

THE
Maura Quinn
SERIES 2.5



Endurance

ASHLEY N. ROSTEK



endurance

ASHLEY N. ROSTEK

Copyright © 2021 Ashley N. Rostel

ENDURANCE

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or used in any manner without the written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Edited by Alexandra Fresch of To the Letter Services

Photography & Cover design by TalkNerdy2me
Samantha La Mar | www.tlknrdy2me.com

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locals is purely coincidental.

The Maura Quinn Series

Embrace the Darkness

Endure the Pain

Endurance

*For my readers—
You asked for it and you got it.*



The sound of our shoes slapping on the linoleum floor echoed off the hospital walls as Louie and I ran down them toward the ER. I spotted Stefan pacing in the waiting room as we approached and Brody hovering closely, his worried eyes fixed on Stefan's every move.

Louie and I came to a halt before Stefan. "Where is she?" I demanded. There was blood caked on Stefan's hands and blotches of it staining the cuffs of his white shirt.

Stefan's eyes locked with mine. He inhaled deeply—a small hint that he was struggling to keep calm. "In surgery." Only Maura—his daughter—had

the power to weaken the boss' stony exterior. With everyone else, the placid mask he always wore was unwavering.

"How bad is it?" Louie asked.

Brody had been racing behind the ambulance when he had called, yelling at us to get to the hospital. All he had told us was that Maura had been stabbed.

Stefan's gaze drifted to Louie. "The doctors are optimistic that they can save her."

Louie released a sigh of relief.

My relief was short lived. I picked up on how tight Stefan's voice had grown when he'd said 'her.'

"But not the baby," I said, voicing what he was really telling us. Louie's attention jerked toward me. I kept my eyes fixed on Stefan.

His stare hardened before he nodded. "They can't save the baby."



My fists squeezed tighter the longer I stared at the large stain of blood on the carpet and the smaller spots leading to where Maura had been stabbed. There were even two perfect, bloody handprints—more gut twisting evidence that Maura had dragged her bleeding body across the floor.

I'd watched the video footage of Maura running out of our room followed by the Aryan, with a hunting knife clutched in his hand. He'd caught her by her hair and tossed her outside of the camera's view—a blind spot that should have never existed. We hadn't been able to see either of them for a few minutes until the Aryan had staggered backward, his blade covered in blood. He'd disappeared into our room, where he'd escaped through a window and scaled down to the room below. He'd crept through the house to exit through another window. All of his moves had been hidden by the cameras' blind spots.

Josh, one of the grounds security who monitored the control room, had studied every frame for countless hours only to find small glimpses of the Aryan escaping. A shoulder here, a leg there, and half of his body as he'd climbed the property's wall. Josh had found nothing of the Aryan breaking in. My guess was that he'd made mistakes in his escape because he'd been wounded and rushing.

I stepped over the stains and headed into our room. Broken glass, a

blood covered fire poker, and more stained carpet greeted me inside. The sight made it even harder to contain the rage that seemed to be buzzing beneath my skin.

The only reason I was here and not by Maura's side was because Stefan had made Louie and I go home to get cleaned up. We hadn't left the hospital in days. Neither of us had wanted to leave our girl's side since she'd gotten out of surgery, even if she'd been practically catatonic. The news of losing our baby had seemed to break her soul. All she did now was stare at the ceiling, tears steadily leaking from her eyes, with an expression that terrified us all. Stefan had requested she stay longer in the hospital than needed because he had been worried about what she might do. He wouldn't say it, but I knew he thought she might kill herself.

Wearied by the thought, I dragged my hands down my face before making my way over to the dresser. The new vase I'd bought Maura to replace the old one I had broken was shattered on the floor. Once she returned home, I'd buy her a new one and fill it with her favorite tulips.

I yanked the drawers on the dresser with more force than necessary as I pulled out some clothes. Maybe I should have showered in my old room like Louie. Being here, seeing the aftermath of what she'd gone through, was threatening to obliterate the last ounce of willpower I was holding onto. I couldn't lose it. I wanted to. I wanted to give in to my rage and hunt down every Aryan. I desperately wanted to find who had fed the Aryans information because now there was no doubt that we had a traitor within the family. When I found him...or her, they were dead. I'd string them up in the basement and dish out their torture for as long as I could. Then, I'd cut them open from their lower stomach and rip away what was vital. Just as the Aryan had in ripping away my baby's life. I'd even let Maura go first in torturing them if it would bring the will to live back into her eyes. But I couldn't do any of that right now. I needed to be there for her and Louie. We had to get her better.

In the mirror hanging over the dresser, a bright yellow gift bag on the coffee table caught my eye. I spun and went over to the small seating area facing the fireplace and the TV mounted above it. Maura's boots were on the floor in front of the couch and her purse was placed next to the yellow bag. She'd had enough time to come in, set down her things, and take off her shoes before she had been attacked. I eyed the gift bag and remembered she had texted Louie and I that she had a surprise for us when we got home.

I placed my clothes on the arm of the couch, took a seat, and scooped up the bag. I ripped the white tissue paper from the top and pulled what looked like a tiny pink shirt from the bag. I unfolded the pink shirt and my heart sank. It wasn't a shirt. It was a onesie, and on the front, it read, 'I love my daddies.'

The baby had been a girl.

Knowing that made the reality of my baby more...real. It made the loss feel heavier. Because it painted a more vivid picture of a future I'd never see.

My control broke and my agony took the reins. The next thing I knew I was flipping the coffee table over. Rage burned through my veins as I tossed and kicked everything that was within reach.

I'd failed.

My main role in this family was to protect it.

I had known deep down that there was a traitor walking among us.

I had known the Aryans wanted Maura dead.

I should have done more.

I should have been here.

I'd failed my family.



I didn't want to come here. I didn't want to see. It was why I'd showered in Jameson's old room. But it'd been over an hour and Jameson wasn't answering his phone.

Seeing the blood stains on the carpet made my steps slow. I took them in quickly with a clenched jaw before stepping over them and continuing on. The bedroom door was open. My feet planted themselves in the floor after one step inside. My eyes widened at the sight before me. Half of the room was destroyed. The couch was flipped, the coffee table was broken, the armchair was chucked across the room. Drawers from the dresser were ripped

out and tossed and clothes were thrown about.

I spotted Jameson sitting on the floor in the corner. I made my way over to him. Glass crunched under my shoes and I had to hop over a knocked over end table and couch cushion to get to him. He had one leg stretched out and one bent with an arm draped over his knee. His knuckles were bleeding. His breathing was heavy, and his eyes were closed. In his lap, he clutched a pink cloth.

I bumped his shoe with mine. His eyes shot open. What I saw in them had me taking a seat on the ground next to him.

“I see you remodeled,” I tried to joke. His gaze glided over the room, but I didn’t think he actually saw it. His eyes looked as vacant and sad as Maura’s had since she’d found out we’d lost the baby. That thought had me clenching my jaw again. “I told you not to come here.”

He rested his head against the wall and stared up at the ceiling. “I had to see.”

How did I fix this? How did I make the pain stop? Theirs and mine. I felt like I was free falling down an endless pit of helplessness. I raked my fingers through my hair, scratching my scalp as I went. Fuck, I was tired.

“It was a girl,” Jameson mumbled.

“What?”

He held out the pink cloth. Giving it a second look, I realized the cloth was something a baby would wear. I took it and held it out in front of me. The onesie wasn’t much bigger than my hand and what was written on the front squeezed all the air from my lungs.

The state of the bedroom suddenly made sense and now, I wished I could add to the destruction.



We ran into Emmanuel, one of Salome Herrera’s lovers in the hospital lobby. Salome was the family’s cocaine supplier from Colombia. Or if we were being transparent, Maura’s cocaine supplier. Because of Samuel’s dumbassery and how he’d disrespected Salome, she’d informed Stefan that she now sold to Maura. She hadn’t said ‘and not the family’ but it had been heard loud and clear.

Emmanuel shook Jameson’s hand, then mine before putting a hand on each of our shoulders. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” he said gently in his thick

accent.

I nodded tightly.

“How’d you hear?” Jameson grumbled.

Emmanuel didn’t seem to take Jameson's rudeness personally and for that, I was grateful. Jameson was so wrung tight, it felt as though he was going to snap at any moment.

Emmanuel dropped his hands from our shoulders and straightened. “We received a call that Maura was dead. I’ve already informed Stefan of this but Salome sent me here to verify that it was true. I’m relieved, as I know Salome will be, that it is not.”

Dumbfounded, I asked, “Who told you she was dead?”

“Sean,” Jameson answered before Emmanuel could.

Emmanuel nodded. “He called Salome yesterday to inform her of Maura’s passing and that he would be her point of contact moving forward. Salome is very upset.”

Jameson cursed under his breath and stormed off.

I thanked Emmanuel before chasing after my best friend. I caught up to him at Maura’s hospital room. He was standing just outside, staring in through the partially opened door. I came up next to him to see what he was looking at. It was Stefan. He was sitting close to Maura, with his elbows resting on the mattress of her bed. He held her hand up to his cheek and was speaking to her softly.

“I know it hurts,” he said. She appeared to be sleeping. The wet tracks of tears spilling into her hair said otherwise. He ran his hand over the top of her head, stroking her hair. “The pain will pass, I promise. You just have to endure it until it does.”



With each passing day of Maura not eating, barely sleeping, and in a constant void-like state, the more anxious and angry Jameson got. He looked as helpless as I felt. We had tried everything to snap Maura out of it. I'd even begged. When Jameson had started pleading with her, I'd had to leave the room for some fresh air. Hearing the pain in my best friend's voice had been too much to handle.

I took a seat in the waiting room, breathing through the ache in my chest. My eyes burned. I refused to cry. I had to stay strong for them. Jameson more so. He was starting to spiral whereas Maura was already gone.

Fuck!

I hated that I'd just thought that. She wasn't lost. She would be alright. She just needed time. I raked my fingers through my hair, feeling pathetic at my weak attempt to convince myself that everything would turn out okay. I knew one thing for sure, though. We needed to keep her safe. We had enemies circling around us like vultures looking for the best opportunity to strike. We couldn't let this happen again.



The day Maura was scheduled to be discharged from the hospital, Jameson brought up the Aryans to Stefan. It wasn't the first time this past week and like all the other times, Stefan shut him down, saying, "We'll take care of them later." It pissed us both off, but this time Jameson wasn't backing down.

He frowned at Stefan, who was sitting on the other side of Maura's hospital bed. "We can't let this go."

"We won't," Stefan assured. "But let's not worry about that right now. Maura takes priority."

I was tired of the brush off just as much as Jameson, which was why I had to strain to stay calm when I said, "It's a priority that she's safe and she's not safe here in New Haven. Someone in the family is feeding the Aryans information. We all assumed it when her and Rourke were attacked the first time, but now it's obvious. There's no other way that Aryan would have been able to get into her room without being seen on a single camera."

Stefan's face was unreadable as he listened. "As much as I want to whisk her away to somewhere safe myself, she won't want to be excluded. Not from this."

Jameson scoffed. "I don't want her to have any part in this. She's been through enough. This is something we need to take care of." The determination in his voice was infectious.

"And you think she'll let you make that decision for her?" Stefan snapped with narrowed eyes.

"Look at her!" Jameson exploded.

"We've already asked Kiara to take her and Brenna to Boston," I said. When we'd found out yesterday that she was to be discharged today and she'd had yet to show any improvement, we'd known we needed to act. "She's

looking for a house for them to stay in and Jameson has asked his uncle Aiden for extra security to send with them.”

Stefan sighed frustratedly. “I know my daughter. She won’t go.”

“Then we’ll make her,” Jameson snapped.

“No,” Maura whispered. All three of us looked in her direction. She was propped up by a stack of pillows and she was glaring at her lap.

Jameson squeezed her hand. “Maura?”

She yanked her hand free from his. “Get out.”

I was so shocked and happy that she was speaking that her words didn’t register right away. Not until her glare moved from her lap to Jameson, then me. “I’m not going to Boston.”

Jameson tensed up. I knew her shooting down his new sense of purpose was adding heat to his already burning rage. After having our baby ripped away from us and Maura almost dying in the process, I understood his desperation to keep her safe because I felt it too. I couldn’t lose her.

“You *are* going to Boston,” Jameson said firmly. “You—”

“Get out!” she screamed, startling us all. “I don’t want you here! Either of you!”

“Maura,” I pleaded, hoping to defuse the situation.

“Get the fuck out!” she roared, making me reel back. I wanted to lash out at her. I was desperate for it. But what good would that do?

I left the room and paced in the hall. I heard Jameson continue to argue and, unsurprisingly, Maura refused to back down. I should have felt happy she was acting like her stubborn self again. Instead, I was back to feeling helpless.

“Jameson,” I heard Stefan bark. “Go back to the house.” He said more but I couldn’t make it out.

A moment later Jameson came storming out. He barely glanced my way as he passed. I followed him and we made our way out of the hospital to the parking lot. I watched as he angrily ripped open his car door and instead of getting in, he banged his fist on the roof, cursing. “Only with her do I go out of my fucking mind.”

“It’s because you love her.”

He released a heavy sigh and rubbed his hands down his face. “I know,” he said, his eyes meeting mine for only a second before he climbed into the car.



I banged my fist on the front door of the guesthouse, where Maura had been hiding out with Brenna and her security. All of whom had blocked every attempt Louie and I had made to talk to her. The door swung open, revealing Asher. His giant form blocked the way in.

He greeted me with a frown and folded his arms over his chest. “She hasn’t changed her mind.”

“I just want to see her.” I hated that I had resorted to pleading, but I hadn’t seen her since the hospital.

Asher didn’t budge. “Do you still want her to go to Boston?”

