think about this logically—”

“Oh, so now you introduce logic? After you hijack a car off the freeway at gunpoint and abduct me? That’s the time for logic? No, Jackson Reid, that’s not how this works. If you’re going to treat me like I don’t have any say in this, like my dreams and desires don’t matter, like my *life* doesn’t matter, then I’m going to take it to heart.”

“What are you saying?”

Even before the words leave my mouth, she moves.

Raises her gun.

It’s a movement that provokes a warning shout from Rook, who puts himself in front of Eliza and reaches for his gun. It sends Marcus running forward in some desperate attempt to reach Madison.

But the sight of what she does keeps me rooted, stunned.

Because she doesn’t point the gun in my direction.

Not at me, not at Marcus, not at Rook or Eliza.

Instead, Madison Sinclair raises the gun to her own head.

Chapter Eleven

Madison

Perspiration beads on my brow, droplets that trickle down my forehead and into my eyes, forcing me to blink away the salty sweat. I do so quickly so I can keep my gaze focused on Jackson, relentlessly locked on him. He's everything at this moment—this kidnapping is his idea, and now, he has to face the consequences of his decision: either accept that I will come to harm, or give in to my demands.

I crook my finger around the trigger.

Swallow once, twice, to force my throat to stay steady as I speak.

With effort, I remind myself that Jackson is an enemy right now. He's been an enemy ever since he ran off and broke my heart, and if he wants to be anything more than that, he'll need to prove himself.

“What am I doing? Finding out how much you value my life. So far, all you've done is hurt me. Just like Alexander. Welcome to the put up or shut up phase of negotiation. Either you let me try to salvage what's important to me, or I do quickly what you and Alexander seem determined to do slowly.”

His eyes are wide. Pupils dilated. Veins in his neck and forehead throb rapidly. There is a war going on in those conniving blue eyes of his. I pray the right side wins.

“Fine.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

I lower the gun. Rook lowers his. Eliza smiles and lets out a loud, relieved sigh.

“Holy smokes, I have the shakes,” she says, and Rook gingerly reaches over and rubs her shoulder.

Then I hand the gun over to Jackson, handle first.

“You’re crazy, you know that, Maddy?”

I smile at him. “Desperate, too.”

He does not know how close I actually was to pulling that trigger.

Jackson grins at me. One of those cocksure, conquer-the-world smiles that stole my heart the first time I saw him.

“Trust me, getting shot isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“That so, Bullet Boy?” I say. When he frowns, I quickly add, “Kidding.”

He just shakes his head and laughs.

“What now?” Marcus says. “Because, whatever it is, I hope it includes a fucking break. I didn’t think we’d have our prisoner—sorry, Maddy, I know that’s not the right word and I don’t mean any disrespect, but I don’t have a college education like you, so I don’t know what else to call you—holding herself hostage. I need a fucking beer.”

Jackson laughs again and slaps Marcus on the shoulder. “We’re taking shifts watching Maddy, making sure she’s safe and comfortable. We need to let some time pass so the Covingtons can realize that their future daughter-in-law is actually missing. Once they’re on edge, we’ll make our move. Until then, Rook, you’re up first for guard duty. Every eight hours, we switch. So, Marcus, go get a beer. You’ll be after Rook. I’ll be last.”

* * * * *

Rook glowers at me the second we’re alone, just the two of us in this drafty, ancient, could-fall-down-at-any-second lighthouse. It’s raining outside. I know this because some of the rain is leaking through cracks in the walls and forming an ominously large pool on the floor.

“Don’t try any shit,” he says. “Just sit there, read a book, listen to the radio, and behave like the hostage you are.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, doing a mock salute.

“Don’t get cute.”

I turn on the radio. Navigate the stations until I find something decently acceptable. Taylor Swift, Adele, Megan Thee Stallion. Enjoyable stuff for passing the time in a crumbling lighthouse with a grumpy ogre for a guard.

“Turn that shit off.”

“You’re awful.”

“I’ve got better shit to do than listen to that garbage.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Yet here I am.”

“I’m not changing it, nor am I turning it off,” I say. Defiant. While the masterful “Shake it Off” plays and Rook’s eyeballs look ready to extricate themselves from his skull out of pure rage.

Why is he so grumpy?

“Change it. Turn it off. One of those two. Now.”

“Why are you the worst person alive?”

“Turn it off.”

“If you tell me, I’ll change the station to whatever you want.”

He grabs a chair and sets it just feet from me. With his back military straight, he sits across from me and stares at me like he wants to bore through my skull with his eyeballs.

“You want to know my story? You want to know why I don’t care for shit like this? I’ll tell you, if you promise to change the music.” When I nod and turn the dial, winding upon some random Jazz station, Rook chuckles. It’s a dark sound, like the deep ocean on a stormy, moonless night, and I feel the strongest pang of regret I’ve ever felt in my life. “We only have eight hours, so take a seat, and we’ll get started.”

Suddenly, I’d rather be listening to Taylor than listening to whatever story this angry, dark, grumpy ogre wants to tell me.

But I made a bluff, he called it, and I have to follow through.

Besides, how bad can it be?

* * * * *

“Do you have any alcohol?” I say to Marcus the second he steps through the door to relieve Rook. He’s carrying a large pack with him, and the sound of tinkling glass emanates from it as he sets it down, which fills me with hope. “Wine, maybe? Or, heck, even a beer?”

I need it. Desperately.

I’m shaken to my core. Nauseous. Forever changed. Everything light seems more than a little dimmer after my conversation with Rook while smooth jazz played in the background on the radio. I don’t even like smooth jazz. Rook doesn’t, either. It was just the first station I turned to and then he started talking and I forgot all about the radio.

Except now, thinking back, I didn’t forget about it, and the memories of hearing Rook describe the violent horrors perpetrated by his inhuman brother are forever intertwined with the music of Kenny G. I’ll never be able to ride in an elevator without being triggered, and any time I go to the dentist, sitting in the lobby will be like stepping into a flashback full of blood, gore, and misery.

Marcus looks at me, eyebrow raised. He’s got thick eyebrows that really need to be trimmed, and their thickness is even more stressed by his short-cut hair. I make a note to remind him to do that after his shift guarding me. He beams a ready-to-laugh smile at me.

“Eight hours in and you’re already ready to get drunk?”

“Or even anything related to alcohol?” I add. “Anything at all? It really doesn’t matter. I’ll drink mouthwash at this point.”

“What the hell happened to you, Maddy?”

“Rook happened.”

“If he hurt you, Bullet will kill him.”

“The wounds are all on the inside. I asked him about his past.”

“Oh shit. Yeah. It’s best to just not do that. Or talk to him at all.”

“I could’ve used a warning.”

Marcus chuckles. “His face should’ve been warning enough. I mean, you took one look at his angry mug and decided: I want to know what made someone that unpleasant? Come on, Maddy, I thought you were smarter than that.”

“I’m studying finance, not psych,” I say. “Hell, I don’t think even the psych professors at Costa Oscura University could handle him.”

“They’d be smart enough not to try. But I’m sorry to tell you I did not bring some alcohol with me.” He then opens up his pack, pulling out six bottles filled with various beautiful shades of brown and clear liquor. “I brought *all* the alcohol.”

“I want to drink all of that,” I say, more than half meaning it and already reaching for a bottle. “But before I start, did you bring anything to eat? Otherwise, I am just going to have to deal with the world’s worst hangover.”

“I also brought snacks, water, Gatorade, mixers, and coffee. Oh, and a tablet loaded with movies. Yes, I might be stuck in some shitty old building guarding your fancy ass, but I’m going to do it in comfort, damn it.”

I laugh, clap my hands, and grab a bottle of bourbon, my eyes scanning the bevvvy of mixers and cocktail ingredients that Marcus unpacks from his enormous bag; there are even fresh herbs, which are a nice touch and makes me smile knowing that I can mix an actual cocktail; I spy mint; I spy simple syrup; there’s even a tiny cooler of ice. “I’m making mint juleps. You want one?”

“Fuck, you’re a fancy lady,” he says. “Hell yes, I want one.”

“Of course I’m fancy. I’m a Sinclair, haven’t you heard?” I say, affecting a terrible twist on an elegant accent like I’m in a Jane Austen novel. “Only the finest for me.”

Then, like the fine lady I am, I whip up a pair of mint juleps. Because there’s nothing finer in life than drinking cocktails with a kidnapper in a moldy, leaky, abandoned building.

Outside, thunder rumbles and a flash of lightning sends an electric white burst of color flickering through the spiderweb-cracked window pane.

“Cheers,” Marcus says as he taps his glass to mine.

“Cheers.” I take a sip and feel a little more human. “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

“Shut up. I mean, an actual question.”

“Fine.”

“What the hell are you doing here? Why are you mixed up in this?”

“Good question. I need more alcohol if I’m going to answer that one,” he says, taking a titanic sized drink of the mint julep, finishing it, then pulling a long chug from the bottle of bourbon, before ending with a flourish—a thunderous belch that makes me cringe. “Don’t look so high and mighty. You’re drinking cheap bourbon and sitting on a pile of old blankets in a crumbling lighthouse. You’ve got no room to judge.”

“I’m here because your best friend kidnapped me.”

“There’s your answer: my best friend kidnapped you. That’s why I’m here.”

“He abandoned you just like he abandoned me, right? Left after saying nothing to you? And then he just shows up after four, almost five, years, like nothing’s happened, and just expects you to be fine with it. What the hell is that?”

Marcus shrugs. Takes another pull of bourbon and releases another belch.

“I don’t know which is louder—the thunder or your burping,” I say, snidely.

“Oh, I like that. Since everyone else has a nickname—Bullet, Rook—call me Thunder.”

“Will it make you have some manners?”

“Yes. And it’ll get you an answer to your question.”

“Fine, Thunder,” I say, hardly able to believe I’m calling him that. Who the fuck just picks their nickname? It’s unnatural. “How is it you came to be here?”

“Came to be here?” He chuckles. “Well, that happened about twenty-five years ago. You see, Madison, when a man and a woman fall in love, or even have too much Jaeger after a Motley Crue concert, they...”

“I know what sex is.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“I hate you.”

“I hate you, too. You nearly got my best friend killed,” he says.

I stiffen, my eyes flare, my lips tighten. “Don’t put that on me. I didn’t make Jackson do anything. I didn’t even know he was alive until yesterday. Everything that happened to him is because of his decisions.”

“No. It’s because of you. This is all for you.”

“Maybe he deserves to suffer a little for what he put me through,” I say, bristling. “No, that doesn’t mean I want him to die. But he hurt me. He hurt me so bad. I know it hurt you, too, when he disappeared. So tell me: why the hell have you forgiven him so quickly?”

Marcus takes a long drink of bourbon, stifles a belch, and shrugs. His eyes thoughtfully follow a rivulet of water seeping through one of the many cracks in the lighthouse wall. “Jackson grew up next to me. We’re from the same crappy neighborhood in Costa Oscura. Briarlane. Beautiful name, shitty everything else. And when I was little, I was little. Short, scrawny, light as a feather. So little that I was scared that when I hit puberty, the best I was going to do was grow up to be the world’s shortest man. But I loved to ride my bicycle, and damn, I was fucking good at it. Built a big ramp in my driveway, practiced on it every day. Jackson would watch me from a distance, sometimes, but we never said anything to each other. Me being so short, I was kind of a liability to hang out with. Now, this one day, I was practicing a double barspin.

It's a pretty advanced trick, but I was pretty advanced by then, too. I'd just nailed this trick when some neighborhood boys rolled up and started some shit. They beat me up bad, spit on me, took my bike. It happened so fast, but just as they were really hitting me, I saw Jackson watching, our eyes met, and then he came charging in. He was a big boy back then, and he nailed them like it was nobody's business. Whooped their asses. From that point on, we were a team: he protected my ass, and I taught his ass how to ride." Thunder sips more bourbon and pauses, a smile on his face. "So, when the guy who saved my ass countless times when I was growing up called me and said he needed my help, all I needed to know was when and where."

I feel a twinge of jealousy at the end of his story, jealous that he and Jackson have such a close bond. I've always wanted something like that in a partner, someone to protect me and stand up for me no matter when or where. Yes, I have it with Elena and Ashley, but it's a different thing entirely to go to sleep with, and wake up next to, someone who will take on the world for you every day of the week. Someone who is a partner, a lover, a best friend, a protector, all rolled into one. Instead, I'm stuck with Alexander, a man who only cares about his own ego.

"So, you're just here to help Jackson?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Yeah. He needs me, and I owe him. Plus, I'm curious as hell about what's going on with you and him. I mean, you're about to be married to some narcissistic Napoleon like Alexander Covington, and now you're in a lighthouse with the guy you actually love? That's some soap opera shit."

I roll my eyes. Love Jackson? Those feelings died years ago. Even if looking at him stirs many indescribable emotions inside me, I'm certain that none of them are love. Or even anything close to it. Frustration? Yes. Anger? Definitely. Gratitude at being taken away from Alexander? Yes, though it's made my future impossibly murky. Physical attraction? Well, duh, I have a functioning libido. But none of that is love.

“It’s not like that. It’s just something I have to do. Jackson disappeared without a trace, and my family needed money to keep their business afloat. Alexander was the solution, and I thought I could make it work.”

Thunder scoffs. “Money isn’t everything, Madison. You should know that by now.”

“I do,” I say quietly, knowing there’s so much more to life than money. There’s freedom, there’s curiosity, there’s self-respect, there’s love, yet all of that is something I am trading for the money my family needs.

Even now as I’m removed from Alexander, even being given a distorted glimpse of freedom that this kidnapping offers, thinking about what is going on in the real world and the painful compromises I’ve made puts my heart in a vise and squeezes it until it feels ready to burst with oppressive sorrow.

“I don’t feel like talking anymore,” I say, half for Thunder’s benefit, half to remind myself to keep my mouth shut and stop saying things aloud that’ll only hurt me.

Then I hide inside my drink.

* * * * *

Jackson comes at the worst time, which seems like it’s becoming his thing.

Maybe, instead of calling him ‘Bullet,’ I should start calling him calamity, or catastrophe, or misery. Those qualities seem tied to whenever he appears in my life.

Because when he steps through the door to relieve Marcus, I’m in far too deep with mint juleps. So much so that my breath smells like mouthwash, my sweat stinks like I’ve rolled around in bourbon and mentholated cigarettes, and my heart has accepted the truth that I am a hopeless nobody whose only asset is her last name and who has completely, in every conceivable way, fucked up her future.

Maybe I will get my degree, but what then?

I have no actual prospects. Neither does my family, aside from the Covington’s charity.

Yet still, that degrading charity is mine and my family's best chance at *something*.

When he steps in the door, Jackson gives me a look and a comforting smile, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Maybe he does, or maybe I'm just so drunk that my thoughts are written on my forehead.

"Marcus, can you give Maddy and I some space?" He says.

Marcus nods. "By the way, I'm not Marcus anymore. I'm Thunder, now."

"Thunder?"

"If you don't believe me, ask Maddy. She'll tell you."

I respond to Jackson's questioning look with a half-hearted nod.

"Okay, Thunder, can you give us some space? You good to ride?"

"I'm good. You take care, Bullet."

When Thunder leaves, Jackson sits down beside me on the cot and blankets that have become my little nest of despair. He puts his hand near my leg. Not on it, not touching it, just close enough that I know it's there, and he looks into my eyes with those blues that are deeper than the sea.

"Rough night?"

"Yes. The worst."

"I thought it might be hard. There's a lot of shit going through your head right now, isn't there? It was the same way for me back then, back when I... Anyway, I have a few things for you. Just sit and relax for a second, okay?"

As if I have a choice. Being unwilling to speak any more than the few words I've already said, that way he can't hear just how low I feel, I simply nod.

Satisfied, he gets to work.

He leaves the lighthouse for a moment, and returns with several boxes, a picnic basket, and a small cooler.

I raise an eyebrow at him.

“What?” I rasp. Even that comes out slightly slurred, thanks to the mint juleps that are sloshing around in my stomach. Drinking this much was a bad, bad idea.

“Do you remember our first actual date?”

I frown, thinking. Some of those memories are hazy with grief, others even more hazy with drink. I shake my head.

“It was maybe our third or fourth time together, depending on how you count it. After I found you when your car broke down, after I had it towed to my dad’s mechanic shop, after we went out for drinks so you could vent, and after you came by to pick up your car. You wrote your phone number on the receipt, which you didn’t need to do because I’d already memorized it from the work order, but still, I took it as a sign.”

My eyes go wide. “The picnic? By the beach?”

“You told your parents you were going to meet your friend to have a study party.”

I smile as I remember the sight of Jackson waiting for me at the dirt stretch that passed for a parking lot at the little beach park where he had me meet him. He was leaning against his bike, a basket in one hand, a cooler at his feet, a beguiling smile on his face. We ate fancy breads, cheeses, meats, even little finger sandwiches and some blinis with caviar. He was everything confident, charming, and real.

“You told me you didn’t know what any of the stuff in the picnic basket was.”

“True. I’d gone to the gourmet grocery store—the one by the pier that all the tourists from San Francisco go to—and I paid the woman behind the wine counter to help me put it together. Because we both know there’s no way I’m going to know what a coronet is.”

“Cornichon,” I say, correcting him. “They’re like pickles.”

“Then why don’t they just call them pickles?”

“Because they’re not pickles. They’re different. They’re cornichons.”

“Exactly why I needed help. Radiators, exhaust manifolds, transmissions—that’s my language. But having funny French names for pickles that aren’t pickles? That’s not for me. I told the lady behind the counter I was nervous and needed help to put together a picnic for a beautiful woman who was way out of my league.”

I roll my eyes.

“You were then,” he says. “Still are now.”

“Even more out of your league, now,” I say, both teasing and maudlin. “Look who I’m marrying. It’s going to be like the corporate merger of the century, but with people.”

Jackson gives me a kind smile that, on anyone else, would seem pitying, but on him, it seems understanding and without judgment. From the moment we met, he knew I hated the prolonged engagement and arranged marriage I was being forced into. He pats the picnic basket. “In here is the same meal that we ate that day on the beach. Everything is exactly the same.”

My mouth waters at the memory of all that was in the basket the first time; the rich creamy cheeses, the buttery smooth pâté, the crunchy-on-the-outside-soft-on-the-inside baguettes, the salty-savory caviar. Drunk, as I am, I would be satisfied if Jackson told me the basket held nothing but cold chimichangas from a gas station; that I can enjoy that meal from that special day has me so hungry my stomach audibly growls.

“Exactly the same?”

“I saved the receipt. Kept it in my wallet. Never wanted to forget that day with you, Maddy.” He sighs, then opens the basket, revealing sights and smells that force me to swallow all the saliva that’s suddenly pooling in my mouth. “Let’s eat. You’ll need the food so you don’t get hungover. Then you should sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” I say, through a mouthful of pâté-covered baguette. As I chew, Jackson opens the cooler,

revealing it's full of bottles of water, Pedialyte, and cold brew coffee; everything you need to fight off a hangover.

I grab a bottle of water and a bottle of Pedialyte, taking a grateful gulp from each. He's thought of everything. As I eat, as I drink, he watches me with a twinkle in his eyes. Something stirs inside me, a warm, uncomfortable sensation, and I repress that feeling because, whatever it is, I absolutely can't afford to feel anything warm or affectionate for Jackson Reid.

This is just business, I remind myself. Ridiculous, insane, sure-to-fail business, but business nonetheless. If it somehow pays off and you wind up with enough money to make your problems go away, maybe then you can feel something.

Maybe.

"You and I are going to take some photos, maybe a video," he starts. I raise a warning eyebrow at him, because we are not together and I sure as hell am not the type to make any kind of video with an ex. He chuckles and holds up a hand in a calming gesture. "Not that kind of video. A proof-of-life video. There's a copy of today's newspaper here, too."

"And then?"

"Then Marcus and I are going to deliver the ransom demands. In person. Right to Covington Corporation headquarters."

Chapter Twelve

Bullet

“Let me be honest with you, Marcus,” I say as I take a bite of taco, some meat juice dribbling down my chin. “I don’t think you’re going to enjoy hearing this, but I have to tell you, anyway.”

The two of us stand at a taco truck, Tacos Ricos, which sits on the outskirts of Costa Oscura’s downtown core, close to the Covington Corporation headquarters. It’s only the second bite of my taco that I’ve taken since we’ve been here, my eyes are locked on their target down the block, so much so I can hardly enjoy my carnitas tacos. Not even the juicy pork and the crispy cracklings bring me joy. The weight of our mission bears down right on my gut, making each bite a chore, which aggravates me even more, because tacos should never be a chore—they’re pure joy.

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t think this thing through.”

“That doesn’t shock me. At all.”

“Other than how to steal Madison away from Alexander. Getting her away from him is all that I could think about. But the rest of it... I have no fucking clue.”

“You sure seemed to know what you were doing earlier with getting Madison to make that video,” Marcus says, eyeing the thumb drive that I have clutched in my left hand. “It isn’t the first time that you and her have made a video, is it?” He raises a mischievous eyebrow at me and grins. “By the way, out in public, where anyone could hear, I’m going to have to insist you call me by my road name: Thunder.”

I snort. Thunder? He says it so casually, as if I won’t question anything about it. “Really?”

“Really. I’m Thunder, now.”

“That’s the dumbest name I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh yeah, *Bullet*? You know what, it doesn’t matter—it’s my name. Learn to love it.”

“Maddy told me how that name came about. You can’t go giving yourself a nickname, Marc—” Quick as a snake, he punches my shoulder just hard enough to make me stop talking and his eyes pointedly dart to somewhere behind me. With a quick glance, I see a cop standing in line at the taco truck. “—Thunder.”

“It was a group effort. Spontaneous. She made some comments regarding my, uh, well, it’s not relevant...”

I laugh. Now it’s my turn to cut him off.

“You were guzzling bourbon and belching louder than that fucking thunderstorm.”

“Hence: Thunder. Think about it, Bullet, if you can out-thunder a thunderstorm, you’ve earned the name,” he says, demonstrating flawless logic.

“I can’t argue with that,” I say, chuckling and rolling my eyes. I take a bite of my taco, then another, finish it, and move on to the next one. They’re small tacos, and I’ve got three more to eat before my plate is empty. Suddenly, they taste a lot better than before. That’s one thing I’ve always appreciated about Marcus; no matter how bad things might be, he’s got a way of making the situation lighter. “So, Thunder it is.”

“Listen, Bullet, I need to give you some wise advice, because obviously that’s my thing: you need to clear your head. You get so wrapped up with that girl and with getting back at, uh, the guy we won’t mention right now because who knows who’s listening. Look, I get it, she’s pretty, smart, has that fancy last name, plus a bunch of other prime qualities,” he says. Which is an understatement. All five-foot-six of Madison stands head and shoulders above any other woman I’ve ever met in both brains and beauty. “But she’s just got your brain circling around a drain and we can’t afford that right now.”

“No, we can’t.”

Thunder grins, his eyes scanning our surroundings for that cop, who’s since taken his order of seven tacos—a number that

makes me blink in shock seeing them all on his plate—and is sitting in his car, gleefully stuffing his face with fatty pork. Not that I blame him. They're damn fine tacos. They're so good you want to eat them alone, where no one can hear you moan as you stuff each juicy, meaty morsel into your willing mouth.

“So, you kidnapped the girl, but didn't think through the whole ransom plan, huh? Impressive. How are you still alive? How did you not fall and drown in a two-inch puddle?”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I've made a big fucking mess, I know, but I had to do something. I couldn't let her stay trapped with that abusive jerk. Love makes a guy do crazy things, you know?”

Not just love. Hate, as well.

In a flash, every part of ambushing Alexander on the highway plays through my mind, and I smile at how satisfying it felt to hit that rich asshole. The hate I feel for him is nearly as strong as the love I feel for Maddy, and the sensation of my fists hitting his flesh is one I will treasure for a long time.

“Oh, I know, Bullet. Love can turn the sanest of men into reckless daredevils. And the un-sane, un-educated, former-mechanic ones who weren't that smart to begin with, well, it turns them into... you.”

“Shut up.” I smack him in the shoulder and he cackles.

“Did you also say that you loved her? Or do I have taco in my ear?”

“Never stopped.” It's been over four years since I left her, yet I haven't forgotten the way she tastes, the way she smells, the way it feels to hold her in my arms as she sleeps. Those sensations will always be a part of me.

“You have a shit way of showing it, you know. Ditching her and then showing up years later to kidnap her? I mean, it's clear she's not a fan of you. Can't you even ghost someone right?”

“It's complicated. I had to do what I did. Just like I had to do this.”

“But now we’ve got ourselves in a bit of a pickle, don’t we? How are we going to get that hot little video of yours to where it needs to go?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Well, Bullet, lucky for you, you’ve got me: the brains of this operation.”

“Brains? That’s a stretch, Thunder. How can you be the brains if you’re most known for belching bourbon and getting piss-drunk in abandoned buildings?”

“Two, three things about that. First: I was not drunk, I can hold my liquor. Two: glad to hear you’ve accepted my road name. It makes me happy. Three: I think the fact that I’m the brains of the operation speaks just as much for your level of intelligence as it does mine.”

“Fuck. That’s low.”

“Exactly. As low as you think you’ll go, I’ll go lower. I’ll do that scorched earth shit. Now, do you want to hear the plan, or do you want to just eat tacos all day and shoot the shit? Because I’m okay with either.”

“Go ahead.”

“We walk right in and hand it to them.”

“That’s it?” I say. It’s not much of a plan. Hell, it’s not even a plan at all; it’s just nine words with some verbs, pronouns, and other shit. “That’s your grand plan?”

“And we wear disguises.”

“Like fake mustaches and shit?”

“Obviously. Not.” He shakes his head, restoring at least a fraction of my confidence. Then, after a bite of taco that leaves some salsa verde on his chin, he continues, “Your face, yes, we’ll have to do a little work on. I got a friend who lives just a couple of blocks from here. She volunteers at the Costa Oscura Community Theatre. We’ll go by her place after tacos, get her to do a little work on you so you’re not so clearly Bullet, just in case Alexander is there. Otherwise, all we need is some mechanic’s gear. There’s a uniform store close to here, down

on third. No one questions a guy who looks like he's in maintenance, especially if he's carrying a clipboard."

"That's it? We just walk right in?"

"Exactly."

* * * * *

Dressed in new uniforms, which we've dirtied up with a few splashes of motor oil, carrying a clipboard, a toolbox, and a small envelope addressed to Alexander Covington that contains the thumb drive and a note, we walk right into Covington Corporation headquarters like we belong.

A young woman with curly brown hair, blue eyes, and a smile that lights up the entire lobby sits behind the front desk. She beams a grin at Thunder and I. Her grin is not echoed in any amount by the security guards grimly standing at each side of the lobby.

Thunder and I approach, and I tighten my grip on the clipboard.

"Let me do the talking," he whispers quickly. "You keep your head down so the cameras can't see your face." I pull down my cap and duck my head, keeping my gaze squarely on the floor in front of me. When we reach the front desk, Marcus turns the wattage on his smile up to a million and his voice becomes low, warm, flirtatious. "Hey there," he pauses to read the name on the woman's tag, taking a second longer than necessary because I'm sure he's checking out her chest. Her smile glows back at him, getting brighter. "Jessica. You have just the most beautiful smile, I got to say. Listen, we're here to check the HVAC system." He pauses, looking down at his clipboard, squinting. "Someone from the executive floor called us, said the air conditioning wasn't cooling sufficiently."

"I see," Jessica says, her fingers darting across the keyboard and her eyes narrowing. "I have nothing in my system about maintenance being scheduled. Do you know who called you? I can't just give you access to that floor. I'll need to verify, first."

Thunder purses his lips, stares at the clipboard—which contains only a few sheets of paper that we scrawled on and the receipt from our taco truck lunch—and shakes his head. “I wish I could. I just see a note here that they told our secretary, Maxine—she’s a lovely woman, but she just has this chicken scratch sometimes—that they felt like they were at their villa in the Virgin Islands instead of a properly air-conditioned office.”

Jessica shakes her head and her lips turn to a frown. She goes quiet.

My eyes go to Thunder. He looks calm, but there’s a bead of sweat on his forehead that wasn’t there earlier, and my eyes then go to the security guards, who all seem to have taken an inordinate interest in our conversation. My muscles stiffen and I get ready to fight my way out. There’s three of them, two of us. The odds aren’t too bad.

Jessica mumbles something and the furrows in her forehead deepen.

It was a mistake to follow Thunder’s plan.

Frowning, she looks back to Thunder, her eyes narrow in a cold, calculating way. This is it—my eyes already start looking for the exit.

But then she shrugs, and air nearly leaves me in a whoosh.

“That must’ve been Mr. Gonzalez. He’s one of the EVPs. Not a surprise that he didn’t let me know you were coming.”

“If you want to call up there to verify, we’re happy to wait,” Thunder says. “But the longer we wait, the more likely the coolant coils are to go thermal and, well, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that would be very bad news, Jessica.”

I want to reach out and slap him. What the hell is he doing suggesting she check us out?

Jessica shakes her head. “Look, neither Mr. Gonzalez nor his assistant, Troy, are the nicest people to talk to. I’m just going to give you your badges that’ll get you access so you can check the HVAC systems and whatever else you need to

do. When you're done, please return them to me before you leave, okay?"

"Thank you, Jessica. You've been most helpful. By the way, when do you get off?" Thunder leans in over the desk and delivers another big smile. I wish he'd keep his damn mind on the job instead of picking up the receptionist.

Her smile wavers for a moment, though her voice stays cheerful and welcoming.

"You're not my type. No offense. It's my job to be welcoming, to smile, to put up with all the guys and their assumptions and their flirting, when really all I want is a nice girl to go home to. Now, here are your badges. Don't lose them."

I stifle a laugh at the look of disappointment on Thunder's face.

"Thank you, ma'am," I say as Jessica hands us our badges, and we make our way to the elevator. The security guards follow us with their eyes, but say nothing.

Once we're inside, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Good job nearly getting us caught by security, you fucking lunatic," I say to Thunder. "What the hell was that bit about the coolant coils going thermal?"

"Because no one except HVAC people knows what the fuck an HVAC person does. They're fucking wizards in overalls as far as the average person is concerned; they show up, bang some pipes, and magically make rooms cool."

"Yeah, but you almost blew it with that 'verify' nonsense."

"I had to make it look good," he says, still grinning. "Did the job, didn't it?"

The elevator doors open, and we step out onto the top floor, unobserved. There's no one paying attention to us, because if you're wearing a uniform and carrying a clipboard, everyone assumes you belong. We make our way down the hallway, looking for Alexander's office. Every few offices, Marcus and I stop and I scribble a note on our clipboard to look like we're

actually working. Finally, we find it—the largest office on the floor, with an ornately carved door and a plaque that says ‘Alexander Covington, VP’ out front. It’s unoccupied for the moment, and I slip the envelope under the door.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” I whisper to Thunder.

But just as we turn to leave, the sound of footsteps behind us stops us in our tracks, followed by an angry voice.

“Who are you? And why the hell are you nosing around Mr. Covington’s office?”

Chapter Thirteen

Bullet

We turn.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Marcus's face. His eyes are so wide you could drive a motorbike through them.

Fuck. This can't be good.

"You absolutely should not be up here," says the woman who approaches us. She's about our age, tanned, curvy, wearing a navy blue pants and blazer outfit, with brown curls that cascade down her shoulders, and large, oval-shaped brown eyes that scan us up and down suspiciously. They only glance over at me, a perfunctory search, but they linger on Marcus.

Being checked out by a beautiful brunette, I'll bet he's in heaven.

Except this woman looks less than happy to see Thunder.

"Marcus Thompson, is that you? What in the fuck are you doing in this office?" She says, a mixture of scorn and superiority in her voice. "And why the fuck did you never call me back?"

"Hey Kayla, how are you?" Marcus says. "It's been a while."

"It's been six months. Six months, eight phone calls, eleven texts, and no answers."

"Shit, really? I don't remember any of that. It must be my new phone. I switched providers, and I have to say, their service sucks so far. But how you been, Kayla? I was thinking about you a lot lately. Missed you, girl."

"You've been thinking about me? Really? Just like how you've been thinking about an answer to those questions I asked you last time, about whether you see a future for our relationship, and how you feel about having kids someday?" Kayla says, standing tall right in front of the much-taller

Thunder. She peers up at him, squinting angrily, fire in her voice. “You’re so full of shit.”

As much fun as it is to watch Marcus squirm, people are looking in our direction, and if any of them call security, we’ll be in a world of trouble. I have to do something fast.

“You’re right, Kayla. He is full of shit,” I say, matching my voice to sound just as stern as hers. “You have every right in the world to be pissed at his dumb ass for disappearing on you, because what he did was totally unjustifiable.”

“I am full of shit?” Marcus says. “Seriously?”

“He is?” Kayla says. “Seriously?”

“He is. Marcus, you never told me when I asked you for help to take care of my dying grandparents and their farm out in the mountains above Bakersfield that you had a girl waiting for you. If I had known I would’ve been taking you away from her and making you live outside of cell service, I would’ve made you stay here. Even though, thanks to you, my grandparents’ dying days went much easier, and they got to enjoy their remaining time on earth together and know that their farm didn’t go under. All that said, I still think you owe this beautiful, caring young woman an apology.”

I hold my breath while Kayla looks at Marcus. Her gaze softens, a smile raises her lips, and she twirls a long, curly lock of hair between her fingers.

“You helped a cute old couple save their farm? That’s so... heroic.”

Marcus nods, smiles. “It is. Look, I’m sorry for everything, Kayla, but when my friend called me about his grandparents, I just dropped everything to help those two old sweethearts. You know, they both went out holding each other’s hands and watching the sunset?”

“Oh, how sweet,” she says. “I forgive you, Marcus. Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

“Oh, don’t worry, baby. I’ll call you,” he says. Then he looks at me. “Buddy, I think we’re done with our HVAC

inspection. Everything looks wonderful here, so we better get going, don't you think?"

"Right. Busy day. Lots of other air conditioners to... condition," I finish quickly, hoping Kayla isn't paying attention. She isn't. She's still staring at Marcus with a moonstruck look on her face.

When we reach the elevators and the doors slide shut behind us, we both heave an enormous sigh of relief.

"Fuck, I thought for sure we were dead back there," Thunder says. "One call to security and then they'd be calling us both 'Bullet.' Good work on that story, by the way. If you weren't all love-struck over Madison, I'd say we should go out, because you would be an excellent wingman."

