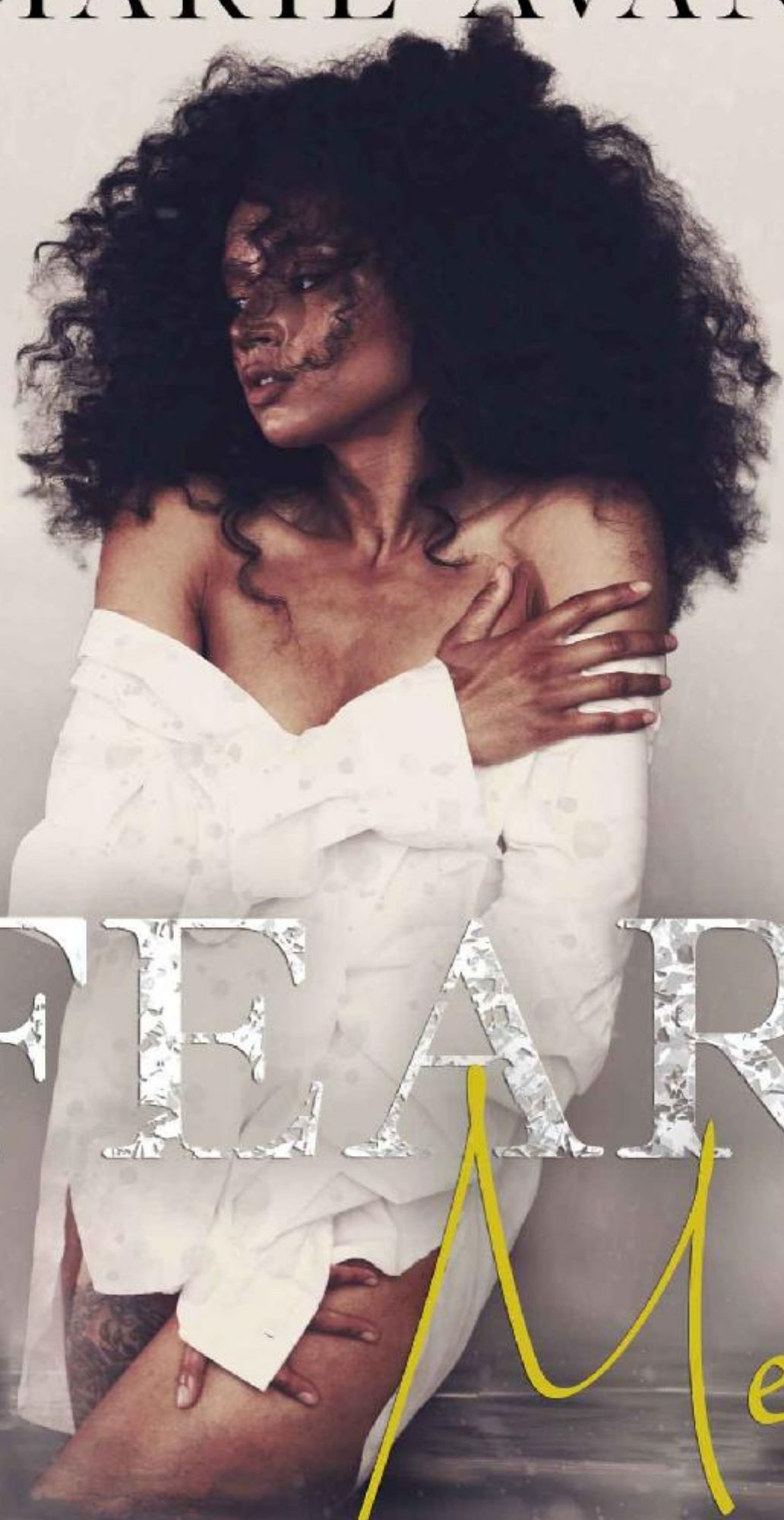


USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

AMARIE AVANT



FEAR

Me

fear me

AMARIE AVANT



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 Created with Vellum

dedication

*This book is dedicated to the beautiful, and super amazing,
Stacie C., CeeJay A., Yvonn K. Z., Ashley M, and Cynthea C.*

disclaimer ...