I snapped my mouth shut and fought not to show how pissed off I was. Maura was being stubborn and refusing to hear us out. She wasn't safe here. Stefan had canceled family meetings and barred everyone else in the family from the manor. With the help of my uncle's security firm, we've been investigating everyone who worked at the manor, from security to house staff, to see if there was anyone who had a connection with the Aryans. Once they were cleared, we would branch out to the rest of the family.

Asher uncrossed his arms and went to shut the door. "You know I can't let you in." He closed the door, and I was left standing there again fuming and struggling to keep my rage under control. I was tempted to kick down the door.

My phone beeped, notifying me of a text. I pulled it from my pocket and saw that it was from Stefan, telling me to meet him in his study. I shot one last glare at the guesthouse's front door before heading back into the main house.

Louie was seated in front of Stefan's desk when I entered the study. I took a seat in the chair next to him and stared across the desk, meeting Stefan's eyes.

"Any updates from Aiden?" he asked.

"All the staff have been cleared. He's currently working on the security, both grounds and personal, that work here before he starts on the rest of the family," I explained. "It's going to take time to look into everyone. Time we might not have."

"We aren't moving against the Aryans until Maura is ready," Stefan said.

Louie and I both sat straighter. Before either of us could argue, Stefan spoke. "I will not force my daughter to step aside for this. She is my heir. You know how weak that will make her look to the rest of the family."

"Who cares what they think?" Louie snapped.

Stefan ignored him and continued on. "If you talk to her and she decides going to Boston is for the best, I won't stand in your way. If she doesn't, then we are to give her the time she needs to find the strength to pick herself up again." He gave us a stern look, warning us not to argue. When we didn't, he relaxed back in his chair. "Let me know if you hear anything more from Aiden," he said, dismissing us.

Louie and I stood and left the study. We both had the same idea and went to the backyard. We stood by the pool, staring at the guesthouse.

“How are we supposed to talk to her if she won’t see us?” Louie asked, voice sounding distant.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “It wouldn’t matter if we were able to talk to her. She’s too fucking stubborn to listen.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I know she needs time, but the longer we wait, the more time our enemies have to strike at us again. She’s not safe here. Not in the condition she’s in now.”

“I’m half tempted to spirit her away,” Louie mumbled.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. That wasn’t a completely terrible idea.

As if reading my mind, he shook his head. “She’ll kill us.”

Probably. “I don’t care.”

“She’ll fucking castrate us.”

Also true, but I still didn’t care.

Louie looked toward the guesthouse. It appeared that he was considering it. “She’ll never forgive us.”

“She’ll be safe.”

He cursed under his breath. “I don’t want to lose her.”

“I don’t either. But I’d rather she be alive and hating me than dead,” I argued, my anger and desperation taking over my tone.

Louie’s head turned downcast. He was quiet for a long moment until he straightened, eyes fixed on the guesthouse with determination. “Alright. What’s the plan?”

“Brody has a spare key to the guesthouse in his office.”



We waited an hour after the lights turned off in the guesthouse before we used the key we'd lifted from Brody's office to unlock the door. We silently crept inside, shutting and locking the door behind us. It was quiet and dark. If it weren't for the full moon outside shining through the window, we probably would have run into the couch because the path leading toward the hall was narrow.

We walked slowly, carefully listening for any sign that we'd woken anyone. A step before entering the hall, something crunched beneath my shoe. The light in the living room flicked on, revealing Asher sitting in a

chair in the corner looking amused. He held a pistol in his lap. He lifted it as he brought his arm closer to his face. With his free hand he pulled back his sleeve to reveal his watch. "You waited an hour and two minutes after we turned off the lights."

"You owe me fifty bucks," a voice said from behind us. Louie and I turned, finding Dean leaning against the island in the open kitchen, gun also in hand.

I glanced down at my feet. Chips were scattered on the floor before the entrance to the hall. Smart.

"It's a tie. You were right about the time, but not about the night. I knew it'd take them a few days until they finally broke and tried to sneak in," Asher said to Dean. His amused gaze shifted back to us. "If you'd waited another thirty minutes you probably could've succeeded, that is if you didn't step on the little traps we set every night."

I couldn't be mad that they were doing a good job at protecting Maura. I was a little irritated with myself that I'd underestimated them.

"Are you planning on shooting us?" I challenged. "Because it's the only way you'll be able to stop us from seeing her."

Asher and Dean exchanged a look. "We won't have to. If you try anything, she'll shoot you herself," Dean said, pushing away from the counter. "But don't think for a second that we won't help her bury your corpses where the boss will never find them." Dean met our stares challengingly as he walked past and into the hall.

"Careful," I warned. "You can be loyal to Maura but at the end of the day she isn't the head of this family."

Dean slowed. "I'm not Will. My job isn't to kiss Stefan's ass. It's to protect Maura and only Maura," he said over his shoulder before disappearing into a room. I had a feeling what he was really saying was that he was loyal to Maura and only Maura.

"Can't fault him for that," Louie said, sounding impressed.

Neither could I.

Leaving without another word to Asher, we continued on, heading straight for the master bedroom. I didn't bother knocking before entering. Maura's room was dark. She appeared to be asleep in bed with her back to us. I caught her reaching under the pillow as I got closer.

"It's us," I said.

She froze. "What are you doing here?"

Louie climbed on the bed to lie behind her. “Let’s not fight, please. Can we just hold you?” he asked, weariness riding his voice.

I walked around to the other side of the bed and sat next to her. She looked exhausted. The sadness etched around her beautiful green eyes stabbed at my heart. I couldn’t stand to see her hurting. It battered at my control and threatened to set off my rage.

She moved her hand from under her pillow. “Alright.”

Louie snuggled up closer to her and wrapped his arms around her ribs, being careful to avoid her stomach. I watched as he breathed her in and nestled his face in the crook of her neck, relief washing over him slowly. I lay down on my side facing her and took her hand in mine. I’d missed her. Being parted from her, knowing she was upset with me, all while trying to handle the grief that felt unending had been agony. I almost wished time would slow to prolong this last night I would have with her. To be this close. Because come morning we were to part ways again and I knew she’d never forgive me.



We had to hurry. Kiara was already out front waiting with a car and extra security I'd hired through Aiden. Louie pulled a suitcase from the closet and we both got to work packing her everything she would need for at least a couple of days.

We had the suitcase almost completely packed when Maura woke. “What are you doing?” she asked, her eyes taking in us, then the suitcase. We didn’t need to answer. The betrayal that filled her eyes told us that she knew exactly what we were up to. Louie and I glanced at each other—coming to the same silent conclusion that he would finish stuffing what he held of

Maura's clothes in the suitcase while I dealt with her.

I went to the side of the bed, threw off her covers, and scooped her up before she could try and wriggle away. She groaned and I winced, hating that I hurt her. She was lighter than she'd used to be. After the loss of the pregnancy and a week of barely eating, she felt frail in my arms. Her current condition only cemented my reason for sending her away.

Louie opened the bedroom door and we headed out.

"Stop!" Maura's hands shot out and grabbed ahold of the door frame. "Put me down!"

Louie yanked her hands away and we pushed on.

She thrashed in my arms. "No! Stop it!" Her arms flung out, knocking pictures off the walls, trying desperately to grab ahold of anything. "Dean! Ash—"

Hating myself for it, I covered her mouth mid scream. The last thing we needed was for her security to interfere and the last thing *I* wanted was to kill them if they tried to stop us. I wouldn't hesitate, either. That was how desperate I was to keep my girl safe.

As we made it out of the guesthouse, she started to fight against me with total disregard for herself. "Stop it, Maura! You'll hurt yourself," I growled.

"Stop!" a voice shouted.

It was Brenna. We ignored her. If she tried to stop us, we'd just make her leave with Maura now, instead of coming back for her later.

A shot rang out, surprising us. Louie and I stopped in our tracks and turned to face who I assumed would be Dean or Asher, with guns drawn. Surprisingly, it was just Brenna with a Glock pointed at the sky. The seventeen-year-old girl, who Maura had taken under her wing, stared us down. Then she lowered her gun and pointed it at me. "Let her go." Her voice was calm, and she held the gun with confidence. That was clearly a result of Maura's mentoring because the girl that stood before us now was no longer the sheltered Barbie doll she'd used to be.

Dean and Asher rushed out of the guesthouse a moment later, both armed, and flanked Brenna.

"Jameson, put her down," Brenna ordered.

"Your aunt Kiara is waiting out front with a car to take you and Maura to Boston where you'll both be safe," I said.

"She doesn't want to go to Boston." Brenna's Quinn green eyes burned with unreleased fury. I recognized the look because it was what I saw every

time I looked in the mirror. I'd lost almost everyone I'd loved. I'd lost my baby. My father had been murdered. My mother had been taken by cancer. And Aiden, the only blood I had left, was a loner and didn't want to have much to do with me. That type of loss and loneliness branded rage on one's soul. Given what Brenna had been through with an abusive father and brother and a detached drug addict of a mother, Brenna had the same lonely rage branded on her soul as well. One day she'd release that rage and I had no doubt it would be bloody, especially if Maura continued to groom her. But that day wouldn't be today. I was leaving with Maura. I wasn't going to lose her too.

"She doesn't get a say," I spat.

"Yes, she does," Brenna snarled. "You may be her lover, but she's Stefan's heir. You don't have the right to make that decision for her."

"What is going on out here?" I heard Stefan roar from behind us. He came to stand next to Louie, Will and Josh not more than a step behind him. Stefan took in the scene quickly, then looked to Louie and me. "I thought you were going to talk to her and convince her to leave, not force her."

Maura thrashed with what seemed to be all her strength in my arms and growled from behind my hand.

"Christ, Jameson, put her down before she gets hurt," Stefan ordered.

I reluctantly did as he said and gently set her on her feet. Once free, Maura's hand went flying. My head whipped to the side and my entire cheek stung from the strong slap.

"You bastards," she seethed at both Louie and I as she walked backward, hand pressed to her lower stomach until she reached Brenna's side. Guilt washed over me.

"We're just trying to protect you," Louie said. The desperation in his voice added to my own.

"I don't need your fucking protection," she snapped.

My heart was racing to the point my hands were shaking. Why did she have to fight us on this? Just this once, why couldn't she just listen and understand?

"You're a woman, Maura." I didn't mean what I'd said, yet the cold words had still escaped me. "What would you know? You already lost our baby. I won't let you get yourself killed too." I didn't mean it, but a part of me—a stupid part of me, I'd later learn—thought that if I hurt her, she'd shut down or want to cower and it'd be easier to get her to submit.

“Jameson!” both Louie and Stefan yelled at the same time.

As I’d suspected, my words affected her, and she was starting to back down.

“You are a fucking asshole. How dare you blame her?” Brenna raged.

Dean inched closer. “I’d shoot you now if she didn’t fucking love you.”

I pulled my gun from where it was tucked into the back of my jeans and aimed it at Maura’s *goon*. He really needed to butt the fuck out of this, or I’d shoot him. “You all are rallying behind someone who’s incapable of standing up for themselves, even to me. She’s going to Boston.”

Maura looked from my gun to Dean and something changed in her. Strength that had been missing sparked in her eyes. She took Brenna’s gun and aimed it at me. “How’s this for standing up for myself?”

I saw her pull the trigger but only faintly heard it fire because pain exploded in my shoulder, overpowering most of my senses. I fell backward to the ground and Louie knelt down next to me, his hand immediately putting pressure on my wound.

I heard Stefan call out to Maura and I tried to sit up enough to see her. Reading what I was trying to do, Louie helped me.

Maura had turned the gun on Stefan with a scowl. “You’re going to leave me the fuck alone, like you’ve been doing since I was released from the hospital. I won’t be going to Boston. The next person who tries to make me go, I’ll kill them.” Her gaze flicked back to Louie and me. She regarded us with disdain. “You fucking come near me again, I’ll kill you both.” She stormed back into the guesthouse, with Dean, Asher, and Brenna following right behind her.

Stefan turned his attention on us—mainly me. He was clearly pissed and did nothing to hide his disappointment. “Someone call Ben and help Jameson inside,” he ordered to no one in particular before going back inside the main house.



“We fucked up,” I said sullenly from where I sat in the corner of Jameson’s old bedroom. The two of us were alone, sitting in silence and reflecting on the utter shit storm this morning had turned out to be. Or at least I was. Dr. Ben had just finished pulling the slug from the meat of Jameson’s shoulder and dressing the wound. Maura had been kinder than we’d deserved. She had excellent aim. If she had wanted to, she could have easily hit where it could have caused permanent damage, or worse...she could have killed him.

From where he lay shirtless on the bed, Jameson glared up at the ceiling.

“We’ll get it right next time.”

“There won’t be a next time.”

His glare shifted to me.

My hands fisted in my lap. “I’m not going to force her to go.”

“What’s changed? Are you afraid she’ll shoot you too?”

“It’s not that I’m afraid. It’s that she will,” I said, anger seeping into my voice. “I’d almost given up that Maura would come back to us. Today, I saw her again. I saw the woman I love. It was the extremely pissed off version of her, but it was still her. Stefan was right. We need to help Maura overcome this.”

“Nothing has changed. There are still enemies all around us.”

“That’s your fear talking, Jameson.” I hated the words but that didn’t make them any less true.

He had never looked at me with such malice as he did then.

“I’ve been afraid too,” I added quickly.

His gaze jerked away from me and I took that as my cue to give him space. I stood and went to the door. Just as I was about to walk out, I glanced over my shoulder. “Be angry with me if you want. I can take it. But don’t sulk for long because I won’t wait around for you to make things right with Maura.”