I shrug. Some of it, sure, I made up, but some of it—about leaving town, about breaking someone's heart even though you didn't want to, just to save the people you care about—comes from the stuff I wish I could say to Maddy. Stuff she deserves to hear, though I have no clue how I'll ever sit her down and tell it to her; she's made it clear she doesn't have any feelings for me, and that our arrangement is strictly business, even though every aching beat of my heart tells me we are meant to be together.

"It was nothing."

Chapter Fourteen

Madison

I'm ruminating. No, I'm dwelling. Languishing.

All as I pace anxiously in the lighthouse's dimly lit room clutching a worn notebook in my hands while thoughts about how screwed up my future is bounce around inside my skull. My impending graduation bears down on me. It's the weight of my future, my family's future, all the years I've spent studying, striving, struggling. Fear surges through me in choking waves with each passing minute that I spend in this godforsaken lighthouse; the fear of missing out on my final tests, last classes, and the thesis paper that hangs over my head like the sword of Damocles.

It's all made worse by the man who currently is watching me. The one I've taken to calling the angry, ugly gargoyle, because all he does is linger against the wall and glare at me like he wants to rip my head off: Rook.

Why the hell did Jackson bring him in on this crazy plan of his?

Still, after some worry time, I muster up the courage to share my concerns with Rook, who stands statue-still by the wall.

"Rook, I have to do something. Graduation is just a few weeks away, and I can't afford to miss my final tests or skip out on picking up my study materials. I need to go to my apartment on campus." Desperation laces my voice; I know better than to show weakness to him, but my future will not be bright if I don't graduate.

"No."

"Please, this is important. I really have to—"

"No."

He adds nothing more. Just that one simple word, then he returns to staring like a statue, or one of those guards who stands in front of Buckingham Palace.

“You really should listen to me. Jackson would. He cares. He’s not a psychopathic creep. Not like you...” My words trail off. Rook isn’t even reacting. And, honestly, I have no genuine desire to provoke him, not after some of the things he told me the last time he was guarding me, when I made the mistake of asking him to tell me about himself. I think I’ll need therapy just to recover from that mistake.

I decide the best course of action is to sit and wait for Jackson to get here. He’ll listen to me, at least. And he respects my desire to graduate.

How sad is it that the one person in my life who respects my needs and wants is the boy who broke my heart, disappeared, then returned, only to shatter my world to pieces all over again?

What kind of shitty luck is that?

Still, he’s my only option.

So I sit and enter a staring contest with Rook. Both of us sit utterly silent, while he stares into my eyes and I stare into the hollow orbs that allow me a view of the gaping black pit that is his soul.

After what might be an hour, or two, or six minutes, he blinks.

“You think it’s that easy? You want to waltz onto campus, where anyone could recognize you? That’s a death wish, Madison. I won’t let you risk it.”

Just as my hopes plummet, a voice cuts through the tension.

“Actually, I think she’s right.”

It’s Jackson, his steely blue eyes cold and steady.

Rook’s eyes narrow, his gruff voice drips with sarcasm.

“Oh, great. The biker knight in shining armor has spoken. Enlighten us, Bullet, with your brilliant plan.”

“Listen, Rook, I understand the risks, but Madison needs her stuff. All of this—the kidnapping, the ransom—is for her. Only her. So if she needs her books, we’ll get her damn books.

Got it?" He pauses and Rook looks like he's about to say something when Jackson adds, "I'll go with her to make sure she stays safe."

Rook's face twists into a scowl.

"You're both idiots, a perfect match made in heaven. Fine, do whatever you want. Don't come crying to me when it blows up in your faces."

With Rook's insults lingering in the air, Jackson and I huddle together, concocting a plan. We decide to wait until it's nearly dark and we'll disguise ourselves—we'll buy hats and sunglasses to obscure ourselves and we'll keep a low profile.

When we get to campus, parking Jackson's motorcycle in one of the student parking lots and surveying the people walking from their dorms to the classrooms, to the library, or to one of the nearby streets where there are countless cheap restaurants that cater to the student body, I realize disguises aren't really necessary. Most people don't pay attention to others around them; if someone isn't trapped in their own thoughts, worried about their own future, tomorrow's test, or a term paper, they're looking at their phones.

Under the cloak of nightfall, we arrive at my apartment building.

The air crackles with tension as we slip through hallways and ascend staircases, our hearts pounding in unison. I swear I can hear every beat of Jackson's heart, each crashing thud deafening in the quiet hallways.

We finally reach my door on the top floor, and a palpable feeling of relief passes over me.

Jackson smiles, chuckling, and I see the face of that same boy who charmed me years ago.

I'm here for a laptop, for my future—I can't afford to feel anything else, I remind myself. Though each word rings less and less true in my head. It's hard not to feel something for someone who so quickly and readily takes on risks just to make my life easier.

Especially when no one else in my life seems to put me first. Definitely not Alexander.

I wonder if he even cares that I'm missing, other than that my absence might cause people to ask him some uncomfortable questions.

"You just need your laptop and what else?" Jackson says.

"Just that. It's got my thesis paper on it. I even get to submit the paper online. So once we get that computer, we can get out of here."

"Good. Because I don't like this. We're too exposed here. Too many people here know you, too. Once word gets out that you're missing, someone's going to start asking questions about why you were walking around your apartment building after you'd supposedly been kidnapped."

"No one saw us. Relax."

"Maybe. But anyone who catches even half a glimpse of you is going to remember it," he says. "Now, come on, let's get inside and do this quickly."

I take out my keys and fumble with the lock. This little clandestine mission has me nervous, and it seems like my keys just don't want to fit in the doorknob.

Just as I unlock the door, it swings open abruptly.

I cry out in surprise and take a step back.

"Maddy!" Ashley exclaims, her eyes widening in surprise. "Oh my god, what are you doing here? I thought you were missing!"

"Missing? What are you talking about?" I say, thankful the joyful shock at seeing my friend in my apartment is enough to cover the surge of fear that races through me.

"No one's seen you around forever. And you missed a class," she says, which has exactly the right amount of emphasis to show its import; I don't miss class except in cases of actual emergencies, and even then, I still try to make it. Like the time I came to class with a noticeably swollen ankle that was already turning black and blue; I'd been wearing

heels and had tripped in the Quad, and the professor had to stop class to tell me to go to the campus emergency room. The trip to the emergency room took forty-five minutes, so I made it back in time to catch the end of the lecture. “Also, the prof said you hadn’t even sent in a written note. So you can see why everyone’s worried. Anyway, who’s this hot guy with you? What’s going on? Are you okay?”

I hear only concern in her voice, other than the surprise at finding me sneaking into my apartment with a man who is obviously not my fiancé. Not that anyone who knows me would suspect me of ever cheating on Alexander, especially with someone like Jackson. Though, as I follow Ashley’s surprised look and run my eyes over Jackson, I feel a stir of old feelings I thought were dead. Each rugged line on his face, each hint of muscle straining at his shirt, his leather jacket that fits him just right, the tempting, teasing light shining in his breathtaking blue eyes... Yes, I feel it. Feel it and force it away. Write it off as nothing more than Stockholm Syndrome, even though the brief love I once felt for him was deeper and more intense than I ever thought love could be.

He broke my heart and ruined my life. I have to get the fuck over him.

“He’s a friend,” I say. “That’s all?”

“A friend? How come I’ve never met him? Are you hiding your hot guy friends from me, Maddy?” Ashley says, crossing her arms and widening her stance. She gives me a teasing look and Jackson a menacing once. “He looks dangerous. You sure you’re not in trouble?” From anyone else, it’d be almost laughable that she’d even think to square up on Jackson like she’s ready for a fight. Except Ashley’s not just anyone—she’s on the Costa Oscura University Women’s Rugby team and loves smashing into people so much it’s nearly tied for first as her favorite form of physical contact.

“He’s an old friend. From before college. He went away for a while,” I say, the words coming out slow as I scramble for some lie that my close friend, someone who knows me inside and out, will believe. “We used to date, but now, that is way, way over. He’s here because he’s helping me out.”

“Helping you with what?”

What can an older, handsome, looks-like-he-is-a-criminal ex-boyfriend be helping me with that one of my best friends can't?

Shit.

I need an excuse.

My heart races and my mind spins like a tire stuck in loose sand. This is bad. Terrible. My tongue feels like it's stuck to the roof of my mouth with Krazy glue.

“Alexander and I are fighting, and I needed somewhere to hide out that he'd never think to look,” I blurt out. “He was being really, really, controlling and just... you know how he gets. So I've been staying with my friend.” Ashley nods and rolls her eyes in understanding. She's seen and heard all about my fiance's temperamental side. “I know I should've told you, but I couldn't risk it. You know how he has guys everywhere. Remember that guy with the gun from graduation practice? I didn't want to bring any of that down on you. So, when Alexander and I had our fight, I ran out on him. I called my ex and told him I needed somewhere to crash for a short time while things cool down.”

Ashley nods and smiles at Jackson. There's enough heat in her smile that it stirs a pang of jealousy in my heart. “So, since you and Maddy are just friends, do you happen to be single?”

I swear I see her lick her lips as she eyes Jackson up and down. Ashley never was subtle.

“Well...” Jackson starts, his voice dropping low, heated, in a way that I definitely dislike. “Now that you mention it...”

I cut in. “It's complicated. He's not available, though, I can tell you that much for sure.”

“Maddy's got it right. My current situation's a little complicated,” he says.

Ashley shrugs. “That's *a* shame. Well, if your situation frees up, maybe you look me up, okay? You know where to find me.”

I step in between them and feel my cheeks get warm from the extraordinary heat in Ashley's gaze. Sometimes I think her thirst is so great she could drink the damn ocean. "Ashley, I hate to interrupt, but I've got two questions for you. First: why are you in my apartment? And second: can you move out of the way? I need to get some of my things."

"First answer: I was here because I came looking for you. I missed you, and I still have the key you gave me from that time you went on vacation with Alexander to the Maldives, and you needed me to water your plants and check your mail. Second, of course, I'll get out of your way."

"Thank you," I say brusquely and I lightly bump her shoulder as I step by. I'm still a little ticked off by the way she is so blatantly drooling over Jackson. Not like I should be—I know that he and I are and done, have been done for years, and I shouldn't be feeling anything for a man who broke my heart the way he did... Except he only seems to have gotten more handsome since the last time I saw him; the extra years have added maturity and ruggedness to his face, though his eyes still have that brilliant sparkle like he's ready to do something utterly audacious. Somehow, in a primal way, it's hot as hell to think there's a bullet scar on his chiseled abs that he earned out of a visceral desire to protect me.

I shouldn't want him. I can't want him. Yet, I do.

Focus on the business, I remind myself. I have too much riding on this scheme—like my diploma and the rest of my life—to get caught up on a man. Even if that man is as handsome and lawlessly sexy as Jackson Reid.

I head right to my desk, where my laptop sits next to one of my favorite textbooks: *Advanced Principles of Quantitative Financial Analysis, vol. IV*; Volumes one, two, and three are in my bedroom, on my nightstand, but they're not required reading for the class; they were an impulse buy to satisfy the completist in me. Once I pick up my laptop and put it in its case and a messenger bag, I turn to Ashley, who's still got her eyes on Jackson.

“Ashley, this is serious. Can I trust you to keep this visit of mine a secret? You can’t tell anyone that I was here. Not Elena, not professor Braithewaite, and especially not Alexander.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything to anyone.”

I exhale deeply, relieved. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

“Of course, Maddy. Anything for you.” She gives me a knowing nod before turning and flouncing out of the room. As strong as she is, she’s still graceful.

Once she’s gone, I turn back to Jackson, who has been watching me silently with his arms folded across his broad chest. He looks calm and confident; completely unaffected by the fact that we’ve just been caught hiding out together. For a moment, I envy him: he doesn’t seem to have any doubts about what we’re doing here—and why should he? He is used to risking his life without thinking twice about it.

Like how he’s risking his life for me.

There’s only one emotion that could make someone do something so drastic. An emotion that I refuse, utterly refuse, to admit still simmers between us.

“Let’s go,” I say abruptly, heading towards the door with purposeful strides.

What we have is a business arrangement and nothing more.

He’s helping me for money. Money, and because he’s a decent person, the type to stop and protect a woman when her car breaks down in a bad part of town, or when her vicious fiance cannot keep a hold on his overpowering, controlling nature.

That’s what it has to be... Right?

“Where to now?” Jackson says, his voice so deep and heated it’s like he’s echoing the flurry of fiery thoughts fluttering around inside my head. Thoughts that an engaged woman like me should not be thinking about a man who isn’t her fiance.

I release a long breath and feel like a pressure cooker venting steam; very hot, very steamy steam.

I need to get control of myself.

I need to stay focused.

“I need a drink.”

Chapter Fifteen

Bullet

“This is one of my favorite places. I’m not a regular here, and it’s not a usual student bar, so no one here is going to recognize me. But I just love the atmosphere of this place,” she says as we park my bike just outside a darkly elegant place with a small clapboard sign out front declaring it to be the Tempo Tavern. Chill, acoustic music emanates through the open door.

“You sure no one here will remember you?”

I find it hard to believe. One look at Madison is all it took to change the course of my life, how could it be different for anyone else with a beauty like her?

“I’m positive. You can relax. I like to come here with my finance homework sometimes, have a negroni, sit alone in the corner and just get some good work done in some elegant ambiance, you know?”

“Do I look like a man who would understand any of those things? Finance homework, ambiance, and negronis? Give me beer, a garage, and the sound of a powerful engine.”

“Neanderthal,” she says and she rolls her eyes at me. It’s adorable. If this is what being a Neanderthal gets me, I’ll gladly be a Neanderthal. Whatever the fuck that is.

I follow Madison into the Tempo Tavern, and it’s like entering a different world; the bar is dimly lit, but luxurious leather chairs and elegant draperies give the interior an air of sophistication. Soft music plays in the background—a few string instruments accompanied by a smoky vocalist singing romantic songs. They sit on a small stage, a mote of light in the passionate darkness of the bar.

The crowd looks to be mostly upper-class business people, all dressed to impress. I feel totally out of place here in my long-sleeved shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Yet Madison seems right at home, though, so I take my cue from her. It’s not like anyone here gives us more than a passing glance, and

of those that look at us, their eyes go to Madison. Which isn't a surprise. She's stunning as hell.

We find two seats at the bar and order drinks. She orders a negroni and I get a beer and a reproachful look from both her and the bartender as soon as my order leaves my mouth, so I switch my order from a beer to a negroni, too. Better to blend in.

We sit back and Madison enjoys her drink, while I wonder how upper class one has to be to enjoy something that tastes like bitter, orange-scented licorice.

"That's some face," she says to me, smiling over the rim of her glass.

"I can't believe you drink this. I once had an old radiator line break on me while I was doing some work in my dad's shop. The line sprayed my face with coolant, and that foul liquid tasted better than whatever this is."

"It's a negroni. And you need to drink it. Look around—no one drinks beer here. It's wine or fancy cocktails. In fact, I don't even know if they have beer."

"How can you not have beer? I'll never understand you upper-class people. This drink tastes like some fat Italian man cried in my cup."

"It's sophisticated."

"It's gross. You know what? I'm getting a beer." I take my glass up to the bar and return—after a shocked glare from the bartender—with a frosty cold bottle that has a bunch of French words on it. I'm wary of my first sip, but it tastes like beer and not like European existential angst, so I keep drinking. "That's better."

The musicians on stage start a new song. Though I don't speak the language they're singing, which might be French or Italian, the words wrap my heart in an intense embrace, filling me with a heat I can't describe; Maddy's eyes meet mine and they take on a wistful look, one filled with sadness and regret.

"He's going to call you soon," she says. "He'll pay, because he has the money and neither he, nor his family, will want to

deal with the embarrassment of word getting out that someone has kidnapped me.”

“Embarrassment?”

“It’s all a popularity and numbers game to him. To them. They’re such heartless, power-grubbers. Anything that could negatively affect the family’s reputation, they keep a tight lid on it. Did you know they ran anonymous surveys and focus groups to pick our wedding venue? Or that a committee designed my wedding dress? I didn’t even get to pick anything involved in it. All I did was just show up to a tailor’s, where they took my measurements about a million times. Everything they do is done to make them look good. Respectable. Powerful.” She drains her negroni—how, I have no clue, because nothing could make me so angry that I’d be able to drink that cup of bitterness—and sighs. “But I’m getting distracted. I can’t let their awfulness pull me off the subject, especially since they’ll pay up soon, our business will be done, and I’ll never have to see them again.”

“Do you need another drink?”

“I already ordered another one. The staff here is great. That’s one reason I love coming here, especially when I’m studying. They just seem to know exactly when you need another.”

Sure enough, a server comes by with another negroni for Maddy. And another beer for me. I give the server a curious look. “I’m not done with my beer yet.”

“The bartender thought you might like this one better. It’s an English-style oatmeal stout. He said it fits your vibe more appropriately. Enjoy.”

I take a sip. “Oh, damn.” Then another sip. Just as the server turns to leave, I reach out and put a bill into his hand. “Bring me another of these as soon as you can. Thank you.” When he leaves, I turn my attention back to Madison. “So, when this is over...?”

“I disappear. You disappear. We go our separate ways. Now, Jackson, I don’t want to be left with questions—at least, as

much as I can help it—which means I need to ask some, now, before you walk out of my life again and leave me having to start over alone... Just like the last time you broke my heart. Can you be honest with me?”

My heart clenches. It isn't easy knowing that the person you care about most in the world is the person you've hurt the most.

“Look, Maddy...”

She holds up a finger, silencing me.

“Listen, Jackson, I need to know: why did you abandon me? That night at the end of the summer, we had plans to meet. We were going to meet up, and we were going to run away together. But when I showed up you weren't there. You weren't there. Why? Why did you lie to me?”

My heart drops into my stomach, and guilt overwhelms me. Maddy's pain radiates off her like a wave. She deserved so much better than the way I treated her.

“It doesn't matter,” I say. “We shouldn't be talking about this. We're supposed to keep this to just business, remember?”

“No, you don't get to take a cop-out answer. You owe me the truth. After everything you put me through, it's the least you can do.”

Another beer hits our table, along with another negroni.

I snatch mine up, needing the liquid courage under the intensity of Maddy's eyes.

“You're right to feel angry with me, Maddy. I know I wronged you.” Another gulp of beer wrests some more words out of me. “That night, I was nervous. Beyond nervous. Full-on butterflies, the works. But I was excited, too, because I was younger and had that crazy optimism that we could run off and conquer the world together. I knew that, with someone as smart as you by my side, we could do anything.”

“So what happened?”

“He showed up.”

“Who?”

“Alexander.” I want to spit that name on the floor, and if we were in a less-elegant bar, I’d do it. But we’re here at the Tempo Tavern, and I’m with a woman who’s used to class and sophistication, so I hold off. “Alexander and some of his fucking goons.”

“What the hell? How?”

“I don’t know, but he knew everything. He showed up, and he was prepared.”

“Prepared?”

“Armed. He threatened to put my dad’s mechanic shop out of business. He threatened to ruin your family. Not just pull out of the deal and withhold the money, but ruin you. And there was something else...”

She leans forward, eyes wide; the negroni sits on the table in front of her, ignored.

“What?”

“He said that he had one of his men outside your house. One of his bodyguards.” I grit my teeth, the pain and anger of that moment resurfacing through me with ferocity. “And...”

“Jackson? What was it?”

“That bastard said that, unless I left right that minute, unless I cut off all contact and disappeared off the face of the fucking earth, leaving Costa Oscura and everyone I love behind, so that he could have you all to himself—so that he could own you—he’d have his man shoot you.”

“You’re lying,” she gasps, voice a fervent mix of denial and anger. She drinks half her negroni and slams it down so hard that the rest sloshes over the side, soaking the table.

“You’re lying. There’s no way. No way. He wouldn’t dare. He wouldn’t...”

“He would and you know it. You’ve experienced it. That’s why I left, Madison. I left because I couldn’t live with the risk of you being hurt. I would rather go my entire lifetime

suffering if I knew it kept you safe.” I pause, further words sitting on my tongue, words that I know I should hold back, words that could ruin this strictly business arrangement between us, but I can’t lie to those all-consuming emerald eyes. She looks at me as if she knows exactly what I’m going to say, as if I’m taking the same words from her lips. On the stage, the musicians switch songs, begin to play something that’s deep, slow, and burns with forbidden desire. “I left because I loved you, Maddy, and it was the only way to keep you safe. I loved you then, and I lo—”

Suddenly, she reaches out and grabs my hand, seizing it in a firm grip.

She stands, pulling me with her.

“I adore this song. After all the craziness today, I need a break. I need to feel good. Will you dance with me?”

Chapter Sixteen

Madison

Every vowel, every consonant, every syllable, I know it all before it leaves his mouth. How?

Because they're also sitting on my lips, coming from my heart, waiting to spring forth and ruin everything. No one else has been so selfless, so dedicated, so throw-their-body-on-the-line in love with me as Jackson.

To everyone, I'm a line-item on a resume or a bargaining chip; to Jackson, I am everything.

It shocks me how close I come to letting him confess out loud what we both feel.

But thankfully, I come to my senses, grasp his hand and seize on a distraction: the lovely music coming from the stage.

“Will you dance with me?”

“Always.”

Jackson and I sway together to the romantic melody coming from the stage. His embrace is strong and protective, his hold on me gentle. He looks deeply into my eyes like he can see right through my soul to my secrets.

Probably because my eyes mirror the same secrets he's holding in his soul: that those emotions that we thought were dead between us are stirring back to life the way an earth stirs to live during an earthquake; powerful, overwhelming, all-consuming.

My heart wants so desperately to tell him how I feel—that I'm in love with him, but I can't bring myself to do it, whether because of fear or confusion or the realization that our roles are only temporary, I don't know. Yet I am certain that, love or not, this is only temporary; in days, once Alexander and his family cough up the money, we'll separate, disappear, and this will be nothing more than a tumultuous memory of a turning point in my life, something I look back upon with a heartbroken smile.

The music wraps around us like a cocoon, shielding us from the rest of the world.

We move slowly and gracefully, as if we were meant to be dancing together forever instead of for only a moment. My head rests against his chest as I listen to his heartbeat, feel sublime contentment as we share this intimate moment together. We sway. I feel his skin on mine, his muscular chest supporting my cheek. We embrace. I smell him and that smell stirs up so many potent, loving memories of when I was a younger, more innocent woman finding solace in the company of a rebellious man. He turns me. I think of the stars Vega and Altair swirling together in the Summer Triangle in the night sky, the two of them kept forever apart except, as the legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl says, once every seven years, when a bridge forms in the heavens to unite the two fated lovers for a single day.

Now, I feel that bridge forming for me.

But even as we dance, the thought of our scheme teases at the back of my mind. Any declaration of love between us could ruin everything—our plan, our relationship, such as it is, and even our chances to survive—but I feel so sure that Jackson is the one I was meant to be with forever.

He doesn't speak as we dance. Maybe he can't speak, just like I can't trust myself to speak without revealing what I feel in my heart. There's this worry I have that no matter what words my brain sends to my lips, my heart and my traitorous tongue will turn it into the ones I so desperately want to say: I love you still, Jackson Reid. Despite how you hurt me, I forgive you, and I love you with every beat of my aching heart. I don't want our 'now' to come only when the stars align; I want to spend my life in your embrace the same way you're holding me now.

Then the music ends.

The musicians announce that they're taking a short recess, and I look up at him.

"Thank you," I murmur, keeping my voice low and my tongue and heart in check.

“What now?”

I don't trust my tongue, so instead I take his hand and lead him back to the table, where already a fresh round is waiting for us.

But we don't make it all the way to our seats.

Just steps away, he tightens his grip on my wrist and he pulls me to a stop. Turning, I look up at him, a question and surprise in my eyes.

“I know what you're doing, Maddy.”

“You do?”

“Don't think I'm not feeling exactly what you're feeling. I've struggled with this for over four years, Maddy. The pain, the regret, the fury of seeing you in the arms of another man... it's torture,” he says. My heart crescendos in my chest; my lips, my tongue, my fingers, my toes—everything vibrates with the electric tenor in his voice. I know I should stop him, I know I should keep him from saying anything further, from ruining this tenuous balance we have between us, but I am powerless against the furious intensity of his eyes. “So I won't say it. But there is something I'll do. Something I know we both want.”

“What?”

“This.”

He puts a hand on my hip and pulls me into him. Then he kisses me. Once, long and deep. With that one kiss, he shocks my heart to life and I realize it hasn't truly been beating in over four years.

This is wrong. So wrong, my brain screams at me. Stop this or you'll ruin everything.

For a moment, I resist.

Press down my urges, place my hands upon his chest and push, just a little. I even manage a second's worth of separation between our two burning bodies.

It's enough time to look up into his fiery blue eyes, to lose myself and my resistance once more, and to rise on my tiptoes to kiss him. His tongue brushes mine, coaxes a moan from my chest, and I reach around him to grab his firm, handful-sized ass. Damn, what an ass he has. I squeeze it. It's better than I remember—an immensely graspable muscle.

If this is wrong, I don't want to be right.

* * * * *

There's a moment I forget where we are. My heart, my consciousness, my soul, it all feels like it's outside my body, looking down at me—me, some wayward girl who thought she had it all figured out, who thought she was so smart, but is in way out of her depth; a girl who would be so lost, so *nothing* without the man in front of her, the man who came back and faced death just to pull her out of a dangerous situation.

Then I snap to.

Then I realize I'm locking lips with Jackson in the middle of a classy bar, while the bartender and half the customers stare at us openly, while the other half at least pretend to be looking elsewhere, though, in reality, they're staring at us, too.

This is not how you go incognito.

But what I'm feeling pounding through my heart is way past the point of stopping. I can only delay it, and not long.

"We need privacy," I whisper. "Fast."

Now that we've stopped actively making out, most of the bar patrons are back to paying attention to each other.

He nods, takes my hand, and we head to the back of the bar and down a hallway.

"Here," he says, pushing open the door to a bathroom.

I take one look, grab the door, and pull it closed. "No."

"You change your mind?"

"Not that. There's only two toilets for the entire bar. This one," I say, rapping on the door. Then I rap on the door next to it. "And this one. It doesn't take a math genius to figure out

that if we take up fifty percent of the toilets in a fancy bar in order to have sex, we have a hundred percent chance of getting the police called on us. We need somewhere different, and we need it now.”

Jackson’s gaze goes down the hallway. “There’s a supply closet there. Or there’s a door to the alley. Your choice.”

I pull him toward the closet. “Madison Sinclair does not have sex in alleys. At least not on the first date.”

“This a date now?”

“You took me out, bought me drinks, and we are definitely going to have sex. That makes this a date.”

“What about your fiance?” He says. There’s a hint of tease in his voice, a burning question. Not that I blame him for wanting to hear out loud what I’m saying with my actions. If I were in his place, I’d want to hear it, too.

“Fuck Alexander. I want you.”

I throw open the door to the closet, pull him inside, and shut the door behind us. Then I leap at him, pressing my lips to his with a furious desire.

His hungry lips dance with mine. My tongue responds, teasing, tasting him; my hands do what they ache to do, what they fantasized about every time I subjected myself to Alexander’s touch—they explore Jackson’s hardened, scarred, muscular body; they touch tattoos; trace battle wounds earned protecting me; they rest above his heart and feel the pulse that beats for me—a beat that goes faster and faster as I kiss him, while my other hand roams his body and grabs his firm ass; as my hand then twists, turns, and teases its way to grip his rock hard cock through his jeans.

When I touch that part of him, a deep growl comes from his throat. It is primal. Hungry. “Fuck, Maddy, I’ve missed you.”

“Yes?” I murmur between kisses, moving my lips along his cheek to nibble at his ear. My hand squeezes his cock again, making him thrust his hips forward, making him moan. “You really missed me?”

Jackson tries to answer, but I'm too quick for him—I slip open the zipper of his jeans, slide my hand inside, and wrap my fingers around the bare skin of his cock. Its pulsing, heated length throbs at my touch. He gasps.

Which I suppose is an answer.

I stroke him, my tongue still playing in his mouth, his hips thrusting in time with the rhythm of my hand. “How bad did you miss me?”

He moans. It's clear words won't come easy for him.

Obviously, he needs inspiration to talk.

So I get down on my knees in front of him, take his cock in both hands, and give it a long lick.

“Let's add something fun to this. An incentive. Like a business transaction. As long as you keep your mouth busy telling me how much you missed me and what you were feeling during those years you were gone, I'll keep my mouth busy sucking your cock. Agreed? Agreed.”

I don't even wait for him to say something. I know he'll agree; he always loved how I'd suck his cock, and in the time since we were last together, I've only gotten better, more confident, more adult, so I confidently take his cock between my lips and flutter my tongue against his glans, drawing a sharp gasp of pleasure from his lips, before working my hands in a strong, slow stroke that turns that gasp into a low, fiery moan.

Then I stop. Look up at him.

“You're not talking, Jackson. Unless you're using your mouth, I'm not using mine,” I remind him, then I return to work. But only because I see him open his lips in an effort to form words.

“Fuck, Maddy, I missed you like crazy the entire fucking time. For months after I left, I could hardly eat, hardly sleep, fuck—” he stops, gasping, as I fill my throat with his thick shaft. Just to see if I still can, because he's so much bigger than I remember and I love a challenge.

Noting the silence, I slowly extricate his cock from my mouth, and while stroking it, I look up at him expectantly.

“You were saying?”

“I couldn’t fucking sleep for weeks. I was fucking hard all the time.”

If he was even half as hard then as he is now, I don’t know how he’d even leave his apartment, or wherever he was staying, without raising all sorts of eyebrows. I chuckle at the thought. The vibrations in my throat make Jackson gasp.

“It felt like I couldn’t breathe. Like my heart stopped beating. Like the world had lost all color and my life had lost all sense of ‘why.’ You were a part of me, the best part, the reason, my reason, and I had to give you up...”

I tighten my grip on his cock, giving it a series of hard, fast pumps that turn into him thrusting and fucking deep in my throat. I shut my eyes and focus on the sense of him using me, of turning my mouth into his little plaything. Fuck, I’ve missed this. Missed having a man who thinks the world of me, who makes me feel safe, secure, valued, enough that I want to be his dirty slut.

“Fuck, Maddy, I missed you so much,” he says in between gasps. Then I feel his hands on my head, his fingers playing with my hair, his hips thrusting forward and his cock pushing deep inside my mouth. “I missed you, and I need to fuck your mouth. Oh fuck, I need your mouth.”

But he’s so caught up in fucking my face that he stops talking; so I withdraw.

Look up at him, frowning. I liked where we were going.

“You stopped talking,” I chastise him. Maybe he needs direction. Maybe it’s not so easy to focus when someone’s sucking your cock. “Were there others, Jackson? Those years you were away, were there others?”

Slowly, I run my tongue along the length of his cock.

“They were nothing. Just nameless ways to try to forget about the pain, the emptiness. It never worked.”

I take him back in my mouth, fully sliding him down my throat until I'm choking on his thick cock.

"Every time I fucked them, I thought about you. Only you. No matter who it was, how hard they tried, what we were doing, I couldn't cum unless I was thinking about you—your lips, your mouth, your ass, your pussy. It had to be you."

He has a grip on the back of my head now and everything is a vibrant blur of sexual fulfillment—his cock pulsing in my throat, my pussy dripping wet, my hands working his cock, his hips thrusting his cock deeper into my mouth, my lungs burning, aching for air, the rest of me crying out to feel him cum in my throat, to fill my hungry mouth with his thick cum.

Cum for me, Jackson, I beg silently. I want to feel him shatter to pieces in my mouth. I want to give him that shivering, shaking, break-your-body satisfaction that he could only fantasize about for all those years.

Cum for me, Jackson.

"This is, oh shit, Maddy, it's coming. I'm cumming—" He gasps as he fills my throat. I latch my lips tight around his shaft, sucking, swallowing. I don't want to miss a single drop of his cum.

Every drop goes down my throat.

When I release him, he is shaking, one hand gripping the wall for support, the other lovingly stroking my hair.

I stand, smiling, and feel a sense of satisfaction and gratification that I haven't felt in years. A rebellious sense of joy flows through me as I look at my kidnapper-slash-sorta-boyfriend and notice just how hard he is shaking; I just made Bullet shoot.

"That as good as you remembered?"

"Fuck, yes, Maddy. My mouth's been watering for you since the first time I saw you. I've been fucking dreaming of you, wondering if I was ever going to get the chance to have you again."

“Well, now you have me.” I touch his face, run my thumb over his lips. “What do you want to do with me?”

I feel him shudder, feel his cock twitch.

“I want to do everything with you,” he says. “I want to make up for lost time.”

“Then take me,” I tell him. “Take me, Jackson. I’m not just your hostage, I’m yours. Completely.”

In a blink, his hands are on my hips again. Pressing me back against the wall, then pulling down my jeans and panties. I kick them both away while his calloused fingertips lightly caress up and down my thighs, raising goosebumps of anticipation up my back.

“It’s been so long since I tasted you,” he murmurs.

My body feels on fire, both aching for his touch and feeling that the sensation will be too much for me. I shut my eyes, preemptively grip the wall for support.

Just in time.

In the space of a breath, I feel his tongue against my wet pussy. I gasp a sharp exhale and my nails claw at the wall; moaning, begging, wishing the wall were a bed, that it gave me something more to hold on to because I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to stay standing.

His tongue is like nothing else—testing, teasing, stroking, slavishly loving my pussy.

“Oh god, Jackson. Oh fuck, I love how you eat my pussy.”

Almost nothing else compares to the feeling of having this man between my legs, his tongue pleasuring me.

“I missed you so fucking much,” He growls, his tongue sliding up my pussy, teasing my clit. “I missed this so fucking much, your sweet, tight little cunt.”

I’m melting. I’m on fire. The pleasure is so intense I feel like I might lose consciousness.

I grab onto Jackson’s hair. Squeeze it tight.

“More,” I urge him. “More, Jackson. I’ve missed this, I’ve missed you. I want all of you. I want you inside me. I want to feel you.”

He kisses my pussy. Slow, his tongue fluttering against my clit and sending my world spinning.

“I’m going to make you come for me, Maddy. I need to feel it.”

He grabs my ass, pulls me forward, devours me. Reaching down, I grip his head for support while I grind my pussy into his face. I’m so close, my body burning to explode in a way it hasn’t in nearly five years. No one has ever made me come the way Jackson Reid does.