... About Tatum:

*Writing this series was like latching onto
Murphy's Law and saying, "Anything that can go wrong will
go wrong."*

*Tatum Li is not a weak woman;
she fights her own battles. As a matter of fact,
she's rather selfless, putting her love of others over herself.
With that being said, I hope you grow to understand why I
wrote this beautiful, imperfect soul the way I did.
Enjoy the conclusion to River and Tatum's story ...*

RIVER

The near future ...

Bubbly tickles my fucking fingers and sloshes onto the veined marble as I pour myself a generous amount.

This is the life. I'm seated in the living room of Harrison's Beverly Hills home. As I glance around, I notice oddly shaped shit that my Tatum just has to have. And I'll be the one to get them for her. *Gotta give her the world.* I laugh to myself as Camdyn elbows my rib.

"How many fucking MacKenzies do you think it'll take to dismount that TV screen?" he asks, nudging his chin to a television spanning an entire wall.

"And carry it outta here?" I chuckle tipsily.

Yeah. This might seem like an alternate universe—my bro and me knocking back champagne with Harrison. First off, the two of us prefer the hard shit. Second and most importantly, Harrison's an asshole, and we don't drink with assholes. But we were test driving Camdyn's new Chevy Nova in the neighborhood when Harrison called. Sam "The Samoan Savage" Sefina transformed from a pussy into a real man

overnight and has agreed to meet me in the cage. So, we accepted Harrison's groveling request to drop by for a drink.

Now, the slimeball is at the front door instead of hosting us. Wonder what's more important than showing off his riches?

I gesture to the TV again. "It'd take all of your brothers." My eyes narrow, flicking from one side of the lengthy room to the other, observing the two dudes Harrison keeps on rotation these days. Two, supposedly intimidating, thick-necked motherfuckers. "But you gotta get past them," I add.

"Not even a challenge." Camdyn leans forward, removes the bottle from the bucket on a mirrored coffee table, and pours himself another refill. "Actually," he clutches the neck, taking a pull, "this is mine now. Let's go."

I laugh at Camdyn but find myself distracted by whoever pulled Harrison away from bragging about the "flown in" champagne he kept specifically for this day—whoever is aggressively raising her voice.

Her raspy voice.

"Is that ..." Camdyn trails off.

"Stubby." I stand. One of the goons steps forward. My brow lifts, mouth snarled. *Do something!*

I can't recall when Harrison started keeping extra company, but now I have questions that the weasel *will not* slither past—with or without protection.

Camdyn clicks his tongue but stays seated, and I know my brother has my back. *Figure out why Stubby's here*, I read in Camdyn's demeanor as his brow pushes up, reflecting my own thoughts. We always had this thing where we could read each other while sneaking into a house full of motherfuckers to

steal straight from beneath their noses. Or when he wanted to ask if I was going hungry while we were around friends. We haven't had to use it in years; however, the connection comes back full force.

That's what I intend to do. I nod my head, rolling my shoulders, and stroll out of the shiny-ass living room, leaving one of Harrison's bodyguards to follow.

As I walk toward the front door, the chef's lurking down the long corridor in the opposite direction, wiping a bread knife on his apron. Although he appears concerned about the verbal sparring match with only one female contender, I see him as a threat.

The maid who called Harrison to the door apprehensively chews her lip. The duster in her hand stops swishing around. Standing in the center of the foyer, she turns away from a copper vase, sweeping slowly toward me with a smile. "Mr. Tagaloo, lunch will be—"

I gently move her aside, muttering, "We ain't stay—"

My stomach clutches as Tatum says, "You had me ambushed in an alley! Just to steal my iPhone. Did *I* roll over like a bitch? No!" Wrath roils my blood, sending my skin taut over my scowled jaw.