I shut the door Dr. Ben had left open when he had gone to attend to Maura. She had popped a stitch fighting against us this morning. Knowing that we had hurt her made my stomach turn. I caught movement to my left. Stefan was leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest. The frown he held told me he’d been listening.

I straightened my stance and looked him right in the eye. “I’m sorry. We weren’t thinking clearly.”

“No. You weren’t,” he said, allowing his disappointment to carry in his voice. “But it’s not me you should be saying this to.”

My shoulders slumped a little. “I’d go beg for her forgiveness right now if I didn’t think she’d shoot me on sight.”

His frown fell and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “Might be a good idea to give her a day or two to cool down a little, but no more. If you truly love my daughter, you’ll risk taking a bullet to seek her forgiveness,” he said and walked away.

I’d do just that. Little did I know that she would be gone before I’d get my opportunity to speak to her again.



I was on my way back to Quinn Manor from picking up tacos—a bribe for Maura to let me see her—when I received a call that she was missing. It had been two days since the morning she had shot Jameson. He wasn't talking to me either.

I rushed up the front steps of the house and through the front door. Jameson and I both stepped into the foyer at the same time. His arm was in a sling and he was carrying a white envelope in his hand. He greeted me with nothing more than a nod and I followed him silently toward Stefan's study.

Like all friends, we fought. Usually over stupid shit. Not something as

important as Maura. Just from walking behind him, the weight of everything that had happened over the past couple of weeks felt heavier. Putting one foot in front of the other had never been so hard. But I took comfort in knowing that I wasn't alone in this—that Jameson was feeling the same. I would have loved that baby as my own. Well, I supposed I already did because of how hard it was to lose her. But the baby had been Jameson's blood. His pain was greater. Yet he had never rubbed that fact in my face or excluded me from mourning our baby girl. That not only gave me comfort but hope as well. So even though shit was going south again with Maura missing, my gut told me Jameson would see past the fog of fear and grief and I'd get my best friend back.

“What do you know?” Stefan questioned the moment we walked through the door. He wasn't sitting behind his desk, calm and collected like he usually was. Instead, he was pacing behind it.

“The bag of money she had under her bed is gone and she left this taped to the steering wheel of her Escalade that we found abandoned at the hospital,” Jameson said, holding out the envelope across Stefan's desk.

As Stefan went to take it, I saw that his name was written on the front of it. Stefan ripped it open and he pulled out a letter. His eyes quickly scanned over it. Then he scoffed. “Dear Stefan, I'm taking a vacation. Don't worry, I'll be safe. I have Brenna and my goons with me. I wouldn't bother looking for me because I stole Vincent. Call you in few days. Love, Maura.” He tossed the letter on his desk and pulled his chair out to sit. “Taking a vacation,” he repeated, furiously. “I see her cheeky personality has returned.”

“How did this happen? Why was her Escalade at the hospital?” I asked.

Stefan pulled his phone from his pocket. “She said her incision was bothering her and that she wanted to get it checked out. Both Brody and I offered to go with her but she refused and said she was taking Brenna with her.”

“She left for her appointment over an hour ago,” Jameson added. “If Vincent is covering their tracks...”

It wasn't going to be easy to find her.

“I'm calling for an emergency family meeting,” Stefan stated as he tapped away on his phone.

“We haven't cleared everyone yet,” Jameson said.

Stefan's eyes jumped up from his phone to meet Jameson's. “I'm sure you know just as well as I do what she's planning to do. I told you both you

shouldn't exclude her from getting back at the Aryans. You didn't listen and you successfully pushed her away. We need to find her before she gets herself killed."

I grimaced. Jameson remained stoic. "You think she's going after the Aryans by herself?" he asked.

"She took a bag filled with two million dollars and I'm sure she's already emptied her bank accounts—even the ones she thought I didn't know about. Not to mention she's vindictive to a fault," Stefan replied.

I couldn't argue with that.

Stefan's attention dropped back to his phone. "Call Aiden. With Vincent gone we're going to need another computer expert to help track her down."

With that said, we were dismissed. Jameson practically stormed out. Fed up with being ignored, I cut him off in the foyer. "You can't be pissed at me forever."

"I'm not pissed at you," he said, sounding exasperated. "I'm mad at myself."

My brows rose. I hadn't expected him to say that, or at least not yet.

"You were right," he said, sullenly. "I was so caught up in my own shit, I stopped thinking about Maura's wants and needs, and started thinking for Maura. Because it was easier. Because it gave me control—control in a situation I had lost all control of. I failed to protect my family and..." He inhaled deeply as he stared at the ceiling. "I fucked up and she left because of it."

"We both fucked up." To offer comfort, I put my hand on his good shoulder. "But we'll find her, and we'll make it right."



Later that day, everyone started arriving for the meeting Stefan had called for. Rourke and Conor had already arrived with their enforcers, two of which were standing in the hall. Jameson and I passed them as we made our way to one of the chamber's doors. Just as I went to enter, I spotted Sean and two of his security making their way down the hall. Seeing Sean reminded me of what he'd told Salome—that Maura was dead. It seriously made me want to pummel the fucker.

Jameson, having also noticed Sean, seemed to be feeling the same. He removed his sling from his arm, tossed it to the ground, and stalked toward

Sean. I only had time enough to think ‘*oh shit*’ before Jameson’s fist collided with Sean’s face. Sean crumpled to the ground and Jameson followed, straddling him. Then he hit him again and again.

Sean’s security went to reach for their weapons, but I was quicker and had my gun pointed at the both of them. “Stay out of it,” I warned.

Conor’s and Rourke’s enforcers also pulled their guns, but to my relief aimed them at Sean’s men.

“Damnit, Jameson!” Stefan roared as he passed me and ripped Jameson off Sean. “Enough!”

Sean rolled onto his side on the floor and spit blood from his already swelling mouth. By the looks of it he was going to be sporting a couple of black eyes pretty soon too. “What the fuck was that for?” he groaned.

“Did you think we wouldn’t find out that you told the Colombians Maura was dead?” Jameson seethed as he took a step toward him again. Stefan put his arm out, blocking Jameson from getting any closer.

“I was told she was dead by one of the housekeepers! I was worried we’d lose our relationship with the Colombians with Maura gone, so I called them to build a rapport before news of her death could reach them. I was being proactive, and I’ve already explained the mix up to Stefan.”

Sean spewed nothing but blatant lies and I couldn’t understand why Stefan was ignoring it. I scoffed. “That’s the story you’re going with?”

Stefan shot a look of warning over his shoulder at me.

“If you’re going to lie, at least try to make it believable,” Jameson snapped, inching closer, putting strain on Stefan’s arm. “I’ve allowed your shit up until now out of respect for Maura because she can handle you herself, but no more. You so much as breathe around her the wrong way and I’ll put a bullet between your eyes. Consequences be damned.” Jameson jerked away and went inside the chamber.

“Are you going to let him get away with this?” Sean asked Stefan as he gestured to his battered face.

Stefan arched a brow and stared down at Sean. The look he was giving Sean was unnerving. Only Maura had been on the receiving end of Stefan’s wrath and smiled back as if tickled to have someone to spar with.

Sean, though, dropped his eyes to the ground. Submitting was a wise choice because Stefan wouldn’t have had to finish giving the order before I would have pulled the trigger and killed Sean.



The mood was somber in the chamber. Part of it was due to the bleeding Sean, who hadn't spoken a word since the meeting started, and rest of it was because Stefan had just announced that Maura was missing.

"Why would my cousin run away?" Rourke questioned, eyeing Louie and I accusingly. "Maura wouldn't have just left."

I held his stare. "She left because of me."

"Not just because of you, Jameson," Louie said.

Rourke frowned. "What did you two do?"

I opened my mouth, prepared to answer honestly, but Stefan spoke over

me. “It doesn’t matter. What does is that she’s gone. I’d like to use every resource we have to find her.”

“The best way to get word out that we’re looking for her is The Underground,” Conor said. “The only downside is our enemies will know she’s out there on her own as well.”

With a traitor in the family, our enemies would find out anyway.

Stefan nodded. “I know but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. I’ll be taking Jameson and Louie with me there tonight.”

“I’ll go as well. Rourke will inform everyone in the family on our end,” Conor said. Rourke nodded in agreement.

Then everyone looked to Sean. He seemed to be barely paying attention as he held an icepack against his cheek. When he finally noticed everyone staring, he sat straighter and cleared his throat. “I—I’ll also inform everyone on my end and make sure word reaches those in Boston by tonight.”

A knock on one of the chamber doors echoed loudly before it opened, and Brody stepped inside. He walked right over to Stefan and bent to whisper in his ear. By the tight expression Brody held, I knew that my uncle had arrived.

Stefan returned his attention to the rest of us as Brody made his way back out of the room. “That’s all for now,” he said, standing. “Jameson, come with me.”

I followed Stefan out of the chamber to his study where my uncle Aiden was waiting with Brody. I could feel the tension the moment I stepped in the room. Aiden sat, looking relaxed and confident, on the leather couch with a finger of whiskey in a crystal tumbler. He was smirking at Brody, who was sitting on the edge of Stefan’s desk, his arms crossed, blatantly annoyed.

Stefan and Aiden had a sexual history and it made Brody jealous. It didn’t help that my uncle liked to ruffle Brody’s feathers either.

Right after my mother had passed away, my uncle had come to stay at the manor for a while to spend time with me and make sure I’d been comfortable living with Stefan. Long story short, I had walked in on him and Stefan kissing. My uncle had laughed it off. However, things had turned awkward between Stefan and I for a while. He’d never brought up what I had seen and neither had I—to him or anyone else. It hadn’t been my business what Stefan did in private.

After a year of me not saying a word of what I had seen, Stefan had taken me to dinner and told me that I had proven to be someone he could

trust and that I was to start shadowing him. It was then I'd realized Stefan had taken me seeing something that I wasn't supposed to as an opportunity to test my loyalty. It was the first test of many he would put me through that would prove me worthy of taking my father's seat at his table.

It wouldn't be until after I had received my father's seat and Aiden had come to visit again that I would learn of the reason behind the animosity between my uncle and Brody. Turned out, Stefan and Aiden had had flings—as in multiple—during the many times Brody and Stefan had broken up over the past twenty-some years.

Stefan had also slept with Monica the maid during one of their break ups. After Monica had flaunted the fact that she had slept with Stefan one too many times in front of Brody, Brody had beaten her over the head with a burning hot pan that Jeana had been in the middle of using. Jeana had burst into Stefan's study, where he and I had been having a meeting, and yelled for us to come to the kitchen quickly. When Stefan and I had arrived, Brody had been standing in front of the kitchen sink washing blood off his hands. Once done and drying his hands with a dish towel, he had calmly stepped over the dead woman on the floor and walked toward us, eyes locked on Stefan.

“Maura will be home from school soon. Clean this trash up, will you?” he had said. It hadn't been a request and then he had left us—or more specifically me—to deal with the bloody mess.

Over the years my uncle had more than flaunted his past sexcapades with Stefan in Brody's face. I had a feeling he got off on getting under Brody's skin. And unlike Monica, Brody couldn't kill my uncle.

“Aiden, thank you for coming so quickly,” Stefan greeted as he walked over to his desk.

Aiden didn't stop smirking. “I wanted to give Brody extra time to stare at my ass.”

Brody's expression turned from annoyed to a full-on glare.

Stefan sighed as he took a seat. I cringed, praying this reunion didn't turn into a fight like it had the last time my uncle had visited, and shut the door behind me. “Don't start, Aiden,” I warned as I walked over to him.

He stood with a smile and threw his arm around my back, hugging me. “I can't help it. He makes it so easy,” he whispered. My uncle and I had the same build and eyes, but that was where our similarities ended. Aiden had sandy blonde hair, with wisps of gray woven in. I returned his hug with a pat on his back. When he pulled away, he moved his hand to my good shoulder

and his expression turned serious. “I’m sorry about Maura and the baby.”

I gave him a tight nod and we both took a seat on the couch. Stefan glanced at Brody, who hadn’t moved. “Are you staying?”

Brody didn’t typically attend meetings or have much to do with the *business* side of things. That didn’t mean he was ignorant of everything. He just normally had his own responsibilities to take care of. But this meeting wasn’t a typical meeting. Brody had helped raise Maura and she’d always considered Brody as one of her parents. “I was thinking about it,” Brody replied.

“He wants to make sure I behave,” Aiden said.

Brody pushed off Stefan’s desk. “I’m here to make sure you take this seriously and not dick around when you should be helping us find Maura.”

Aiden’s smirk returned. “I’m sure her father is capable of keeping me in line.”

Irritated, I pinched the bridge of my nose. I loved my uncle, but he was an asshole.

“That’s enough, Aiden,” Stefan said, voice full of warning. Not that it did any good, because Brody lost it.

“Fuck you, Aiden. I raised her. I was there for the dirty diapers, the runny noses, and the scraped knees. I was there for every milestone in Maura’s life,” Brody snarled and pointed a finger at Aiden. “Don’t you dare come into my home and cast me aside as no one. Especially when you have no idea what it’s like to be a parent. You gave up that opportunity. Or did you forget that I helped raised Jameson too?”

My uncle’s smirk fell only to be replaced with a threatening look.

“I said that’s enough,” Stefan snapped in a low and eerie voice. It drew everyone’s attention. “Brody, let me handle this and we’ll talk later.”

Brody whipped around to face Stefan, ready to argue.

“I know,” Stefan bit out before Brody could say anything. “I know,” he repeated in a softer tone and they exchanged a look that felt private. “We will find her,” he assured.

Brody nodded before leaving the study. As soon as the door clicked shut, Stefan turned to Aiden.

“It’s not my fault he riles—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Aiden,” Stefan snapped. “My daughter is missing. That is why I called you here—to help us find her—not for you to antagonize Brody.”