“I want you to scream my name. Scream it. I don’t care who out there hears. Scream my name. I want you to scream it so everyone knows that this pussy belongs to me. Not Alexander, not anyone else—your pussy is mine.”

“It’s your pussy,” I moan. “You own my pussy.”

His tongue, his lips, his hands grabbing my ass, pulling me into him, my hips grinding my aching, wet pussy into his face. I’m so close.

So fucking close.

“Come for me, Maddy,” he moans. “Come on my lips. I need to taste you.”

My body goes stiff and my legs buckle.

My entire body quakes.

My pussy clenches, releases, along with the rest of me.

I am cumming, cumming, and cumming.

“Ahhh, Jackson,” I scream, my palms smashing against the wall, and ecstasy overwhelms me. “Fuck, Jackson. Oh my god, Jackson, no one makes me cum like you do.”

I collapse against the wall, my body shuddering in delight.

He laughs, looks up at me, my juices dripping off his chin. “You’re so fucking wet for me, Maddy.”

I smile. "I've been wet for you since the first time you held a gun to me," I tell him, remembering the moment when he ripped me away from Alexander. "Well, once I knew it was you."

"Can you stand?" He says, offering a hand so I can steady myself.

"Not just stand. I can bend."

"You mean?"

"I mean, I want you to fuck me from behind."

"I'm going to fuck you into oblivion, Maddy."

"I'm ready for it."

He grabs my wrists, lifts them above my head. "Are you?"

"I am."

He presses me into the wall, the cold tile making me shiver. "You're mine."

"I'm yours."

He kisses me. His tongue in my mouth. Possessing me, owning me.

I moan into his mouth. "Please, Jackson. Take me. Fuck me."

"I'm never letting you go," he says.

"Never," I agree.

He reaches down, grabs my ass, pulls me to him. His hard cock pulsing at the entrance to my pussy. My soaking wetness drips, glistening on his cock.

"I'm going to take your pussy, Maddy. I'll bend you against the wall when I'm ready, but right now, I want to stare into your eyes while I fuck you senseless."

The sense of him entering me is like coming back to life after years of years of heartless, empty existence.

I gasp, my body filled with a joyous ache at his fullness.

We stare into each other's eyes as he takes me. As he fucks me, slow, deep, more intimate, more caring, more loving, more lustful than I've felt in years. I want to give everything to him, to this man who is willing to give it all just to keep me safe.

"I love you," I tell him between kisses. "I tried to fight it, but I can't."

"I love you, too," he answers.

He fucks me harder, deeper, my ass slapping against his thighs while he drives his cock into me. Reaching my hands around, I grab his ass and pull him deeper, his cock filling my entire body with the bliss that only Jackson can give me.

"Oh, Jackson. Fuck, I love the way your cock fills me," I tell him, dragging my nails across his ass. "Fucking love it."

"I love the way your pussy grips me," he answers. "Oh fuck, you're tight, Maddy."

"I'm going to cum again," I tell him, my body aching for another orgasm. Pressure building, my heart pounding with the desire to come while his thick cock is deep inside me. I want to see the look on his face, in his eyes, as my pussy clamps around his hard cock.

"Then cum," he urges me on. "Cum for me, Maddy."

"Oh god, Jackson, I'm so close. I'm cumming," I tell him, my whole body trembling with the rush of pleasure.

"Come, Maddy. Cum for me. Cum on my cock."

"Oh fuck, Jackson, it feels so good," I moan, my body shaking, my pussy tightening around his cock. He grabs my hips, thrusts his cock deep in me. My whole body quakes.

"That's right, Maddy," he growls. "Cum for me."

His thrusting increases, the speed intensifies. I clutch him tight, pulling him into me; I want it. In his eyes I see the building pressure, the need to release; Jackson's close, and I want to make him cum, want to feel him cum deep inside me. He thrusts deep, his cock filling me, and I rock my hips into him, bringing him deeper.

“Jackson,” I moan, my body melting under the heat of his lovemaking. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed you.”

He thrusts deep and I gasp; his cock is so hard, so thick, so deep.

“Tell me, Maddy. Tell me how much you’ve missed me.”

“I’ve missed you so fucking much.”

I can feel my orgasm building—unstoppable, uncontrollable, all-consuming.

“I need you,” I say, my voice desperate. “Need you always.”

“You’ve got me, Maddy,” he says. “You’ve got me.”

“I love you, Jackson.”

“I love you, Maddy. Always will.”

“Cum inside me, Jackson,” I beg him, my voice so urgent from the strength of my growing orgasm I don’t even recognize it. “I want to feel you cum in me. I want all of you.”

He grabs my chin, stares into my eyes. “You’ve got all of me, Maddy.” He thrusts into me. “All of me. It’s yours.”

“Jackson,” I plead. My voice is ragged. Hoarse. Shaking with the intoxicating desire that floods through me as I come once more. “Oh god, I’m cumming.”

“Maddy,” he moans. Then I feel it. Feel him release. Feel him fill me with his cum, again and again, as he thrusts his cock deep inside me. “Oh, Maddy. Fuck.”

We’re both cumming, my pussy pulsing around his thick cock, his cock exploding inside me.

My body feels... I can’t think of a word that does it justice. Gloriously satisfied. Salaciously used. Utterly Fulfilled.

“Oh fuck,” I moan as I fall against him, and we both hold each other, staring into each other’s eyes as we orgasm together. I feel whole in his arms. Complete. Fulfilled. More myself than I have in years. This man loves me, loves me wholly; in all the ways I am, in all the ways I’ve been, in all the ways I will be.

“I love you,” I tell him.

“I love you, Maddy,” he tells me. “I’ll never stop loving you.”

He kisses me and I know he means it. I know he’ll always love me. Always be there for me, always protect me.

And that’s a problem.

A big problem.

It’s a love that could ruin all the plans that we’ve put together; a love that puts my family in incredible danger; a love that could lead to Jackson and I finding ourselves thrown in jail for orchestrating this kidnapping and extortion, or even worse, dead if Alexander’s men ever find us.

Though he says nothing, I’m sure he sees it in my face, that nagging, bone-chilling question: what have we done?

Chapter Seventeen

Bullet

Words that we've both wanted to say, words that can't be unsaid, words that change things between us forever, hang in the air.

She's not just my hostage anymore. She's something so much more.

The realization hits her at the same time it hits me.

"I want to get out of here. Now. Please," she whispers, voice low, urgent, desperate.

We dress. On the way out, I slap a handful of cash on the bar to cover the tab. Outside, we make straight for my motorcycle without speaking, and when she slips behind me and grips me for support, it doesn't feel nearly as close as it felt when we came here. She's distant, withdrawn.

The ride back to the lighthouse passes in silence with only the sound of the engine in the night. The entire ride, thoughts race through my mind. How could I slip up like that? To tell her how I really feel when everything depends upon being able to treat her as a hostage? It was a mistake.

It was a mistake to tell her I love her; it was a bigger mistake to let her tell me the same.

We're both smart enough that we should've known better.

But sometimes your heart doesn't give a damn about what's the smart thing to do; it knows what it wants, and it takes control.

Even if it throws everything else in your life into chaos.

At the lighthouse, she leaps off the bike and storms to the door. The lighthouse is a ruggedly beautiful sight, and I find myself momentarily lost in awe of its magnificence—a jagged, crumbling tower thrusting up into the sky. Its long-dead lamp shines with a haunting glow, a gentle reflection of moonlight in the darkness, a shining dead dream surrounded by the

twinkling black. The stillness of the night air is broken only by the sound of crashing waves against the cliffs below us.

I follow Madison.

“Hey,” I say as I close the door behind me. She’s seated on the cot, surrounded by blankets, her laptop open and the glowing screen illuminating an unreadable face. “What we said back there...”

“Was a mistake,” she says with sharp finality. Her voice shaking with anger. Is it at me? At herself? At it all. “An absolute mistake said by some girl drunk on negronis and thirsty for cock. It was meaningless. Utterly meaningless. I’d take it back if I could.”

As much as I love her and want to fight those words, I need to agree with her. It’s too dangerous for us to be in love.

“You’re right. It was a mistake. We can’t be in love with each other. It’d ruin everything.”

She flinches as if I’d physically struck her.

“I can’t love you, Jackson. I can’t. We’re too different. You’re jeans and beer and motorcycles, and me, well, fuck, I like negronis and nice cocktail bars and I actually enjoy the opera. Yes, the literal opera. I think if you actually set foot in an opera house, you’d burst into flames like a vampire entering a church.”

She’s right. About most of it. About the opera house thing, fuck, I have no desire to even test it, because Maddy’s smart enough that I’m sure there’s a reasonable chance she’s right about that, too. I have no fucking inclination to see myself spontaneously combust. What would my road name be then? Smoke?

Actually, Smoke ain’t half bad.

“So what do we do?” I say. “How do we fix this?”

Her eyes flicker to her laptop screen and then back to me.

“Well, I have to focus. There’s a thesis paper I have to finish. I’m going to get to work so I don’t screw up what I’ve worked on for these last four years. And you, well, you still

have hours on your shift guarding me, right?” Her expression softens as I nod. A quirk quickly tugs the corners of her lips upwards into a heated, welcoming flicker that lasts for a moment. “If you can focus on what’s important, I wouldn’t mind if you stayed the night.”

* * * * *

Morning comes. The tide outside changes, dawn creeps upon us, and the sound of singing shorebirds echoes through the holes in the concrete lighthouse walls.

I haven’t slept for a second.

She’s at her laptop, as she has been the entire night, her face aglow with sunrise, with light from the screen, with the vibrancy of knowledge sparking around inside her head. Her mouth is open—sometimes in a beaming smile, sometimes lecturing. Right now, it’s lecturing.

Because I’ve just asked a question.

I don’t even remember what the question was about, because the second I ask it and her face lights up with enthusiasm, I forget everything else.

Though it was probably: ‘what is that and how does it work?’.

Getting the answer isn’t as important as hearing her talk, in letting her shine with enthusiasm and knowledge.

Fuck, she’s beautiful when she’s giving me an answer I don’t understand to a question I don’t even understand, either.

“This is a variation of the Monte Carlo method that I’m working with. The Monte Carlo method is basically an algorithm that uses randomness, tons and tons of random sampling, to find a numerical solution to a problem. It’s used a lot in math and physics, and...”

She trudges out a lot of math.

A fucking lot of math.

Complex math—math with letters, symbols, and signs that look like they’re in a foreign language and have nothing to do

with numbers.

My eyes glaze over.

My ears glaze shut, or whatever the equivalent of going-deaf-from-boredom is; I don't know. I'm not a scholar like she is.

But that glazed-over state only lasts for a second, until I remind myself that this is important to her, that she's willing to risk her life for this math—which I will never, ever understand, because, personally, I'd risk my life to get the fuck away from math—and that it is important to her makes it important enough to me that I can at least show some interest.

I lean in. “Really? That's so interesting. So you're finding a new way to use this...” My voice trails off for a second, grasping at the name for the formula or whatever that she's using. Then I remember it's got the same name as a shitty coupe put out by Chevy. “This Monte Carlo method?”

“Yes. It's the foundation of my thesis paper,” she concludes. She grins, sheepishly, and it's as if my heart is tied by strings to the corners of her luscious lips, pulled to life with each quirk of her mouth. Fuck, she is stunning. So stunning I'd listen to math for her. No, I'd even learn math for her. Which is something far more serious than taking a bullet for someone, because a bullet either passes through you and gets removed during surgery, or it kills you; but math, math sticks around in your brain forever and you have to live with that knowledge. “I know it's boring. You have to be a certain type of person to find it interesting. But I love it.”

“Love it?”

“Well, yeah. I really do.”

“Math? You love math?” I repeat. It's one thing to have a general idea about a person, it's another for them to tell it to your face. It'd be like Marcus telling me he thought the Bimota V-Due wasn't as bad of a motorcycle as it was made out to be; it'd be confirmation of what I've suspected for a while: his childhood habit of occasionally eating paste has had dire consequences for his brain.

“Yes and no,” she says. “It sucks sometimes, and it can be arcane, and yes, sometimes I zone out like you did when I first started talking—don’t think I don’t know every single expression you make, Jackson, because I do, I never forgot—but when it clicks, it just gets me so excited that it feels like my entire body is humming. Do you ever get that way?”

Oh, I do, but what winds me up like that is the one thing she and I promised we wouldn’t talk about.

“I’ll bet you know what I’m going to say,” I answer, delighting in the flush of color that floods her cheeks. “When I’ve taken a stock bike and tweaked the air intake, upgraded the exhaust, or flashed the ECU, and I hear the engine roar and feel that bump in power between my legs, yes, I know what you mean. So you get that way about the Black-Karasinski model, too?”

“Fuck, you actually were listening, weren’t you?”

“You were talking. Of course I was listening.”

“Really? Through all of it?”

“All of it.”

As if I wouldn’t hold on to every word out of her mouth; I spent four and a half years living off the fading memory of her voice. Now that I have her in front of me, I’m going to hold on to every syllable, even if she’s reading the phone book.

“This is just my chance to do something, Jackson. I’ve always had this idea that if I got my degree, if I made the right connections, if I was just successful enough on my own, I could save my parents’ business without the Covington’s help. Maybe I could find them a different investor or a partner, something, anything.” Her voice rises with excitement, then as she continues, it slows, goes quiet. “I don’t want my family to be beholden to those criminals, but getting engaged to Alexander is a way of hedging my bets. If I can’t figure out a way to do it on my own, I’ll do what I have to do to keep my mom and dad from losing everything.”

“I get it, Maddy. You have to keep your focus on what’s important, even if it hurts. There’s people I feel the same way

about, too.”

Maddy opens her mouth, then pauses as the sound of an approaching motorcycle fills the room. My shift is over.

“I can’t let anything impede that, Jackson. You understand?”

“From the start, this has all been about getting you away from Alexander and getting your life back, Maddy. I want you to be safe, happy, and free. So whatever it takes to make that happen, I’ll do it.”

I watch as Madison pauses, her smile outshining the morning sun. Her bright emerald eyes look me up and down, as if she’s assessing me for something, but whatever it is, she keeps it to herself.

For a moment, I’m lost in her beauty, wondering what she’d say if I asked her what was going through her mind right now. But before I can speak, the sound of a revving motorcycle mixed with laughter from outside startles us both and breaks the spell.

Thunder.

His bike sounds different, too. He must’ve made some changes to better fit with his nickname, because now it’s loud as hell.

Maddy quickly turns away from me, hiding the emotion that had been on her face just moments before. “Time’s up.”

But I’m not ready to let go of things just yet; I take a step closer, so close that I can feel her breath on my face. I brush a strand of her hair out of her eyes and tuck it behind her ear.

“Thanks for a great morning, Maddy. Don’t ever forget: I’m in this for you. You are what’s important to me.”

She smiles softly, her cheeks turn a light shade of pink. “I know. I’m grateful. And thanks for talking with me about my paper. I don’t get that opportunity, except in class. No one else really cares to listen. But explaining things to you, answering your questions, just talking to you... it helped me figure something out. “

My eyes widen. “Something about your paper?”

I don’t see how that could be possible—math and I mix about as well as water and motor oil.

“Not about my paper.”

The door to the lighthouse opens and Thunder enters, killing the moment. He laughs loud enough to match his road name. “I ain’t interrupting, am I? Should I get out of here and do a long ride around the block?”

Maddy shakes her head again, and a few stray chestnut hairs brush my face.

Slowly, she steps back and gives me one last smile.

“Not at all. Jackson was just leaving.”

I grunt and turn, nodding hello to Thunder as I head to the door.

“Oh, and Jackson...” Maddy’s voice brings me to a stop in the doorway. “Thanks for all your help. It really was enlightening.”

“Bullet, you helped Maddy the genius out with her homework?” Thunder says, incredulous.

“He helped me get closer to answering a very important question,” she says cryptically. “Take care, Jackson.”

“Holy fuck, Bullet’s a genius, too,” Thunder muses. “A genius who likes to get shot. How do you reconcile that?”

“I won’t be the only one who gets shot if you keep talking like that, Thunder,” I reply. “Take care, Maddy. I’ll see you in sixteen hours.”

Then I step outside and climb on my bike.

It roars awake in a way that sounds more alive, more vital, than it has in a very long time.

When I get on the road, I smile, crank the accelerator, stand up on my bike and let loose with a whoop that echoes for miles.

Chapter Eighteen

Madison

The days pass in silence. Shifts rotate. My thesis develops, grows, refines until something that exceeds even my exacting standards sits glowing in a twelve-point pixelated font on my laptop screen. But the best thing of all is that, every sixteen hours, I get to spend eight with a man who, despite all my smarts, every scrap of logic I can muster, every attempt I make to remind myself of the very obvious fact that he is, at best, a fatal complication to my future, cuts through every argument I can muster with a smile, a glance, or a stray touch.

I know I said I wouldn't; I know I shouldn't; I know I can't; but I can't stop myself—I love him.

Love him because he cuts through all my resistances without trying.

Just by treating me the way he does, how none of the other men in my life do: like I matter.

It's a shift change.

Days into what I've started to call my 'lighthouse sabbatical' and Jackson has just arrived to take over from the always-taciturn Rook, who hasn't said a single word since he arrived beyond telling me to sit, be quiet, and raise my hand to be acknowledged if I have something urgent to say. Needless to say, it's been eight hours of working solely on my paper and feeling like I'm back in elementary school detention.

"How was she, Rook?" Jackson says as he comes through the door, carrying a duffel bag that, if I know him, contains some takeaway from one of my favorite restaurants in Costa Oscura—either a little Vietnamese joint called 'Let's Phoggeddaboutit' which does New York-Vietnamese fusion sandwiches and a Matzah ball Pho that is out of this world, or an Italian restaurant called Bella Notte that does divine Neapolitan-style pizzas—along with a cooler of cold-brew coffee, cold beer, chilled wine, and probably a moisturizing

face mask or two, because the air in this lighthouse is just wreaking havoc on my skin.

“Not terrible,” Rook answers, coolly flipping a page in the newspaper he’s been reading for the last few hours.

“Aw, Rook, thank you so much. You know, I feel like we’ve really bonded this last shift,” I say. “That may be the kindest thing you’ve ever said to me. I’m really touched.”

“Cherish it.”

“Oh, I will. Can I give you credit on my thesis paper? Your kindness and support means the world to me. None of this would’ve happened without you here to inspire me to focus solely on my paper with your glowering, menacing silence.”

I’m trying to be sarcastic, but even talking about my thesis paper puts a smile on my face. I’m just three days away from being able to send it in to my professor, days away from being done with this long journey, and I am so excited and proud of that fact.

“Glad to be of service,” he grumbles, giving me a grim look over the top of his newspaper. “Bullet, are you ready to take over staring at this girl?”

My eyes drift to Bullet; his have been on me this entire time.

“Ready. You can go, Rook,” he says.

“Bout damn time, Bullet. You were five minutes late this shift. That’s five extra minutes you owe me, so I’m going to take that extra time with my Eliza later. Thunder can cover for me.”

“Whatever, Rook. It’s just five minutes.”

“Five extra minutes without her feels like a fucking lifetime, so don’t you ‘it’s just five minutes’ me. You’re lucky I’m in such a good mood this morning that I felt like covering for you. Next time, you won’t be so lucky. Next time, I am out the fucking door as soon as my shift is over.”

“Feeling chatty this morning, Rook?” I say. That might’ve been the longest string of words I’ve ever heard him put

together.

He snorts at me. “Go back to playing your video games, girl. See you in sixteen hours and five minutes. Try to stay out of trouble until then.”

I roll my eyes at the grump. “Bye, Rook. Love you, too.”

Bullet’s phone rings, cutting me off and stopping Rook in his tracks before he can leave. Bullet snatches his phone out of his pocket, frowning at the screen.

“It ain’t Thunder,” he says.

“Who is it?”

“Only one other person it could be.” Bullet holds the phone to his ear, coughs, and speaks in a low, grumbling voice. “Yeah?”

I catch the faintest hint of the voice on the other end of the line, and flinch as if someone screamed in my ear.

“Alexander Covington,” Bullet says. Immediately, a chill runs through me. It is fear and excitement; this is the moment that has dominated my future for days upon days, the lynchpin upon which my life hangs. “I was wondering if you were going to work up the guts to call. I hope that the number on the ransom note didn’t scare you too much.”

Alexander’s voice rises on the other end of the line. Though I can’t make out the words, I can make out the intent; I’ve heard him use that voice with some of his men before when things didn’t entirely go his way. If I shut my eyes, I can picture his contorted face: the angry veins that throb in his forehead and throat, the eyes that bulge with rage, the tongue that spits the most degrading, dehumanizing words at everyone he considers his lesser—which is anyone without the last name Covington.

“Cool it, Alex,” Bullet says.

My eyes go wide.

For ego’s sake, Alexander never goes by ‘Alex.’ I made the mistake of using that name once and it provoked an ages-long

tirade about why he would ever want to reduce his already perfect name.

I hear a click.

It's not the phone being hung up, but the sound of Alexander's jaws clacking shut.

A second of silence falls.

Bullet smirks. "Are you done stewing in your britches, Alex? Are you ready to talk? Because I have something valuable that you want. That's why you called, right? Or are you just wanting to have a conversation with a grown man who won't take your bullshit?"

My heart jumps in my chest, and I give Bullet a warning look. I know my fiancé; there's only so much you can provoke him before logic, reason, and cost-benefit analysis goes out the window. Thankfully, I've never seen that point in person, but I've heard rumors about it. Heard things his bodyguards have said when they think I'm not listening. I have no desire for Bullet to run into that version of my fiancé, especially in a negotiation as delicate as this one.

A look over at Rook reveals similar thoughts clearly on his face. He doesn't have the same emotional stake in this hostage situation as Bullet or I do—he also probably doesn't have the gift with words to even have a negotiation that goes beyond a few sentences—but I debate trying to politely, and quietly, suggest Bullet hand the phone over to him.

Alexander answers with a few muttered syllables.

"Why don't we get down to business, Alexander?" Bullet says.

A few words of assent come through the phone.

"You've read our demands. I'm guessing you have the money together and now you'd like to know how to pay. Is that right?"

Something I can't make out comes through the line.

Bullet's eyes narrow. He frowns. "Did I hear that right? Say that again."

Alexander says something.

Bullet's frown deepens.

"You're joking," he says. "You're fucking joking."

Alexander's voice rises through the receiver just enough that I can make it out. Triumphant. Mocking. Gloating. "I've done the math," he says. "I have people for this, you low-life scum. People far smarter than you, or even that know-it-all bitch I'm engaged to. They tell me that the bump in public opinion and sympathy that I'd receive by being a victim of a tragic crime is considerable."

"Are you really fucking saying what I think you're saying?" Jackson says, incredulous. "You will not pay? You want us to kill your fiance?"

I'm not breathing. I'm hoping this is a joke. That it's just one of Alexander's pathetic power plays, some tragic tactic to regain the upper hand. It has to be.

But Alexander's answer comes through loud and clear, and his tone is anything but joking—it is confident, cocky, exultant.

"I'm saying that my fiance has often annoyed me with her pathetic behavior. I'm saying that I love money more than I love her. So if you want to do me a favor and kill that bitch, go right ahead."

Jackson's mouth hangs open in surprise.

My heart wants to hammer through my ribs and run away, probably to hide somewhere far from here, where it won't have to deal with feeling like my entire world is coming apart.

Everything hinges on what happens next and Jackson looks entirely dumbstruck at Alexander's response. He was supposed to agree to our demands. He was supposed to pay the ransom. He was not supposed to tell my kidnappers to murder me.

I have to act.

I have to save this negotiation.

There's only one thing I can do—I grab my pen, my notepad, and I write.

Only a desperate gambit can save us now.

Chapter Nineteen

Bullet

While I stand there stunned that this upper-class dickwad could so easily choose money over Madison, a note gets shoved into my hand. I read it.

Blink.

Read it again.

It's fucking brilliant.

"So, are you going to kill her for me, you pathetic gutter-dwelling savage?" He says.

"Guess I will kill her for you, Alexander Covington," I say. "Just to be clear, that's who I'm talking to, right?"

"Yes."

"That your full name?"

"Are you a fucking moron? Yes, this is Alexander Aurelius Covington. Now, are you going to spare both of us the time and aggravation and do what you said you were going to do?"

I read the note again and chuckle in anticipation of dropping Maddy's brilliant bomb on Alexander. "Sure, Alex," I say, leaning into the name and chuckling again at the frustrated scoffing noise he makes. "I'll kill her for you. Save you that money that you so very much care about. There's one thing you should know about first: I've been recording this call. All of it."

"So?"

"So, when I kill your fiance, as you so desperately want, I'm going to leave her body right in front of city hall with a copy of this recording taped to it. I'll also send it out to all the newspapers and news stations on the West Coast, as well as CNN, the Times, NPR, the Washington Post, the works. Everyone will learn that you put your wallet above the life of the woman that you told everyone—in public, even as recent as that ridiculous TED Talk you gave—was your intellectual

inspiration and most loving supporter. What do you think that will do to your popularity then, Alex? You think it'll have an impact? I bet it might affect the Covington Corporation's stock price, too."

His intake of breath is audible.

"Don't."

I laugh again. "You made your bed, Alex. It's too late."

I go silent, waiting, relishing the sound of the prick stewing in his impotence.

"Please," he bites.

I savor that word coming from his lips and have to bite back the urge to insult him, make him beg, the way he did to me all those years ago. Doing so could ruin everything we've worked for—he'd know it was me in a minute—but it would almost be worth it. "Please what?"

"Please don't kill her. I'll pay."

"Oh, you'll pay?" I say. "What changed your mind?"

"Fuck you. You know why." He pauses, stewing, maybe snapping his fingers quietly to fetch a butler to change his diaper, or whatever rich man-babies like him do when someone teaches them a lesson. "I want proof of life."

I pause, my eyes naturally going to Madison. She has such a gorgeously smug look on her face. She knows she helped me bend her fiance over a barrel and smack his pasty rich ass. "Proof of life? I sent you the fucking video. What more do you want? Another video of me with her? I wouldn't mind putting my hands on her gorgeous body. She sure has a great ass on her. I would love to see her work it over my cock."

With each word out of my mouth, I can hear Alexander nearly having a seizure on the other end of the line. To a prick like him, I can kill Madison as long as she's not worth anything to him, but the second she's costing him money? Yeah, I better not touch the merchandise.

"Don't. Just let me talk to her for a second, please."

Please. He used the ‘p’ word again. He must be broken.

“You want to talk to her?” I say, my eyes looking at Madison for an answer.

Hers go wide. For a second, I fear she’ll say ‘no.’ Not that I’d blame her—if I were her, there’s no way I could pretend to be so scared that I’d be eager to get back to Alexander Covington. I could literally be roasting in hell, and if Alexander called to ransom me, but wanted to talk to me first, I’d say ‘New phone. Who dis?’

Finally, Maddy nods and I hand the phone over to her.

“Alexander? Is that really you?” She says, somehow making her voice sound both warm and excited to talk to that festering anal sore. “Oh, I’ve missed you so much.”

He says something then that leaves a look of unease on Maddy’s face. I strain my ears, but a lifetime of being around motorcycles and the occasional sound of gunfire means my hearing isn’t nearly as great as Maddy’s.

She notices me trying to listen.

“So you don’t have the money right now. You need time to get it together? Well, why not just talk to your father? Oh, I see,” she says, then pauses while the mumbling noise coming through the receiver tells me Alexander’s going on some long-winded explanation of the financial system to his fiancée, as if she isn’t a fucking expert in the subject. “I see. Yes, I understand what liquid assets are. Yes, I understand it can take time. No, I’m not questioning you.” While the call goes on, I see Madison’s formerly triumphant mood change to one of pain, anguish, and degradation. That motherfucking asshole doesn’t deserve her. He doesn’t even deserve to live on the same continent as her.

The berating continues while I watch, silent.

A glance to my left shows Rook with a look of fury blooming on his face, matching my own.

Finally, Madison meekly says, “Yes, Alexander. I understand. Sorry for questioning you. I’ll give them back the phone.”

I take it. Without waiting for him to speak, I say, “You have our demands. You need time to get the money, fine, but if I even get a hint that you’re trying to fuck with us, we will execute your fiance and rain hell down on you and your precious reputation. You have two—”

That patronizing cockface, he cuts me off.

“—Three days,” he says, brusquely. As if this is some fucking board meeting and he’s whipping his cock out to everyone else at the executive table, waving it around, and no one can say a damn thing because his daddy owns the fucking place. “That’s how long you’ll need to give me if you want your money. Do you understand?”

I blink. How fucking dare he try to take control of this phone call?

“Do you understand the consequences of what will happen if you try to pull any shit?”

“Do you understand it takes time, even for the ultra-wealthy such as myself, to put together the amount of cash that you are asking for? This isn’t like when you get paid for your fucking temp job and walk up to the teller to cash your fucking paycheck so you can buy yourself some cheeseburgers at McDonalds. This is real money. More money than you’ll ever see in your lifetime. Do you comprehend that? Because if you’re too stupid to get it, we are going to have a problem.”

I breathe deep and look over at Madison for support. She has a look on her face like she knows exactly what I’m going through. I’m sure she does. How the fuck did she put up with this guy for four years? Was she waiting for the marriage to go through so she could kill the motherfucker in his sleep and take his money?

She smiles at me and mouths the words, ‘Be calm.’

‘I hate this guy,’ I mouth back.

‘Me too. So does everyone,’ she mouths in a reply.

“Hello? Are you there, or did your pathetic brain have a fucking aneurysm trying to hold a conversation?”

“Look, go fuck off to the White Lotus with your bullshit, Richie Rich. Understand this: you have three days to put the money together, and once you pay us, you’ll get the location where she’s being held and you can come pick her up. But if you don’t pay, or hell, even if you do but you piss me off, know that your fiance isn’t the only one who will get a bullet. I’ll make sure the bullet that I fire into your stupid, shit-spewing mouth is shot from the cheapest, most low-class gun out there; I’ll drive around fucking Oakland until I find the sketchiest bastard huffing Freon straight from a fucking air conditioner, and I’ll buy it from him. So shut your fucking mouth with your high-class bullshit, get me my fucking money, and don’t bother me again, got it?”

Then I hang up the phone.

It is the most gratifying hang-up I’ve ever done, and I’ve hung up on my fair share of telemarketers.

“We should kill that bastard anyway,” Rook says. “Talking to women the way he does, he doesn’t deserve to live.”

“Still might,” I say, imagining the look on Alexander’s face as I pull the trigger. “Still might.”

But the satisfaction is short-lived.

Because now that the call is over, I see the look on Madison’s face. She’s shaken, rattled by her abusive conversation with Alexander. Her face is pale, her eyes wide and glistening with hurt. In just a minute or two of talking, he completely shattered her with his vileness. I fucking hate that she feels so down about herself. That she should ever feel that way, as smart, kind, and drop-dead gorgeous as she is, is unacceptable.

I go to her, put my hands on her shoulders, and look into her eyes. “This will all be over soon, Maddy. In just a few days, you’ll be done with college, you’ll have earned your degree, and you’ll have enough money that you can save your family and never have to live in the same fucking hemisphere as that asshole. You’ve got this. Just hold on a little longer.”

“I’ll try,” she whispers.

I brush a tear from her cheek. “It’s going to be okay. You’ve nearly got your thesis done, right?”

“Yes. It’s done. Now I just have to wait three days until I can turn it in. Why?”

Three days for her, too? Such strange timing.

It’ll be freeing for her to turn in her paper, to be done with her degree, and then receive more money than she’ll ever need.

But I don’t have time to muse on the serendipity of the timing. Maddy needs me. Needs me to free her again from the crushing grip that Alexander has on her soul.

“We’re going out.”

She snuffles, and I brush another tear from her cheek.

“Out?”

“Bad idea,” Rook chimes in.

“Butt out,” I say to him. “After what she went through, she deserves a breather. Staying in this fucking lighthouse for three more days is out of the question. I’m taking her out. Maddy, if you could go do or see one thing right now, anything at all, what would it be?”

Her eyes change—from glassy to bright, as imagination takes over and lifts the corners of her lips. “I’d love to see a show. Like a concert or the opera or a play.”

“Doesn’t your rich asshole ex-fiance run in those circles?” Rook cautions. “This is a terrible idea that’s going to get you caught, Bullet.”

“He’s right,” Maddy says, eyes downcast. “The Covingtons know so many people in San Francisco. They’ve got as nearly as many business connections there as they do in Costa Oscura.”

I shake my head, refusing to give up. “They can’t have people in all the opera, uh, theaters...”

“Opera houses,” Maddy corrects me.

“In all the opera houses and theaters in the Bay Area. It’s just not possible.”

“Wait... Oh, I got it. I know what we can do,” Maddy says, laughing. That laugh is all the music I need to hear for the rest of my life, fuck the opera. “There’s a concert hall in Oakland that I know of. When I was little, back when my family still had some money, we sponsored an orchestra there. Alexander and his friends wouldn’t set foot in Oakland city limits. It’s, uh, not their type of place.” She turns away from me quickly, caught up in the enthusiasm of her idea. After a few clacks on her laptop keyboard, she lets out a triumphant yelp. “They’re playing tonight. Oh, and they’re doing a trio of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos. Are you sure we can go, Jackson? Please?”

Even though I have no idea what these Brandenburg Concertos are, and I’m pretty sure I won’t understand or even like them, the hopeful, happy look on Madison’s face is all I need to know I’m making the right decision, regardless of the risks.

“Get ready, Maddy. We’re going out.”

Chapter Twenty

Madison

“We need to make a couple of stops first,” Bullet says as I slip onto the motorcycle behind him.

“Of course. For clothes, right? Because we can’t go see the symphony looking like this. They just wouldn’t let us in,” I say, looking down at the desolate state of my wardrobe and realizing I should’ve grabbed more than just my laptop when Bullet took me by my apartment. A change of clothes would’ve been nice. I look and smell extraordinarily rough.

“Got my suit at home. We’ll grab it, then get you some clothes from a store. Shouldn’t take long.”

With that, he starts the motorcycle and my thoughts get so scrambled by the roar of the engine that we’re several miles down the road before I realize that we’re heading to his house. I’ve never seen his house. Never known where he lived. Never met his family, really, except saying a brief hello to his father when I stopped by their garage once. And now that I’ve been kidnapped and am extorting my fiancée’s family for tons of money, I’m going to just casually walk into his house like nothing’s happening and meet his parents?

I am freaking out.

More than when I talked to Alexander, more than when Jackson first stormed back into my life and kidnapped me by running the car off the highway.