Aiden smartly kept his mouth shut.

“That being said, the feud between you and Brody ends right now,” Stefan said, eyes locked with my uncle’s. The entire situation was uncomfortable as fuck. As Stefan’s enforcer, it came with my position to constantly have a front row seat to his drama.

Aiden gave Stefan a single curt nod. “I’m here to help.”

Stefan immediately switched to the problem at hand and explained all that we knew.

Even though my uncle knew everything because I had told him over the phone, he still listened intently. “Jameson told me that Asher is with her. At the firm we require those who work in the field to check in every forty-eight hours when they are on assignment. Asher has always been good about this. However, he was due to check in this morning and he didn’t. I tried contacting him without any luck. Then I had my team try to track him through any of his electronic devices such as his phone, computer, or tablet. They were also unsuccessful. Either this Vincent kid is as good as you say he is or Asher has gone rogue on me.”

“My money is on both,” I said.

Stefan grumbled in agreement. “Don’t be surprised if Maura steals Asher away from you.”

Aiden’s brows rose. “I thought we had an agreement that you wouldn’t poach my security specialists.”

“I didn’t hire Asher. Maura did,” Stefan pointed out. His face was a mask of innocence, but I could see a little bit of amusement spark in his eyes. “So I recommend you express your intolerance for poaching to her. Unfortunately, you’ll have to find her first.”



The Underground. A club under a club as I liked to call it. It was located under Anarchy and was run by the Bratva. It was one of a few neutral places in Quinn territory where those who were rich enough and had a standing in the crime world went to gamble, drink, and take part in any other debauchery The Underground had to offer. Because it was neutral, those who weren't loyal to Stefan and the Quinn family were also allowed in. There were rules, of course. No weapons and no fighting. A lot of feuds were ended at The Underground and a lot of feuds were created.

Jameson and I walked ahead of Stefan and Conor as we made our way

through the club. It was a Thursday night, yet Anarchy was still pretty packed. We walked past the bar and the dance floor to a single door in the back of the club that had a sign on it that read, 'Employees Only.' A bouncer was standing guard by the door. When he noticed us approaching, he opened it so we could continue inside without stopping. The door led to a short hallway. At the other end was an elevator where two more bouncers stood holding black leather containers.

As we came before them, one said, "Please hand over any weapons. They will be returned to you after your visit."

Jameson, Conor, and I began handing over the guns we carried. Of course, we all kept at least one other weapon on us. Just because it was a rule didn't mean we followed it.

Once our weapons were taken, one of the bouncers called the elevator and the four of us stepped inside. There were only two buttons to choose from. '2' led to the second floor where Sasha had an office and '1' went to the ground floor, which we were already on. Stefan pressed the '1' button and held it down until it dinged three times and the elevator began moving down.

The doors opened and my senses were overwhelmed with cigar smoke and low jazzy instrumental music. Jameson and I entered first, our feet stepping on dark red carpet with gold swirls. The room was filled with poker tables where high-stakes bets were being made.

Young girls dressed like high end strippers walked the room carrying drink trays. Their job wasn't only to serve drinks. For a very hefty price, they served in other ways, which was why they walked around in lingerie. They were showing off what they had to offer. I didn't like to pay for sex. It took away all the fun, but it was a rite of passage to have one of Sasha's girls at least once. Jameson, Rourke, and I—we had all done it. Dylan and Samuel, though, had been repeat customers. Especially Samuel.

Speaking of the, uh...*cocktail* waitresses, one was walking toward us. She looked the four of us over and zeroed in on Stefan. Sasha's girls knew how to spot a boss and a boss meant more money to them.

She smiled boldly at him. "Is there anything I can get you?" I wouldn't lie, she was gorgeous. She had long midnight hair and sky-blue eyes. She was a little too thin, though, and her breasts were unnaturally too big for her frame. It was obvious she'd had them upgraded to that size.

Stefan just blinked at her.

She was barking up the wrong tree. I snorted in an attempt to stifle a

laugh. Stefan and the girl looked at me and I pretended to cough. “I’m sorry. I have something in my throat.” Jameson gave me an exasperated look and shook his head.

“Stefan, what a surprise,” Sasha greeted as he came up next to the waitress. She backed away, giving the pakhan—the boss of the Bratva here in the States—her spot in front of Stefan. He and Stefan shook hands. “It’s been a while since you’ve visited The Underground.”

“Things have been occupying my time,” Stefan said.

Sasha’s expression turned grim. “I heard about the attack on Maura. I am sorry.”

I glanced at Jameson and he was frowning at the Russian.

“Yes, Maura is why I’m here,” Stefan admitted.

Sasha’s brows lifted. “Oh?”

“She’s missing,” Stefan said as if it weren’t a big deal. “I’m offering a substantial reward to anyone who can find her.”

Sasha frowned. “Has she been taken?”

Stefan shook his head. “No. My daughter has decided to play a large-scale game of hide and seek.”

“How much is the reward?” Sasha asked.

“Ten million,” Stefan replied and wasn’t quiet about it either.

Sasha’s eyes widened for only a second. “I’ll be sure to spread the word. Are you playing tonight?”

Stefan nodded. “Yes, I’ll need chips for a few million.”

Sasha looked to the waitress and she scurried off. He gestured out to the tables. “Please pick your table. Nika will bring your chips shortly.”

Conor moved up to stand next to Stefan. “The table all the way in the back.”

We all looked in that direction. Sat at that table was a president of a local MC that had sister chapters all over the New England area. Next to him was Ignacio, a member of the Mexican cartel. The third guy at the table was Vito, the consigliere for the Romano family. The Romanos were a smaller and rival family to the De Lucas. Once upon a time, the Romanos had used to rule both Quinn and De Luca territories. Then the Quinns and De Lucas had aligned to dethrone the Romanos, with the promise to divide the region between them. It was the only time our two families had been allies. A few bosses later, one side had become greedy for power, the feud had started, and we’d been fighting with the De Lucas ever since.

Stefan took the lead, heading for that table. “Have room for two more?” Stefan asked as he pulled out a chair.

Ignacio beamed. “Stefan! Conor! Please join us.” Ignacio and Conor had a good relationship. The cartel was one of his biggest buyers.

Stefan and Conor sat at the U-shaped table. Jameson and I stood by the wall behind the dealer, but we were still close enough to hear everything that was being said.

A lot of pleasantries and small talk were exchanged. Nika showed up with chips for Stefan and Conor and they began playing Texas hold 'em.

“I hear you have named your daughter as your heir,” Vito said as he looked over his cards. “That’s very...progressive of you.”

Stefan didn’t react. His face was a mask as he looked over his cards.

“If you knew my niece, you’d understand,” Conor chimed in.

“Speaking of my daughter,” Stefan started, capturing everyone’s attention. “She has decided to take a trip without telling me where she went. She likes to think she can outsmart me. I want to show her that is not the case. I’m thinking about paying a large reward to anyone who can find her.”

The corner of Vito’s mouth lifted. “Your heir ran away?”

“She said she’s taking a vacation but didn’t tell us where or when she would be home,” Conor said, his Irish accent coming out thicker than normal. It was a small tell that he was irritated. No one really liked Vito. He was a power-hungry dick, with a grudge against everyone.

“Although my daughter is loyal to me, she likes to bend the rules. She told me that she was taking a vacation and that she would check in, yet didn’t tell me where she was. She walks a very fine line of obedience and defiance,” Stefan explained.

Vito pushed a stack of chips forward, placing his bet. “Sounds to me like you’ve given your daughter too many freedoms, Quinn.”

Stefan locked eyes with Vito. “No, Romano, I raised a boss.”

Yes, he had, I thought, smiling.



Three months later...

“Maura went to see Sasha,” Stefan informed everyone in the chamber. Stefan had called a family meeting after receiving the call. Maura had been missing for three months and within that time we hadn't been able to find a single clue that would help us find her. We had exhausted every resource and Stefan had increased the reward for Maura's whereabouts to twenty million. Nothing had come of it. We'd even reached out to the De Lucas. The don had agreed to keep an eye out, but Stefan wasn't confident he would help. If she

hadn't texted Stefan every couple of weeks saying, 'I'm fine. Don't look for me,' I was pretty sure we would have gone out of our minds with worry by now.

"Why didn't they bring her home?" Sean asked.

"She ambushed them in Sasha's office at his club, Anarchy," Stefan said.

"Why would she go to the Russians?" Conor asked next.

Stefan hesitated to answer. "Sasha wouldn't say."

I glanced at Jameson. He was studying Stefan.

"What?" Rourke blurted, clearly confused. "Sasha and the Bratva have always been our allies, why wouldn't—"

"Rourke," Conor snapped, interrupting his son. They exchanged a look and I caught Conor giving a slight shake of his head.

Stefan quickly took back control of the conversation. "I called you here today because I think Maura is back in New Haven."

Conor nodded. "We'll spread the word."

"Unless anyone has anything they'd like to add, I'll leave you to it," Stefan said, dismissing the meeting. Rourke, Conor, and Sean left. Jameson and I lingered with Stefan. Once the chamber door shut and we were alone, Stefan spoke before we could bombard him for real answers. "She gave Sasha files on every Aryan locked up in the New England area and then offered him two million to take them all out."

"I wonder where she got that kind of money," I said caustically.

"She's moving against the Aryans," Jameson said, sounding equally exhausted and angry. Our goal had been to find Maura and help her go after the Aryans. That didn't look like it was going to happen now. We had run out of time.



It felt like I had just closed my eyes to fall asleep when my bedroom door swung open and Jameson stormed in. After Maura had returned from the hospital, I'd kind of moved into the room across from Jameson's. I still had my condo. I just didn't want to be far away in case she needed me, and after she'd disappeared, I wanted to be here if we heard anything.

"Get up. It's Maura," he said, flipping on the lights and ripping open my dresser. I shot out of bed and by the time my feet hit the floor, he was

throwing a pair of jeans and a shirt at me. I didn't think I'd ever gotten dressed so fast in my life. I tugged on my shoes on the way out the door and followed him up to the third floor—Stefan's suite. I'd never been up there before.

Once we reached the top of the stairs, we walked down a hallway leading to double doors. Both of which were wide open. I could hear a TV on and what sounded like the news playing. Jameson walked right in and veered off to the left. Stefan's room was very large. He had his bed up against the far wall, what looked like an en suite off to the right. There were a few other doors that were closed. I knew from Jameson that one led to a personal gym that had used to be Maura's nursery. Like a lot of rooms in the Quinn Manor, there was a lounge area facing a TV. I hid my surprise when I noticed Brody was sitting on the couch dressed in a robe with his eyes glued to the screen. Seeing him so at home in Stefan's space was a first. I had always assumed Brody was gay. However, when Maura had hinted that Stefan and he were together, I'd been a little stunned. Stefan had always kept his love life very private and I'd also figured it was none of my business.

Stefan was standing behind the couch—his attention also on the TV. We both went to stand next to him. With a quick glance I saw that the news was covering some building on fire. Then I heard 'Whiskey Bandit' and 'four explosions.' I became sucked into the news like the rest of them.

The news listed off all the locations of the explosions and it clicked. They all belonged to the Aryans. "Holy shit," I gaped.

The ringing of a phone broke the hold the TV had on all of us. Stefan pulled his phone from his pocket. His eyes narrowed as he read the number on the phone just before answering it. "Hello?" His posture straightened as if on alert. "Maura," he said and put the phone on speaker.

Her sultry voice poured out of the phone. "I've called to tell you that I'll be making some noise in the city. In fact, I've already started." She sounded good. Stronger...but there was a detachment in her words.

Stefan sighed and glanced at the TV. "The explosions, I take it that was you?"

There was a pause before she responded. "I should be done with my vacation in two weeks. After that, I'll come home."

"Running away isn't a vacation, Maura," Stefan snapped.

"You know why I left," she snapped back.

I squeezed my fists as I listened to Stefan voice what Jameson and I both

wanted to say. “We were trying to protect you.”

“You weren’t protecting me. You shut me out and tried to send me away.”

“Enough,” Stefan bit out before he took the phone off speaker and walked away. “I just want you to come home,” I heard him say before he disappeared into his en suite.

I released a heavy sigh and turned to Jameson. He was leaning against the back of the couch with his arms folded across his chest. He held a pensive look in his eyes as he tried to bore a hole in the floor.

Brody had twisted around to look at us. He studied Jameson first before his gaze moved to me. “I hope you two know that you will be helping Stefan clean this mess up. None of this better fall back on her.”

We knew that and we’d make sure of it.



We found her.

Over the past two days, bodies of Aryans had been popping up. Seven had been killed in the explosions. Four had been found hanging from a bridge with fucking shamrocks drawn on their chests. And today two more had been gunned down outside a bakery in Hartford. Stefan, Louie, and I had been going nonstop cleaning up the carnage and covering up Maura's tracks. Stefan had called in a lot of favors and given out a lot of bribes. In the few instances neither of those had worked, Louie and I had stepped in to take care of whoever hadn't been on board with the story we'd wanted told. An

inspector who had been assigned to the explosions had needed to be replaced and we'd had to physically convince a reporter who was too smart for his own good to stop running his mouth.

It was pure luck that we received a call today that a woman matching Maura's description was staying at a hotel in New Haven. Stefan took on the task of covering up the shooting in Hartford while Louie and I were sent out to make sure the tip we'd received was legit.

It was just after nine at night when we arrived at the hotel. The lobby was busy. Probably due to the nightclub located somewhere inside.

The concierge who had called in the tip was waiting for us toward the back of the lobby by the elevators. Once we approached him, he held out a room key and a folded-up piece of paper. I took them and handed the key card over to Louie.