When we pull into the driveway of a single-story house on the outskirts of Costa Oscura, I’m so close to hyperventilating that it takes me a moment to notice the state of the house—the peeling paint, the sagging roof on the garage, the plywood nailed down over a broken living room window—that speaks to a state of sorry disarray.

“What the hell...?” Jackson murmurs as he slips off the bike.

“This is your house?” I say, shocked I can even get those words out.

He nods, looking around as if he’s seeing the place for the first time.

“Used to be. Now it’s just my dad’s. I haven’t been back in a while. He never was the best about caring for the place, even when mom was alive. But after she passed and after I left, it looks like he just...” He reaches out a hand to help me off the motorcycle, and I take it, feeling a little unsteady on my feet. But after he helps me off, he hesitates, staring at the house. “Maybe it was a mistake to come here.”

“Jackson, it’s okay. I don’t care what your house looks like.”

“My dad doesn’t know I’m back. I never called... When Alexander made those threats, I didn’t want to put anyone in danger. So I just disappeared.” He sighs. “We should go.”

I take his hand, clutch it tight, and smile at him.

“It’ll be fine. Your dad needs to know you’re alive.”

We make our way inside; the door creaks ominously on its hinges to announce our presence. The inside of the house is even worse than the outside, with air that is thick with dust, with age, and a musty smell that makes me wrinkle my nose. The furniture is faded and worn, and the curtains threadbare and stained. It’s like something out of a horror movie.

It’s dark. But down a long hallway to the left, the flickering lights of a television stream through an open door, along with the sounds of some sitcom’s laugh track.

“Dad?” Jackson calls out. There’s no response, and Jackson turns to the door. “We should go.”

“Mr. Reid,” I call out.

A second of nothing, then the television is switched off, and a voice calls from down the hallway. It’s harsh, angry. It sends my eyes glancing to the door, wondering if we really did make a mistake coming here. “Who the hell is it?”

“Dad, it’s me. Jackson.”

“If this is some fucking prank, I’m warning you: I’m armed. Whoever the fuck you are, thinking you can just fucking come here and taunt me about my dead son. You’re trespassing and I won’t hesitate to shoot you.”

“It’s really me, dad. It’s Jackson.” Jackson’s voice shudders, rife with pain, with heart. There’s a glassy shine to his eyes and a look on his face like nothing I’ve ever seen: sorrow and longing. “I was gone, but I’m back now, dad. I’m back and I’m so sorry for leaving.”

There’s a shadow in the doorway at the end of the hall. A quiet response. “Jackson? Is it really you?” The shadow comes a few steps forward, bringing into the light a man clearly broken by pain, by heartbreak. “Jacky, oh Jacky, my boy.” He shuffles toward us down the hall, but with each halting step, his stride grows, quickens, and his posture straightens. He envelopes Jackson in a hug and kisses him once on each cheek. “I can’t believe it. You’re back?”

“I am. For a while, yeah,” Jackson says, hugging his dad back. “I know it’s been hard on you, but I want you to know that I’m okay.”

“Why’d you leave? Why didn’t you call me?” Jackson’s dad says. “What’s wrong? You know you can trust me. I may not look like it, but I can help you if you need something. I’ve still got the shop, I’ve got the house, I’ll sell them both if you need money, son.”

“It’s not that, dad. It’s complicated.”

“And you can’t tell me?” Jackson’s father says, his voice shaken, hurt. “I’m your dad, Jackson. Why can’t you tell me?”

“Because people could get hurt. Just trust me.”

Jackson’s father turns from his son. Maybe he saw something in his son’s face, or heard something in his son’s voice, but he looks right at me, as if he knows.

“Bryan Reid,” he says. “And you are?”

I’m the reason your son disappeared, I want to say.

“Madison.”

“Do you have a last name, Madison?” Bryan Reid says.

Jackson clears his throat. “Dad, better if you don’t know.”

“Son, this is all so confusing. I feel like you’re a ghost, like you’re just here for a moment and you’re going to leave me all over again. I don’t know if I can take that. First your mother, then you...”

“Mom had cancer, dad. You can’t blame yourself for that. You did everything you could for her, more, even. You worked yourself to the bone, and you nearly went bankrupt with all the doctors, the experimental treatments... mom said over and over—to you, to me, to others even when you weren’t around—that you made her so happy, even at the end.”

“You don’t understand, son.”

“I understand, dad. I understand that you’re trying to put everything on your shoulders. You have to stop doing that to yourself.”

His dad is quiet for a moment. “Is that what you’re doing with her?”

I look from Jackson to his father, and back again. I can see how they are cut from the same cloth. See how, if things were just a little different, if I were the one in the hospital bed, Jackson would run himself into the ground, work himself to the bone until his very bones were ground to dust, just to bring me an ounce of comfort. It’s who he is. How he suffered these last four years, living alone in some faraway city, doing what he had to do to survive, but knowing he could never contact anyone he loved, even his father, is just a fraction of what he would endure for me.

That’s what love is to him: sacrifice, even self-destruction. All to make that one person whose life is the center of your world and your happiness just a little happier.

He truly loves me.

Loves me, and in introducing me to his father, is showing me just where our love could lead, once my kidnapping is over.

Jackson seems stunned, unable to answer his father.

I cut in. “No, sir. We’re here because the man I love left a suit here, and he’s taking me to a show. Isn’t that right, Jackson?”

“That’s right, dad. I wanted the woman I love to meet my father. You’re the last family I’ve got, and she’s important to me. I hope that my old suit is still in the closet?”

Bryan Reid nods, his eyes softening as he looks at his son.

“Of course, son. Anything for you.”

He leads us down the hall and into a room that looks like a mixture between a bedroom and a storage closet. There are boxes piled high to the ceiling and clothes strewn about the room, everything in disarray, a room of memories kept locked up, locked away, so Jackson’s father never has to face them, but never has to lose them, either. At the center of the far wall is a small closet. Bryan opens the door, rummages around and causes several moths to indignantly flutter about. He pulls out a suit bag. “Is this it?”

Jackson takes the bag and nods. “Yeah, that’s it. Thanks, dad.”

Bryan smiles at his son, then turns to me. “You take care of him, you hear me? My boy’s been through a lot.”

I smile back at him, feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment. “I will, sir.”

Bryan nods and watches us as we make our way out of the room and back towards the front door. “Jackson,” he calls out. “Come back soon, okay? I love you.”

“Of course I will, dad. I promise. I love you, too.” Jackson’s voice shakes with love, with pain.

As we make our way back to the car, I can feel his eyes on me.

“You love me?” he asks, his voice full of surprise. Not that I blame him. After how much I protested earlier, after how we agreed to put away our feelings and focus on our business arrangement, it makes sense he’d be surprised.

But dollars, cents, and logic don't mean a damn thing to my heart; not when he treats me the way he does: like I mean more to him than all the money in the world.

"I do. No one else cares for me like you do, Jackson. No one else actually treats me like they love me more than they love themselves."

My voice takes on a note of sorrow at that; even my parents, the people who raised me, who are supposed to protect me, don't. Oh, they love me, sure, but not so much that they'd lose everything for me. I am both their daughter and a bargaining chip.

He smiles at me, his eyes sparkling with joy and fire.

They fill me with warmth. There's nothing I wouldn't do to see those eyes look at me the rest of my life the way they are looking at me right now. But they spark regret in me, too.

What will happen to Jackson's father after we part?

Furthermore, what will happen to Jackson? Will he wind up the same as his father, a broken man trudging on, waiting for death?

Doubts and regret swirl within me, though I fight them off by forcing myself to smile harder.

"I love you too, Madison. I always have."

"I know that. And I've loved you, too, always. Even when you broke my heart, there were still pieces that loved you."

We reach his motorcycle and he helps me astride, then he hands me the suit bag to hold while he gets on. Before he starts the bike, I put my hand on his shoulder, making him turn his head. I kiss his cheek, then his lips, drawn to them by the call of my heart. For a long time, we sit there in the driveway of his dilapidated family home, lost in each other's lips, in each other's love.

Finally, he pulls back, smiling.

"We can't miss the symphony show."

“No, we can’t. Also, it’s called a concert, not a show. Or you can simply refer to it as ‘the symphony.’”

“You learn something new every day,” he says.

I look back at his house for a moment, struck again by how broken it looks, how ready to fall into a heap of nothing but rubble and shattered memories.

“What’s going to happen after?”

“What do you mean?”

“To your dad. When we’ve finished with Alexander and taken his money, are you ever going to see him again?”

I can’t forget how small and agonized Bryan Reid appeared; as if he were already dead and his soul was just waiting for his body to catch up to the news.

“I don’t know, Maddy.”

“Will you see him again? Will you say goodbye?”

“We’ll figure it out when it comes up.”

“What will happen if you disappear again?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s tough,” Jackson says. “It’ll be safer for him, anyway. It’s not like I can just pop back into his life for a while after everyone dangerous, like all of Covington’s men, think I’m dead. That’d make my dad a target, and I can’t do that to him.”

“Is that any better than giving him hope and then ripping it away?” Maybe Jackson doesn’t think about these things, but I do. I’ve lived through that pain once before and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. “He’s miserable, Jackson. He looked more dead than alive.”

Jackson shakes his head and starts the motorcycle. “There’s no time for pointless speculation. We’ve got a concert to get to and we have to get you a dress first. I can’t wait to see how good you look.”

Despite the feeling of anxiety growing in my chest, I can’t help but smile. Going to the symphony, getting dressed up, spending a night surrounded by culture, is something that

speaks deeply to my soul. It's one of those things—like coffee, a good book, a lazy Sunday morning, or a hug from a dear friend—that gives me life.

“You're right. Oh, I can't wait to hear some proper music and wear something other than stinky old clothes.” My fingers and toes are tingling with excitement just imagining it. “It's going to be bliss.”

But as we tear away from the driveway, I throw one last look over my shoulder at the dilapidated house that was Jackson's childhood home. Bryan Reid watches us from the living room window, his face pensive, pained.

He knows this is one of the last times he'll be seeing his son.

Is this the cost of our love?

Nothing but misery and hurt for the people we care about?

I grit my teeth and try to force the dark thoughts away, but they resurface just seconds later with a vengeance.

How many more people will we hurt with our scheme?
People who will suffer when we disappear?

So many.

Ourselves included.

But what else can I do?

Because of our actions, our decisions, our future is a runaway freight train barreling forward at full steam and there's nothing I can do to stop it; I can't go back to Alexander and just pretend like nothing's wrong, like life is just going to go back to normal. I have to move forward.

Still, as we speed away, I look to the uncertain future and I wonder just what waits for us at the end. Is there love waiting for us? Against all the odds, against all the differences between us—in who we are and what we believe—can Jackson and I find the love we so desperately ache for, despite all our many differences and the painful consequences of our love?

Or is it misery that's waiting for us?

I know which outcome the odds favor, and thinking about it makes me shiver.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bullet

Wrapped up in a black dress made of silk, with a seductive slit up to her thigh and sensual amount of cleavage, Maddy is a vision. She glows, beaming a bright smile and with green eyes that shine with excitement. As I park the motorcycle in front of the concert hall, I can't help grinning when she slips off the bike and checks herself out in another car's side-view mirror, proud.

"My hair is a total mess, my makeup is non-existent, this dress seriously needs to be tailored, I feel like some vagrant just sneaking in and I wouldn't be shocked if they kick me out for looking so atrocious..."

"And yet, you're going to be the most gorgeous woman there."

She stops what she's doing and aims a frown at me that would be intimidating if it didn't make her look even more gorgeous. Something about the way she firms her lips and her eyes flash with undisguised pleasure while she's trying to look mad.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"You're making me want to skip the symphony and spend all the time kissing you instead."

"Don't threaten me with a good time."

She blushes. "It is tempting. But I did not come all the way out here, riding a motorcycle while wearing a dress and having it billow all over the damn place like I'm Marilyn Monroe just dying to flash my crotch at everyone, just to spend the whole evening making out with you in the parking lot."

"It doesn't have to be in the parking lot. We could get a hotel room."

“Bullet, you’re impossible. We’re going in there, and you are not stopping it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I say, extending my hand.

I take her hand and lead her inside the concert hall.

The place is enormous, with a vaulted ceiling and a stage that’s already set up for the performance. As we make our way to our seats, I can feel the envious glances of other men and women as they look at Maddy. To the last man, or woman, they stare. Because she’s stunning, and it’s not just because of the dress, which fits her perfectly despite her protests. There’s something about her that draws people in, that makes them want to be near her. A radiance, a blinding, blushing smile, and eyes that sparkle with wit and mischief.

How did I get so lucky? Not just once, all those years ago, but again, lucky enough to steal her away from Alexander and to know that the spark of love that I’ve carried in my chest all these years has a twin burning in her heart.

We settle into our seats, and I wrap an arm around her.

She leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder, and the warm feeling in my chest spreads throughout my body. Alexander is out there somewhere, trying to find us, and being here is a gigantic risk, but right now, I don’t care. All I care about is being here with her, listening to the music that I don’t even understand, and feeling her body against mine. It makes her happy, and that’s enough for me.

No, that’s more than enough. There’s no limit to what I’d give to make her smile.

As the symphony plays, I watch Maddy’s face; she’s completely absorbed in the music, her eyes closed and her lips slightly parted. It’s like she’s in a trance, and I can’t help but think that this as happy as I’ve seen her, as happy as she was during our first carefree days together those years ago, when love was first wrapping its seductive noose around our hearts. This is her world—this concert hall filled with nicely dressed people listening to music that sounds like it belongs in the elevator of an office building.

This is her world, and I'll never understand it.

We're so damn different. So different it doesn't even make sense. Like two incompatible, wrongly sized gears somehow miraculously fitting together and working perfectly.

But for how long? How long, really?

I don't belong in a place like this, and she craves it. The suits, the sophistication, the soft music, the softer people—it's where she's happiest.

And me? I mix with this place like oil and water.

Yet somehow, we're together, and we've stolen this moment.

It's perfect, even if I know that it's temporary.

I lean in and kiss the top of Madison's head, and she opens her eyes, looking up at me, smiling with those emerald greens that take my breath away every time I see them. For a second, we just stare at each other, and then she leans up and kisses me. It's a soft kiss, but it's enough to make my heart race.

As the symphony plays on, that one kiss turns into another, then another, and several more. My head spins, my hands roam, my cock stiffens, and she moans into my mouth.

Maybe these concerts aren't so bad.

"Behave yourselves, you disgusting perverts," says an older man behind me, his hissing whisper making Maddy's eyes go wide in embarrassment.

I turn. Look him in the eye. "Go fuck yourself."

"Excuse me, young man? You're going to curse at me just because I don't want to watch you stick your tongue in that slut's mouth?"

"Jackson, we're at the symphony," Maddy hisses, her cheeks coloring. "Just let it go."

I hear her, but I focus my eyes and attention on the older man behind us. Him and his thinning comb-over, judgmental, graying goatee-adorned face, and beady brown eyes that look at Maddy and me like we're worthless. I'm used to that look,

as the son of a mechanic and someone who spent their entire life living on the wrong side of the tracks, most everyone in Costa Oscura looks at me like that, but for someone—for anyone—to look at Maddy that way sets my blood on fire. It's unacceptable. It's reason enough for violence.

“Outside,” I say to him.

“Are you saying what I think you're saying, you degenerate scumbag?” He says.

“I'm saying you need to be taught a lesson, old man. No one talks to my lady like that.”

“You are unbelievable,” he sputters. More eyes turn toward us, and I can feel the weight of their condescending glares all over me. The old man can feel it, too, and it's not sitting nearly as well with him as it is with me. It's a sensation that's goading him into a situation that he knows is trouble.

“You're stalling,” I say. “What's the matter, old man? You can talk a big game, but when it comes time to perform, you can't get it up?”

“This is unacceptable. I'm getting the usher and I'm going to make them deal with you,” he says, standing. Then he looks throughout the row, and not seeing anyone, starts toward the lobby. Probably to corral some unlucky ticket taker to do his dirty work.

I let him get halfway to the door before I get up and follow. I'm not done with him.

Once he passes through the doorway, I pick up speed and catch up with him ten steps into the empty lobby of the concert hall. Everyone's inside watching the show. It's just him, me, and some teenager standing in some booth by the door.

The old man starts toward the ticket taker, his eyes locked on the unfortunate teenager like a lion stalking a gazelle. The fingers of his right hand wiggle in excited anticipation. This probably isn't the first time this old bastard has thrown a fit at this concert hall.

As I glance at the ticket taker, a flash of recognition goes through the teen's eyes and his complexion pales. No, it's

definitely not the first time.

I follow.

“Time to sort this out, you old bastard,” I say and I grab him by the ear, stopping him halfway through the lobby. I twist, pull, and lead him to the doors to the parking lot.

“Young man, release me this instant,” he mewls. “This is unacceptable.”

My eyes meet the ticket taker’s and a moment of understanding passes between us: take it outside and there will be no problem.

“No, I don’t think I will,” I say as I shove open the door and wrangle the struggling, red-faced man out onto the asphalt. “Because then you won’t learn your lesson.”

Once we’re outside, I release his ear and he spins off-balance and takes a swing at me.

It misses wide, and I retaliate with a light punch to his considerable gut. Fat jiggles beneath my fist like a bathtub full of Jell-O in an earthquake.

“You ungrateful shit! You don’t know who you’re messing with,” he gasps. “I’m going to call the police. I’m going to sue you. You’re going to be sorry you ever laid your hands on me.”

I laugh.

The man looks at me, his eyes filled with rage, and he charges.

I sidestep him and track his movement, keeping him in front of me.

He turns and lunges at me and I duck under his arms, then hit him with several quick punches that leave a satisfying amount of blood on my knuckles. The man gasps, and then, before he can recover, I slip behind him and loop my arm around his neck, cinch it tight into a choke, and pull him to my chest.

He’s trapped.

“You’re fucking pathetic,” I say into his ear. “Talking to a woman like that. Insulting her. You think you can just get away with it? That no one will show you up for being the limp-dicked old fool that you are?”

“Let me go,” he gasps. Even helpless like this, he’s still arrogant, still sounding like he’s superior, like I should grovel at his feet and beg forgiveness. I hear in his voice the same tone I heard in Alexander’s when he confronted me that summer night four years ago. The same tone that told me I’m worthless, I’m nothing, that I don’t deserve to breathe the same air as someone like him, as someone like Madison. The same superior tone he used as he told me my choices were to leave town immediately or watch him burn my life to the ground.

Rage overcomes me—rage at him, rage at Alexander—and I squeeze his throat tight. He struggles, sputters, his face coloring first pink, then red, then purple.

“Let you go? I should choke the life from you. You’re never going to learn, you’re never going to change, you’re always going to be a fucking arrogant bastard. So what’s the point of letting you live?”

My grip tightens; he begins to go limp.

I’m going to kill him.

Murder him, right here in front of this concert hall, where Madison is sitting inside, waiting for me, probably worrying about me, that I’ll do this very thing that I’m about to do. I can only imagine the disappointment and fear in her heart. Can I do that to her? Can I hurt her again, no matter how good it might feel in the moment?

All the rage keeps my grip tight. It screams at me to hold on just a little longer, until this asshole’s pulse stops thumping beneath my fingertips. This man is just enough like Alexander that this dark impulse inside me screams to punish him the same way I want to punish Maddy’s fiance.

But I can’t do it.

I can’t hurt her like that.

With a scream, I let go.

He slumps, hits the pavement. He lands ass-first, then he sprawls forward into a puddle, face down.

With my foot, I move him onto his side so he doesn't drown.

For a moment, I look down at him and wonder if I've done enough. Even though I've decided not to kill him, I don't know if he's really learned a lesson. It's not good enough that I've strangled him, if he wakes up and stays the same condescending asshole as he was before.

Some time passes while I contemplate the unconscious man. How long, I don't know, but enough time that the teenager in uniform comes to the door and stands just outside the confines of the concert hall, watching in curiosity.

Maybe he knows what I'm thinking.

Maybe he's urging me to do it, to do what he's probably fantasized about on more than one occasion—give this bastard a taste of his own medicine in a way he'll never forget.

But should I? Is it the right way to teach this asshole a lesson or is there something better I should do?

Then I get my answer, though it comes slowly: the Emperor's New Clothes. Well, not exactly that version. My version has nothing to do with some fairy tale written by some dead old guy. Mine's the animated version about an emperor who gets turned into a llama to learn a lesson in humility. As the son of a single dad who spent most of his days slaving away in a mechanic's shop just to afford our meager life, movies and TV shows were an outsized portion of my upbringing. At least until I was old enough to help my dad out in his shop, then my life was torque wrenches, oilcans, and working so late I could barely keep my eyes open while doing my homework. My teachers would constantly berate me about oil smudges on the papers I turned in, but as long as I turned them in and tried my best, my dad didn't give a shit what grades I got.

I snap my fingers. I know—this old man needs an outfit change. Something to teach him to tone his prickishness down a notch.

I strip him.

Strip him down to his bare skin.

Then I use my knife to cut his fancy pants, shirt, underwear, and suit jacket into shreds.

The teenager lets out a muted ‘Holy shit.’

I look right at him. “Hey kid, anyone asks, you going to say you saw anything?”

“Nothing except that I saw some weird old guy wandering around naked.”

“There any security cameras in there? Anything that’d catch my face?”

“They’re just for show. Except for the one over the register at the lobby bar. That one records, but it’s aimed right at the register cause the owner’s a cheapskate and thinks we steal.”

“Good. Now, kid, this old bastard is going to wake up in a bit and call the cops. If they give you shit, if they really get on you and threaten you to give a statement, just give it. Don’t wreck your life to protect me. I know what I’m doing here.”

“Whatever.”

He leaves to return to his spot in the lobby, though he casts a satisfied glance at the naked, unconscious man as he closes the door behind him.

I allow myself a moment to savor the view, too. Not this man’s splotchy, flabby ass or his bulging belly, but the mud and grime and blood smeared on his face. Even if it doesn’t last, he’s going to wake up and know that he’s worthless. He’ll feel the way everyone like him has tried to make me feel my whole damn life.

That’s worth it.

That is justice.

I feel it in my soul, feel how satisfying it is, and how I can't wait to do the same to Alexander.

Smiling, I adjust my clothes, wipe some of the blood off my knuckles, run my fingers through my hair, and head back inside. As I enter the auditorium, eyes turn and look at me. They narrow, they squint, they peer into me.

They see the truth: I don't belong here. Never have, never will.

No matter what I wear or how I act.

Not like her.

These events, in places like this, with people like these, things that are so important to her, will never welcome me.

I'll always be an outsider. A mechanic's son, a criminal, an outsider. Someone who, no matter how much he tries, will always have a timer hanging over his relationship with that stunning, green-eyed girl.

Because we're too different.

Even all the ransom money in the world couldn't paper over the differences between us.

At some point, Madison's going to want more than I can give her. More than just love. She'll want those things that bring her happiness and fulfillment. Things like the symphony, museums, opera halls, fancy bars.

And then, in trying to mix my world with hers, she'll end up getting hurt.

I can't let that happen.

As I approach our seats, I try to cover my pain with a smile. I see Maddy watching me with eyes that beam with love and profound sadness. Watching me with calculating eyes that see the truth.

We're too different to last.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Madison

When I look at him, I just know.

It hits me with the potency of undeniable truth.

It's in everything about him and everything around us, from the darkly satisfied look in his eyes, the unhidden blood on his knuckles, and the way the air just changes in a deeply wrong way that tells me that our time together is fast drawing to a close. It isn't just how different we are, it's how I know neither of us can change enough to truly belong in the other's world.

We'll never quite fit. There will always be something about us that's just a little offset, a little wrong, and that will never change. Because neither of us can make that large a sacrifice. So someone, him, me, the people we love, or everyone, will inevitably get hurt.

It's as clear as the solution to the most basic math problem. As simple as '*A squared plus B squared equals Jackson is my soon-to-be ex.*'

The second our eyes meet, I know he knows, too.

It shines clear as daylight in the sadly sweet smile he gives me, the kiss that burns with just a little extra passion, as if he's fighting with all his heart to cling to something that's running through his fingers like grains of sand. A long goodbye.

Our end is fast approaching.

The conductor waves his wand, drawing a final, mournful crescendo from the band, and then, with a flourish, fills the air with ringing silence.

The audience stands and applauds.

I reach for Jackson's hand. Squeeze it. Feel some of the slickness of the blood on his knuckles and suppress the urge to flinch.

"Shall we go?"

“You don’t want to stay a little longer?” He says. He sounds reluctant. Not that I blame him for wanting to preserve this moment. It’s one of the last in our attempt at a fantasy: that we could ever really work as a couple. “Isn’t it improper or whatever to leave while everyone’s still applauding?”

It is, but I can’t stand the sound of celebration that fills the surrounding hall. It’s too discordant with what echoes in my heart.

“No. They’ll be clapping for a while, and it’s just tiresome,” I say. A disbelieving look crosses his face and my brain scrambles, grabbing hold of a clumsy metaphor. One that I know he’ll understand. I also know he’s too inexperienced with going to these types of concerts to even question me. “It’s like in a sports game, baseball or whatever, when you know your team’s won, but the game isn’t over. It’s okay to leave then, so you get out early to beat the traffic.”

“Or when you know you’ve lost,” he says. There’s a weight to his words. We both know why we’re leaving.

“Either way, we should go.” I pull on his hand and we exit the concert hall to the resounding sound of applause. We’re the first ones in the lobby, and my steps hasten toward the exit doors so much that I’m pulling Jackson along. Until we step into the parking lot and then I come to a sudden halt. Lying face down on the concrete is the older man from earlier. He’s nude, his bare, bulky body bruised and bleeding, his chest, thankfully, rising and falling in the throes of deep unconsciousness. I give Jackson a questioning look. “Why?”

Why did you have to give me such visual proof you can’t change? That we can’t really work together? That, if we even try to make this happen beyond the ransom exchange, I’ll always have to be watching you to prevent something like this from happening.

“He brought it on himself,” Jackson says, simply. “He needed to learn a lesson.”

Maybe there’s more to the story, but those words are all the answer I need. “Let’s just go.”

It's hard to peel my eyes away from the man's prone body as we walk through the parking lot. It's hard to look away from the truth when it's staring you uncomfortably in the face.

When Jackson helps me onto his motorbike and climbs on in front of me, I've already hardened my heart, encased the sadness within me inside a cold, solid shell.

"Where to now? The lighthouse?" He says.

I shake my head. This is one of our last nights together, and I want to make it special. Despite everything that's happened tonight to cause me pain, I'm still fully aware of all the risk Jackson has taken on for me. That, in his own way, even with all the chaos and confusion he's thrown into my life, his intentions are good.

At least, they're good when he's not beating people unconscious in a parking lot.

This is our goodbye. Even though our physical separation is yet to happen, this is the moment where things truly ended.

I want to give him something to remember us by.

A piece of me he can hold on to.

A final something that I can cling to in the lonely nights ahead.

"I have something else in mind." I take out my phone while Jackson watches me, quizzically, and my fingers dart across the screen in pursuit of a piece of me I haven't revisited in a long time. Then I find it. A couple taps of my finger makes it a reality and I pass him the phone. "Can you take us here?"

* * * * *

Later, the motorcycle comes to a rolling, thunderous stop in front of a familiar house. A house that tugs at painful parts of my heart as I gaze upon it. Enormous windows, two stories, built in the early 1920s, with Spanish-influenced architecture, a red-tiled roof, and a million happy memories.

I slip off his bike and stare at the home, swallowing to force down the bulge building in my throat.

“What’s this? Where are we?” Jackson says.

My eyes sweep over the neighborhood as I turn to him. I swallow again.

“This was my home. I grew up here.”

“It’s beautiful,” he says, politely. His voice is subdued, respectful, as if he recognizes the category five hurricane of emotions swirling inside my chest.

“It’s not my home anymore,” I continue. Then I swallow, twice. A deep breath brings historical air into my lungs, familiar scents I haven’t inhaled in almost a decade. Even in pain, I can’t help but smile; there’s a eucalyptus tree on the corner, a tall, proud tree that despite its hated, non-native status in California, I always loved because of the way it flooded the air with its lovely, perfuming scent. It’s the smell of home, of my happy childhood, of the time before my family fell on hard times. I breathe in that era and I smile.

“What happened, Maddy?” His hand touches my shoulder. His voice is low, caring, and I hear in it the echoes of that dangerous, heart-stopping young man with beguiling eyes who helped me when I was young and desperate and my car had broken down somewhere I should never have been; a young man who lent me a hand, his ear, and stole my heart. “Why here?”

“I want you to see, Jackson. To understand.”

“Understand what?”

“This is why I put up with everything. This is why I took all the misery that Alexander heaped upon me. This is why I fought through university, despite the wishes of my fiancée, despite the privileged destitution of my parents, despite all of life’s obstacles. It’s because I remember this place, this happy place, and I would go through hell with a smile on my face to make this home and all its memories a part of my life again.”

“I’m sorry you lost it. It looks like a wonderful place to grow up.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” I gesture to a window on the lower floor, a massive bay window that afforded me a

perfect view of the yard and an adequate view of my favorite eucalyptus tree. “Right there. I used to sit there all the time. The light was perfect for doing homework.” I pause, smile again, and hear Jackson lovingly whisper, ‘Nerd.’ I nod. “I was. I was a huge nerd. In, like, third grade, when other girls were talking about dip-dyed hair and colored denim—yes, terrible, I know, but it was what was in at the time—I was deep into the quadratic equation.”

“Nerd,” he says again, louder, and still with enough love that I blush.

“Absolutely,” I say. “Next to the living room, where I’d sit in the window and do math or read or just daydream, my dad had his office. Sometimes, he worked at home. When he did, if he had the door open and he saw me sitting there, he’d always lovingly yell at me to go outside and play like a normal kid. I’d yell back at him to get back to work or go into the office, like a normal adult. Then my mom would tease us, from the kitchen or the art studio she had set up in her own room, and tell us to stop bickering and to remember we loved each other. Then she’d tell us both to get back to work.”

“Sounds like they both really loved you,” he says.

“Still do. Even if I resent them for the deal they made with the Covingtons; I know they love me. They’re just scared. Scared and embarrassed that they made such poor decisions, that they mismanaged the business, that they had to sell this home and downsize to something so... lesser... just to survive. I know it kills them, though I’ll never tell them that to their faces. Because what parent would want their kid to point out the elephant in the room—that they failed? Besides, I love them enough that I can deal with it, with anything Alexander wants to dish out, and I believe in myself enough that I know I can get this home back for them, for us, for me.”

Whether it’s with the ransom money or by some other means, getting this home back is one of the first things I’m going to do. I just hope that, somehow, I can be there to see the looks on my parents’ faces when they realize this home is theirs again.

“They’re lucky to have you,” he says.

“I am who I am because of them,” I say, then I stop, caught in the clutches of a loving memory, and my eyes stay on the house as the remembrance plays out in my mind. Finally, I exhale and smile at Jackson. “I tried to show him this house, too, you know. Alexander. Gave him the address, told him to meet me here after work one day, had this plan to show him this piece of me and hoped that maybe he’d appreciate me more. He said he’d come. Then he didn’t. Blew me off and had the shitty excuse that a work meeting ran late and that he had to go to San Francisco to have drinks with a potential client. My history was less important to him than sipping mezcal in some hipster bar with some nameless fucking bullshit influencer guru who probably didn’t give a rat’s ass about working with the Covington Corporation and just wanted the free drinks. After that day, Alexander never mentioned coming here, and I never brought it up. We both knew it was fucking pointless.” I shake my head, exhale, release the fist I realize I’ve been clenching for the last thirty seconds, and then hop on my tiptoes to kiss Jackson on his scruffy cheek. “But I brought you here. You came. This is a big part of me—of who I am and why I am. I am so proud to share it with you. Now, come on, there’s something else I want to show you, too.”

“What?” His voice is smiling,

My heart leaps. I clench his hand tight and I lead him forward to the gates that bar the entrance to the driveway; they’re wrought iron inset into brick columns, closed with a heavy duty iron lock that looks like something used back in the Mission era to shut the gates of a hacienda against the outside world.

“Something inside.”

“But those gates are locked. They’re heavy gates, too. You sure you want to climb them wearing that dress of yours? It could tear.”

“It would tear. If I tried to climb it, that is. But I thought we’d just walk in.” I take out my phone, pull up the

confirmation email I received before we left the concert hall. There's a code in the email, and I quickly enter it into the small lockbox inset into one of the brick gate columns. It pops open, revealing a large iron key. I take it. "But whoever bought this house turned it into a vacation rental. I booked us a night. We're going through the gate and then I'm going to show you something truly special."

"Which is?"

My smile grows. With heat, with intention, with desire. "My childhood bedroom."

"Oh?"

"See, I was too young when we moved away."

"Too young? Too young for what?"

I kiss him. My cheeks color, and I can't help but smile bashfully. It's as if I'm young again, on the verge of growing up, feeling feelings stirring inside me—feelings I don't fully understand yet, but know I like in a way that makes me warm.

"To have a boy alone in my bedroom."

* * * * *

The room isn't how I remember. Of course, that doesn't surprise me. Whoever bought this house to turn into a rental wouldn't have kept the little girl's desk with the plastic, hot pink chair, nor would they have let the bookshelf full of age-inappropriate math books, or the nautilus poster on the wall illustrating the golden ratio. Or the several Barbie dolls or the Easy Bake Oven—because I wasn't entirely obsessed with math and still had those normal, little girl things.

Now, it's just a normal bedroom, decorated in a bland, modern style with furniture an expensive grade or two above IKEA, yet still looking as lifeless and character-free as if it were assembled from mass produced parts.

Still, I can see all that used to be here. Feel all that used to be here, too. That loving, familiar flush of childhood, of warmth, of love, fills me.

But there's something new here, too. Someone new.

Him.

“This was yours?” Jackson says. “Little Maddy grew up here?”

“She did. I liked to read in that corner over there,” I say, pointing. “I had a hot pink beanbag chair. So pink it nearly burns my retinas just remembering it. I loved that color for a time longer than I’m willing to admit. Over there I had my Barbies, and where that bland, blue-blanketed bed is, was where my bed used to be, too. It looked nothing like the one you see now. It was more colorful, with a duvet so big and fluffy that it was like sleeping with the love child of a rainbow and a cumulonimbus. To this day, I’ve found nothing as comfy as it used to be.” I slip onto the bed.

It creaks.

A familiar creak.

Laughing, joy bubbling inside me, I turn and inspect the bed beneath the sheets.