"Room 327," the concierge said as I unfolded the piece of paper. It was a scan of a driver's license. All the info was of a fake alias, but the picture was of Maura. I handed the paper over to Louie to look at and reached into my jacket pocket. Any legit tips were to be rewarded with ten grand in cash. Had the guy delivered Maura to me, I would have been handing over a shit ton more money. I pulled an envelope filled with the cash and gave it to the concierge. He snatched it and quickly scurried off.

"Want to go check out the room and I'll wait down here?" I suggested.

Louie answered by pushing the button to call the elevator. There was a ding before the doors slid open. A small smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth as he stepped inside. It was the most upbeat I'd seen him be in months.

I went to stand in an alcove near the front desk. There, I was kind of hidden, but it gave me a view of the whole lobby. Not even a minute later, the elevators dinged again, followed by the sound of heels echoing off the tile floor. My gaze shot in that direction and there she was.

Maura.

My breath hitched as I took her in, from her green high heels, her long creamy legs, the black dinner napkin of a dress she was wearing, to her red hair. She had cut it. Before it had used to remind me of a silky river of blood. Now, the waves she styled her hair in barely kissed her shoulders. She had gained her weight back and her muscles were a little more defined. She looked good but still exuded pain. I could see it in her face and despite her strong exterior, I noticed it in the way she carried herself as well.

Brenna was walking beside her, her hair equally as short. Dean, Asher,

and Finn surrounded them in a protective formation. Asher took the lead, Dean walked at Maura's other side, and Finn took the rear. By how the girls were dressed and the direction they were walking in, I assumed they were going to the hotel's club. I followed from a distance and watched them disappear, as I'd suspected, into the club.

I called Louie. He was already in her hotel room. We agreed that he'd stay up there while I watched from afar down here. After I hung up, I went into the club. It was dark and crowded. Lights flashed and glided over the dance floor. Off to the right was a large oval shaped bar. High top tables were scattered around it. Leather booths lined the walls and there were a few roped off seating areas on the opposite end of the club. I spotted Maura at the bar with Brenna. Her security stood around them, their eyes scanning the rest of the club. I kept to the shadows, making my way to a dark booth.

A cocktail waitress approached. Her eyes roamed all over me, openly checking me out. I could tell she liked what she saw. "What can I get for you?" she asked, leaning close and giving me a direct view down her top.

"I'll take a beer," I said. "I don't care what kind."

She nodded. "Are you here alone?"

"No." I glanced around the club, silently dismissing her. She seemed to get the hint and took off toward the bar. By the time she had returned with my beer, I had watched Maura take two shots of tequila and hold up a finger, signaling to the bartender for another. Brenna sipped a cocktail next to her slowly and her security watched them with varying expressions. Finn looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. Dean watched Maura with what seemed to be a permanent angry frown. Asher watched them all with amusement. Out of the three of Maura's security, I found Asher the hardest to read. Finn was an asshole who hated to be inconvenienced but took his role in the family seriously. Dean was a guarded bastard but cared for Maura. He might have even loved her. That thought tried to pull my jealousy to the surface. I forced it down. Feeling that way right now didn't help any, especially since I wasn't entirely sure what kind of love he had for her. Was it friendship? Or did he want her? Either way, I didn't want to think about it.

From what Maura had told me about Asher he was ex-military, had an unhealthy relationship with money, and was morally gray like Louie. When I'd asked her what color my morals were, she had responded with 'a shade or two lighter than black.'

"Don't worry, baby," she had said with a small smile. "You and I are the

same. If the two of us were on a sinking ship with three thousand other people and I had a choice between saving you or them, I'd choose you. I wouldn't hesitate. People like Louie would hesitate and that's okay. I admire and love him for it because I feel he keeps us from going completely black. It's almost like he's our tether—our light in the darkness.”

Maura had explained Asher's character but that didn't tell me his motives. Why would he give up his career at my uncle's security firm to help Maura with her revenge? I doubted she had offered him more money. It was possible that he was the one feeding the Aryans information, but I didn't feel like that was the case. Why would he help Maura kill them? As I continued to watch Asher, who was watching over their little group, I caught what looked like fondness mold his expression. I had always thought Maura was magnetic but maybe it was stronger than I'd originally thought. Like she had done with Dean, maybe she really had stolen Asher's loyalty.



My knee bounced as I watched Maura dance. Her body swayed to the music in a dress that barely covered her next to Brenna. Men around them stared hungrily, their eyes raking over her exposed skin. That yanked on a possessive need inside me. Fuck, the longer I watched her, the more I ached to touch her—to breathe her in. It had been too long. Three months too long.

When one of the fuckers inched closer to her, his intent clear, I couldn't hold back any longer. I beelined for Maura, not giving a damn that her security would spot me or that when she found out that I was here, she'd try to run from me. Her back was to me as I approached. I locked eyes with the

guy and smoothed my hands over her hips. Touching my front to her back, I swayed with her. Her body against mine felt like I was returning home. The ache I had been carrying in my chest since she had disappeared lessened so much I almost groaned. I was happy she didn't push me away and instead molded against me and hooked an arm around my neck. The sleazeball who had been zeroing in on her like a fucking predator gave up and moved away.

I briefly glanced at Brenna. She was gaping at me, clearly unsure as to what she should do. I ignored her. All I cared about was in my arms.

I trailed a finger along the underside of the arm she had hooked around my neck. I started from her elbow down, causing her skin to break out in goosebumps as I went. I brushed my knuckles along the side of her breast and rested my hand on her ribs. I felt her shiver. It radiated through me down to my dick and I grew hard instantly. Her responses made me greedy for more.

I brushed my nose along her ear, inhaling her intoxicating scent that reminded me of the tulips she loved. "You cut your hair." It wasn't the best way to greet her, but it was the first thought that popped into my head. Her long hair had been beautiful, but the short waves she had now made her look fierce and sexy.

She unhooked her arm from my neck and whipped around to face me. Her green eyes widened for only a second and I tightened my arms around her. She surprised me by putting her hands on my chest and pressing herself against me. Her hand moved up behind my neck and pulled me closer. Reading her intention, I didn't resist and let her bring her lips to mine. Slightly doubting this moment was real, I was hesitant to move anything but my fingers. Her demanding tongue slid across my lips and whatever had been holding me back broke. I stopped caring about everything—her security, the club, the Aryans, the guilt, the pain. Everything else ceased to exist but her.

I shoved my hand in her hair and dominated her mouth with my tongue. I couldn't get enough. When it came to her, I knew I never would.

She pulled away slightly just before she rammed her knee up between my legs. The pain squeezed all the air from my lungs. Grunting, I fell to a knee and watched her green heels back away from me. Fuck. I supposed I deserved that, but my sore balls begged to differ.

I had to take a few deep breaths through clenched teeth before I could force myself to my feet. I barely caught Maura running off in the opposite direction as Brenna and her security. I had no doubt she was sacrificing herself so they could get away. Not that it mattered. I didn't give a fuck about

them. Only her. I took off in her direction. She exited the club and briskly walked across the lobby, the sound of her heels clacking loudly as she went. She never glanced back as she entered the hotel's stairwell. I stalked behind her without rushing. I knew where she was headed, and Louie would be there to greet her.



Jameson had texted to give me a heads up that Maura was on her way. I pulled the armchair that had been in the corner of the room and positioned it to face the door. I wanted her to see me right as she came in. Knowing that she was on her way made my pulse race. I had missed her more than I'd thought it possible to miss someone. Which was why I was a little worried how this reunion was going to play out. I didn't have time to dwell on it because the sound of the lock clicking on the door stole my attention.

She was here.

The door opened slowly. The first thing to come into view was a Glock

cradled by two equally deadly and beautiful hands. My stare flicked to the woman holding the gun as she stepped into the room and it took a lot of effort not to react. It felt like the slightest movement might spook her. “Are you going to shoot me, beautiful?”

Without lowering her weapon, she held an unwavering blank mask as she moved further into the room, leaving the door open slightly behind her. “What are you doing here?” Her words came out indifferent and cold. I knew it was all a facade. If she truly felt how her words sounded, she would have shot me already.

“You know why we’re here.”

“I’m afraid that I don’t,” she said, taking another step closer.

The hotel room swung open behind her and Jameson walked in carrying a pair of green heels. I instantly knew he was angry as he stalked toward Maura. “You dropped these,” he snarled before tossing them on the bed. My eyes dropped to Maura’s feet and found them bare.

Maura pointed her gun at Jameson, making him halt a few feet from her. She smirked up at him, which seemed to piss him off more.

“You think you’re funny?” he practically growled.

Maura didn’t back down. If anything, she relished his anger. “Did you honestly think I would throw myself at you after what you’ve done?”

I shot to my feet because I was having *déjà vu*. I needed to defuse the situation before she shot him again. “It seems we started off on the wrong foot. We only came here to talk.”

She didn’t remove her eyes from Jameson. “Bullshit.”

“We did. I swear,” I insisted.

“Even if that were true, I don’t want to talk to either of you,” she seethed. Her words were harsh, and her eyes were full of sadness. “So you might as well just leave.”

Jameson gave her a sardonic smile. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

I had the urge to sigh. Instead of begging for fucking forgiveness, he was challenging her. I wouldn’t be surprised if she shot him again.

Maura tilted her head. “Why? You had no problem leaving me before. I remember you being pretty insistent on sending me away. You did just about anything to unburden yourself of the woman responsible for your baby’s death.”

Her words were like a punch in the gut. Jameson stepped away from her, guilt filling his eyes.

“That’s not true and you know it,” I argued. “We wanted to send you somewhere safe so we—”

“So you could what?” she snapped at me. “Get back at the Aryans for me?” She laughed a dark little laugh. “I don’t need fucking men to fight my battles for me. The only thing you two ended up doing was making me look weak to the rest of the family.”

“You were weak,” Jameson bit out.

Yup, she was going to shoot the both of us.

“I had my baby gutted from me!” she roared. I winced at the pain that rattled in her voice. “You couldn’t give me a fucking minute to grieve. Instead, you wrote me off. You abandoned me!”

“We didn’t abandon you! We were trying to protect you!” Jameson roared back. “You left us. You shot me and disappeared for three fucking months.”

Maura’s shoulders squared as she glared at Jameson. “You think I wanted to leave? That I wanted to do this alone?” Her brow puckered as tears filled her eyes. She lowered her gun and said, “I needed you and you tried to send me away.” Her voice cracked along with my heart. “And don’t tell me it’s because you wanted to protect me. You both knew that once I was able to pull myself to my feet, I’d want revenge. You tried to take that from me, to punish me.”

What? Why would she think that we wanted to punish her?

I shook my head because she had it all wrong. “No. We—”

“It’s my fault we lost her,” she cut me off.

Internally, I was screaming, ‘No, it wasn’t!’

“Right, Jamie?” she asked him.

Jameson’s jaw was clenched as his eyes bored into Maura’s. He looked like he was battling like I was. What could we say or do to convince her that she was wrong?

“I don’t blame you,” he said.

I tried not to roll my eyes at his lame attempt and added, “We never did.”

She stepped away from us, with tears rolling down her cheeks. “It doesn’t matter.”

Jameson moved toward her. “Yes, it does. I didn’t mean any of it. I was hoping that if I hurt you, you’d go. You weren’t safe and I was desperate.”

I was proud of his honesty, but Maura didn’t look like she wanted to

believe it.

“I know it sounds stupid, but you’re a runner,” he said. My shoulders slumped. Why did he have to put his foot in his mouth?

“You tried to run from Louie when you thought he didn’t want to be with you,” he continued. “You’ve run from me I don’t know how many times. When it involves emotional pain, you run.”

I took a step closer, wanting a turn to plead our case. “We almost lost you. It scared us. We were angry and grieving. Did we go about things poorly? Yes. But our intentions were to protect you, especially since we have no idea who is feeding all our secrets to the Aryans.”

She shook her head and backed away from us. I could see she felt cornered and was about to bolt. She spun on her heel and tried to get away, but Jameson caught her by the waist. “See what I mean? You run.”

She rammed her elbow into his ribs, and he released her with a grunt.

“If you’ve said all you needed to say, then leave,” she shot over her shoulder before she dashed into the bathroom. She slammed the door in our faces before we could stop her and the sound of the lock clicking into place followed.

I glared at the damn door and said, “We’re not leaving.” I turned to look at Jameson, who had taken a seat on the foot of the bed. His shoulders were slumped, and his gaze was glued to the carpet. I sighed. “That could have gone better.”

He ran his hands down his face and groaned. “I keep fucking things up.”

I nodded, not that he could see it. “Yup.”

He dropped his hands from his face to glare at me.

I shrugged. “Don’t give up.”

“I’m not.”

“Good.”

He looked at the bathroom door behind me. “How long should we wait until we go in there and get her?”



The moment I felt movement in the bed I knew Maura was awake and trying to sneak away. I betted she hadn't been happy to discover that we'd broken into the bathroom a few hours after she'd locked herself in it. We'd found her sleeping against the wall with her legs curled up to her chest. Killing Aryans must have been tiring because she hadn't even stirred when I'd scooped her up and carried her to the bed.

Peeking through my lashes, I fought not to smile as she scooted slowly toward the foot of the bed. It was cute that she thought I'd let her get away after just finding her. Once she was off the bed and tiptoeing toward the door,

I dared to open my eyes fully. She stopped by the closet and pulled out a bag. She glanced back over at us and I had to shut my eyes again and didn't open them until I heard her move for the door.

I shot up from the bed and made it over to her just as she finished turning the deadbolt. I put my hands on the door on either side of her shoulders. One; to keep her from opening the door. And two; I liked that I had her trapped between me and the door. The dental floss that her dress had for straps had fallen off her shoulders and her breasts were barely holding her napkin dress on her body. Her hair was tousled as if I'd spent the whole night with my dick buried deep inside her.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

She turned to face me, and my gaze dropped to where her dress was hanging on for dear life. One little yank and she'd be bare before me. And I knew for damn sure she wasn't wearing any panties.