“What is it, Maddy?” Jackson says.

Quietly, I continue my inspection. Then I burst out laughing again.

“The blankets are different, but the mattress is the same—there’s still marks from when I was really young and playing with my mom’s nail polish—and the frame is the same, too. It was never anything special, just a basic frame, but I remember the creaky noise. Oh my god, it’s my old bed.” I pat the spot next to me. “Come on, get over here.”

He joins me. “And now?”

“We’re both adults. We both know.”

Unable to just sit, pushed by the urge to kiss those impossibly kissable lips, to kiss away the feeling of loving sadness swelling in my chest, I lean in and press my lips to his.

He reciprocates.

Hot, intense, with a kiss, with a hand on my back that pulls me into him; my hands—one on his back, gripping his

strength, one on his thigh, moving higher—explore him in return.

With a sudden move, he pushes me back on the bed.

With another sudden move, he climbs atop me, holding my arms pinned above my head.

“Yes,” I gasp between kisses. His hands are on the straps to my dress, slipping them off my shoulders. I help, shrugging, moving the fabric across my electric skin. “The zipper’s on the back,” I moan, lifting myself just barely off the bed, pressing my chest to him.

Nimble fingers free me.

Another pull and I’m bare before him, except for a pair of thong panties so sheer and delicate it’s a miracle they exist. His eyes widen, flash with desire.

“Well? Are you going to leave the job undone?” I say.

“Never.”

His lips travel down my bare chest, across my goose bump covered tummy, until the hot breath from his lips tickles my pubic mound through the near non-existent lace of my panties.

“Oh god, you’re making me so hot,” I moan, fisting my hands in his hair, pushing his face into my sex. “I need it now.”

The wetness from my arousal is already showing through the lace. My breathing grows heavier and heavier as I feel his lips, his tongue, move across my soaked sex.

I slip my fingers in the thin waistband of my panties, pull them down.

“I want you to eat my pussy in my childhood bedroom. Do it, Jackson.”

He grips the panties and pulls them the rest of the way off. His lips return to my thighs, to my wet, waiting, aching pussy.

“I’ll do more than that, Maddy,” he murmurs as his tongue makes me shiver. As his slow, succulent kisses fill me with impossibly heated desire. “I’m going to make you come, and

then I'm going to fuck you on your childhood bed. Fuck you so hard, so deep, that you're screaming my name and begging for every drop of my cum."

With the touch of his tongue, I thank god for inventing the orgasm. Especially the one I feel rising on my inner horizon, the cosmic, cataclysmic orgasm that I know is going to shatter my small world to pieces.

His tongue slithers over my clit, sends electric pulses of pleasure rocketing through my body, filling me with the need to cum. His hands grip my ass, pushing my pussy to his face, crushing my sex to his mouth.

"Yes," I moan, my voice shaking with need, with desire. "Just like that. Give me your tongue."

The orgasm rises inside me, imbuing me with a yearning, an explosive desire so strong I know it's about to overwhelm me. I'm almost there.

"Yes, Jackson," I moan. "Eat my pussy. Eat it. Make me cum."

He works my clit with a swirling of his tongue, a sucking and a nibbling of his lips, with moans and growls of his own.

"I'm going to make you come." His eyes look up at me, lock with mine, burn with heat.

As his lips caress my aching clit, he makes good on his promise.

With a growl, his mouth locks around my clit; he sucks it and slithers his tongue over it. His hands hold my ass high, pressing my pussy against his face, while my toes curl and my thighs shake and my back arches and my head pushes against the pillows.

I scream at the ceiling of my childhood bedroom, racked by incredible passion.

"Oh, god," I shout. "Fuck, Jackson. Oh, my fucking god." My voice breaks into an incomprehensible tremor, a violent shake of passion, before my tongue returns to my control.

“Fuck me. Fuck me now. Give me your cock and fuck me until I scream.”

He stands, eyes locked on mine as he strips off his suit, a burning smile on his lips; a chiseled chest, firm abs, tattoos, and a rock-hard cock fill my vision.

Then he climbs onto the bed.

My childhood bed shakes as I wrap my legs around his waist, moaning.

My childhood bed shakes as he presses his cock against my waiting pussy. I feel every inch of heat, every pulse, the slick wetness of precum as it dribbles from the head of his cock.

My childhood bed shakes as he pushes into me, as he fills the wet slit between my thighs, as he pushes his cock as far into me as I can take it.

A gasp breaks my lips.

A gasp, and then a moan.

I clench my legs tighter behind him; my nails run lines down his muscular back, drawing blood.

He grins at me. “You can do more than that. Let’s make this one to remember. Give me everything you have, Maddy.”

Moaning, panting, I claw at him again, digging in my nails and leaning up to whisper in his ear, “I want to feel every drop of your cum in my pussy, Jackson. I want to watch you melt as you fill my tight cunt with your cum.”

My childhood bed shakes as he pounds me, as he fucks me, as he makes me cum again, screaming, twitching as his hard cock pounds me into ecstatic oblivion.

“I’m cumming, Jackson. Fuck me, give me all of your hard cock. Make me feel it. Fuck me like you hate me.” Screaming, I claw at his back again, begging for more, urging him to fuck me senseless in the same room where I slept innocently every night as a young girl.

Growling, he pulls himself from me, drawing a sad moan from my lips at the moment of separation. Then he flips me

over, grabs my hips and pulls me into position; with a growl, he fills me so deep I sink my teeth into the pillow and scream so hard my throat hurts.

But I want more.

Need more.

If this may be the last time we're together, I want something that, years from now, I can think back on and feel myself get so wet I won't be satisfied until I've touched myself.

“Put your finger in my ass, Jackson. I need it in my ass.”

He does as I ask, and the new sensation makes me buck, makes me build towards another orgasm. I look at him over my shoulder—the ink on his arms, on his chest, the fiery look in his eyes, the muscles that ripple and flex each time he thrusts his cock deep inside me. Each pushes me further to the edge.

I'm going to come with his finger in my ass, with his cock deep inside me, as I moan and writhe in my childhood bedroom.

“I'm almost there, Jackson. Harder. Faster. Just a little more.”

I feel his fingers dig into my hips, his cock slam into me, his fingertips penetrate the tense muscles of my ass, his grunts and growls and groans fill the room.

Then, with a gasp, I break; the orgasm explodes through me, a violent, bone-shaking, mind-altering orgasm that drowns me in the pleasure of being fucked.

I turn, beg. “Fuck my ass.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I want you to fuck me in my ass in my childhood bedroom.”

Shutting my eyes, letting loose a deep, relaxing breath, I give myself over to the darkly primal sensation of him carefully slipping his thick cock into my willing ass.

It takes time, a long, sweet sensation of slowly being filled by his hot, pulsing cock.

I relish every second.

Release long breaths that every time end in a heated hiss, “Fuck my ass.”

He does. Goes deep until he’s filled me completely, until my nails and knuckles are knotted into the bed sheets, my teeth sunk deep into my pillow like a predator, and his hands holding my hips in place while he gradually fucks me faster, deeper, harder, until his balls are slapping my slickly wet pussy and my body is thrumming with vibrant waves of pleasure that surge through me with each thrust.

“Fuck, your ass is so tight,” he moans. “So tight, so fucking hot. I love that I’m the first to take your sexy ass in this bed. Can you feel it, Maddy? Can you feel the way you make my cock throb inside your ass? I’m going to cum. I’m going to cum for you.”

Then his cock pulses.

His grip tightens.

A sharp exhale that makes me release the pillow from my teeth, makes me look at him over my shoulder, watch as he throws his head back, overcome with the pleasure my body gives him, driving each thrust harder, more desperate than the last, each thrust forcing the bed frame to issue an echoing cry, until, at last, a passionate and profound moan comes from deep inside him as his cock releases in my ass.

“Give it all to me, Jackson. All of it. I want every drop of your cum,” I urge him. Every moan, every twitch, every drop of cum from his thick cock. I want it all. I want to hold on to this burning moment so that, years from now, I can relive it, relive this night in my deepest fantasies while I masturbate.

He pulses, twitches inside me, and a smile lifts my lips as his entire body shakes.

Then, with aching slowness, he removes himself from me.

“Holy fuck, Maddy,” he gasps as he lies down and places his arm around me, pulling my sweaty, sex-drenched body to his own. “Holy fuck. I’ve never cum that hard.”

“Well, I think we broke my old bed in.”

Then I shift a little so that I can pull him even closer, press my body even tighter to his. As I do so, the bed issues a loud squeak. It sounds relieved that its punishment is finally over.

“Broke it in, definitely. Broke it completely? Maybe. Fuck, am I alive? It feels like I’m floating. Or having a heart attack.” He pauses, checking his pulse at his throat with his free hand. “Still alive. Heartbeat’s fine, too. God damn, that was... wow.”

“Let’s get some sleep,” I say, kissing him. “Then maybe in the morning we can try for round two.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Laughing, I kiss him again.

“Checkout isn’t until noon. The cleaning fee the rental site is charging me is absolutely exorbitant, and I plan on getting every penny’s worth.”

Smiling, he kisses me deep, in a way that pulses a shocking burst of energy through me and nearly wakes me up enough that I’m ready to get started right now. But I force that urge away.

What I want is sleep. Real sleep. A good night’s sleep in the arms of the man I love, in a room that represented such a happy time in my life. A beautiful memory that I can look back on, once mine and Jackson’s time together has drawn to an inevitable end.

Because we’re too different.

Too wildly different to live in each other’s lives.

Once the ransom money changes hands—that’s when we must part.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Madison

Once we leave my childhood home, the remaining time passes in the most beautiful, sublime haze. It's like that final transition period between daytime and night that photographers call the Golden Hour; every kiss, every smile, every whispered 'I love you,' every time we have sex, has more sparkling vitality, more meaning, because each of us—whether or not we want to say it out loud—knows that the sun is about to set on our relationship.

We hold on to it all. Cherish it. Grip its dying light.

"I love you, Maddy," he whispers, following words with a kiss that makes my heart ache and swell.

"I love you, too, Jackson." I wrap myself in his love, his arms, in the blankets, as we lie in bed, moonlight shining through the window, marking the close of the last day of our relationship.

He drifts to sleep.

I stay awake. Watching the moon, the stars, the black sky through the small window in the crumbling lighthouse wall. They all beam light down upon us, as if they want me to see every moment of this night clearly. Every line on his now-sleeping face, everything I want to kiss, everything I wish I could keep in my life, but know I can't.

Jackson lets out a soft, sighing snore.

I watch him sleep for a long while, memorizing everything.

Then a new light catches my eye. Something harsher, brighter, more mechanical and unnatural than the soft moonlight.

My phone.

At first, I try to ignore it. Nothing is more important to me in this moment than savoring this final night with Jackson, in writing every memory in my mind, my heart.

Then my phone shines again.

And again.

An insistent pest intent on intruding.

Frowning, I slip out of his arms, out of bed, and snatch my phone off the milk crate that serves as a makeshift nightstand.

It's Ashley. A lot of Ashley.

First, a photo of a note taped to the door of my professor's office. Then a forwarded email she received from one of her professors, along with a reminder that, if I'd been around campus any time in the last few days instead of hiding out in the middle of nowhere, I'd know that the school administration has stated that, because of rumors about widespread cheating thanks to some new technological toy on the internet, all thesis papers need to be submitted in print.

In person.

And some professors are even requiring students to sign a declaration that their submitted work is purely their own, and that any proof found to the contrary will entirely negate the completion of their degrees.

Based on the picture that Ashley sends me of the notice taped to my professor's door, my submission deadline is nearly the same time that Jackson will make the ransom hand-off with Alexander.

There's no way around it: while Jackson is off getting the money from Alexander, I'll have to go to my professor's office, turn in my paper in person, and sign some form saying I didn't cheat.

He will not like it.

I don't like it, either.

I'd rather be anywhere else, safe, waiting for the money to change hands before I disappear into the wind, clutching a ridiculous, life-changing amount of cash. Not out dodging witnesses and whatever relentless thugs that my fiance has working for him while my lover risks his life to get the cash that'll change my future and end our relationship.

The enormity of the task ahead settles upon me, suffocating me with its weight. How do I even broach the subject with Jackson?

The mere thought of discussing my departure fills me with a mixture of anxiety and guilt.

My gaze drifts to him. His features sit softly in the embrace of sleep. He remains blissfully unaware of the brewing tempest.

I climb back into bed and into his arms.

I find solace, warmth, and a love that stirs both euphoria and despair within me. Deep down, I know our paths will diverge, and soon.

Because no matter how things go tomorrow, it ends between us.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jackson

Morning comes, and I'm not the first to open my eyes. Not by a long shot. My eyes open to gentle sunlight and the subtle clacking of fingers on a keyboard. When I slide out of bed and look around, I see Maddy is already awake, her eyes staring intently at her laptop screen. A light stream of classical music fills the humid morning air, so quiet I can barely hear it.

"What's wrong?"

She ignores me, her fingers still moving, and a frown locked in place on her face.

"Maddy?"

Her frown deepens. She holds up a finger for a moment's silence, then her fingers return to her keyboard, clacking away. Something ominous and painful grows in my gut, a familiar agony like that moment four years ago when everything between us ended.

It's not a surprise, but it's definitely not welcome.

Finally satisfied, she raps a few more clicks on her keyboard, grabs a scrap of paper, and scribbles something on it, which she hands to me.

I look at it. There's nothing but numbers and a name I don't recognize: Eurydice Fields.

"What's this?"

Madison is quiet for a while, looking at me, a soft, sad, confusing smile on her sunlit features. There's no one else in the world capable of capturing and crushing my heart with a single expression.

I know what's in my hands, even if I don't want to admit it: an ending.

"Maddy?"

"My paper's done, Jackson," she says. "Well, honestly, it was done a while ago. I had to make a few tweaks to it this

morning so it'd look better in print; something about the margins needing to shrink a little. It took me forever, from about an hour before sunrise until twenty minutes ago."

"Twenty minutes ago? So, what were you working on just now?"

"That," she says, nodding toward the paper in my hand. "That's for what happens next. Just in case. But I have something else I have to talk with you about first."

"What are you talking about? Why are you being so cryptic?"

"I have to turn in my paper in person."

I stand, suddenly. "What? Why?"

She looks away from me, looks down. "This morning. I have to hand it in to my professor around the same time you'll be getting the money from Alexander. They say it's because some students were using some program to falsify their papers or cheat on them; I'm not sure of all the reasoning, I just know that I have to be there, give my professor my paper, and sign some document saying that I didn't cheat."

"You have to do this at the same time as the ransom exchange?"

"The same time," she pauses, looks at me with a calculating eye. What she's evaluating, why she's evaluating, I have no idea. "Well, almost at the same time. There's a brief window between the two, so maybe you could send Rook or Marcus, or both, to collect the ransom and you could come with me. We could spend a little more time together before... before the money changes hands and this is all... done. Is it important that you be there?"

Important? It's vital. Just as necessary as it is to get the money, I have to be there to see that defeated, broken look on the face of the man who ruined my life. Alexander has to know that I'm the one who beat him. Me—the low-class, poor son of a mechanic that he forced out of town years ago. This is my revenge.

“I have to be there. It’s the only way. But Maddy, I don’t like you going in to the university. It’s too risky. There has to be some other way to get your paper in. Can’t you contact your professor?”

“Too risky?” Her eyes come up to mine. There’s profound fire burning behind the green in her eyes. “I’d rather risk bumping into one of Alexander’s goons than face the sure risk of losing my degree. This isn’t up for debate, Jackson. I’m going.”

My fists clench. How can she be so casual about something that’s going to put her in so much danger?

Then I open my mouth to protest—to remind her we have so much riding on this ransom exchange that we can’t deviate from our plans now—but she frowns so heavily that my lips glue themselves shut.

“I’ve thought about it from every angle, Jackson. There’s no way around it. Unless you want our last memory together to be us fighting, and I mean literally, physically fighting, this is how it has to be. I did not suffer through four years of hell—hell inflicted on me not only by Alexander, but by you, too—to have anyone take this moment away from me.”

It’s insanity. How can she not see this?

“Jackson?” She says, eyeing me expectantly. I can’t help but notice her fists are clenched and her jaw is set in the same way mine gets at the moment just before I’m about to throw down with someone. To argue is to turn her from the woman I love into the woman who wants to rip open my jugular.

“Fine,” I say. “I hate it, but we’ll figure it out.”

“We’ll figure it out? No, that’s not how this goes. I’m going to the university to turn in my paper. Do you want to come with me, or not?”

I hesitate. As I do, she breathes a sigh, and my mind scrambles ahead, considering what comes next; I want to go with her, to watch her back while she steps into dangerous territory where any of Alexander’s men could be waiting, yet I need to be at the ransom exchange, to look Alexander in the

eye and let him know that I've won. I need the revenge that I've craved every moment of the last four years.

It's like she reads that all on my face.

With sudden determination, she nods.

"I'll take Marcus with me," she says. "You go to the exchange. It's clearly very important to you."

We both know where this is heading: the end.

"You sure?"

"I am. It's for the best. Like you said, you have to be there to get the money; this is your plan—you're the one in charge, so you have to make sure it goes right."

I hold up the paper in my hand.

"So this? Eurydice Fields and some numbers—what is this?"

"For after," she says with forceful finality.

"After?"

There's a growing sound in the distance that I know is Rook and Marcus approaching. It's about time for our crew to assemble, to orchestrate the last steps of our plan. In just a short time, I'll be taking a ridiculous sum of cash from Alexander Covington.

"It's an alias, a bank account number, and a routing number for the First Union Bank in the Cayman Islands. It's mine. That's where you can send the money."

"To some empty name and number on a piece of paper?" My voice rises, angry. It's so impersonal, so disrespectful of everything I've done for her, everything we were, everything we are, everything that's ending. It's like our love doesn't matter, like my sacrifice doesn't matter. It's nothing more than a business transaction. "You think that it's going to be over just like that? What the hell, Maddy?"

She nods. Her voice is weighty, sad, but determined. "Just like that. Because, like we've said all along, once this is over—we disappear."

“I love you. How the hell can you think I can just let you walk away like that?”

“Because we don’t work together, Jackson. We both know that.”

“Don’t work together? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You know it, I know it. Our lives don’t work and either of us can change in the way the other person needs them to.”

I shake my head. “This is foolish, Maddy. Think about it: once Alexander discovers that you’ve run off with his money, you’ll be a fugitive, just like me. Don’t end it like this. I know I don’t have as fancy a name as him, or the same wardrobe, and I definitely don’t know shit about classical music or whatever magic money math you do, but I love you. I know you love me, too, unless you’ve been lying all this damn time.”

“It isn’t a lie, Jackson,” she says. “But I’ve looked at it, I’ve thought about it, I’ve wracked my heart and my brain over it, and I know you have, too. You know as well as I do that we’re too different to be together. I mean, you beat the shit out of that old guy and stripped him in the parking lot of the symphony, and you were proud of it. I was mortified. You held me at gunpoint and kidnapped me, and you were proud of it. I was terrified. And in a few hours, you are choosing to go get the money from Alexander, even though you know damn well that Rook or Marcus could get it just fine, because you want to spit in Alexander’s face. I want to get my degree and help my family—I don’t give a single shit about revenge.”

“Maddy, I—”

The door opens, revealing Rook, Marcus, and Eliza. All three of them looking serious, ready to finish this dangerous job.

Maddy slams her laptop closed and gives me a withering stare.

“No more arguing, Jackson. If you ever loved me, you’ll respect my wishes. Marcus will take me to the university so I can turn my paper in. You’ll wire the money to the account

I've given you, and we'll never see each other again. It's over."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jackson

I ride like hell from the lighthouse.

After everything that's happened between Madison and me, I can't be around her for another second. Though it may have been inevitable, according to her, there's still something viscerally painful about having the person who holds your heart—the person you sacrificed blood, sweat, and years of your life for—crush your beating organ in front of you.

All I have left is revenge. Revenge and hate.

My soul is on fire as we pull up to the abandoned warehouse that is to be the location for the ransom exchange; I have to salvage something out of this terrible day, even if the thing I'm salvaging is the joy of revenge against Alexander.

"Some spot you picked," Rook mutters as we get off our bikes. "It'd be a compliment to say that this place smells like ass. Of course, it'd be a lie, too. It's fucking worse than that."

I look at the ruined building, and I smile.

"It's not much now, but it used to be something. I picked this place for a good reason, Rook. Just trust me."

"Well, it's isolated. I'll give you that. No one sane would live downwind. And no one with eyes would live within visual distance."

This place is an old brewery, filled with corroded kegs and smelling of malt, hops, and mold. It went out of business a decade ago, but it used to be the home of Black Coast Brewing, where my dad's favorite beer was made. It was what he'd drink at the end of a good day, those days when he'd almost forgot about mom's death, when business was good, or on those rare times when I got something close to a good grade on my report card. It was the first beer I ever tasted, and I remember nearly spitting it out because of its dark bitterness. It took me a while to get a taste for it, but I kept trying because I knew those times sitting on the front porch with dad were

destined to be memories of the great kind. Black Coast Brewing went out of business by the time I turned sixteen, but dad had started his downward trajectory long before that. No matter how hard I tried to help him, I knew where things were going.

But seeing this place, even as it is, feels good. It takes me back to those rare memories of hope, and right now, it's something to cling to.

I need that.

Revenge and memories—that's all I've got now.

Rook turns and looks down the lone road approaching the old brewery. He squints, shading his eyes against the high sun.

“They're coming. We should get in position. Oh, and Bullet?”

“Yeah, Rook?”

“I know Madison broke up with you earlier, and you must be feeling like shit right now. Now's the time to stuff it down and deal with that later. I'm not your counselor, I don't have any words of wisdom for you, except to tell you this: if you fuck things up and keep me from getting back to Eliza, or if you ruin this ransom exchange and cost me the money I was going to use to take her on a vacation—because my lady works too damn hard and needs a fucking break after all this—I will kill you. Murder you in a way that's so brutal and bloody that people will remember it for generations. And if Alexander and his men get to you first, don't think that'll save you. I'll find a way to bring you back to life just so I can kill you again. Are we clear?”

I watch the pair of SUVs approach, can feel my needed revenge drawing closer, too.

“I won't fuck this up. I've sacrificed too much to get us here.”

Rook draws his gun, taps it, and keeps it in a loose grip. “Better not. Now, let's get into position.”

He and I move deeper into the brewery, deeper into the stink, the rot, the dark.

The air is tense, thick, and choking.

My heart beats with rage as the moment draws closer. Rage at everything, past and present and future, that Alexander has robbed from me.

The pair of dark SUVs arrive. The vehicles pull to a stop, the doors open, and out steps Alexander, flanked by six of his hired thugs, all heavily armed and muscular. I can feel my grip on my gun tighten as they come closer. Alexander looks around, his gaze cold and contemptuous as he takes in the scene before him.

“So, this is who my money is going to,” he says with a sneer. “Two insignificant fucking peons on bikes.”

Rook steps forward, his gun raised and pointed at Alexander’s head.

“Yeah, it’s nice to see you, too,” he says coolly. “Now shut your fucking mouth and hand over the money.”

“This is how you do business?” Alexander snorts and rolls his eyes. Then those piercing, pompous eyes settle on me. “You just don’t die, do you, Jackson? I have to say, I thought your similarities to the common cockroach started and ended with your propensity to live amongst trash, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Money. Now,” I say, gesturing with my gun.

Alexander’s six thugs heft their weapons and look to their boss.

“And then?” Alexander says.

It sounds less like a question and more like a promise, as if he wants exactly what I want—to finally introduce murder into our relationship. I knew the second he stepped out of his vehicle and gave me that derisive, denigrating look of recognition that there is only one way things could end between us, and I can’t wait to rip the money out of his cold, dead hands.

“Then you get the location where we’re keeping Madison. You give us the money, you get her. Pretty simple transaction, unless something like that is too much for your brilliant business mind?”

A snap of his fingers, a nod of his head is all it takes to put things in motion. “Get the money. Let’s get this over with.”

Five of the men tense, fingers resting tight to the triggers of their guns. The sixth man walks to one vehicle and pulls out a heavily laden duffel bag.

As the man brings it to me, I lock eyes with Alexander. Peering into his repulsive orbs, I hunt for something more than arrogance, something closer to defeat, to pain, to regret. I want to see him suffer. I want him to feel this defeat. Deep down, I need it. If I can’t have love, at least I can have hate. At least I can take that from today. I may have lost the person most important to me, but I’ve still won. It doesn’t matter how much money Alexander has, how much above me society thinks he is, I still beat him.

“Go ahead. Open it. It’s all there,” Alexander says. There’s a ghastly hint of a smile on his face and a twinge of anticipation in his voice.

Rook and I trade wary glances.

He nods, his finger moving an imperceptible amount closer to his trigger; something isn’t right, but no matter what it is, if Alexander tries anything, Rook will be ready to send a bullet right into his heart.

Ready for all hell to break loose, I open the bag.

Inside, I see a pile of bills, twenties, fifties, and hundreds, all immaculately fresh and banded together as if straight from the printing press at the federal mint. I exhale in relief. It’s all here: the money to give to Madison, the money to set my father up and keep him safe, the money to take care of everyone else I care about.

Then I spy something else. It’s rectangular, metal and plastic with a glass screen: a phone.

I take it out.

“What the fuck is this?”

“The button on the side. Press it. Turn it on,” he says, his voice growing from anticipatory to mocking. “Go on, Jackson.”

I press the button, and the screen comes to life.

On it, I see an image that stops my heart. I stand, frozen, staring, shocked and in disbelief as a nightmare shimmers on the silvery cellphone screen. What I’m seeing can’t be real. There’s no way.

Rook curses again as he catches sight of the phone.

“I should’ve known better to trust that this rich, silver spoon motherfucker would’ve held to the deal. Or that a gigantic fucking idiot like you, Bullet, was even worth the risk. Fuck you all, I’m out of here. I’m through with this fucking shit.”

With that, Rook pulls the trigger, and an intensely loud crack erupts from his gun with as much earth-shaking fury as a thunderclap during a lightning storm. There’s a puff, a flash, and then Alexander lets out a shout of surprise as the bullet hits him square in the chest.

He drops.

Then all hell erupts.

Roaring, Rook becomes a tornado of violence, his gun unleashing bloody mayhem.

“Fuck you, Alexander. Fuck you, Bullet. Fuck all of you all in this ridiculous fucking enterprise. Fuck you all to hell and back with a red-hot poker, you worthless pieces of shit.”

The other men return fire and the air fills with the pungent smell of gunpowder and screams of pain.

But Rook’s aim is dead on, and he’s a better shot than anyone has any right to be. While running, he sends a bullet into the forehead of the first bodyguard he fires at. The next man—a rifle-toting thug who is standing between Rook and his motorcycle—Rook hits in the shoulder, then the knees, forcing him to buckle over, screaming, as Rook runs by. Rook slows for a second to bash him in the head with the butt of his

gun and then finishes him with a shot to the back of his skull. Blood, bone, and brain-matter blast out what used to be his face, coating the grimy concrete floor in viscera.

“Fuck you all,” Rook screams.

He climbs atop his motorcycle, still firing, pinning the other men down with a hail of bullets. Rook then starts his motorcycle and revs the engine, burning rubber and filling the air with acrid smoke.

I stand, frozen, my eyes still glued to the phone.

On it, I see her.

She’s alone, walking hurriedly down the streets of Costa Oscura, with her eyes wide and terrified, and most frightening of all, an imperceptible red sniper’s dot sitting at the center of her chest.

Maddy.

As the combat stills, silence fills the warehouse. Even though so much of me is screaming for me to put my gun to use, I can’t look away from the phone in my hands.

Because I still love her.

Because, in that moment, I understand the gravity of the mistake I’ve made by coming here instead of going with her.

Because, in that moment, I know that Maddy and her love mean more to me than revenge.

Then Alexander’s laughter reverberates through the warehouse, chilling me to the core. He sits up, smiling, and lifts the tailored shirt of his too-expensive suit to reveal a bulletproof vest.

“You didn’t think I’d come here in good faith, did you? That I wouldn’t figure you out? That I wouldn’t be prepared? Jackson, for someone who I thought had already reached rock bottom in terms of disappointing me with your ineptitude, you continue to break new ground.”

His mocking words stir me to action, and I level my gun at his face.

“Do it, Jackson,” he says. “Think. How many times have I tried to kill you? Pay me back. Do it. But know that the second you do, she’ll die, too, and you can watch it happen right there on that phone in your hands.” He laughs, and yet his eyes flicker to my gun, a hint of disturbance behind their mockery. “I shouldn’t have to spell this out for you, but I will, since your idiocy knows no bounds: I have men watching her, and that red dot on her chest, well, even you know what that is.”

For a long moment, I weigh my options: Alexander doesn’t know we’re broken up. That the only thing between Maddy and me now is an impersonal business transaction and a hell of a lot of heartache. He doesn’t know that the only thing I’m clinging to is my need to see his blood spilled on this concrete.

I could still do it. Could still pull the trigger and earn that bloody revenge that I so desperately crave. If I do it right, if I shoot Alexander right between his eyes and make my escape, I’ll come out of it with his blood on my hands and a duffel bag full of money.

Assuming his other thugs don’t kill me before I can get away.

They likely will.

But it just might be worth it to see the look of surprise on Alexander’s face just before he dies. Just before I die.

It really might be worth it.

Except I still love her.

Desperately.

Money, my freedom, my life, none of it matters compared to her.

“What do you want?” I say.

A snap of his fingers has one of his men take out handcuffs. Another, a black bag to go over my head. They approach and, knowing what’s at stake, who’s at stake, I stay still.

“You,” he says. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you. Yet. Not for a very long time.”

My last sight before the handcuffs cinch around my wrists and that black bag slides over my head is Alexander's mocking grin.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Madison

The anguish from breaking up with Jackson lessens as I slip off of Marcus' motorcycle and feel how truly right it is to be back on campus. This is what I worked so hard for. This dream kept me going through four years of Alexander's torture, and it's that hope that I cling to now, even though those bright spots that I envisioned in my future seem so much dimmer now without Jackson's love. I brush tears from my eyes and reach into my pocket and take out the flash drive. Something so small and insignificant, bought at an Office Depot for less than five bucks, holds my key to finally earning my degree, to controlling my future. Me, controlling my future; not my parents, not my evil, arranged fiance—me.

My degree is my independence, my self-determination, my future.

Everything important to me.

Yet now, even that sweetness seems bittersweet for what I've lost.

"Lets go and get this over with," I say, gesturing for Marcus to follow.

A quick stop at the campus library to print off my thesis paper leads to another stop at the campus bookstore to buy a laminated cover and have it spiral-bound, which finally results in me standing outside my professor's door, with my hands shaking, heart thumping, and sweat beading on my brow.

Minutes from now, I'll have turned in my paper, signed the forms, and I'll be done with this journey.

"I'll be right down the hall, Maddy," Marcus says. His voice snaps me out of my apprehensive reverie. Until now, I'd been so focused on putting my paper together, in making this monumental paper look presentable, that I'd forgotten he was with me.

"Thank you, Thunder," I say.

He smiles at hearing me use the nickname he's so proud of.

"I'll be keeping an eye out. Jackson will call any minute now, too."

I nod, not even taking my eyes off the door to my professor's office. The prospect of being rich enough to change the course of my life and the lives of everyone I care about doesn't distract me from what's really important: what waits for me inside this door.

"Good luck," Marcus says, then he leaves.

"Thank you," I whisper.

It's so quiet I doubt he can hear it, but I can't speak any louder with my heart in my throat.

It all ends now.

Then I open the door.

Professor Braithewaite looks up from his computer as the door opens. His desk is clean, neat, organized. Everything on it—from the planner, to the scratchpad, to the penholder and the keyboard—sits at precise angles from one another, which is to be expected from someone who cares so much about Quantitative Analysis that they've given up on working in the higher-paying finance field and want to teach it to others instead, just to make sure it's taught right.

"Ms. Sinclair, this is a surprise. I hadn't expected to see you today, especially after your string of absences. Are you all right?"

His surprise sets me back a bit, but it doesn't shock me; I've been absent a lot, and I don't blame him for making a comment with a slight edge to it.

"I'm sorry, professor. I had some personal business come up that, well, made my life difficult for a while." Such a simple way to sum up reuniting with the ill-fated love of my life and orchestrating a life-changing fake kidnapping. "But I'm here to turn my thesis paper in."

"Your thesis paper?" His voice is quizzical. "You're here to turn it in?"

Maybe he didn't expect me to even show up at all. Again, I don't hold it against him after the way I've behaved lately.

I hold the thesis paper out to him. My hands shake slightly with excitement. This is the moment. This is what I've ached for—it's finally coming true.

"Yes. I printed it off and bound it, just like you requested. I'm here to turn it in and sign the declaration that I didn't cheat, too."

When he doesn't stand and take it, instead just sitting there, staring at me, confused, I set the paper on the desk in front of him and then grab a pen from his penholder. I've been through too much, risked too much, to get to this moment and I won't let his befuddlement hold me back.

"Professor?"

"Ms. Sinclair, what is this?"

"This is me, turning in my paper. And borrowing a pen to sign the declaration," I say. "Is something wrong?"

"Why is your paper printed?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why not just email it to me like the rest of your class?"

My heart falls. Down, down, down into the yawning dark depths of mortal terror.

"Because you and the rest of the school administration said it had to be printed and all the students had to sign declarations saying that their work is theirs alone, that they didn't use some cheating program or whatever."

Or whatever.

My possibly last words before my heart hits rock bottom and terror overtakes me are 'or whatever.'

"They—and I—said no such thing. Where are you getting your information, Ms. Sinclair?"

I'm mute for a while. A long while. While my brain runs a calculus that it never thought it'd have to perform: why would

Ashley lie to me?

As it adds the incomprehensible pieces into a solution that I'm not sure I want to know, a soul-swallowing sense of dread comes over me and I put the pen back in the penholder—because, even terrified, I'm not a pen-stealing asshole—and then I run out into the hallway.

Something is wrong. Terribly wrong.

I have to get to Marcus. We have to get out of here, because one of my dear friends just lied to me, to bring me here, at this moment, for some reason I don't know. The implications of that fill me with utter dread.

The door slams behind me, startling several students passing by, and I throw my eyes left and right, looking for Marcus. Which way did he say he'd go? Has he heard from Jackson yet? Maybe he'll know what's going on.

First one way, and then the other, I run down the hallway, looking for him.