Her eyes also moved down to my chest, heat filling them as they roamed over me. As if realizing what she was doing, her eyes returned to mine and I did nothing to hide my smirk.

"I'm not hungry," she said, sounding irritated at being caught.

I stepped closer, making her back up until she was pressed against the door. I leaned forward and laid a kiss on her collar bone. She jerked, rattling the door behind her. Her reaction made me chuckle against her soft skin. "I think you're hungry. Not for food, though."

"Don't fuck with me, *Jameson*," she growled.

I pulled away. "I'm not fucking with you. Just stating what you're too stubborn to admit."

"You wish."

"Enough," Louie snapped, startling both of us.

I pushed off the door and snatched away the bag she had been holding. Yanking it open, I began going through it. We had already hidden her gun last night, but I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd had another. I pulled out another fake ID and a passport with her picture on them. I found a burner phone next and decided to toss it to her. "Call your little team. Tell them that we'll drop you off in a couple of hours."

"Or you could just let me leave," she grumbled.

I tried to not get angry. I hated that she was so determined to run away from us. "No. She was our baby, too, Maura. Revenge is not only yours." I tossed her bag on the dresser as I walked away from her.

“So, what? You’re going to help?” she asked, her tone full of distrust.

“Yes,” Louie answered from where he sat on the foot of the bed. “We want to help.”

The room fell quiet for a moment until she said, “Fine. I’m taking a shower.” She grabbed her bag from the dresser and disappeared back into the bathroom.



Other than giving us directions, Maura was quiet. Too quiet. I’d sneak peeks into the backseat through the rearview mirror to check on her. For most of the drive she was unreadable. However, the longer we drove and the closer we got to our destination, the more her mask dropped as she stared out the window. That vacant yet sorrowful look she’d used to have in the hospital returned.

“Turn here,” she said, pulling my focus back to the road. She had led us to a heavily wooded area in the mountains. For a while now we had been driving on a dirt road. I pulled down what looked like a long private drive that led up to a large cabin. I spotted Dean and Asher standing on the wrap around porch as we pulled up. So this was where she had been hiding for the past three months.

Maura jumped out of the car before I could even shift it into park. Her security looked her over as if assessing for injuries. It pissed me off that they’d think we’d lay a hand on her. Once they were done, and after Louie and I had gotten out of the car, their gazes shifted to us. By their pissed off looks, it was obvious that they weren’t happy that we were here. I didn’t give a fuck. They could glare at us all they wanted. We weren’t going anywhere.

The front door of the cabin opened just as we reached the steps leading up to the porch. Brenna stepped out with a Glock. She looked Maura up and down. “You okay?”

“Just peachy,” Maura grumbled and looked at Dean. “Did you move things around?”

Dean didn’t look away from me as he responded, “Yup.”

“Finn made lunch. Let’s go eat,” Brenna said and practically dragged Maura inside.

I moved up the steps and Dean blocked my way before I could make it to the top. “You got something to say?” I asked, not at all impressed by their

attempt to intimidate us.

“Just trying to figure out why you’re here,” Dean said as if he were bored by this whole situation.

Louie stepped closer. “We’re here to help.”

Asher came to stand next to Dean, displaying a united front and blocking us from following Maura. “She doesn’t need your help.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Louie said, irritation seeping into his voice. “But we’re here anyway.”

Dean huffed. “You’re here to win her back.”

“It’s none of your business,” I snapped. Maura was right. Her security was mouthy.

“Where she’s involved it is my business,” Dean snarled. He always gave off a pissed off vibe but right now his anger was genuine. “Because we were there for her. We helped her stand and reminded her that she was still strong. What did you do? You kicked her when she was down and tried to send her away.”

I was a breath away from shooting Maura’s goon. Even though what he'd said was true, it wasn’t easy to hear. So before I lost it, I walked away. I pounded down the steps and took off into the woods, not giving a fuck where I was going.

“Jameson!” Louie called out to me. I didn’t stop and I wouldn’t until I came up with a plan to make things right. Everything I had done up until now had been one fuck up after another. I hated myself for it. I hated that I'd let my fear and grief consume me and I'd ended up hurting her more because of it. I'd used to pride myself at the control I maintained but when it came to Maura...my love for her outweighed everything.



I tried to chase after Jameson but after following him for a while I turned around and headed back to the cabin. He needed time to figure his shit out and I had a feeling it was going to take a while. When I returned, Asher was waiting on the porch.

“I’ll show you the room you’ll be sharing,” he said and led me inside.

Right as I walked in, I was in what looked to be a living room. Asher led me down a narrow hall that was filled with doors. Just after we passed the second one, a loud voice said, “And you’re a jaded asshole!” Then the door ripped open and Brenna stomped out. “Fucking dickhead,” she muttered as

she shoved past us. She was fuming so much I highly doubted she saw us. She was four steps ahead of us before she whirled around, her blonde ringlets flailing about as she did, and she leveled a glare at me. “You better not take this from her.”

My brows rose at the threat in her voice. “We’re only here to help.”

She arched a brow and for a second I thought I was staring at a younger, blonde version of Maura. “And get her back?” she asked.

I hesitated in answering but eventually nodded.

“I hope you realize that the safety is off, and everyone here has their finger hovering over the trigger, waiting for Maura to say the word. I suggest you don’t fuck up,” she warned and disappeared through one of the many doors.

Asher chuckled. “Looks like she’s rooting for you.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

Asher smirked and continued on down the hall. “Did anyone else here give you a warning?” he shot over his shoulder.



Jameson had returned, cooled off and holding a determined look. “Let’s focus on helping her get back at the Aryans,” he had said. “She doesn’t need to deal with us on top of that and getting back at them seems to be the thing that she needs. I don’t want to take that from her. Not again. We’ll make things right after.”

I had agreed. “Did you check in with Stefan?”

He’d nodded. “He understands why we can’t leave her, and he had assumed that we wouldn’t drag her back to the manor. He seems more at ease now that we are with her.”

Later that night everyone congregated in the living room. Just as Jameson and I took a seat on the couch, Maura announced that we were going after Alex Roth in the morning. Hearing that name made Jameson and I go tense. Yet Maura said it with such indifference. I saw the others exchanging looks as Maura went over the plan and answered our questions like a textbook.

Her and Brenna were loading bullets into magazines while they sat on the floor. Next to them was a huge ass crate of weapons, which I’d come to find out had been from Nicoli De Luca. I supposed I understood why she

hadn't asked Rourke, but he would be hurt if he ever found out that she hadn't trusted him enough to ask. Our family was the largest arms dealer in the U.S. after all.

Vincent, Stefan's hacker who Maura had supposedly stolen, slammed his computer shut. "I've got nothing on Buck." By how he interacted with Maura, I'd have said it hadn't taken much convincing for him to leave with her at all.

Vincent went on to explain how he had tracked Buck from Hartford using street cameras after Maura had sniped a few of Buck's Aryans yesterday. Then he said that he'd lost Buck after he'd gotten onto the interstate. "Facial recognition hasn't picked up him or the others that are with him anywhere."

Maura got to her feet. "No more computer tonight." She took his laptop from him. "We'll find him, but right now, you need rest. Go to bed and try again tomorrow."

He pushed his electric blue hair out of his face and stood. "Okay."

She handed over his computer with a motherly look, which made me sad, and he went to his room.

"We should all get some rest," Asher said from where he was standing next to the weapons crate. Him and Finn had been taking inventory of everything inside. "Big day tomorrow."

"Some rest it's going to be. Finn snores," Brenna grumbled.

Finn frowned. "Are you still pissed from this afternoon?"

Brenna glared at him. "You really shouldn't piss off your roommate. They might kill you in your sleep."

Her words took me by surprise. I had given myself a little tour of the cabin earlier and there were only four bedrooms. Jameson and I were sharing one. I had assumed the girls would share one while Vincent and Maura's security shared the remaining two. If Brenna was bunking with Finn, who was Maura sharing a room with?

"Roommate?" Jameson said, obviously coming to the same conclusion.

Hoping I'd misunderstood, I asked, "You aren't sharing a room with Maura?"

Brenna winced and exchanged a look with Maura. "Finn, that's our cue to leave." Finn didn't argue and the two of them took off down the hall.

Jameson and I both looked to Maura.

I swore she surpassed Stefan when it came to being unreadable. "Dean is

bunking with me,” she said.

Anger burned in my chest and I didn’t fucking care to hide it. “Are you fucking him?”

Maura didn’t even react. She just blinked at me and replied simply, “No.”

I looked at Dean. He had been quietly cleaning his gun where he sat in a chair across from us. The corner of his mouth twitched, and he shook his head. “None of us trust you not to take her.” He stood and gestured for Maura to leave with him.

When she did, I waited until I heard their door click shut before I stormed down the hall, leaving Jameson behind, and shut myself in the room we shared.

I had been jealous before when Maura and Jameson had gotten together but it had never been as bad as this.



Louie and I rode up in a cargo van with Dean and Maura, while Brenna and Finn followed with Asher in his truck. Dean parked the van on the side of the road about a mile away from where Alex Roth was hiding out. Everyone climbed out of the vehicles and began checking over their weapons. We were all dressed in black. Black long sleeved shirts, cargo pants, boots, and ski masks.

I couldn't stop staring at Maura as she cocked her Glocks before shoving them back in the holsters strapped under her arms. I didn't like how involved she was in this.

She caught me staring. “What?”

“No one would think less of you if you stayed behind until we captured him,” I said as delicately as possible.

Everyone around us paused. Maura rolled her eyes. “No.”

“You’re important, Maura,” I said, trying to reason with her.

“Not just to us but to the family,” Louie added. “If anything happens to you—”

A gun was cocked by my ear and Brenna stepped between us and Maura. “Back off.”

Dean stepped up next to her. “Don’t forget that you’re just guests here.”

I wasn’t trying to take charge. I wasn’t trying to be chivalrous and make her feel weak. It was that I needed her to be okay. I needed it as much as my next breath.

“If you’re worried about the danger, you’re more than welcome to wait here and watch the cars,” Asher quipped as he carried over two large rifle cases and held one out to Brenna.

When neither Louie nor I responded, Maura said, “Let’s go.”

We all split off. Because the sun was just starting to rise it was still a little dark out. It made it easy to go unseen as we made our way through the wooded area surrounding the house.

Asher and Brenna were the first to get into position where they’d watch over us through the scopes of their sniper rifles. “The sister is sitting on the porch, boiling heroin in a spoon,” Asher said through the tiny radio tucked into my ear.

Louie and I crept up to the last line of trees and peeked from behind them. Sure enough, Alex Roth’s sister was getting high. “We have a visual,” I said.

Dean’s voice followed. “Us too.”

“Same,” Finn said last.

“We should just shoot her,” Brenna mumbled. “I bet that’d draw the bastard out.”

A smile spread across my face. I looked over at Louie and saw that he was also smiling. Maura had definitely rubbed off on Brenna.

“No innocents,” Maura said, wiping away my smile. Maura had insisted we all wear masks to hide our identities from Alex’s sister. I wasn’t completely on board with that.

“I doubt the junkie is innocent,” Brenna quipped. “What if I maim her?”

She'll live."

I couldn't help but laugh and from the chuckles coming through my earpiece I wasn't the only one.

"And now she's high," Brenna scoffed. "She isn't moving from that spot anytime soon." She was right. Tiffany, I thought was his sister's name, had her head thrown back in the rocking chair she sat in, riding her heroin high.

The front door opened and both Louie and I ducked back behind the trees.

"Don't move," Asher said. "He's looking around."

We stayed still and waited.

"Okay, he's walking over to the sister," Asher informed.

I nodded at Louie, silently telling him to peek first because his tree had a big bush in front of it that would help keep him hidden. Just as he got a visual Brenna's voice came through the earpiece. "That's fucking disgusting." Louie ducked back behind his tree, his shoulders shaking as he fought not to laugh. Curiosity getting the best of me, I peeked out and saw what all the fuss was about. I didn't look long before ducking back behind my tree and shook my head. The sister was going to town on her brother's dick.

"Please let me shoot them. My eyes can't take it," Brenna begged.

Louie let out a tiny snort and then gave me an apologetic look.

"Can you get him in the leg?" Maura asked, obviously coming up with a plan B.

"Yeah, I can," Brenna replied in a giddy tone. I was beginning to think Maura had corrupted the girl.

"We move in once she takes the shot," Maura ordered, and we all responded that we understood. "Okay, Brenna."

The shot echoed through the trees and the next thing we heard was a masculine roar.

Maura ordered for Brenna and Asher to take out the tires on their cars and then more shots rang out. Louie and I jumped out from behind the trees and advanced on the house.

"Get my gun," Alex yelled at his sister and she ran into their house, leaving Alex bleeding on the porch.

Telling me what I already knew, Maura said, "Jamie, the sister went inside for a gun."

I veered away from Louie. "I'll go in from the back."

"I'll go too. Finn, you're with Maura," Dean said, and I fought not to

roll my eyes.

I made it to the back door and didn't bother waiting for Dean to catch up. To please Maura, he'd probably try and force me to put my mask on, which I had no intention of doing. From all the information I'd been able to dig up on Alex Roth, I knew his sister was the one thing he seemed to care about. He'd killed my unborn daughter. I was going to make sure he knew what our loss felt like.