When I don't see him at the first end, I call out his name, "Marcus? Where are you?" but receive no answer.

The other end of the hall yields nothing but emptiness and fills me with apocalyptic horror.

Where did he go?

Did he abandon me, or did something else happen?

Suddenly, I have the sense that I'm being watched. Not just by the passing students, who are understandably staring at me like I'm having a mental breakdown—which I am—and are logically giving me a wide berth, but by someone else. Someone sinister.

I'm alone. Alone and in danger. Yet not alone.

Frantically, my brain scrambles for answers and clutches to the resolution that, no matter what is happening, I have to get out of here. I have to go on the run.

My first stop should be my apartment. I have things there—money, credit cards, clothes, a passport—that I will need on

the run.

I take off running down the hall, my heart galloping in my chest. Every step I take feels like it's echoing through the entire building, calling out for my pursuers to come find me. I can't shake the dreadful feeling that someone is following me, yet every time I turn around, no one is there.

I make it to the stairwell and descend the stairs two at a time. My mind is racing, trying to figure out what's going on. Why would Ashley lie to me? Where is Marcus? As hard as I try to stay calm, I can't shake the suffocating feeling that something is terribly wrong; I have to run; I have to get to my apartment; I have to escape.

As I burst out of the stairwell onto the quad, I stop for a moment to catch my breath and take in my surroundings. The bustling campus is still going about its business, completely unaware of the panic that has taken hold of my life. I take a deep breath and try to settle my racing heart. I need to think logically, to figure out what my next move is.

My apartment is only a few blocks away. I head in that direction, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of danger. Every car that passes, every person on the street, is a potential threat.

I'm hyper-vigilant, my senses on high alert.

As I turn a corner, I see a figure in the distance walking towards me. Is it a friend or a foe? I can't take any chances.

I duck into an alleyway.

My mind races as I try to come up with a plan; I need to get to my apartment, but I can't risk being seen by anyone who might be after me.

I run down the alleyway, my lungs burning as I sprint, trying to put as much distance between myself and the shadowy figure following me. The air in the alley is fetid, smells of rotting trash and spilled beer, and each frantic, gasping breath chokes me.

As I reach the end of the alley, I look back over my shoulder and see the figure is still there, still walking towards me.

I run, darting around corners, sprinting across open streets, moving from one alley to another.

I need to get to my apartment. That's where I'll be safe.

I turn down a side street, then another, and another, at one point I duck behind someone as they're entering their apartment building, taking advantage of an ajar door, and race down the hallway of their apartment complex and out the opposite side. Every second, I'm sprinting until my lungs are screaming and the muscles in my legs are exhausted, begging for even a moment's reprieve.

But I keep going.

I will not be caught.

Finally, I come to my apartment building.

As I approach my building, adrenaline courses through my veins, urging me to keep moving, to run inside and sprint up the stairs until I reach my top floor room, where I know I'll be safe.

But I stop myself.

It'd be a mistake to sprint into something that could be a trap.

So, taking a deep breath, I slow my heart rate and I slip inside the building, casting wary glances down each hallway as I make my way to the elevator. It's empty. The hallways are empty. Carefully, I step inside and hit the button for my floor.

The ride up feels like it takes an eternity. An eternity spent in mind-numbing fear.

Someone is after me.

Someone set me up.

My protection has disappeared, and there's been no word from Jackson.

Everything is falling apart and everyone I care about may be in mortal danger. Never in my life, even when a masked Rook, Thunder, and Bullet were kidnapping me at gunpoint, have I felt so close to certain death.

The doors slide open and I step out, my eyes searching the hallway for any signs of danger. It's quiet and empty, but that means nothing. I approach my door slowly, my hand reaching out to turn the handle. I take a deep breath and push the door open, bracing myself for the worst. I'm ready to fight, I'm ready to run, I'm ready to scream.

The door opens.

I see Ashley.

Sitting in my living room, facing the door, with her hands folded in her lap, and a smile on her face. It's a smile that, despite her intent to seem calm and welcoming, I can't help but see as conniving and wicked.

Then I freeze.

Not because of her, but because of what I see behind her.

Who I see behind her.

“Mom? Dad? What are you doing here?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jackson

The metallic taste of blood floods my mouth. Pain throbs through my battered, beaten skull. My tongue is a swollen, immobile muscle. When my eyelids manage to pry themselves apart, breaking the dried blood that binds them together, I see the same sight that greets me every time I return to consciousness in this nightmare: Victor Stone. He stands in the corner of this room, watching me, my blood dripping from his knuckles, painted across his tattooed forearms, even droplets splattered upon his forehead.

He swings again, his fist connecting with my jaw with bone-shaking force.

I fall. I'm handcuffed and unable to catch myself. I land in a heap, my head hits the concrete floor and I spit blood, bile, and vomit.

He laughs. Grips me under the armpits and hauls me back into the chair.

Then falls silent again.

Victor never speaks as he beats me. He's just a silent dispenser of merciless torment.

I breathe, blink some more of the blood out of my eyes, and try to focus on anything but the man who's breaking me apart, piece by piece.

The dim light of the room reflects in the small puddles of blood on the ground. The air has a sharp tang, an acrid bite that makes my swelling eyes water. It tastes of copper.

The air is heavy with tension; the silence punctuated only by the distant sound of footsteps echoing through the corridor outside. They approach. Stop outside.

Victor smiles.

The door opens.

Alexander, the puppet master of my torment, strides into the room, his gaze filled with sadistic pleasure. He revels in my helplessness, in the power he holds over me.

“Enjoying your stay, Jackson?” Alexander sneers, his eyes glinting with malicious intent. “It’s so nice to see you again.” He walks closer to me, his shoes tapping against the cold stone floor. He stands over me and looks down at my broken body. “How does it feel to know that you are only alive for as long as I say?”

My body screams for revenge, or, at the very least, release from this wretched existence. I muster what little strength I have left and spit my reply: “You can beat me all you want, Alex, you cocksucking asshole, but I won’t give you what you’re here for. I won’t beg for mercy.”

He places a finger beneath my chin, traces a leisurely line across my face that digs into bruises, cuts, lacerations. There’s a flashing second where he looks at my blood on his hand and his breathing quickens, his pupils dilate, his cheeks flush as if he’s aroused. Then he shakes his head and those probing fingers return to exploring every nook and cranny of my facial wounds. I fight to suppress the urge to flinch at the pain, to keep my eyes locked on his soulless orbs.

“You are mine now,” he declares, a cruel smile playing on his lips. “And I will make sure that you suffer every single day for your insolence. Jackson, you are going to suffer a very long time.”

“What the fuck kind of game are you playing at? Just fucking kill me. And do it right this time, not that half-ass way before, where you just fucking shot me and dumped me in the bay.”

Alexander chuckles, his laughter filled with derision. He circles me like a predator, reveling in his power over me. The flickering light of the bare bulb overhead casts eerie shadows across his face, accentuating the inhuman malice in his eyes.

“Oh, Jackson,” he says, his voice laced with sadistic delight. “I have no intention of killing you just yet. I have something

special planned for you, something that will break your soul piece by piece.”

A chill runs down my spine as his words sink in. My mind races, trying to decipher his twisted game. He’s going after Madison, my love, the woman I would give my life for. Am giving my life for. Panic clenches my throat, and I struggle to contain the fear that threatens to consume me.

With rage—rage that is exceedingly easy to find just looking at Alexander’s self-satisfied face—I force the fear and panic down. I can not give him the satisfaction.

He watches me expectantly.

Not wanting to give him the pleasure of asking first, I stay silent, stubborn, my jaw clenched.

Alexander’s patience doesn’t last long. Sighing, he rolls his eyes and then, with a tilt of his head, he unleashes Victor.

Victor batters me like a relentless hurricane. Fists that hammer flesh and bone with vengeance. Each blow draws blood, spit, bile from my broken body.

“You’re only making it harder on yourself, you know,” Alexander says, once he’s felt that Victor has brutalized me enough. For now, at least. “Maybe that’s why you are who you are. Unable to make the right choices. Unable to stay out of the way of your betters. The world will be better without you in it.”

I spit blood on his fancy pants.

He contorts his face in a way that makes the violence that Victor unleashes on me more than worth it.

“Yes, you do like making it hard on yourself, don’t you?” He says. Then he smiles, kneels until his face is within inches of mine. “You’re much more determined than your friend Marcus, who we have as well. But your resistance just makes what I’m about to tell you so much sweeter. Did you know that, right now, I have her? That I have someone in the room with her—in her own apartment—along with her beloved parents?”

“Fuck you, Alex,” I say, not knowing what else to say to express the hate I feel. The shortening of his name strikes him hard enough that it makes the blows I receive worth it.

“They’re going to give her a choice. Well, not much of a choice, really, because Madison, for all her poor decision-making recently, is smart enough to recognize the situation she’s in. She will come back to me. We will be married, as planned, as scheduled, and you will get to watch. I’ll have a video feed streamed to this very room, and you can witness it as we are married. You’ll witness our wedding night, too. I’ll have Victor hold your eyes open as I defile every part of Madison’s body.”

“She’ll never marry you.”

“Again, she won’t have a choice. That’s where you and her differ, Jackson. She understands these things. Madison will understand that if she tries to walk out on me, she will die. Just as you’re going to die when I’m done with you. In the end, she will come to me willingly. Or willingly enough. Oh, Jackson, I am so going to delight wrecking her while you watch.”

I steel myself against the pain in my body, in my heart, my voice filled with determination. “You won’t break me, Alexander. I will get out of here, I will save her, and I will kill you.”

Alexander’s bitter laughter reverberates through the room, echoing the depths of my despair. “We’ll see about that, Jackson. Enjoy your time alone while I bask in the joy of stealing everything you hold dear.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Madison

In the safety of my apartment, a place I once considered my haven, I confront an unexpected gathering of unlikely enemies. Ashley, one of my closest friends and confidantes, stands before me with an expression of strained worry on her normally carefree face. She grips my hand tightly. The imposing figures of my parents, Richard and Cassandra Sinclair, flank her, their disapproval clear by the way they lean forward to peer at me over Ashley's shoulders. Confusion swirls within me as I try to comprehend the purpose of their presence here. Whatever it is, what I know is that the hair on the back of my neck rises in alarm. My body tenses, ready for danger.

"I've been so worried about you—" Ashley starts.

"—We all have been so worried about you. Where have you been, Madison?" My father says, cutting in.

My mother frowns, both worry and disappointment clear on her face and in her voice. "No one's seen or heard from you for ages. It's like you've just disappeared. What's going on, honey?"

I take a step back until I'm almost standing in my doorway. The urge to run still swells inside me with powerful force. I'm facing my family, people I know should make me feel safe and loved, but something feels utterly wrong.

"Ashley, what are you doing here and why are you with my parents?" I say. My eyes narrow at her. I can't forget that she lied to me about the thesis paper. What game is she playing?

"I know how important your thesis is to you," she says. "I had a feeling you'd be showing up on campus today. So I called your parents, and I asked a few friends of mine to keep an eye out for you. When they saw you heading this way, your parents and I decided to wait for you in here. We have to talk, Maddy."

Ashley's words hang in the air, shrouded in concern. Concern, and something else. Is it malice? A threat? Jealousy? It's impossible for me to tell, I don't know her like I thought I did. All I'm certain of is that the woman that I thought was my friend is a friend no longer; she's something else entirely.

"Ashley is worried that you're running away," my dad says. "That you're planning on running out on your wedding. The last time the Sinclairs and I talked, they expressed similar doubts to me about how much... fidelity... you might be feeling toward your wedding."

The weight of their gazes falls upon me, their expressions a mix of disappointment, concern, and an underlying desperation.

"Is it true, Maddy?" My mom asks. "Are you going to abandon us?"

My mom's words feel like a physical blow, shaking me to my core. They are both pleading and accusing, asking me how I could be so selfish by not protecting our family's business and urging me to fulfill my duty by marrying Alexander Covington. Her words bring forth floods of guilt and resentment which tear through me with an intensity that leave me breathless. The haunting sensation of being used by the people I love is relentless, yet no matter what I do, I feel as if I have no escape from the situation.

Each accusation sends me stepping backward until I press my back to the door. In front of me stands both my parents, their eyes pleading, accusing, dominating. Behind them stands Ashley, a triumphant, tiny smile on her face.

"Mom, dad, I can't..."

"Don't say it. You promised, Maddy. You promised. Everything depends on you. We all depend on you. Can you really do this to us? Can you really abandon your parents like this?" My mother is implacable, merciless, pleading.

She advances.

Anger, fear, sadness, longing—these emotions fight for dominance within me; I think of Jackson, his broad shoulders

and kind eyes, wish he were here to bear this burden with me; then guilt washes over me as I remember the shattered look on his face when I rejected his last entreaty to reconcile our relationship.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes and I quickly blink them away.

I am breaking. Broken.

As despair seeps into my very bones, I have no other choice. The weight of familial obligation suffocates the last of any resistance I have. I have to give in to the people who are supposed to support me, respect me, love me. Return to my expected state as a bargaining chip to save the family business.

Resigned to my fate, I nod slowly, my voice barely a whisper.

“I will stay. I’ll go through with the wedding.”

Those few words rip the life from me and I collapse on my couch, broken.

My parents and Ashley sit down beside me—she to my left, they to my right. They have me confined, trapped.

For a long time, I don’t speak.

Thankfully, they don’t push me to speak, either.

They all sit silent, glad, all believing that they’ve helped me do the right thing.

Except for Ashley. I no longer know her. I have no idea what that bitch is thinking.

Ashley’s smile widens, and she pats me on the leg in a consoling way.

“It’ll be all right,” she says. “This is for the best. For all of us.”

I roll my eyes away from her.

Then there’s a knock at the door. Two quick, proper raps, before there’s the sound of a key entering the knob. In alarm, I

sit up, my stupor suddenly gone and adrenaline flooding me as I enter a terrified fight-or-flight state.

In strides Alexander, my soon-to-be husband.

He looks like a man in complete control, his eyes a smoldering mix of smugness and triumph, as if he had been expecting us all along.

“Madison, my love, how I’ve missed you,” he gloats. “Ashley, Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, I am glad you’ve found my missing fiance for me.”

Ashley stands up quickly and greets him with a simpering hug. My eyes narrow. Alexander returns her embrace absentmindedly while his calculating gaze roves the room, taking in each of us and our reactions to his presence.

After giving my parents only the most cursory, dismissive look, he gazes at my face as if searching for something that I have hidden. That, or to impart a message that he knows everything. Whatever it is, his purpose seems clear: to assert his dominance over me and regain control of the situation. I am nothing more than a pawn in his twisted game of power and manipulation.

I stay silent, refusing to greet him, refusing to stand, refusing to even acknowledge his filthy existence.

The three of them stand together talking quietly among themselves, yet though they talk about my impending wedding, somehow I feel left out, an invisible barrier keeping me separate from them and their conversation. Ashley moves closer to Alexander, speaking softly with barely contained excitement radiating from her body language. My parents seem pleased with Alexander as they make polite conversation, which he responds to without enthusiasm or warmth—an exchange so banal it almost hurts to watch. They’re selling me, and now that the deal is assured, it’s time for chit-chat.

I remain seated on the couch, feeling completely alone despite being surrounded by people who supposedly care about me.

This is my life now—powerless.

Tears prick at my eyes again, but I push them away; there is no time for mourning.

“Madison, come. Don’t keep me waiting. I have important news about us. About our future. Everyone—all our friends here, and those elsewhere—will want to know this,” Alexander says. His emphasis on that word, elsewhere, twists my stomach and I can only think of Jackson.

What has he done to him? Is he okay?

Alexander steps forward, taking my hand. His skin is cold and clammy, his grip unyielding. The room feels still as he speaks in a voice unnaturally deep.

“We shall wed in two days’ time,” he declares, slowly raising our entwined hands for all to see. “There is no need for delay. I am tired of waiting to make you my wife.”

Tiny tremors build in my body. I feel a scream building and I clench my jaws shut to keep it contained. I’ve entered a nightmare. Everything is distorted, warped, twisted.

“Of course,” my mother says, her eyes wet with happiness.

My father nods his agreement, his lips smiling in a thin line. “We’re all excited about the wedding. I can’t wait to see how beautiful my daughter looks in her dress.”

I’m ready to vomit.

The image of puke getting all of Alexander’s too-expensive clothes, and the look of shock and disgust that would mark his face, nearly makes me smile.

Nearly.

I don’t think I’ll be smiling for a while.

“You are excited, aren’t you, Madison?” Alexander says, tightening his grip on me.

“Very,” I whisper, unexcited.

“I’m glad you agree, my love,” Alexander says. It’s shocking to hear that word—love—sound so cold, so anti-

love. He smiles. “Tomorrow, my family will hold a celebration dinner in honor of our two families joining. Then, the following day, Madison and I shall join our lives until death do us part.”

Everyone smiles, nods, and Ashley even hugs me. “I can’t wait for you to get married, Maddy.”

I again suppress my urge to spew terrified vomit all over my husband-to-be.

“Good!” Alexander says, smiling again in his sick and wrong way. “It’s settled. Now, I have to go—I have people to see, arrangements to make for the wedding.” He turns to Ashley. “Ashley, would you make sure that Madison has everything necessary for tomorrow and for our special night together? It should be just as we discussed earlier.”

Ashley nods quickly, her smile growing even more wide and sickeningly sweet.

“Yes,” she says, reaching out to take my hand. “I’ll take good care of her.”

I wince at her touch, feel dirty and violated, and pull my hand away.

Ashley’s smile wavers slightly, then she laughs.

“Maddy, relax,” she says, her eyes taunting me. “It will be for the best. I know you have nerves about your wedding. It’s understandable to have cold feet—I know I sure as fuck would if I had to settle down with someone, even someone as great as Alexander—but you have to get yourself under control. You don’t want to hurt anyone, do you? Especially not the man you love?”

It’s such a pointed question; I know she’s not talking about Alexander.

Icy cold runs through my veins. They must have Jackson. That means I am truly alone; his life, as well as my future, all depends on me.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“The real dream comes in two days, my darling, when you finally become my wife.” Alexander’s grip tightens around my hand like a noose as he brings it to his lips. His words ring in my ears like an ominous death toll, crushing my spirit and extinguishing the last spark of hope in my heart for a brighter future. “Then our new lives begin together.”

No. No life begins for me—my life ends in two days.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Madison

The next day comes too quickly, with too much of my time spent under Ashley's watchful eye. Now, as demanded, I find myself at the Covington Residence, standing in the dining hall, wishing I were anywhere else on earth. The opulent dining hall is a vast space with dark wood tables and chairs. Elaborate chandeliers cast a warm light over the room and cast shadows in the many nooks and crannies. Paintings of yachts sailing valiantly through calm waters, of foxhunts set against rich scenery from times gone by, of European villas adorn the walls and, sitting central to everything, are a pair of Renoir paintings. The soft sound of conversation fills the air, punctuated by the faint tinkling of delicate porcelain cups.

This is the putrid, pulsing heart of the Covington Residence, a home so fabulous that many in the neighborhood—and those who operate in certain lofty circles of Costa Oscura society—simply call it 'The Residence'.

Dominating the center of the room is a long table set for the grand celebration, adorned with fine china and shimmering silverware, surrounded in some parts by chairs occupied by the most connected of Costa Oscura's wealthy and powerful, while other chairs sit empty as their intended occupants circle around the room socializing.

My heart sinks as I enter, my eyes scan the room, and I take in the presence of my parents, the Covington family, and Ashley, my former friend, now an enemy.

Why did she do it?

My feet feel like lead as I stand in the doorway.

The room is alive with bright laughter and cheerful chatter that bounces off of the walls, yet to me, it sounds like a funeral dirge. This is my last night before I'm wed to a monster of a man, and I have to spend it surrounded by enemies and former friends, by their grovelers and hangers-on. Heavy sadness wells up inside me—regret, remorse, a wish that Jackson were

here, a hope that Jackson is, at least, still alive—and I allow myself a moment to feel it, to remind myself that I am alone, I am the only person I can depend on, and that no one in this room is a friend. Then I force those feelings deep down inside me and put on the polite facade I know I must wear; I have to keep control of myself; I have to be calm, cool, calculating, because that is the only way I will survive this nightmare.

Yet controlling that boiling cauldron of emotion is so daunting; I want to run the second I take another step into the room, even though I know that running would be pointless. So I grab a glass of wine from a passing servant. Sip it. Empty it. Grab another. The numbness the wine brings seems like a haven, but I know it's just a temporary refuge.

I circulate.

The room is a blur of faces and conversations, the wine in my hand like an anchor to keep me grounded. I make polite, trite conversation with all the guests, some of whom I recognize and some whom I do not, none of whom I actually care for.

I eventually come to Mr. Jonathan Covington—tall, silver-haired, and imposing—the dominating patriarch of the Covington family. He greets me warmly, but his piercing gaze belies his true intentions: to size me up and break me down.

“Madison Sinclair, I trust you are enjoying the party?”

My voice is stilted, awkward in my throat, like it's not me speaking, but some stranger inside me instead. Yet even that stranger knows how dangerous Jonathan Covington truly is. “Of course. How could I not enjoy such lovely company?”

“It is important that you do. I want my guests to see what an attentive, loving fiance my son has.”

“They will.”

He lowers his voice, ever aware of even the potential that a passing server or, even worse, a guest, might overhear him. “Do I need to explain to you the consequences? I know you are a bright person, however I understand you may be unfamiliar with this way of doing business. Know this: it is

vital that you grasp your role, as well as its importance to both you and the lives of your friends and family. If you prove yourself an asset to the Covington family business, the people you care about will reap the rewards. If you prove yourself otherwise, well, reaping of a different type will be necessary. Do you understand me, Madison Sinclair?”

What frightens me most about Jonathan Covington—among the many things that frighten me about him, such as his iceberg-cold eyes, his height, his physical presence—is how he speaks so calmly about what will happen to me if I don’t fall in line. It isn’t a threat to him. There’s no anger in his voice; he is completely calm. He talks as if it is the most natural conclusion in the world that anyone who gets in his way will have everything they love ruthlessly ground to dust.

I swallow wine and terror in a big gulp. “I understand my situation.”

Though I will never accept it. Never stop searching for some way to fight it, to make it untenable, to free myself.

He smiles at me in a tight-lipped way, as if he knows every thought going through my mind. “Go. Enjoy your party.”

My stomach clenches in relief as I leave Mr. Covington and circle through the room, doing everything I can to avoid eye contact with Ashley, who stands across from me, talking animatedly with her parents and sister.

Victoria Covington draws my attention next—Alexander’s striking mother, whose impeccable clothing cloaks a heartless interior. I’ve heard the rumors about her, and like so many guests at this party, I keep my interaction with her to a hug, a kiss on her cheek, and a few whispered pleasantries before I invent an excuse to get away. No one except the most desperate wants to linger too long in her presence for fear of getting caught up in her malicious and conniving aura.

Alexander’s brother and sister—Nathaniel and Isabella—I ignore. They’re the younger children and, even to their family, are less important, less worth the investment of time. My status as their older brother’s wife means I can look down on them, if I so choose.

My parents, I hardly acknowledge. The pain I feel because of them is too raw to say anything more than a simple, “I love you.”

Thankfully, as I circle, my husband-to-be is ignoring me, which is what I think we both prefer; he focuses on his networking, and I focus on my drinking. We both know this marriage is nothing more than a business arrangement.

Then, as I take my fourth glass of wine from the tray of a passing server, a strong hand grabs me by the shoulder and whirls me around.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ashley says, her voice betraying concern and anger. “Why the hell are you moping around like such a bitch?”

I bristle at her words, and my hand tightens around my wine glass. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Ashley says, her eyes flashing. “You’re acting like a spoiled little brat. Do you know how lucky you are to be marrying into the Covington family? Do you know how much your parents have sacrificed to make that happen?”

I feel a surge of viciousness inside me. “Sacrificed?” I say, my voice rising. “They sold me off like a piece of property to further their own ambitions. And you, Ashley, you went along with it. You betrayed me, you bitch.”

Ashley’s face darkens, and for a moment I think she’s going to hit me. “I did what I had to do. You think you’re the only one with dreams and ambitions? This was my chance to make something of myself, and I took it.”

I stare at her, my heart pounding in my chest. I want to scream, to lash out at her, but I know it won’t do any good. She’s made her choice, and I’ve made mine. Besides, in a physical fight—even if I were sober—I know she would kick my ass; she’s one of the top players on the Costa Oscura Women’s Rugby team for a reason.

“Fine. Do what you have to do. But don’t expect me to forgive you for this.”

Ashley's lips curl in a sneer. "I don't need your forgiveness. I've got everything I need right here. Or over there, rather." Her eyes flash to my fiance for a split second, and the heat in her glance is unmistakable.

Waves of betrayal crash against my soul, my breath catching in my throat as the weight of the revelation settles upon me. She is having an affair with Alexander. Not only has she hitched her ambitions to his coattails, she's fucking him.

"You fucking whore. I can't believe I once thought you were my friend, when really, all you are is a gold-digging slut."

"You're a piece of gutter trash. You don't deserve to be here. You don't deserve the Covington name. You don't deserve Alexander."

The words cut me like a knife, and I feel a sob rising in my throat. I fight it down, swallowing it and forcing my emotions back into the hidden depths of my soul.

"Fuck you," I say, feeling tears welling in my eyes. I turn away from her, only to find myself face to face with Alexander.

"Madison," he says, his voice low and husky. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I say, swallowing my emotions. "I was just telling Ashley how excited I am about the wedding."

"Is that so?" he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Yes. I can't wait."

Alexander's eyes darken for a moment before he leans down and gives me a kiss that turns my stomach. When he pulls away, I can feel Ashley's gaze burning a jealous hole in my back.

"I'm glad you're excited," Alexander says. "But perhaps it's time for you to retire for the night. You're making a scene and I won't have that in front of our guests." He then places his hand on my wrist. A warning. "There'd be dire consequences, my love."

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to make a scene. Wouldn’t want to embarrass you,” I hiss so low that he has to lean in to hear. “Though how you can feel embarrassment when you’ve shamelessly been fucking one of my friends is beyond me.”

Alexander laughs for appearances, so that anyone observing would think I had simply told him a hilarious joke. But the way he tightens his grip on my wrist is anything but funny.

“Watch yourself. I’ll fuck who I want, you bitch. The terms of our deal are that you be a good, submissive little wife and stay the fuck out of my business, and maybe, when I’m done with you, you’ll make it out of this marriage alive.”

“Is that so? You think you’re the only one who can make things a nightmare for the other?” My mind runs a dangerous calculus: just how far I can push Alexander, how far things can go before one of us breaks. Luckily for me, I don’t value my own life that much right now. That gives me an edge. Because sure as all fuck Alexander thinks the world of himself.

“Oh, I do. Because I wouldn’t just be making things a nightmare for you, Madison. I’ll make you watch as I grind your family to dust, and then, when I’m done with your weeping mother and your feckless father, I’ll go for your heart. Because I have it, Madison. I have it. Or should I say him.”

A choked gasp escapes my throat. “You have Jackson?”

A chill sweeps over me, as if I was already six feet beneath the ground.

“Yes. Jackson.” His voice is a low, venomous growl. “I have him. I have his friend, too. If you even think about pushing me, if you dare threaten me, if your very gaze betrays anything less than admiration for your beloved husband... my men will tear him to shreds. They will bleed him dry, and just before his final breath, the last thing he’ll see is me, covered in his blood, ending your life.”

Chapter Thirty

Jackson

Some time passes.

One day, maybe two, I'm not sure; it's hard to tell time between bouts of being beaten senseless. I'm only able to figure out for sure a couple of things in my intervals of consciousness. First, Marcus is definitely here, because there comes a point where I can hear him screaming for mercy in one of the adjoining rooms. It's gut-wrenching to hear someone who, out of their love for you as a friend, chose to put their life on the line and now actually has to face the dark consequences of their decision. It was never supposed to be like this, and each time my friend screams is like a knife in my already wounded heart. There are moments where I come as close as the razor's edge to attempting to provoke Victor into killing me, and it's only the faint hope that I can escape to save Madison is what keeps me hanging on.

The second thing I learn is that we are in an abandoned mechanic's shop; it smells like one; feels like one, too. And it makes sense. Alexander is the type to love the symbolism of a poor son of a mechanic meeting his bloody end in the same type of building where his father slaved over the cars of people richer than him. But being in a garage gives me a strange sort of comfort, because there's always been a piece of me that thought I might die in a garage. Every time I crawled under a car on jacks, there was a part of me that had a momentary flash wondering if the jacks were truly secure, or if this would be the time they'd fail and I'd be crushed under a beige Toyota Sienna.

The last thing I learn is that Victor Stone really loves his job. The man just does not get tired when he beats me. Every time I pass out, he's there to bring me back to life just so he can resume beating me; if he weren't killing me or the people I care about, I'd almost be happy for him—it's rare for people to find a job that they really, really enjoy, but he's done it. The dick.

The talented, happy-in-his-job dick.

After some time, Victor drags me and the chair I'm cuffed to into the main bay of the mechanic shop. Sure enough, there's a wreck of a car hoisted on an old lift in the center bay. Not a Toyota Sienna, though. Instead, it's an orange Kia Rio.

"Hey Jackson," Marcus says to me through his busted mouth when another one of Alexander's thugs drags him into the room beside me.

"Hey Marcus. How are you doing today? Been a while since I've seen you," I answer.

"Oh, can't complain," he says.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I tried that earlier. Even asked the guy if I could talk to his manager. Motherfucker punched me. Can you believe it?"

"Fuck, bro, the service around here sucks. I've never felt so unwelcome."

"Shut the fuck up, both of you, or I'll cut your tongues out," Victor snaps.

"See what I mean?" Marcus says. "These guys suck ass."

"Definitely not five star service. I think I'll get on Yelp after this just to warn everyone not to book their torture session here," I add.

"Fuck, I wouldn't even come here on a Groupon," Marcus says. "Or a gift card. Like, if my Aunt Sally gave me a certificate to this place, I'd disown her and spit in her face, and I love my Aunt Sally. She's a total sweetheart."

"Shut the fuck up, both of you, or I swear to fucking god, I will beat you both to within a fucking inch of your lives," Victor snarls.

"What the fuck have you been doing to us already? Giving us your version of a massage?" I say. "If so, I sure as fuck ain't leaving a tip."

Victor draws a gun, fires two rounds at the ground inches from Marcus' feet. He does the same to me.

“Shutting up now,” Marcus says.

We both shut our mouths.

But we trade plenty of information with our eyes. That's the advantage of knowing someone as long as I've known Marcus—we can talk without talking.

And Victor, well, he doesn't know exactly what we're saying, but he sure as fuck doesn't like it.

It's at that moment that the sound of heavy footsteps reverberates through the space and Alexander, the orchestrator of our torment, arrives, followed by another one of his bodyguards carrying something that looks like a television or a computer screen. Alexander is dressed in a suit that's even fancier than normal. As I squint with my swollen eyes, I see it's not even a suit—it's a tux.

My heart sinks at the realization that he's dressed up not just to show off how much of a fancy-ass motherfucker he is, but it must be because today is the day that he'll be forcing Madison to marry him.

Shit.

“Yes, Jackson. Today's the day,” he gloats. “You know, she's not excited to marry me. You should see the way she squirms when I kiss her, or even when I touch her. But she knows about you. Knows that I'll have your skin peeled off your body while you're still alive if she does anything to cross me. So she's doing a rather admirable job of playing the enthusiastic bride today, even though she's also found out about me and her friend Ashley.”

He laughs.

I wish I had my hands free. Oh, what I would do then.

“I can see you are enjoying your time here. That's good. I am, too,” he continues. “Victor, you are doing excellent work with these two, but I'm afraid I have to tell you that Jackson and Marcus are to have things easier today. They have

something very important to watch: my wedding. And what I do to Madison later tonight.”

With a snap of his fingers, he directs one of his men to set up the monitor in front of us. After a minute, it flickers to life and I have a view of some fancy event space, where rich people in rich clothes circulate and do rich people things, like chit-chat, talk about their stock portfolios, or their last trip to the Hamptons—I don’t fucking know.

“Enjoy,” he says with a malicious cackle. Then he turns to Victor, his face serious. “The ceremony begins in four hours. I’ll be fucking her just hours after that. Both of them must watch everything, so staple their eyes open if you have to.”

“With pleasure, boss,” Victor says, in a tone that tells me he’ll definitely get pleasure out of it. Again, I’m glad for him that he enjoys his job, but I fucking hate that I’m on the receiving end of his joy.

Without another word, just a disdainful glance, Alexander and his men leave Marcus and me alone with Victor Stone.

Victor grins. “It’s almost showtime, boys.”

Time is slipping away. I have only hours to prevent the tragic union and rescue the woman I love from the man who makes the devil look like Mister fucking Rogers.

I lock eyes with Marcus, our unspoken bond conveying our shared understanding and determination. He knows what we need to do, and he’s willing to do whatever it takes to help me save Madison.

But how?

In the depths of our silent exchange, a plan takes shape. I nod, and it begins.

Marcus lets out a bellow of pain, his body doubling over. “Oh my fucking god, my insides hurt so much. It feels like I ate week-old Taco Bell,” he gasps just seconds before he vomits a mixture of puke and blood all over the front of his shirt, his pants, and into a projectile stream that pools at his feet.

“What the fuck?” Victor snaps. “Stop that.”

“Ain’t like I want to do this,” Marcus says, before unleashing another monsoon of puke. After a heavy gasp once the spray settles, he gives Victor a forlorn look. “Something’s wrong, man. Something’s really wrong. There are bubbles inside me, man. Fucking bubbles. Oh fuck, something’s ready to come out the other end, too.”

“Don’t you fucking dare, or I will beat the living Christ out of you.”

“You think I—a grown fucking man—want to shit myself with liquid poop and blood? Do you think I’m having a good time here? I know you hate me, Victor, but nothing about this is even close to my idea of a good time. I’d rather you stomp on my face than go through this, because it feels like my fucking asshole is on fire and my body’s about to unleash a stream of liquid shit to put out the blaze. Oh, no... Get ready, Victor—the shit train’s a-coming.”

“No, don’t—” Victor shouts.

“If you don’t want me to make a lake, you better get me to a toilet,” Marcus screams. “Now.”

“Fine, but don’t you fucking try anything.” Victor cautiously stalks to Marcus, handcuff keys out in his hand.

“The only thing I’m trying to do is contain the boiling river of shit in my rectum,” Marcus retorts.

When Victor gets to Marcus’ chair, I seize on the distraction and brace my wrists against the handcuffs, recalling knowledge gained from 1980s action movies and confirmed by YouTube—which I know are not the best sources to risk your life on, but they’re all I’ve got right now—if you dislocate your thumb, you can slip out of handcuffs.

After a sharp inhale, I brace my left thumb joint against the steel of the handcuffs and wrench it.

Hard.

A groan forces my mouth open as a monumental pop erupts from my left hand. My vision wobbles. I feel close to

vomiting, just like Marcus, but then the cuffs slip free.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Victor snaps, reaching for his gun.

“Kicking your ass, that’s what,” I scream as I charge. “It’s time for some fucking payback.”

As I move, the pain in my hand intensifies, but I push past it. Adrenaline courses through me, dulling my pain; all I can think about is Madison and how I need to get to her, I must get to her.

Victor fires, but I’m already on him.

The bullet rips by my head, kissing my ear with a gentle breeze before hitting the far wall.

I unleash.

Fists, elbows, knees, a torrent of retribution on his ugly mug. Skin lacerates, ruptures, bleeds.

But Victor’s not a fucking rookie—he’s done this shit before; hell, he gets paid for it. He hits back. Hard. Pain flares, blooms, boils through my right side, and as my vision dims, I feel my legs give out.

We circle each other, fists up, hearts on fire.

Victor and I are equally matched—we’re both trained well, we’re both willing to kill, but I’m fighting to save the woman I love, while he’s fighting to take her away and hurt her.

Nothing’s going to stop me from getting to Madison.

Not even Victor Stone.

“Fuck you, Victor,” I scream, my words colored by a surge of blood and spit. I charge.

He swings, a heavy blow forcing a halt to my attack. “Fuck you, Jackson. You’re fucking dead.” The barrel of his gun comes up, and knowing my fucking luck with guns, I lash out hurriedly, smacking the barrel as a blinding flash sends me staggering.

The bullet hits the ceiling, sending dust everywhere.

He closes in for the kill.

I swing again, blasting his jaw with my dislocated hand and making the both of us roar in pain.

My knees shake as agony floods me, but I fight on.

So does he.

Our fight carries us through the room, battering into busted tool benches, into abandoned storage crates, and finally, I lock my hands around his throat just as we crash into the abandoned Kia Rio on the lift. We smack into it with a heavy thud and then tumble to the ground, entwined in a deadly struggle.

After a series of blows, Victor stuns me enough that he's able to get a steady grip on his gun. He aims the weapon, intent on murdering me.

I hit him once and then, with all my strength, maneuver him into position with one hand, while my free hand wrestles with his gun hand. It's a subtle shift to get him where I want him, but he's so intent on shooting me he doesn't notice.

Not until I suddenly release my grip on him, and with one quick movement, pull the release lever on the car lift, sending more than a ton of steel crashing down on Victor Stone's head so quickly he doesn't even have time to scream.

There's a sharp, wet snapping noise; blood, bone, brain matter sprays out from beneath the automobile in a wide, flat arc, dousing my legs in viscera.

Victor's legs go stiff, sticking out straight, rigid. His arms, too.

Gradually, a pool of blood grows beneath his broken body.

"Serves that asshole right," Marcus says. "Now, can you get me out of here so we can go save your girl? Cause I sure as shit don't want to stay here and watch her have sex with that rat-bastard Alexander. No, I'm not even tempted at all. At. All. Even though she's got a great ass." Then he winks at me.

After I roll my eyes at him, I find the handcuff keys in Victor Stone's blood-drenched pockets. Jangling them, I hold

them out to Marcus and head toward him slowly.

“I’ll let you out, but you need to promise me one thing.”

“Jackson, I puked blood on myself and you want more from me?”

“Promise me you’ll never mention Madison and Alexander fucking ever again.”

“Deal,” he says. I let him free and he stands up, stretches, and grins. “So, Bullet, you want to go crash a wedding with me?”

Grinning, I gesture for him to follow and start toward the door.

“Thunder, I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Madison

My dressing room is an opulent, gilded cage of misery. Mirrors cover the walls and reflect my blush-tinged face and the existential fear that lurks underneath the makeup; the sconces draw luminous patterns on the gold and red fabrics that cover them. Adorned with silk flowers, frills, and lace, a table stands by my vanity holding an array of powders, perfumes, paints, eye shadows, and rouges.

A large window overlooks the grand event hall, allowing me a glimpse of the luxurious festivities below and, like a queen observing her subjects, I can survey the grandeur that awaits at my wedding to the most horrible man I've ever known.

My trembling hands fidget with the delicate lace of my wedding dress, which fits perfectly, as the Covingtons spared no expense in literally flying in tailors from Milan in order to have my dress made. My heart pounds with terror and anxiety, though I force down any urge to vomit—as much as I hate everything happening, this dress is such a lovely creation that, even though it was a gift from the worst man in the world, I'd hate to even dirty it. It'd feel wrong. Deeply wrong. Like scribbling on the Mona Lisa or smashing the head off the Venus de Milo. It even has pockets. Pockets. In a wedding dress. That alone makes me cherish it.

Still, the suffocating weight of my impending wedding sits on my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs and drowning out all hope. I can see my future stretched out before me—a cruel, loveless marriage, full of slights, full of disrespect, full of spousal transgressions, full of threats, a marriage that feels more like a death sentence than a union of love, followed by, probably, an execution once I've outlived my usefulness.

“You look radiant,” Ashley says the second she opens the door to my dressing room. I frown at her. She looks stunning in her bridesmaid's dress and triumphant in her manipulations

and machinations. “Alexander is going to absolutely love how you look in that dress. I’m jealous, Maddy.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snap. “You have no right to use that name with me. Only my friends can call me that.”

“Don’t think you have a choice, Maddy.”

“Bitch,” I mutter beneath my breath and I turn away from her and walk to the window, looking down at the festivities below. Momentarily, I debate hurling myself through the glass. Would I die? Would the fall free me? The distance is enough that it just might. But then I shudder at the alternative—survival—and I imagine what would happen to me if the fall simply wounded me, or left me partially paralyzed; I’d be even more at Alexander’s mercy than I am already.

No, I can’t. As much as I want to, I can’t.

“I thought I told you to wait outside. I don’t want anyone with me while I get ready,” I say. “That’s what Alexander said, too. So why are you disobeying him, Ashley?”

“They asked me to check on you. To make sure you’re still following along with the plan.”

“Asked by who?” I say. There are few people in this city who could get Ashley to go against Alexander Covington. At one point, I thought I was one of them.

“By Mr. Covington,” Ashley says, her voice going hushed. No matter how old, how distinguished, how powerful Alexander Covington becomes, whenever he is in his father’s presence, there will only be one ‘Mr. Covington.’

My eyes seek him out in the crowd below. He isn’t hard to find. I just look for the spot where the most people are doing the most groveling. And there he is, holding court. Holding court amongst the crowd that, even as I leave this room and step into their midst, I’ll still be completely alone within. I have no friends here. No family, either, at least not in the way it counts.

It’s just me. Alone. Trapped in this impending death sentence with no one to save me.

Suddenly, something catches my eye. Alexander makes his way through the crowd to exchange a few words with his father, who replies with a simple shake of his head and a raising of his eyebrow that sends Alexander, my husband-to-be, scampering away like a six-year-old.

I smile as a spark of something ignites within my mind. I'd love to call that spark hope, but it'd feel too naïve. Too much has taught me that hope is nothing more than a fool's gamble, something that people who don't make plans, don't make calculations, don't make preparations, trust in to cover their lack of intellect.

What I see is an opportunity.

“Go, Ashley. Tell Mr. Covington and whoever else that I'm nearly done getting ready. I won't make the ceremony late, they can be assured of that.”

Ashley leaves, and the second she is gone, I fish my cellphone out of my bag and my fingers dance across the screen with a flurry of determination.

A quick search confirms my suspicions.

Then, still on my phone, I compile a spreadsheet. A storm of numbers, of calculations, of citations—from news articles, from financial magazines, even from several YouTube clips of financial reports—get added to my spreadsheet.

I have never worked so fast, so thoroughly.

But then, I've never had such stakes; not even my thesis paper has so wholly commanded my attention.

When it's done, a triumphant smile curls my lips.

I have a plan.

Excitement surges through me and my eyes scan the crowd below, searching for my next target, the next stage of my plan.

I have to do this just right. Flawlessly.

Or else I may as well call myself Mrs. Covington and go drown myself in the bay, because my life will be over.

I see him. My target.

Adjusting my hair, checking myself in the mirror, I take a deep breath—as deep as I can considering how tightly this dress fits my chest; it’s tailored so well it feels almost like a second skin—and then I slip my cellphone into one of the subtle pockets sewn into my wedding dress, an elegant feature that makes me smile because it exists, and then I step out into the hallway. Melodic strains of a string quartet float through the air, calling me forward.

I advance. Until the scent of gourmet delicacies hits my nose, appetizers provided by the caterers for the revelers, so tantalizing to my senses with the aroma of seared filet mignon, truffle-infused risotto, and champagne-soaked strawberries, that I almost regain my appetite.

I continue down the hall in pursuit of my target.

But no sooner do I round the bend and descend the stairs toward the event hall than I see that things have shifted and my intended is nowhere near where I need him.

Quickly, I grab the first guest I see: an older man with a gigantic paunch and a beard that strains to cover his bulbous neck and six chins. His name is Howard. He runs a mining company, and we met the night before at the celebratory dinner.

“Excuse me, Howard, have you seen my future husband?”

He sputters for a moment. His cheeks are red, and not just from the heat of the assembled crowd and the effort of keeping his bulk in the suit he’s wearing, a suit that looks like it was made for him two chins ago. He’s drunk.

“Alexander? You want to see Alexander? Madison, it’s bad luck for a bride to see her groom before the wedding.”

“Then I’ll keep my eyes closed,” I retort. “Howard, it’s important that he and I talk.”

“Cold feet?” He says, knowingly, cupping his hands around his prodigious gut and nodding with a smug look on his face. “It’s only natural that you feel that way. You know, back when I was about to get married for the first time, I felt that way, too. See, what you need to do is...”

Sensing that he's about to start on a man-needlessly-explains-the-world-to-me tangent, I clear my throat. "Whatever. Yes. I just really need to talk to Alexander. It is about the wedding and it is important. So, you can either tell me where he is or, when I find him, I can tell him and everyone else in his family that you weren't very helpful. Do you want Jonathan Covington to hear that about you?"

That shuts him up. His eyes bulge at me in a way that is incredibly satisfying.

"He went to his dressing room. His father told him that his tie wasn't tied to an appropriate standard. Which means he'll probably be in there for a good twenty minutes before it's fixed. Maybe half an hour."

"Thank you, Howard, you've been most helpful," I say, patting his arm and smiling at him. He's been nothing close to helpful, but people like him need to feel like they're the most useful, sagacious people in existence or else they'll make problems for you later.

Then I race down the hallway toward Alexander's dressing room, pushing my way past guests, relentlessly ignoring everyone, thankful for the formidable shield that my elegant wedding dress and my potent angry bride face provide.

Finally, I'm outside Alexander's door.

My heart is wild, like it wants to rip open my ribcage and make a run for the exit. My stomach is twisting itself into some new form of knot that would befuddle a boy scout.

But my will is firm.

Set.

Determined.

This is it. The next phase of my plan.

I tap my phone for reassurance and then reach for the doorknob.

It all depends on this moment: confronting my husband.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jackson

Bloody, battered, but not broken, we step outside into an overgrown parking lot, filled with weeds, oil stains, and shrapnel from long-wrecked cars. Facing the sea, with mountains lined with dry scrub at our backs. A stretch of road runs parallel to the sea, stretching off as a straight line into the horizon. This is one of the many middle-of-nowheres that stretch along the beautiful Pacific coast, a place perfect for riding, yet impossible for figuring out where the fuck you are aside from the fact that you're somewhere along the western edge of the continent of North America. The ruined old mechanic shop behind me is someone's dream, their aspiration that the surrounding nowhere might grow up to support their business, or their hope that enough unlucky souls would find themselves broken down nearby to sustain their dreams. Either way, they failed, and now their old shop is nothing but a lonely grave for the terrible Victor Stone.

I smile as I recall the way his skull wetly popped beneath the force of the falling Kia Rio. Son of a bitch got off too easy.

After a moment, I cast my eyes around, looking for his car: the lone car in the parking lot—a black BMW.

“Lets get the fuck out of here,” Marcus says as he limp-jogs toward Victor's car.

Holding Victor's keys in my hand, I follow. “I'll drop you at the hospital once we get far enough away.” The keys shake in my hand as I step up to the driver's side door.

“The hospital? Maybe after. I ain't fucking leaving you to deal with that bitch Alexander on your own.”

“I'll be fine. You're covered in blood and vomit. You're not in any position to argue.”

“Piss, too,” Marcus adds, grinning. “Can't forget that one.”

“You peed yourself?” I say as I try one key in the door. “Really?”

“He just kept hitting me, like, right above the bladder. I couldn’t help it. Doesn’t matter how hard you fight it, when someone is determined to use your bladder as a punching bag, you’re going to pee yourself.”

Finally, I find a key that fits in the door. Holding it still, I hesitate and grin at Marcus. “Almost feels like a crime to let you sit on the nice leather interior of this sweet BMW when you’re covered in all that mess.”

“Suddenly you care about Victor’s feelings? After you drop a Kia on his head? Just open the fucking door and let’s get out of here.”

I twist the key, but the door doesn’t unlock. Frowning, I try again. Nothing. “Must’ve been the fight. Or the falling car. Key’s a bit mangled. It ain’t working.” Determined not to let that stop me, I grit my teeth and bash the window open with my elbow. Reaching inside, I open the lock and the door. “There. Get in.”

We enter. I test a few more keys in the ignition. None of them fit. They are all too twisted and wrecked.

“Well, that fucking sucks,” I mutter.

“You want to hotwire this thing?” Marcus says.

In answer, I hold up my left hand, which is wickedly swollen and looks like it’s going to grow to the size of a malignant pumpkin. “Not exactly in the condition for the fine-fingered sort of work. You?”

“My life right now is piss, blood, vomit, and shit,” he says.

“You’ve added shit to the equation?”

“Sitting down just now, I found some things may have happened that I was not aware of as Victor was beating me like a piñata at a quinceañera.”

“You really should get to a hospital.”

“After,” he says, levelly. “You’re my friend, and I’m not letting you face this alone.”

“Fine. We need to find another ride. I see there’s a convenience store about a mile down the road. Let’s head there.” I’m already out of the car before I finish talking. Marcus is, too. It surprises me how, although his face is contorted in pain, he keeps up.

The rising sun beats down upon us, heat that’s only broken by the calming ocean breeze. The air smells like salt, seaweed, and the blood crusted on my upper lip. We limp on.

At the store, there are several parked cars and several customers milling about inside. Residents of this remote area, most likely. Before we enter, I take a second to size up myself and Marcus—we’re beat to hell and back, we’ll have to do this carefully, make sure that whoever we’re carjacking isn’t capable of beating our asses. If only toddlers could drive, that’d make the carjacking we need to do a lot easier.

“Hold on a second, Bullet,” Marcus says, reaching out to grab me by the arm and pull me to a stop as I limp toward the entrance to the convenience store. “We need to fix your thumb.”

“I ain’t a doctor,” I reply. “We’ll fix it later.”

“Let me.”

“You’re not a doctor, either, Thunder, unless you pulled some Doogie Howser shit while I was gone.”

“Took a couple of classes at the community college. Thought I was going to be an EMT for a while. I can set your thumb, then we need to ice it. Hold it out, I’m going to count to five, then adjust it.”

I hold out my hand. He doesn’t wait until ‘five.’ I yell like someone’s just jabbed a red hot poker up my ass. Then the pain in my hand fades from swelling, mind-numbing throb to dull, teeth-grinding throb, which is a fucking lot better.

“There. We’ll put some ice on it and you should be good. You know, in a couple weeks,” he says. “Maybe. If there hasn’t been any permanent damage.”

“I hate you so much right now, Thunder.”

“You’re welcome, Bullet.”

We step into the convenience store, looking like two men who just crawled out of their own closed-casket funerals. The store is mostly empty, occupied by only a few customers and a single clerk who gives both of us a wide-eyed look and then immediately takes his break and disappears into a back room.

One customer is a man in his mid-forties, who looks like he retired only a few years ago from a career as a lineman for the Los Angeles Rams. Marcus and I share a look. Then we limp toward the other customer: an older woman taking an inordinate amount of care in trying to decide between two identical-looking packages of Wonder Bread.

From the look on her face, it’s a life-altering decision.

“Morning, ma’am,” I say as I carefully approach her from her left. Marcus slowly moves to come in on her right.

She looks up from her bread and smiles at me in a way that reminds me of my grandmother, the few times I met her before she died, and makes me wish there were any other options here, but there aren’t.

“Morning, young man,” she says. “My oh my, you and your friend both look horrible. Are you all right? Do you need a doctor?”

“No,” Marcus says. “We’ll be all right. This is just a normal Friday for us, ma’am. See, we’re practicing for Burning Man.”

“I think you boys need to re-evaluate your lives.”

“Probably true,” I say. “We’ll get on that later. Right now, we need a favor from you.” I pause, wondering just how to politely ask this old woman to hand over her purse to two bloody and stinking strangers.

“A favor? What do you need?” She says. “I’ll help you if I can.”

“We need your car, ma’am,” I say with a wince, bracing myself for her reaction. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but we’re in a bind, and we need to get out of here as soon as possible.”

The old woman's expression changes from one of concern to one of suspicion.

"Why do you need my car? Did you two boys do something wrong?"

"No, ma'am," Marcus says quickly, trying to reassure her. "We're not criminals or anything. It's just, we were in a bit of a scuffle and our car got totaled. We just need to get out of here and get to safety."

The old woman looks between the two of us, her gaze lingering on our battered faces and blood-stained clothes. For a moment, I think she's going to refuse us and call the police, but then she sighs and nods her head.

"Alright then. I suppose I can give you a ride. But you boys better not be up to no good." She sets down the bread and reaches for her purse, digging around inside for her car keys.

"Not just a ride, ma'am," I say, trying to sound as polite as possible. "We need you to give us your car."

"I'm sorry, but no." She shakes her head firmly. "I can't just hand over my car to two strangers. You could be anyone."

Marcus takes a menacing step toward the old woman and she wrinkles her nose the closer he gets. "Look at us. Do we look sane? Normal? Do we look like people you want to piss off?"

I follow Thunder's lead, looming over the old woman. It kills me inside to do it, but knowing that Madison is suffering and needs my help is enough to drive me forward.

"You have one more chance," I say. "Give us your keys and your cellphone, or else we will hurt you."

"My cellphone, too?"

"Yes. Now."

The old woman's hands tremble as she hands over her keys and cellphone. When I look into her eyes, I am struck by the fear that is so plainly visible, and it causes a feeling of disgust within me. But Madison's safety is more important than this woman's comfort. Marcus takes the keys and heads out the

door, motioning for me to follow him. I give the old woman a sad smile before I leave, hoping that she'll forgive me one day.

We make our way to her car. It's a beat-up old Toyota that's seen better days, but it'll do.

As we tear out onto the road, Thunder drives at a rapid speed because we are both acutely aware that we have only minutes to get away before the police arrive on the scene. I take out the old woman's cellphone and use it to search for the location of Alexander and Madison's wedding; considering how highly that asshole thinks of himself, there's sure to be some announcement about the event in the major San Francisco newspapers.

"Bullet, this doesn't feel right," Thunder says.

I shake my head. "No, Thunder, it doesn't."

"When this is over, I'm fixing her car up. I'm going to get her address from the registration in her glove box and I'm going to bring it back to her, as good as new."

"I'll help you get it back to her," I say, my eyes still on the phone. At last, I find it. "But that'll have to wait. We need to get to San Francisco first, because in less than an hour, Maddy and Alexander will say their vows."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Madison

There's no one else to look out for me. It's just me. In the face of the terror that Alexander threatens me with, there's only one thing I can do: step up, fight back, and take control of my future.

Even if the way I have to do it is so frightening I want to run away screaming.

With each step, my trepidation grows as I approach Alexander's dressing room. The door is heavy, solid, engraved wood and my hand hesitates on the handle.

This is where I have to take control. Fight.

With a deep breath, I push the heavy wooden door open and enter a room that makes the opulence of my dressing room seem like a tawdry tent on the side of the freeway. The walls are covered in thin slabs of marble held together by gold swirls and an enormous mosaic crosses the floor from wall to wall, depicting some middle ages scene of a king lording over his subjects.

Inside, Alexander and his younger brother, Nathaniel, are adjusting their tuxedos to make sure that everything is perfectly perfect according to their father's demands. They both stand in front of separate mirrors, their faces furrowed in intense concentration.

I can feel Nathaniel's eyes on me as I walk in. He radiates an air of menace, hinting at a troubled past I've only heard whispers of in my time around the Covington family. My hands tremble slightly at his presence. No, not just at his presence, even though he looks like he could be dangerous, it's because everything—every thought, every emotion, every ounce of adrenaline—racing through me right now has me so nervous I feel like I'm outside my body.

Alexander shoots Nathaniel an icy stare, his thin lips pinch together in a silent warning. "Leave us."

My gaze darts between the two of them as a tense silence descends on the room.

Nathaniel mutters something. I can't hear it, but I know it's dark, threatening.

Alexander smiles. "Care to repeat that, little brother?"

Nathaniel stays silent, petulant and fuming.

Finally, Alexander waves his hand in dismissal and, after another moment's stare, Nathaniel leaves.

I take a deep breath and face Alexander. He looks surprised to see me standing here, but there's no turning back now. It's time for me to get what I deserve for once in my life: freedom.

"Hi, husband," I say, tersely.

"Madison, why are you here?"

"Can't a woman want to see her future husband before she's about to speak the most important words of her life?"

He rolls his eyes and scoffs. "We both know that's a lie. Though, if you speak wrong, they will be the last words of your life." His gaze returns to the mirror, which is probably where he prefers it, and his fingers return to his bow tie. "Tell me what you want and make it quick."

"You know what I want."

"We're not even married, and you're going to start with these ridiculous games? Haven't I taught you enough of a lesson? Or are you just too stupid to understand your position?"

I step in closer, my hand resting just above my dress pocket. "Do you want help with that tie, Alexander?"

"Do I look like I want help? What I want is for you to tell me why you are here interrupting me before our wedding, Madison."

"What I want is to get a few things straight before we become husband and wife, that's all," I say, noting that he still hasn't turned his attention from his tie to me. "Will you at least give me that?"

“Will it get you out of here without making a ridiculous scene?”

“Yes, it will.”

“Fine.”

I clear my throat, making sure to articulate. I know I don't have to worry about Alexander speaking clear enough. With his upbringing and the money his parents spent on his private education, I wouldn't be surprised if he had at least an entire semester's education in enunciation. “How long have you been fucking Ashley?”

“A while. She approached me. It was clear what she wanted—sex for career advancement—and, while I don't normally care for her type, she's far too much of a common slut for me to publicly associate with, I was happy to have another set of eyes to keep watch over you. You've always been such a disobedient bitch, Madison.”

“I see. And my parents? What did you have to do to get them to show up at my apartment with Ashley? Did you threaten to hurt them the way you threatened me?”

Alexander laughs. He sounds so full of himself, so proud of this masterwork of manipulation of his. “I would've loved to, but I didn't have to threaten physical violence against them, not like what I've had to do with you, or what I am most definitely going to do to your precious Jackson. Oh, I cannot wait until I can finally kill him. No, all I had to do to your parents is remind them of the money they would lose if they didn't follow through on their deal. Then they were only too happy to make sure their daughter got in line.”

I want to hit him. Not for what he's telling me—all stuff that I know, or have guessed at well enough—but for how pleased with himself he sounds. In the beginning, I thought him simply a stuck-up rich man who might mellow if I worked on him enough. Never could I have fathomed he'd be so ruthlessly evil. It sickens me how naïve I was not to see it.

“Are you about done?” He says. That statement makes him turn, so he can blast me with what I'm sure he thinks is an

intimidating glare. “Because I am about running out of patience, and the second that happens is the second I have my men peel the skin from Jackson’s body. They’ll work slow, and they’ll keep him alive long enough for me to have plenty of time to rape you, just so he can watch on the live feed I have set up for him. Then, once I’m done with you, I’ll bring you along so you can watch me kill him.”

I swallow. Those words of his come out icy cold, as if he’s simply stating a fact and not threatening to commit rape and murder.

“No, that’s all. Thank you, Alexander.”

“Now get the fuck out of my sight.”

Turning, I head for the door, eager to put distance between myself and the sickening man who is my fiance.

As the door shuts behind me, I lean back against the heavy wood, grateful for its solid support. Then I smile. A proud smile I allow myself to relish for nearly a minute as I catch my breath against the heavy door.

Then I move.

My destination is the main event hall, and my target is the family patriarch, Jonathan Covington.

My heart swells with power as I stride into the main event hall. My masterpiece of a wedding gown swirls about me like a cloud, as if I’ve risen above every person in this measly, opulent hall. I find Mr. Covington at the center of it all, the conductor of this symphony of decadence; His head is inclined slightly, and he’s surrounded by several older men, one of whom I recognize as the mayor of San Francisco.

I approach without hesitation and he spots me even before I make the outer edges of the circle of hangers-on and grovelers that surround him. With a raise of his eyebrow, he beckons me forward. With a gesture, he dispels the surrounding crowd.

“Madison,” he says. “What is it?”

“Mr. Covington,” I begin, my voice steady despite the nervousness within me. “We need to talk about your son.”

Jonathan Covington's piercing gaze meets mine, his brows furrowing in regal confusion. "What the hell do you mean?" he demands, his voice laced with a mix of annoyance and curiosity.

"Perhaps we'd better speak somewhere more private."

With a slight nod, he agrees, and we move away from the bustling crowd into an empty chamber, away from prying eyes and eager ears.

Once we are alone, my hands tremble with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. I reach into the subtle pocket of my wedding dress and pull out my cellphone. My fingers glide along the screen, and my smile rises just a little higher.

Jonathan Covington regards me with a mix of disdain and curiosity, his eyes narrowing. "What is it?"

With a steady hand, I hold up my cellphone. The screen is illuminated with the interface of the recording program I've had running for the last ten minutes.

"I recorded an interesting conversation with your son earlier. He had quite a lot to say, things that the press and your esteemed company's investors might find rather captivating. Captivating, and exceedingly costly. So much so that I'm sure you—or someone who works for you—might be tempted to act with force to get it erased. But don't worry, I've already backed it up to the cloud and sent a copy to a trusted friend for safekeeping. Do you follow me so far, Mr. Covington?"

The weight of my words hangs in the air, tension stretching taut between us. I meet Jonathan's gaze. This is my moment, my opportunity to demand justice and freedom from the clutches of manipulation and torment. I stand proudly in front of him. Proud and commanding.

"What are you getting at, Madison?"

Jonathan Covington's response is so much more than a question. So much more than a demand. There's a threat behind it which he doesn't even need to speak. Because, unlike his arrogant and childish son, Jonathan Covington possesses the wealth, the calculating intelligence, and the

brutal will to entirely erase from existence me and everyone I ever cared about without a second thought.

“Don’t worry, I’m getting there. Now, you are going to want to hear this recording first,” I assert firmly, my voice carrying a note of quiet authority. “And then, Jonathan, you are going to want to hear my demands.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jackson

As Marcus and I pull into the parking lot of the grand wedding hall, and I witness the empty parking lot, a surge of fear and rage courses through me and I clench my fists. Is it over already? Has he already taken her? It's as if my worst nightmare is unfolding before my eyes, and the realization that I may have lost Madison forever threatens to consume me.

Marcus and I leave the car, and as we step into the parking lot, I hear the sounds of an approaching motorcycle. Rook arrives, dismounting, gun in hand. Now, after everything, the bastard shows up.

Snarling, I draw my gun and level it at him.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing here?”

“Saving your ass,” Rook says as he calmly aims his gun at me.

Marcus gives me a strange look and then steps between both of us.

“What the fuck are you two doing? Why the fuck does the man who's covered in vomit, shit, blood, and piss have to be the sane person in this fucked-up equation?”

“Son of a bitch fucking ran out on me during the ransom exchange,” I retort. “I should kill him for that.”

“You ditched Bullet?” Marcus says. “Fucking really, Rook?”

“Thunder, do you think it would have done anyone good if I had just surrendered like Bullet did? Someone had to survive to have a chance at saving your asses.”

“So where were you?” I say.

“Hunting for you. Which is more difficult than it sounds, considering how fucking big this ridiculous fucking state is and how much the Covington family has in the way of resources.”

Marcus chuckles. “Oh, you were looking for us, huh? Tell me: how much of a chewing out did Eliza give you before you finally got off your ass?”

“Oh, she was pissed,” Rook says. “But I’m here now. Figured when I heard over the police radio that a couple of men matching your descriptions and covered in vomit and blood, which really doesn’t surprise me, had carjacked an old woman—which is a low fucking move and I am going to make you both apologize to her—that you were on your way here. Now, are we going to stand around pointing our guns at each other, or are we going in there?”

I lower my weapon and start toward the doorway.

“Come on, Rook. Glad to have you back on the team.”

Inside, it is as quiet as a graveyard. The event hall, which is decorated in the way only the richest of the rich can afford, sits empty. Empty of sound, empty of life, empty of hope.

Empty of her.

Madison.

In pain, I scream out her name. My voice bounces off the stone walls, as if taunting me, each echo reminding me of what I cannot have: Madison.

I’ve lost her for good.

“Something’s not right,” Rook says cautiously. “Rich assholes like these Covingtons wouldn’t cut a celebration like this short. They live for adoration, for showing everyone how fucking great they are. So why the fuck is it empty here?”

“Maybe all the guests finally got a closeup look at Alexander, realized just how much he looks like a festering cock, and decided they’d all rather go home,” Thunder says.

“Yeah, Thunder?” Rook says. “You think they all came in, thought to themselves: ‘Hey, that man looks like an infected penis,’ and decided they’d leave? That’s your best guess?”

“Look at me right now,” Thunder retorts. “Do I look like someone you’d turn to for a reasonable answer?”

“Fair point. You look like shit. Smell like it, too.”

“That’s because I shit myself.”

“Fair point, again.”

“Shut up, both of you,” I say. “We have to find her. Split up. Let’s search this place for some evidence of what the fuck happened.”

Before they can reply, I charge down the hallway, pulled onward by my desperate need to find Madison. Either her, or some evidence of where Alexander’s taken her; I can’t lose her, not again. Never again.

Driven by a desperate determination, I sprint through the opulent halls, my footsteps echoing off the polished marble floors. Each room I enter fuels my anxiety, my despair, as I find them empty of any trace of the woman I love. Each room is a reminder of what I’ve lost. Each room is another slap in the face, another knife in my heart. While the opulence and grandeur that drapes from the walls, from the ceilings, is a mocking reminder of how out of place I am.

Alexander Covington has taken Madison to a world I’ll never be a part of, never belong in, no matter what I do.

She’s gone.

And I’m never getting her back.

Just as despair grips my soul, a voice cuts through the suffocating silence and I cling to it like a lifeline. It’s Madison, calling out my name. My step quickens and my heart hammers in my chest and I burst into a room that must have been her dressing room. The sight of her, still clad in her breathtaking wedding dress, strips my breath away.

“Maddy,” I whisper. She looks so beautiful it feels wrong to make a sound in her presence, like I’m viewing some masterpiece in a museum, a work of art meant to be appreciated, admired, adored.

When she looks at me, a smile breaks out across her tear-streaked face.

“Jackson? Is that really you?”

I take one halting step forward, then another, then the next thing I know, I'm running to her. Our bodies meet, our arms wrap around each other, and our lips find bliss.

"It's me. I'm here for you, Maddy."

"I can't believe you're here," she says, laughing, crying, kissing. "It doesn't feel real."

Relief and love greater than I've ever thought possible washes over me as I hold her in my arms and press my lips to hers. I'll never let her go.

"How?" I say, my eyes sweeping in an arc to encompass her empty, palatial dressing room. "What happened?"

She giggles, then. It's cute, it's full of pride, it makes me love her even more.

"I recorded him. Alexander. Admitting to what he'd done. Admitting to all of it. I sent a copy to Elena, and I asked her to keep it safe. Then I made a presentation to Alexander's dad."

"A presentation?"

"Stock figures, numbers, dollars, you know, the things he really cares about. I did some math based upon cases where other companies experienced controversies similar to what would happen if I leaked the recording I made of Alexander—you know, family businesses having one of their leading members turn out to be a murderous psychopath. Anyway, I showed him just how much money he would lose if he didn't comply with my demands to call off the wedding and to give my parents the money he owed, plus some extra to buy my silence. He caved in an instant."

My jaw drops. "You're fucking brilliant."

"Of course. I know I'm good at this shit. And I nailed that presentation with PowerPoint, too."

"You're incredible, Maddy. I wish I could have been here to see Alexander's face when he found out what you've done."

"I'll show you. It was something like this..." She screws up her face, doing a decent job mimicking the donkey's asshole that used to be her fiance. Then her face changes back to its

normal, breathtaking state of perfection. “I did some other calculations, too. I think you’ll like this math, Jackson.”

There’s a tone in her voice that makes me smile, even though I can’t imagine a case where I’ll actually enjoy math.

“Yeah?”

“I was wrong earlier. About us.”

I hesitate, part of me reluctant to accept what I’m hearing; it’s too good to be true.

“What do you mean?”

“I spent today surrounded by the people that I thought I belonged with: rich people, sophisticated people, people that, well, you know—”

“—People in a much higher class than me,” I finish bluntly. “It’s true. You don’t have to dance around it.”

“Well, I spent all of this morning around them. It was clear to anyone paying attention that I was in trouble, but no one even asked me if I was okay, or if I needed help, because not a single person wanted to cross the Covingtons. They were all so concerned with status and appearances and all that bullshit. Even my parents kept their mouths shut. All the people that I thought I belonged with, that I thought would care about me, turned out to be...”

“The fucking worst?”

“The fucking worst.” She nods, smiling. “The only person who saw me as anything other than a commodity is you. Even after everything I’d put you through, said to you, and after everything that Alexander did to you—because of me—you still came to save me. I love you, Jackson. I love you and I want you back.”

“I love you, too, Maddy. But you never lost me. I’ll always be yours.”

“And I’ll always be yours. Forever.”