The backdoor led into a dated kitchen. Gun held out in front of me, I crept further into the house and walked slowly through an open threshold that led into a dining room. Something moved in my peripheral. I just had enough time to jump out of the way before the junkie bitch's body slammed into me. The drugs obviously were boosting her confidence because she came at me again. I released a warning shot above her head. She let out a scream, ducking down as the bullet whizzed past her and shattered the glass on a family picture hanging on the wall behind her. Without missing a beat, she scooped up a piece of broken glass and charged at me again. I tried to grab her wrist, but she jerked out of my reach and cut my inner arm.

I let out a grunt and backhanded her. She flew backward and slammed against the wall headfirst. She let out a hysterical little laugh and staggered back to her feet. She faced off with me again with a psychotic smile and blood trickling down from her temple. She lifted her now bloody piece of glass and I knew she was going to charge at me again. If I hadn't needed her alive, I would have shot her. I took a step toward her intending to knock her out, but Dean finally showed up. He came up behind her and locked his arms around hers. She fought, trying with all her might to cut him with the glass. I snagged her wrist and ripped her weapon away.

"Jamie?" Maura called out to me. Before I could answer her, Dean tossed Tiffany at me.

"Where's your fucking mask?" he snarled as he pulled some zip-ties from his pocket. I didn't bother responding. Grabbing one of the four chairs surrounding the dining table, he sat it in front of Tiffany. I shoved her into the chair and held her there while Dean tied her hands to the legs.

"We got her," Dean responded to Maura after we secured Tiffany and were heading toward the front door to check on the situation outside.

"Jamie?" Maura asked again just as I stepped onto the porch. Maura was standing there, looking ready to come inside if need be. Behind her, Louie and Finn had their guns pointed at Alex where he lay beaten and bloody.

Maura ripped off her mask, her anger blazing in her eyes. I knew she was going to rip into me about my mask, but something caught her attention. Her anger instantly vanished and was replaced with worry. She went to reach for me, then caught herself and dropped her hand back at her side. Her eyes lifted back to mine briefly before she looked away.

Louie came up next and pointed at my arm. “What happened?”

I looked down at my inner arm. “The bitch cut me with a piece of glass when we tried to grab her.”

Maura turned and walked away after I responded. She stopped next to Alex. Staring down at him, she removed her mask fully. She stared at him for the longest time with a blank look on her face and we all patiently waited. We all knew that this wasn't easy for her, yet she was handling this moment fiercely.

“Let's tie him up,” she finally said.



For someone who'd been adamant that we spare the sister and wear masks, Maura got over it pretty quickly. She even accepted my shitty excuse that I had forgotten to put it on. She wanted the sister to die just as much as I did because it was the best way to make Alex suffer. I was almost positive she was relieved that I had taken away the burden of making that choice.

After we got Alex and Tiffany tied up in their living room, Maura pulled her security aside to talk to them privately. I thought I heard her say that she didn't want them here. Asher nodded at her and handed her his keys. He shoved Dean and mumbled to him, "They'll be fine." Then the two of them

went out onto the porch where Finn and Brenna were hanging out.

Maura stuffed Asher's keys into her pocket and gave herself over fully to what was about to happen. Her eyes glided over Alex and Tiffany, studying them and taking in their injuries with a hint of contentment. Alex was bleeding from a broken nose and from where he'd been shot in his leg and shoulder. Each of the girls had put a slug in him and I hoped it fucking hurt.

When she was done looking her fill, her attention moved to us. Louie and I stood shoulder to shoulder, with the unspoken agreement that we would let her take the lead, spill the blood she needed before we would get ours.

She pulled the hunting knife from where it had been strapped to her leg. It was as big as the one Alex had stabbed her with. She went to stand next to Tiffany, facing Alex. "I warned you that we'd wipe out your pathetic little gang and take away everything you care about. I've pretty much followed through with the first half of that threat." She lightly ran her knife along Tiffany's collar bone, watching Alex as she did. I knew she was searching. As Louie would say, it was her superpower. Maura played with people to see what kind of reaction she could get from them. It was sexy as hell.

"Do you know where Buck is?" she asked him.

Alex didn't answer. To persuade him, I punched him in the face. He didn't react much other than a small grimace. Then his eyes flicked to me and he spit blood at my feet. "You must have been the father of the baby I cut up inside your bitch."

I punched him again.

Tiffany let out another hysterical laugh that made me think she was psychotic. "All Irish babies go to heaven," she sang. Maura smacked her. The stupid junkie laughed again. "You should have stayed dead, bitch!"

Maura ignored her and looked to Louie. "Untie one of her hands."

Louie seemed to be happy to oblige. Tiffany tried to claw at him as soon as she was free. Maura caught her hand. She bent it until Tiffany screamed. Then she slid her knife across the girl's wrist. Blood poured from Tiffany's wrist to the floor. I watched the blood seep into the carpet, thinking how poetic this moment was.

"She'll bleed out," Maura said to Alex. "Tell me where Buck is."

Tiffany fought to free herself from Maura to no avail. "Ow! Damnit, Alex!" she cried. "She's hurting me!"

"Shut up, Tiffany!" Alex snapped. "I don't fucking know where he is."

Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

Maura released Tiffany's wrist. I caught a flicker of relief in Alex's eyes. Then Maura grabbed Tiffany by the hair, yanked her head back, exposing her throat, and brought her knife to it. "How'd you get into my house? Who in the family is feeding you information?"

Alex shook his head quickly. "I don't know. That's a question for Buck. He gave me the blueprints of all the blind spots in your house and a list of times when security changed shifts."

Maura just stared at him, unmoving.

"I'm telling the truth." Alex's words were filled with panic.

A look I couldn't decipher came over Maura. It was equally triumphant as it was sad. "I believe you," she said and dragged her knife across Tiffany's throat.

"No!" Alex roared as blood spilled from his sister's neck.

Maura took a step back as she watched Alex wail and fight against his restraints. Her eyes were dilated and unblinking. The three of us stood there taking in this moment—his agony of watching his sister choke to death on her own blood.

Alex's screaming turned into groaning long after Tiffany had died. Maura's knuckles turned white as her hand squeezed around the handle of her knife. She stalked up to Alex and slammed it into his lower stomach. Alex let out a gasp and Maura backed away, leaving her blade behind.

"Your turn," she said to Louie and me before leaving to go outside.

Louie and I looked at each other. We knew what we wanted to do. We had talked about it before, one night after a lot of whiskey.

We moved to stand in front of Alex. Louie knocked Tiffany, who was still tied to the chair, backward by her face. Gone was my carefree friend. In his stead was a person who was ready to release his pent-up rage and deliver revenge. In this moment him and I were the same. We felt the same. What we wanted was the same. Our need was the same.

Louie's fists snapped out one after the other, punching Alex repeatedly in the face until the last hit he delivered had enough force to knock Alex and his chair backward. Without even bothering to sit him upright, I pulled the knife from Alex's stomach and gave it to Louie to cut one of Alex's legs free from the chair. As soon as it was free, Louie removed Alex's shoe.

"Maura's foot was cut," he said and then rammed the knife through the bottom of Alex's foot. The blade went all the way through and out the top of

the foot. Alex wailed. Before he could finish screaming, Louie pulled the knife out.

He worked at cutting the rest of Alex's bindings. I hovered close just in case Alex tried anything. Once Louie was done, he handed me the knife. I kicked Alex out of the chair. He rolled on the ground with zero resistance.

Louie lifted him by his underarms to his feet. Then Louie hooked his arms around Alex's and locked his fingers together behind Alex's head—putting him in a full nelson hold. Louie gave me a nod that he was ready, and I cut the front of Alex's shirt open with the knife, revealing his lower stomach. "You cut her stomach," I said as I put the blade to his skin, right over where Maura had stabbed him. My eyes moved up to his. I hoped he felt what she had felt in this moment. I watched him intently as I sank the blade deep.

The only sound Alex made was a loud intake of breath. He fought a little when I cut all the way to his hip, then twisted the knife and sliced my way to his other. Blood flooded the carpet at my feet. Without removing it, I moved the blade back to the middle of his lower belly. I twisted it again and ripped it out at an angle, pulling out his intestines in the process. I flicked the knife free and took a few steps back to take in the view.

He was dead. I could tell by his unblinking eyes. I nodded at Louie, who was now fully supporting Alex's weight. He dropped him and shook out his arms. "We should clean up a little before we go out there," he said, gesturing to my hands. My hand that was holding the knife was completely covered in blood. My other hand wasn't as bad but still bloody.

We both took turns washing our hands at the kitchen sink before we went out on the porch where Maura was waiting. She was sitting on the top step with that vacant look. We took a seat on either side of her and we sat there for a while, absorbing everything that had happened.

Finn had left behind some small bombs that had been intended to draw Alex out. We used those to cover up what we had done. After we watched the house blow up, we climbed into Asher's truck and I drove us back to the cabin. Maura didn't utter a single word the entire drive or when we returned. She walked inside the cabin in a drone like state. Her security and Brenna were in the living room as we came inside. They just watched Maura in stunned silence as she walked by, stripping off her weapons as she made her way to her room.

No one asked us what had happened or if Maura was okay. It was as if

they all understood and they returned to what they'd been doing before we'd showed up.



Jameson disappeared into our room whereas I stood outside Maura's. Her door was open, and I could hear the shower running. I wanted to go to her. I needed to know that she was going to be okay.

My feet moved without much thought and before I knew it, I was standing in her bathroom. She didn't even have the curtain pulled closed as she stood under the water in her underwear. By the amount of steam coming off the water I could tell it was scalding.

I walked over to her. "Maura." She didn't seem to hear me. She was just staring at the tile wall looking vacant again. I touched her shoulder. It startled

her, but it seemed to bring her back from wherever her mind had taken her. I reached to turn down the temperature of the water next. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her voice cracking. So much emptiness spilled from the cracks in her voice.

I didn’t want her to see my worry, but I wasn’t as good at hiding how I felt as her and Jameson. “I wanted to check on you.” Red splotches on her skin caught my attention and my gaze moved down her practically naked body. I saw her scar just below her belly button and it took everything not to react to it.

She grabbed the bottom of my shirt and tugged. I met her eyes. There was need in them. She probably thought I was staring at her body for other reasons.

“I just want to feel,” she whispered and pulled on my shirt again. In the back of my mind, I knew it was a bad idea. I just didn’t have it in me to deny her.

I stepped into the shower fully clothed. She pressed her body against mine as I leaned down to kiss her. It had been too long being without her—not having her this close. These past three months had been hell.

That first kiss seemed to set ablaze inside us. We became frantic and rushed. She unfastened my pants while I unclasped her bra. Her tits sprung free and I tossed the bra away. Her fingers wrapping around my already hard dick as she freed me from my briefs made me feel a little delirious. She quickly shoved her underwear down her thighs. As soon as she stepped out of them, I pushed her up against the wall. She hooked her leg around my hip. I aligned myself with her entrance and slammed home. We both groaned. She was perfectly tight and wet. Her pussy squeezed around my dick as if she didn’t want to let me go. I pumped inside her at a languid pace, wanting to savor our time together.

She slid her fingers into my hair and tugged. The slight sting made me thrust into her.

“Harder,” she panted.

I increased my speed. The sound of me slamming into her and her moaning was hot as fuck. I was scared I wouldn’t fucking last.

“Harder,” she moaned. I hiked her leg higher and pounded into her. She leaned close and rested her head on my chest. Other than a little panting, she was quiet. In my gut, something didn’t feel right.

“She wants you to hurt her,” a pissed off voice said.

I froze as I looked out of the shower. Jameson was leaning against the bathroom door, looking mad as hell. Not at me, though. He was glaring at Maura.

Confused, I peered down at her and reeled back when I saw that she was crying. Not understanding, I cupped her face. “Why would you want me to hurt you?”

She didn’t answer.

“She wants you to punish her,” Jameson answered. “Because she feels like she deserves it.”

“Maura, no,” I groaned as guilt washed over me. “I’m sorry for everything that I did.” I held her eyes, hoping she would see that I meant it. “I let my fear get the best of me. If I have to grovel and beg to get you to forgive me, I will. I love you so fucking much.” I stepped back, pulling out of her as I did. “But I can’t and won’t ever intentionally hurt you.”

I tucked myself back into my pants and climbed out of the shower. I ripped a towel off the rack before leaving the bathroom. My shoes squished with each step I took.

As I entered the hall I ran into Brenna. She eyed me up and down, then saw what room I’d come out of. She shook her head before walking around me. “I hope you didn’t just fuck up because I’m the only one who bet in your favor.” She paused just before entering her room. “And I have a lot of money riding on you two.” She shook her head at me again and went into her room.



Days passed by as we waited to come across any clue that would lead us to Buck and the remaining Aryans. That seemed to really piss off Vincent, who had been searching for them nonstop. Maura and Brenna had to forcefully drag the poor kid away from his computers to eat.

Maura's security occupied a lot of their time training Brenna with different weapons and self-defense. Louie and I even tried to help. Brenna was open to learning from us. The others frowned as they watched us like hawks. For some reason they still thought we'd snag Maura and Brenna when they weren't looking.

Maura was distant and quiet. None of the others pushed her to talk or take part in what they were doing. They gave her space. We tried to follow their lead, but it was hard. Louie was still beating himself up over what had happened between them in the shower. I wondered if Maura felt the same because she avoided both of us like we had the plague. She went on a lot of walks.

Three days after we had killed Alex Roth, I gave in and spoke to her. She appeared to be on her way out for another walk. “Can I join you?”

She looked ready to say no. Disappointment built up inside me as I prepared for her rejection. But she surprised me with a slight nod.

It was a long and awkward walk, which I spent the majority of trying to build up the nerve to say what I needed. Louie had apologized to her the other night and that made me realize I hadn’t.

Maura led us to a lake with a spectacular view. I sort of understood why she walked here every day. It was so quiet and peaceful.

I peeked at her from the corner of my eye. She was taking in the view with a calm demeanor. “I hate that you’re standing next to me, yet feel so far away,” I blurted. “I hate that every time you look at me, I see hurt in your eyes. I hate being the one who put it there.” I was trying to be honest and bare, hoping that she would hear me out. “Everything has fallen apart, and I don’t know where to begin to fix things, but I can’t accept that this is the end for us.”

She folded her arms over her chest as she continued to stare out at the lake. “I want to tell you not to accept it, but even if we were to forgive each other, I doubt it would fix things. A huge part of who you loved died that day. I’m not the same person anymore. Maybe what’s best for you and Louie is to move on.”

“Isn’t that for us to decide?” I couldn’t accept what she was saying.

“I’m a shell of myself—”

“You feel that way right now,” I interrupted her.

She shook her head gently. “Things won’t get better.”

“Yes, they will.”

She finally met my eyes. “I can’t have children.”

Why did she think that would matter to me? I had told her repeatedly that she would be enough for me.

“The doctor in the hospital told me that there was a chance that I might not be able to carry. I had it verified last month. The scarring on my uterus is

too extensive. If by some miracle an embryo were able to implant itself in a spot that's not scarred, the likelihood of miscarriage is very high. I can't give you or Louie children and I saw how happy you two were at the idea of becoming fathers."

I said the first thing that popped into my head. "There are other ways—"

"No!" she snapped, and I instantly regretted what I had said. I should have reassured her that she was enough. I'd fucked up again.

"It's just me, Jamie. That's it. If who you see in front of you is enough for you, then don't give up on us. But if I'm not, let me go."

She walked away, leaving me behind without a backward glance. I wanted to go after her, but I didn't want to make things worse.

"Fuck!" I shouted out at the lake. I hadn't apologized.



That evening Vincent emerged from his room yelling for Maura. He had found a lead on Buck and that lead was back in New Haven.



Vincent's lead was Buck's pregnant wife, Amelia. She had gone into labor and had to have her baby by C-section. We staked out the hospital for a little over twenty-four hours, hoping Buck would show up. He didn't. The next day Maura came up with the not so brilliant plan to go and talk to Amelia.

Something didn't feel right, yet Maura was adamant. What was worse was that she wanted to go in alone. Even her security wasn't thrilled about that one. She wouldn't listen. It was almost as if she were eager. I didn't know what to make of it.

We wired Maura up and dropped her off at the front entrance of the hospital. Brenna, Finn, and Vincent were watching Maura through the hospital's cameras in the cargo van parked in the guest parking lot. Dean, Asher, Jameson, and I were piled in Asher's truck near where we had dropped Maura off.

"So far so good. She's almost—" His voice trailed off. "Maura?"

"What is it?" Jameson asked.

"She took her earpiece out. Now she's trying to call out on her phone but that doesn't seem to be working," Vincent explained.

"Could it just be a bad signal? Cell service sucks in hospitals," Brenna said.

"That doesn't explain why her earpiece isn't working," Vincent grumbled.

"Is she out of range?" I asked.

"No," Vincent snapped. "Damn it, Maura! She went into Amelia's hospital room."

"She was supposed to abort if something happened," Dean said.

"Vincent, start listing off reasons why her earpiece wouldn't work," Jameson ordered.

Everyone went quiet.

"Vincent!" Jameson snapped when he didn't get an answer.

"Fuck! I don't know. Something must be jamming the frequency, but I highly doubt a hospital has something like that," he said frustratedly.

"So someone is jamming it," Jameson said.

Dean turned in his seat to look at Jameson. "This was a trap."

"Oh shit! They're here. Buck is here!" Vincent shouted. "He's going into Amelia's hospital room."

I went to get out of the truck.

"Wait!" Asher yelled. "Hospitals are mazes with many exits. If you run in there, you will easily lose them."

"How do you know they aren't trying to kill her right now?" I asked him.

"They know we're out here. It's why they jammed our way to communicate with her. They need her alive if they want a chance of getting out of here," he explained.

"He's right," Vincent said. "They have her and are heading east through the hospital."

Asher put his truck into drive and drove in that direction.

“They’re heading toward the cafeteria,” Vincent said. That was toward the back of the hospital. “They’re going to exit through the kitchen. Go! Go now!”

Asher floored it and turned sharply toward the back side of the hospital. We each pulled our guns. Dean cocked two semi auto rifles—one for him and one for Asher.

There was a white cargo van parked near some large dumpsters about two hundred meters away. As we got a little closer, we saw Maura. An Aryan held a gun to her spine. Asher slammed on his brakes and we all hopped out of the truck. The Aryans ducked and ran for their van as we unloaded on them, releasing shot after shot. Amelia screamed, cradling her baby close as she jumped into the van.

The other Aryans, including Buck, tried to return fire but ducked behind a dumpster and the van. The Aryan with his gun at Maura’s back grabbed her by the arm and was trying to drag her toward their van. If they got her inside, we’d lose her.

“Maura!” Jameson and I yelled at the same time.

“Go, we’ll cover you!” Asher yelled as he and Dean started raining bullets down on the Aryans, making them duck for cover.

Jameson and I dashed for Maura. We only had a breath of time to make it before the Aryans would start shooting again. Maura dropped to the ground, breaking her captor’s hold, and rolled away. She barely got to her feet and went to run for us when Buck jumped out from behind the dumpster and grabbed ahold of her by her hair. She let out a painful scream.

We were almost there. Using Maura as a shield, Buck pointed his gun at me. I didn’t have time to react before he pulled the trigger. Pain exploded in my middle.

“Louie!” I heard Maura scream.

I put my hand to my stomach before I bent over, and my legs gave out on me. Once I was on the ground, Jameson was there not a heartbeat later, throwing his body over mine.

“Go get her,” I tried to tell him, but he couldn’t hear me over the gunfire.



Asher's truck sped past, chasing after the van. I faintly heard the squealing of his tires over the sound of my heart booming in my ears. They'd gotten Maura in the van.

"Louie's been shot," Jameson said into his mic.

Through the earpiece, Brenna responded, "We'll get help."

"Don't worry about me. Go back up Asher and Dean," I grunted and tried to sit up. Jameson shoved me back to the ground by my shoulder, pinning me there. He placed his other hand where I'd been shot, just under my ribs, to slow the bleeding. The pain made my breath hitch.

With a clenched jaw, his gaze flicked from me to the two vehicles disappearing in the distance. His hand at my shoulder fisted my shirt before his head turned downcast and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“They won’t catch them,” I gritted what we were both thinking. Dean and Asher were chasing after them, but the van had a distinct lead. We needed to do something. We needed to get her back. “Jameson.” I sounded desperate and panicked but I didn’t fucking care.

“I know,” he snapped, his eyes shooting open to glare down at me. His regret was easy to see.

I stopped fighting to sit up and rested my head on the asphalt. I regretted him saving me too. “You should have kept going for her instead of protecting me.”

His glare lessened. “If I had, I’d be bleeding out or dead on the ground a few feet away.” He clenched his jaw again. “I just don’t want her to think I didn’t choose her.”

I knew he wasn’t talking about dying recklessly trying to save her. Maura had asked us to fight for her—to prove to her that she was enough.

I grabbed his arm. “They’re going to torture her.”

He nodded slightly.

A growl overtook my voice as I said, “They’re going to rape her.”

He put more pressure on my wound. It hurt like hell but that was alright. I could take it.

“Once they see that they’ve broken her, then they’ll kill her,” I said as evenly as I could.

“She’s too stubborn to give them the satisfaction.” His tone was confident, and he was right. Our girl was indeed stubborn. As much as it pissed me off, right now, I was glad.

“Besides, she already thinks she’s broken.” He shook his head, more apparent regret furrowing his brow. “So she’ll fight them like she has nothing left to lose.”

My strength was fading fast, and the cold had long since seeped in. I didn’t have much time left.

Unable to hold onto him any longer, my hand fell from his arm. “You have to prove it to her, Jameson.” He gave me a puzzled look. I took in a shallow and shaky breath before continuing. “That she’s enough. Don’t just say she is but show her. She won’t believe you otherwise.”

Understanding, he frowned. “Don’t talk like you aren’t going to be right

there with me proving it to her.”

The next breath was even shallower than the last. “Promise me?”

His lips moved but I couldn't hear him. Then my vision turned blurry before everything faded to nothing.



“Are you going to tell us what happened?” Detective Cameron asked from where he sat across the metal table. I had already given my statement to him at the hospital but apparently a hospital staff member claimed that I was the one who had started the shooting. I was calling bullshit.

As soon as Cameron and his little sidekick, Brooks, had slapped cuffs on my wrists, I'd lawyered up and shut my fucking mouth. It had been hours since they'd brought me to this dim interrogation room. They had tried many tactics to get me to talk. Threatened me, played out the good cop bad cop ruse. When none of it had worked, Cameron had gotten more and more

frustrated. If they truly had any condemning evidence I would have been charged already.

Detective Cameron slammed his hands down on the table as he glared at me.

“Let’s take a break,” Detective Brooks said from where he was standing in the dark corner. Cameron reluctantly stood, and the two of them left.

They had never offered me my phone call. Not that I needed it. I knew Stefan would send Adam, the family’s lawyer, sooner or later.

What felt like a few more hours passed and it was getting harder to stay calm. Maura had been taken. The last time I had seen Louie, he'd been being wheeled into emergency surgery.

I was almost to the point of feeling like I’d explode from the inside out when the door ripped open and Cameron came in followed by Adam and Stefan. Relief washed over me, not that I showed it.

Cameron looked beyond pissed as he pulled out his keys and unlocked my cuffs. “Don’t leave town,” he grumbled as I stood. I had the urge to roll my eyes, but instead I remained unfazed and walked over to where Stefan was waiting by the door. I tried searching his face for any hint of whether Louie and Maura were okay. I found nothing. Stefan stepped back into the hall and I went to follow him.

“Before you go,” Cameron said, making the three of us pause. “Witnesses say that there was a red headed woman at the scene. By chance were they talking about Miss Quinn?”

“My daughter is in Ireland visiting family. Has been for little over a month now,” Stefan responded.

Cameron narrowed his eyes. “I’ll have to verify that, and she needs to return my call.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her that the next time she calls,” Stefan informed him and walked away.

On the way out, we stopped where I could pick up my belongings that Cameron and Brooks had confiscated. All they'd taken was my wallet and phone. Finn had taken the weapons Louie and I had been carrying before the police had shown up.

After I retrieved my stuff, we left the precinct and headed to the hospital.

Stefan was quiet and visibly tense as he stared out the window.

“Are you going to tell me?” I asked.

“Louie is going to be okay. The surgery was successful,” he informed without removing his gaze from the window.

“And Maura?”

Her name made his expression harden. “We have nothing. No leads. No ideas. Nothing that would help us find her.”

“I will find her,” I assured.

Stefan turned to face me with a scowl. “From this point forward, anything and everything will be run by me. All actions taken will be from my instruction. There will be no more acting on your own. The situation with the Aryans has gone from bad to worse. I refuse to lose my daughter because you all are blinded by your need for revenge. She shouldn’t have gone into that hospital alone.”

My rage exploded to the surface. “You want to blame me for her being taken, fine, but tell me, how successful you were the last time you tried to tell Maura not to do something?”

“Don’t.” It was a single word of warning.

I didn’t heed it. Through the window I could see that we were pulling up to the front of the hospital and as the car slowed to a stop, I leveled my eyes with his. “You’re not the only one who loves her, Stefan.” I got out of the car.

Stefan didn’t follow me inside. I stormed through the hospital’s door and asked the front desk for Louie’s room number. The long trek through the hospital’s halls did nothing to lessen my rage.

I didn’t bother knocking before entering Louie’s room. Inside I found Maura’s security and Brenna sitting around the bed where Louie lay unconscious. They all wore grim faces and Brenna’s eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

“Stefan took Vincent,” she said.

I nodded, understanding. “Stefan and he are working together to look for Maura.” I moved closer to Louie and Finn vacated a chair. He gestured for me to take it and I did. The moment my ass touched the chair, the weight of everything that had happened today finally hit me. I put my head in my hands and just focused on the act of breathing for a moment. This would be the only time I’d give myself to feel the stress of worry. Because after this moment passed, I needed to focus all my energy on finding Maura.

I took in one last deep breath and stood.

“Brenna and Finn, I want you to watch over Louie. When he wakes up,

call me,” I ordered. “Dean, Asher, we’re retuning to Quinn Manor. If Vincent finds anything, I want us to be there so we can move out right away.”

Dean and Asher stood next. I looked at everyone and tried to exude confidence. “We’re going to find her.”

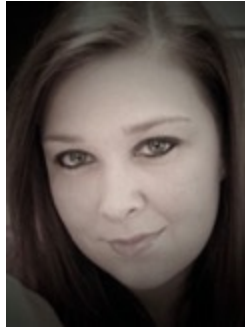
TO BE CONTINUED...

MAURA QUINN

BOOK 3

COMING SOON

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashley N. Rostek is a wife and mother by day and a writer by night. She survives on coffee, loves collecting offensive coffee mugs, and is an unashamed bibliophile.

To Ashley, there isn't a better pastime than letting your mind escape in a good book. Her favorite genre is romance and has the overflowing bookshelf to prove it. She is a lover of love. Be it a sweet YA or a dark and lusty novel, she must read it!

Ashley's passion is writing. She picked up the pen at seventeen and hasn't put it down. Her debut novel is *Embrace the Darkness*, the first book in the Maura Quinn series.

You can find out more about Ashley and her upcoming works on social media!

[FACEBOOK](#)

[THE INNER CIRCLE](#)

[INSTAGRAM](#)