Our lips crash together. The electricity that courses through me is palpable, and I savor the sweet taste of victory mixed

with the intoxicating flavor of Maddy's luscious lips. In this magical moment, we both know our lives are forever changed—this is finally the beginning of our newfound freedom and joy.

That feeling lasts only a moment and ends when the door swings open with force and hits the wall with a thunderous crash. I turn in time to see Alexander step into the room, his face contorted with menacing rage, a gun clenched in his hand.

Time freezes and the air becomes so thick with tension it's impossible to breathe.

Instinctively, I grab Maddy by the shoulders and pull her behind me, shielding her with my body; I'll take every bullet in Alexander's gun before I let him touch her.

He grins at us, a look of pain, triumph, and intoxication writ all over his ugly face. The gun sits rigidly in his grip as he aims it at me, then at Maddy, moving it back and forth.

“You think you can ruin my plans? That you can get away with this? You're both fools. And now, you're both going to die.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Madison

The room crackles with tension as Alexander strides forward and directs his malevolent gaze towards me, holding the gun in a determined, murderous grip. Jackson pulls me behind him to shelter me from danger, and though Alexander's eyes dart between us—as does the muzzle of his gun—I know I am this primary target; I used his own words against him, turned his own father against him, thwarted his petty dreams and vile schemes. I beat him. To a petulant child like Alexander Aurelius Covington, that is unacceptable, so now he's here to throw a tantrum—a tantrum with a gun and a stomach full of expensive brandy.

“Alexander, think about what you're doing. You know you won't get away with this. You will get caught. Do the smart thing and just put your gun down, walk away, and we'll forget this ever happened,” Jackson says. There's a note of honesty in his voice that surprises me. Despite how much I know he hates Alexander for everything he's done to him and to me, Jackson would actually let him walk away forever just to keep me safe. Never did I expect him to be so ready to let go of his hate.

Alexander doesn't even acknowledge Jackson's words, instead his eyes burrow into me with malevolence. “You think you've won, don't you? That just because you made my father call off the wedding that you'll get to walk away?”

“Those were the terms, Alexander,” I say. Even though my pulse is racing and the world teeters on the verge of swimming every time Alexander aims the gun in my direction, I keep my voice steady, steely. I'm both surprised that he would dare do something so bold as to disobey his father—not to mention getting his hands dirty—and also not shocked at all that a public defeat would send him into a tailspin. “Did you not understand them? Would you like me to call him so he can explain them to you?”

Even in his drunken, disordered, and dangerous state, he flinches at the mention of his father. Then, with a shake of his

head, his murderous scowl returns. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what you say, it doesn’t matter what you do, none of it matters. You are not leaving here alive, you fucking bitch.”

“You think your fearsome daddy won’t punish you, Alex?” Jackson says, a derisive twist to his voice. “You think you can keep something like this from him? Everyone knows your daddy’s the real power in the family, and he will fucking ruin you if you disobey him.”

I give Jackson a quick, stern look. He’s not helping, and I wish he’d shut up. When you’re on the receiving end of a gun-wielding maniac’s anger is no time to posture or see who has the bigger penis.

“You two wouldn’t be the first people I’ve had to make disappear without my father noticing,” Alexander says. “Not to mention the things we’ve covered up for Nathaniel. My father is not all-knowing, and the things he doesn’t know, well, they just might give him a heart attack if he ever found out. So, no, Jackson: once I kill you both, I don’t expect any problems aside from the minor annoyance of a sky-high dry-cleaning bill to get your blood out of my tuxedo.”

As the two men posture like animals fighting over mating rights, I carefully engage in the more useful task of subtly surveying the room for anything that might be useful in staving off my murderous ex-fiance.

But unfortunately, my bridal dressing room does not come equipped with a bullet-proof vest, guns, or even a SWAT team sniper.

How inconvenient.

Just like earlier, I’ll have to rely on myself to get out of this mess; no more being a pawn in other people’s games. I’m a queen in charge of my own destiny.

Taking care so that Alexander doesn’t notice, I pinch Jackson on the back, hoping that he’ll get the hint to stop provoking the madman with the gun and let me talk. Alexander came here to feel superior, to watch me grovel, to

assuage his pathetic ego because he simply can't bear to be beaten. Anything that threatens his perfect vision of himself is just going to entice him to pull the trigger.

If I want to buy us time to figure a way out of this mess, I have to give him the begging that's like catnip to his gigantic ego.

"Please, Alexander," I begin, my voice quivering. "Don't do this."

"Madison, don't even think that by asking nicely you're going to save your life," he says mockingly.

I step forward, move around Jackson to fully expose myself to Alexander and his gun. Though I want to meet his gaze, though I want to stare down this bastard who has for so long dominated my past, my present, and my future, I don't. Because I know that he's too fragile to bear the challenge. That's why he's standing in front of me now—he's too broken, too weak, too pathetic to take defeat like an adult. He has to cry; he has to throw a tantrum like the pitiful facsimile of strength that he is.

Instead of meeting his gaze, I keep my eyes low, averted, meek. My voice is that way, too.

"I'm not asking, Alexander. I'm begging."

As I speak, I lower myself until I'm on my knees. I suppose I must make a shocking sight, kneeling in my wedding dress before someone as sloppily drunk as Alexander, a madman with a god complex who's waving a gun around like a toddler throwing a tantrum. But it's what I need to do to survive this without anyone I care about getting hurt.

Behind me, Jackson hisses. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I give him a brief and withering look.

Thankfully, Alexander seems not to notice.

He stares at me, entranced, a victorious smile lifting the corners of his mouth like a sick puppeteer pulling the strings on a marionette.

“You’re begging? I must admit, Madison, the sight of you on your knees in your wedding dress is something I never thought I’d see. This pose looks good on you. It’s where you belong. Where I wish you’d understood you belong from the very beginning.”

“I know that now,” I say. Bit by bit, I can feel his resolve to kill weakening. Can see it in the way his jaw loses its tightness, in the way his eyes turn less steely, more glassy; he still wants to dominate me, and my begging is pure intoxication to this drunken wretch of a man. It keeps him entranced, and it keeps me alive so my brain can scramble for some escape, some route to survival. That’s all I need—time. “I wish I had known it sooner. But you know how people like me are. We think we know everything, and sometimes it’s hard for us to understand that we’re less than those above us. I’m sorry, Alexander, for all the trouble I caused you.”

“You caused me all the trouble in the world, Madison. It was all your fault. You deserve to die for embarrassing me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I hurt you, and I’ll make it up to you. In any way you want. Just don’t kill me. I’ll do anything. Anything you want. Please, just be merciful, Alexander.”

“Do you mean that?” He steps closer to me, the gun pointed down at the floor. His grip slackens, but he’s still in control of the gun. For now. The best I can do is keep him talking, keep him engaged.

“I do. I’ll do whatever you ask.” As the words leave my mouth, I reach up and undo the wedding dress. It falls to the floor in a lacy, elegant pool. Beneath it, I’m wearing nothing but the most minuscule bra and panties. “Anything. Everything. Whatever you desire.”

Alexander appears entranced. Enraptured. His eyes grow wide and his smile, too. He comes closer.

“Anything?”

“Anything.” Keep coming. Just a little closer. “Whatever you ask of me.”

This close, I can see just how intoxicated he is. He must be truly unhinged to be so openly drunk where even a lesser person like Jackson or me might see. Good. Because the second he gets close enough for me to strike, he'll be undone, too.

That's my plan: kick my drunken ex-fiance's ass as soon as he gets in range.

Alexander shifts his aim just slightly more toward Jackson. Enough that I can see the crooked gears in his mind are grinding over something, some way to hurt me, to hurt Jackson, without pulling that trigger.

"Anything at all? Even in front of him?" He says.

"Don't you fucking dare, you sick—" Jackson says.

Alexander erupts, firing a bullet into the ceiling. "Shut your mouth, you fucking peasant. I've heard that some people have taken to calling you 'Bullet.' If you don't be quiet, I will bury your namesake in your skull."

"Bullet, please shut up. This is between me and Alexander," I say, mustering enough reproach in my voice that Jackson flinches and Alexander nods approvingly. I make a note to myself to apologize to Jackson later.

"Anything. Anywhere," I repeat to Alexander. "Whatever you want."

He takes another step. It is a test of my will to stay still as he approaches. He's almost where I want him, but not quite.

"You really mean it, don't you? You'd let me fuck you, right here, right in front of him," Alexander says, licking his lips. "Think of it, Bullet. You can watch as I fuck the woman that was to be my wife. You can watch as I fuck her ass, as I make her scream my name before I cum all over her pretty face. Would you like that? Would you like to see a real man fuck the woman you love?"

One more step. Just one more.

Suddenly, there's a noise. A sharp, shocking click, followed by a swishing noise as the heavy wooden door to the changing

room opens, revealing Rook and Thunder. They're both carrying guns, both frozen with shocked looks all over their faces the second they see me standing nearly naked in the middle of an armed standoff.

"Who the fuck are you?" Alexander says. Then he makes a fatal error: he turns toward the newcomers; he leaves himself open.

I scream, and I strike. Strike with every ounce of rage that has burned inside me over the four years that I have endured Alexander's miserable malevolence. I launch myself at him, clawing at his face, my fingernails digging furrows in his cheeks, his forehead, and his left eye.

He howls like an animal.

Something wet sputters and soaks my right hand—blood, and something more. Something clear and sticky. Visceral fluid from his punctured eyeball.

In a wild arc, he swings and the butt of the gun hits the side of my head, sending me stumbling.

"You bitch," he screams, clutching his hand over the socket of his ruined eye. "You maniacal bitch. How fucking dare you?"

"It's the least you deserve, you miserable prick," I snap. My heart skips a beat as he aims the gun directly at my head and my focus shrinks to a single point: the muzzle of the pistol, from which the end of my life is about to emerge.

But just as he's about to pull the trigger, there's a voice. Jackson's voice.

"Hey, asshole," he says, his fist already cocked back and flying toward Alexander's ruined face. "Don't you fucking dare threaten her." Jackson's fist connects with brutal force, snapping Alexander's head backward. Then he hits him with another, and a third punch sends my former fiance to his knees. An uppercut sends a tooth flying free of his bloody mouth, the impeccably white incisor landing on the far side of the room.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Jackson growls as he hits him over and over, with fists, with knees, with elbows, with kicks, until Alexander is a broken, bloody man kneeling on the ground in front of the man I love, his hands clasped in a praying gesture as he begs for a reprieve from Jackson’s merciless onslaught.

“That’s enough,” I call out, but Jackson doesn’t seem to hear me.

Getting to my feet, I run to him, grab him by the shoulder and, when that fails to stop the violence, I seize him by the ear and twist.

“Ow! Fuck,” he says. “Lay off, Maddy.”

“That’s enough. We can’t kill him. Not right now. We’d spend the rest of our lives being hunted by the FBI.”

“So you’re going to just let him get away? After all he’s done to you, you’re going to let him walk?”

“No, I’m not saying that,” I say. Truth is, my heart is filled with rage just looking at the battered remnants of Alexander’s face. I want to do so much more. Briefly, I envision the two of us attacking my ex-fiance, battering him, ruining him, until he’s no longer a threat to anyone. It’d be the least that Alexander deserves.

But that’s not the right answer.

I look at Rook and Marcus, who both are still standing awkwardly in the doorway, guns raised, faces marked with shock. “Leave us.”

“Fucking gladly,” Rook says.

“You sure you’re good, Maddy?” Marcus says.

“I’m good, Thunder,” I say, using his road name in the off chance that Alexander doesn’t know his real identity. The last thing I want to do is give my vengeful ex another target to pursue.

“You holler if you need us,” Thunder says, then he and Rook both leave.

“He still needs to pay for everything he’s done,” Jackson says.

“In a minute,” I say. Then I take a second and just look at my groveling worm of an ex. He’s pathetic. More pathetic than I’ve ever seen him. But he still hasn’t suffered enough.

Then I look at Jackson, at the collection of wounds, the blood, the bruises, the injuries he took on just to keep me safe, again, even though I’d rejected him. When it counts, he’s proven himself to be the one I can count on. And he’s shown himself willing to sacrifice himself, and even that hate he’s carried for all these years, just for my sake.

That’s love.

“I really love you,” I say. My heart, my voice, my entire body goes warm just saying those words to the man who inspires such intense feelings within me. “I’ve known it all along. Even if fear or doubt made me run from it for a time, I really, truly love you.” Then my eyes go to Alexander, disdain and anger assuming control of my voice. “And I hate him. The stuff he threatened me with, from the beginning of our relationship until just seconds ago, makes me so angry that I want to murder him. But we can’t. Instead, there’s something else we can do. Jackson, would you like to give Alexander a taste of his own medicine?”

“What do you mean?” Jackson says.

“He threatened to do something in front of you, as if he actually had the talent or even the equipment to make that something happen. From what I know in dealing with insecure, pathetic men like him, they base those threats on things that they fear. Do you remember what he threatened to do to me?”

“I follow. You want to hurt him the same way he wanted to hurt us. Sounds like justice to me. How about we make him comfortable first?” Jackson says. Then he casts his eyes about the room, looking for something, before they settle on the lacy pile that is my wedding dress. “How attached are you to that dress?”

“I love how I look in it, but I hate everything it represents.”

“Then let’s put it to good use,” Jackson says. He kneels down to pick up the gun that’d fallen from Alexander’s hands and he casually aims it at him. “Sit there like a good boy while we do some work.”

Then he rips a long strip from my dress. Then another. And another. After ripping many strips of fabric, he begins to braid and knot them together, forming a rope. Then he repeats this process until we have several long lengths of lacy rope.

“Sit down over there,” Jackson says, directing Alexander to a chair. Then Jackson hands me the gun. “I’m going to tie him up. If he moves, if he even says something disrespectful, kill the whiny bitch.”

Jackson binds my ex to the chair.

Alexander doesn’t move. Doesn’t even make a sound except to let out a broken whimper.

Once finished, Jackson comes to me. “What now?”

“This,” I say. Then I kiss him. My lips meet his with a vengeance, powered by the fiery mix of fury, love, and lust that fills me in that moment. That kiss leads to another. Then another. On and on with heat until my bra is loose in Jackson’s good hand, until his lips are on my breast, until his tongue is circling my nipple while I loudly, vociferously urge him to suck my tits.

On the other side of the room, Alexander squirms, his face going red with embarrassment, with fury, and I increase the volume of my lusty cries, begging Jackson to kiss, lick, and suck my tits.

I want Alexander to watch what he will never have again, what he never deserved in the first place; I want to emasculate that asshole and make him feel like the powerless, pathetic loser that he is.

“Yes, just like that,” I moan, no, scream. “I love how you suck my tits. Oh god, you are so good.” I wink at Alexander, delighting in the way he squirms, in the way his face goes

from red to impotently furious purple. “Do you like my tits, Jackson? Do you like sucking on them?”

“You taste so fucking good,” Jackson murmurs. “I love the way your nipples get so fucking hard in my mouth, Maddy.”

“I love it, Bullet.” I roll my head back, letting my hair go all over the place. Momentarily, I look into Alexander’s eye, meet his furious gaze, and smile at him. “But I need you to eat my pussy now.” My hands leave his head, slide slowly down my body to pull my panties off my hips. They get halfway down my thighs before Jackson takes over, ripping them down and off, before burying his face between my legs.

“Oh. Oh yes,” I gasp as his tongue deftly strokes my wet pussy. “No one does it like you, Jackson. Everyone else—oh, everyone else has been such a letdown. You’re the only one I’ve been with who knows how to eat my pussy.”

“I love how you taste, baby,” he says, his mouth never leaving my pussy. “I love how you sound when I eat you, and I can’t wait to make you cum for me.”

“Oh Jackson, I love the way you tongue my pussy. Please, don’t stop, I’m almost there.”

“I won’t stop, Maddy. I won’t stop until you’ve cum all over my face.”

“Yes, oh god, yes.” My breath comes in quick, short pants as my orgasm rushes over me, fierce and unrelenting, flooding my body with heat and wet-hot electricity. I scream. “I’m cumming, Jackson! Oh please, don’t stop—I’m cumming.”

Suddenly, I collapse into Jackson’s arms, leaning against him as my orgasm rolls over me and then subsides in a rush that leaves me breathless.

Then I look over at Alexander. His eyes—no, eye, I remind myself—is bugging out of its socket and there are veins that I’ve never seen before throbbing in his neck and forehead. “It was never—and I mean never—like that with you, Alexander. You were always pathetic in bed, and anyone who’s ever told you otherwise—even that bitch, Ashley—was lying to you to protect your puny ego.”

Jackson stands, licking his lips and grinning lasciviously.

“You always taste so good. Nothing has ever come close to how delicious your pussy is. Whoever would even think about giving you up has to be the biggest moron alive.”

Laughing, I take a second to look Jackson over, my eyes drifting from his handsome face still wet with my juices down his body to his groin, where his cock presses hard against his pants.

“I need to suck your cock. I need your big cock in my mouth right now.”

“You know how much I fucking love your mouth, baby,” Jackson says. Then he takes my hand, leading me to a couch that sits nearby. We sit down. I kneel in front of him. My hands undo the fly on his jeans. His cock springs free, the crown glistening with precum.

I capture the crown between my lips, licking it, tasting the essence of precum on Jackson’s cock. Then I take his cock into my mouth, filling my mouth with the shaft. I bob my head back and forth, sucking, teasing, loving the way Jackson’s head rolls from side to side, the way his hands run through my hair, the way he moans.

When his cock is pulsing, throbbing, on the verge of releasing between my lips, I stop. I’m too wet and I can’t take it anymore; I need to ride him.

“Lie back,” I say, planting my hands on Jackson’s chest and pushing him back on the couch.

“I’m so close,” he murmurs.

“Then hold the fuck on,” I say, giving his cock a few gentle, calming slaps. “Hold on long enough to fuck my brains out.”

After a deep inhale, Jackson nods and I climb atop him, holding his cock at the entrance to my pussy. Then I shut my eyes, rubbing the head of his cock against my pussy, a quick, teasing motion that sends blissful shockwaves up my body. Just as it becomes overwhelming, I lower myself, gasping aloud as he fills me.

Fuck, it feels so good.

“Oh, fuck,” Jackson groans, his hands sliding up the small of my back to my shoulders. “You’re so fucking tight. I can’t take it. I can’t hold back.”

Then Jackson thrusts upward.

“Don’t hold back. Fuck me like you mean it, Jackson.” I wrap my arms around his neck, holding on as he fucks me hard, as his cock pounds my pussy. “Oh god, I love how you feel inside me. I love your thick cock.”

He sits up, his lips finding my nipples and teasing them, his hands cupping my breasts, his hands gripping my ass. I moan, crying out his name as his cock hits my g-spot, sending a blistering wave of pleasure through my body

“Oh my god, Jackson,” I gasp. “I’m so close. I’m so fucking close.”

“I’m almost there. Fuck, your tight cunt feels amazing.”

I’m on the edge of orgasm, the wave rising in my body. I let it build. I let it rise.

“Cum with me, baby,” Jackson says, thrusting his hips against me. “Cum with me.”

Then Jackson’s cock throbs, twitching inside me. It throbs again. Then again. I grip Jackson’s shoulders, digging my fingernails into his flesh as my orgasm overtakes me, my pussy tightening around his cock.

Jackson slaps my ass. His voice is deep, guttural, charged. “I’m fucking cumming, baby.”

“That’s it,” I moan. “Cum for me. Cum inside me.”

I push into him, feeling his cock pulse between my legs, feeling his hot cum filling me, feeling my own orgasm drown me like a tidal wave.

“Oh my god, Madison. I fucking love you.” Then Jackson kisses me, his tongue dancing with mine as his cock continues to pulse inside me.

I'm still catching my breath when Jackson sits up; he pulls me to him, kissing me again, cupping my ass in his hands. I'm still impaled by his cock, his cum dripping out of my pussy.

"I love you," I whisper, my lips moving against his. "I've only ever loved you."

"I love you, too," Jackson says, his lips finding my nipples, teasing them, sending another wave of pleasure through me. "Everything about you."

We spend a few minutes there on the couch, just kissing, just holding each other. It's a sublime feeling to have him back in my life, to know how much he truly cares for me, to feel important to someone other than myself.

A look over my shoulder reveals Alexander still watching, his face now a deep, nearly black color, his one good eye wide open, dilated, bloodshot.

This is killing him.

And I love it.

"What now?" Jackson says, noticing my eyes on my ex.

I stand, still covered in sweat, in spit, in sex, and walk until I'm standing directly in front of him. With my hands on my hips, I stare directly into his good eye, unflinching, unafraid. "I beat you. And, not only did I beat you, but I kept the evidence: the recording that could sink your family's company and ruin your family fortune. So this—everything you witnessed, everything that's happened to you—is us being merciful. We're going to leave you here, and, eventually, someone will find you and set you free. You'll live, and you'll never hear from us again. But if you try to fuck with us, that recording will make it's way public and it will ruin everything you hold dear. Do you understand me, Alex?"

His reply is a helpless, quavering nod.

I smile.

Then I turn to Jackson.

"Let's go, my love, he's not worth another second of our time."

Epilogue: Madison

“Madison Sinclair.”

Five simple syllables call me from my seat and make my heart swell in my chest.

I straighten my cap and gown, symbols of the countless hours and sleepless nights poured into my education; everything I’ve fought for, suffered for, is draped around me, enveloping me, protects me and adorns me. With each step to the podium, confidence and a sense of empowerment grow within me.

I’ve earned this.

“Congratulations,” says Professor Braithewaite as he shakes my hand and passes me my diploma. It’s a struggle to keep my diploma in a steady grip; it feels both weighty and insubstantial, a simple piece of heavy stock paper that carries so much potentiality. “You’ve truly impressed me, Ms. Sinclair,” he adds in a whisper as I stand beside him fighting back tears, taking a quick second to soak in the sight of the crowd around me and the sound of their polite applause. To them, they’re clapping out of rote respect for another smiling graduate. For me, this moment is so much more. “I thought your paper was especially brilliant, by the way. I’ve had several copies made, as some colleagues of mine at other universities wanted to read it. They may contact you. Enjoy this moment, Ms. Sinclair.”

“Thank you,” I respond in a similarly quiet whisper. “For everything.”

For one more second, I stand with my diploma held delicately in my hands, basking, my eyes shimmering with pride. I’ve made it.

As I make my way back to my seat, a wide smile spreads across my face, and I glance over the crowd, my eyes searching. Finally, I spot them—my parents, Jackson, Elena, Rook, Eliza, and Thunder—some of them beacons of

unwavering support and unquestionable love, while others, like my parents, are those who know they've lost their way and are doing their best to atone for it, but everyone is here to support me. They're all dressed in their finest attire, though for Jackson, Rook, and Thunder that still means they are the most casually dressed members of the audience. Still, each of them is cheering for me and their genuine happiness and love washes over me, filling me with a profound sense of happiness, pride, and fulfillment; I am surrounded by family—some chosen, some by blood—and all of them believe in me.

In this moment, I feel incredible.

When the ceremony ends, I break away from the crowd like a rocket.

Unbidden tears streak my face as I seek Jackson first, crushing him in an embrace and kissing him a dozen times before I turn to the rest of my family. Their eyes sparkle with pride as they surround me, forming a wall of love. Except for one notable absence: Rook; he stands aside from the group, arms tightly folded across his chest, radiating a dangerous energy that no one is brave enough to even question. For a moment I worry, but then his lips twitch up in a smile and he winks at me; he'll never join the group hug, but it is nice to know he appreciates me.

When the hug breaks, my father pulls me into a separate hug. It's tight, and I let out a contented sigh in his arms.

"I am so proud of you, Maddy," he says. "So very proud."

"Thanks, dad."

"I was wrong. Back when... well, you know," he says, voice trailing off for a moment before he clears his throat. "I should have supported you better. Protected you. The way a father should support and protect his daughter. I let other things get in the way, and I'm sorry for that. I'm going to do better. I promise."

I smile at him and kiss him on the cheek.

"You know, I accepted your apology the first time. And the second time. The third time, too. I love you, dad."

“I love you, too, Maddy. I have more good news for today, though it pales in comparison to what you’ve done. Tomorrow I will sit down with an investor interested in developing one of our properties into a mixed condo-retail project. A large project. It could be the start of something new, something big.”

He beams, and I let out a squeal of joy and hug him again, happy for his success; despite everything that’s happened between us, I’m still proud to have him as my dad and want the best for him and for my family.

“That’s amazing! Congratulations, dad.”

“But I have a favor to ask,” he says. “A big one.”

“Which is?” Beside me, Jackson tenses; though we’ve both forgiven my parents—he almost entirely at my urging—Jackson is still very defensive when it comes to shielding me in my relationship with them; I give his back a gentle pinch to remind him to back off.

“They’re going to send me a proposal. You know, numbers, figures, projections, all of that. When they do, I’d like you to look it over and tell me what you think. Would you do that for me?”

I take a shocked second to process his request; he’s never really brought me in on the family business before. “Don’t you have people for that, dad?”

“I do. They’ll look at it, too, but your thoughts mean more to me than theirs. I want to know what you think about it, and if you think it’s good, we’ll do it. If you have revisions or suggestions, I’ll push for them. But if you think it’s a terrible idea, I’ll quash it. And maybe if you have other suggestions for the business, maybe you could share those, too.”

A swell of excitement builds up in my chest as I glance up at my father. His face beams with pride, and his eyes sparkle with the knowledge of what this moment means for us both; I never expected to be brought into the family business so quickly, nor to have so much influence so soon, but I feel pride like I never have before. This is my chance to truly help the people I love in a way that has meaning to me.

“Yes, dad, I would love to do that.”

It takes everything I have to prevent myself from becoming a whirling dervish of delighted dancing right then, though that Elena grabs me in a tight hug helps keep that from happening. She’s always so good at reading me.

“You did it, Maddy,” she says. “You fucking did it.”

“I know. I really did, didn’t I?” I have a feeling I’ll be saying that out loud to myself for a very long time. “It almost doesn’t feel real.”

“It is real. You’re amazing and a badass, you know that, right?”

“You think so?”

“After everything you went through, of which I probably only know, like, half, calling you amazing is an understatement. Seriously, you kick so much butt.”

Even hearing that oblique mention of my terrible past sends a shiver through me,. My hug tightens on Elena just a moment and I whisper, “You still have it, right? The recording?”

“It’s safe. You’re safe.”

Safe.

No more worrying about Alexander; no more striving and fighting just to get my degree—I am safe and I am free. At long last, I’m in control of my life, surrounded by people I love, people who love me.

“What now? Today’s your day, Maddy. and, even if I’ll never understand even a tenth of what that degree in your hand means, I am proud of you,” Jackson says.

Adjusting my cap and gown, and then passing my diploma to my parents for safekeeping, I hop on my tiptoes to give my man a kiss. There’s nothing more than I want right now in this moment than to enjoy this sense of newfound freedom with the man I love.

“You rode your motorcycle, right?”

Jackson smiles. “I did.”

“Let’s go for a ride.”

Epilogue: Bullet

The first thing I do with my share of the money is buy my dad's old shop for twice what the place is worth. He fights it every step of the way, but he's worked long and hard enough. It's time for him to take time for himself, to enjoy life, to stop working himself to the bone. This is my chance to repay him for all his many sacrifices.

The day the shop becomes mine and my dad hands me the keys before he leaves to the airport to catch a flight to Hawaii, everyone in my newfound family—Maddy, Thunder, Rook, and Eliza—meets me outside the bay doors of Reid's Repairs, my father's shop, now mine. The keys shake in my hands, only stilling when Maddy engulfs me in the tightest, most heart-calming hug ever.

"This is big, Jackson," Maddy says. "You own your own business. Let's open it up, look inside. I want to see what my man's shop looks like."

"Yeah," Thunder adds. "Owning your own business, that might almost make you respectable. Almost. Because, well, you're still you, Bullet."

I laugh and lovingly flip him the bird. "Fuck you, Thunder."

Then I approach my father's shop, keys in one hand, Maddy's hand in my other. It's been years since I've looked inside my father's garage, and trepidation resurfaces to make my hands shaky as I open the bay doors. Knowing what happened to his house over those years I was gone, I'm prepared for the worst.

"This place is a mess," Rook says the second they slide open and reveal a garage full of oil stains, old equipment, and a musty, funky odor. "Decrepit springs to mind."

"Looks like we'll be having a cleaning party today," Eliza says cheerfully. "I can run out for coffee and cupcakes. Oh, and candy, too."

“Just today? Look at this place. It’ll take all week to clean up this mess,” Rook says. “It’s a fucking disaster.”

“However long it takes, we’ll be here, because we help our friends. That’s what friends do for each other, dear,” Eliza replies. “Try to remember that.”

Rook grumbles something inaudible.

“What was that?” Eliza says, sharply.

“I said: ‘Yes, my love,’” he replies.

“Bullet, are you sure you’re ready to take this on?” Thunder says, clapping me on the back. “This is an enormous project.”

“Maybe you want to help me with that? Once I get this place fixed up, I could use an extra set of hands around here,” I say. Then I turn toward Rook. “Maybe two extra sets. How about it, Rook?”

He grumbles something, receives an elbow in the ribs from Eliza, then nods. “Part time. Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

Eliza elbows him again and gives him a look so pointed it nearly draws blood. “Rook, what do we do for our friends?”

“Fuck it. Fine, Bullet, I’ll help you out,” Rook says. “Whatever you need. Within reason.”

“Glad to have you aboard, Rook,” I say.

Maddy returns to her car for a moment, and she opens the trunk and removes buckets, mops, brooms, and several bottles of cleaner. “I came prepared,” she says. “Because I may have been by this place not long before you came back into town, and I saw what state it was in.”

“If you need it, I’ll be a mechanic with you, Bullet, brother, no problem,” Thunder says as he comes up beside me and pats me on the shoulder. His eyes are locked on the mess in front of us—I have to admit, it’s huge. “But if you want me to be a janitor, too, well, you better throw in something extra.”

“How about all the pizza and beer you can handle?” I say, grinning. Seeing the state of my father’s shop is a little

disheartening, but with my family here to support me, I know I can handle whatever life throws at me.

“Free pizza and beer? Deal,” he replies.

“Grab a mop or a broom, everyone. It’s time to get to work,” Maddy says, walking through the group and passing a mop or a broom to everyone.

With my mop in hand, I head inside and get to work. But it’s not long before Rook sidles up beside me and Thunder, a dark look on his face.

“Mopping got you moping, Rook?” Thunder says.

“It isn’t my ideal way to start my day, no,” he says. “But that’s not the reason why I’m not happy right now.”

“Are you ever happy?” Thunder says.

“With her. Always,” Rook answers, his eyes going to Eliza and something that might be a smile appears on his face. “Bullet, you did something incredibly generous and profoundly stupid today.”

“Excuse me? What the hell are you talking about?”

“This,” he says, his arm sweeping around the shop. “Is the fucking dumbest use of your money you could have possibly chosen.”

“I’m helping my dad out. What the fuck is wrong with that?”

“Because you’re being public, Bullet. Throwing this in the face of the Covingtons. They’re going to hear about what you’re doing, especially since I saw the ads you took out in the Costa Oscura newspapers advertising that you’ll be opening this shop soon. Yes, Jonathan Covington—his royal fucking highness with the stick up his ass—swore they’d lay off, but do you fucking believe them? Do you believe a single fucking word from anyone in that family?”

Chills burn their way across my skin. “No.”

“Yet, here you go. How long do you think it’s going to be before they try to take one of us out?”

“Not long, if that bitch Alexander has his way,” Thunder says, being both entirely correct and completely unhelpful. “That motherfucker is big mad.”

“That’s right,” Rook says. “He’s erratic, powerful, and obsessed with hurting you and Madison. As well as anyone who’s ever helped you—which includes me and the woman I love. So I ain’t fucking happy about that. Or this. Even if I want you to be successful, Bullet.”

“What the fuck do you propose I do, Rook? Run scared from Alexander Covington for the rest of my life? No fucking way I’m hiding from that asshole. If he wants to come after me, I’ll kill him.”

“I’m saying we need to prepare.”

“Prepare? How?” I say as I swipe my mop through a stubborn stain on the concrete. It’s pointless to try to get everything clean, because no one trusts a sparkling clean mechanic’s shop, but right now I need something to grind away at, something to occupy my muscles and my mind in order to keep my focus away from the fact that I’ve just lovingly done something that puts the people I care about in mortal danger.

“We need to stick together. Expand. Find others that think like we do and maybe are tolerable enough that we can form an MC. I realize that’s a tall fucking order because most other people are pure fucking shit, but that’s the position we’re in because of our own fucking actions. Beyond that, well, I hear a lot of rumors. The Covingtons aren’t the only criminal family in this town. Some of those other families aren’t so happy with having the Covingtons around, either, if you get what I mean.”

“So you’re saying ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend?’” Thunder says. “Makes sense.”

“You want to form an MC? Where? Out of my shop?” I say. Though my voice hardly sounds incredulous. It’s an idea of I’ve toyed with ever since this adventure with Rook and Thunder began.

“Exactly. Well, for starters.” Rook grunts, nods. “We form an MC, and if we want to survive, we need to be ready to spill some blood.”

I look around at my shop, trying to picture it as a headquarters for an MC, a grander—more dangerous—vision than I’d intended for this garage. “What’ll we call ourselves?”

Marcus clears his throat. “I think ‘Thunder and the Other Ones’ makes for a good name. Let’s go with that.”

“Fuck you, Marcus,” I say. “That’s not it.” Before Marcus can come up with another terrible suggestion—and I can see that the gears in his head are already turning—I look at my newfound family, and at the danger we’re in. We are all here, united, because of the threat of death that hangs over us; we’ll survive because each of us, in our own way, has a spine of steel.

“Bullet, I can tell you’re thinking. You’re making that face that makes you look like you’re passing a kidney stone.”

Rook grunts and opens his mouth before I can reply to Thunder.

“We’re the Steel Reapers MC. If you’ve got a problem with that, I don’t give a fuck. That’s our name. It’s settled.”

I stare at him. “How the fuck did you know I was going to say that, Rook?”

“Eliza and Maddy talk. Maddy told her she’d seen you writing out a list of club names on a scrap of paper. I like that one, so that’s the one we’re going with. Do you have a problem with that?” He hefts his broom in a way that plainly declares he could probably kill Thunder and I with it without even breaking a sweat. “Now, what the fuck are you two lazy pieces of shit standing around for? No self-respecting MC would be caught dead with a garage this dirty—get the fuck back to work.”

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