She's keeping things from me.

I still haven't set eyes on my woman yet, but her words leave me glued to the spot just behind the ajar front door. Tatum shouts, "You think I need a cellphone recording to prove to anyone who loves me what you've done, *Godfather*? You had me attacked!"

"You almost ruined my business. *Almost*, Princess Tata."

At the humor in Harrison's tone, the edges of my mouth are sharper than an obsidian knife. Emotionless, I glance down the foyer to Camdyn, still pretending to enjoy his libations.

The bodyguard nearest me glares daggers my way as if anticipating I'll start something. A moment later, he's lying flat on his face. A single throwing knife wedges in his spine. Camdyn hurls another sharp blade toward the guard still in the living room. By the sound of a quick drop, I gather my brother handled him too.

"Well, you," Tatum croaks, "you and your 'sit on my lap, lemme tickle you' . . . 'lemme give you teddy bears,' 'lemme blind you with collectible Barbies' . . ." Her voice breaks. "You *ruined* my life, Harrison. And you- you-"

"Tickles," I undertone, hardly able to funnel in oxygen. Tatum's furious rant causes all the muscles in my body to stiffen. It's like this is all a dream as the chef starts to run in the opposite direction back to the kitchen.

Apparently, the nosy dude wasn't a threat after all. I reach him in a few strides, swiveling his neck away from his shoulders. A blade zips past me, and the maid screeches, clutching her clavicle as blood arches. Camdyn's strolling over just as Harrison begins to turn around, and I quickly close the distance between us. My fist slams into the side of Harrison's skull. *Fuck!* He's laid out in an unconscious heap in the doorway.

I don't need him dead.

Not yet.

I *want* answers.

Blood pulses beneath my crushed knuckles. *Great.* A fracture—a few fucking fractures. As I shake the growing

inferno of my broken hand, Camdyn shoves the door open, kicking a KO'd Harrison out of the way. Tatum's drenched in sweat. Workout shorts and a tiny shirt cling to her modest muscles and curves.

The animosity ripping through her soul explodes into nervous tension. "Wh-what are you guys doing here?" I think Tatum asks if *we heard* as her voice grows scarce.

Intuition hangs in the air between three best friends. Camdyn's hotter than my favorite Red Rooster sauce. I'm cooler than a motherfucking cucumber as I clutch her against my chest. I run my knuckles over her trembling spine and drop my mouth to the shell of her ear. Voice silky and lethal, I ask, "There something you wanna tell me, *Tatum?*"

TATUM

Now ...

I always saw MMA as a dance. Beautiful fluid motions of a vicious fighter driving a submission left me in awe. Not any fighters, my father. Silly, I know. And I'm living my dream now as the only man I'd ever give my heart to creates the same nostalgic feeling.

After River massacres Sanchez, I'm the one doing the dancing, shucking and jiving, as Momma had. I've placed Poto and River's *presumable* mother in the living room of Harrison's Malibu home. He decided the celebration should be here as opposed to any of his other grand homes.

I dart past ... Camdyn MacKenzie. An unsuspected twist since maneuvering around Harrison Herrington has been my MO for two years, but Cam's sizing up Poto like any respectable, family-oriented clan member would.

He has questions about River's estranged father.

Estranged. Deadbeat is a more precise term, and Poto Tagaloa will be *dead meat* if any MacKenzie uncovered the

fact that he's been around all this time and hadn't handled his paternal duties.

I slink out the front doors of Harrison's beach house. Inside is organized chaos. Along with feeding information about River *abusing* me to the media and weaseling the original UFC fighter into canceling with River to make him look like a pariah, *then* doubling back and securing an alternative match, in addition to his usual mind games, Harrison apparently had time to hire servers to sweep across the grand areas, hoisting champagne and appetizers. *Good gawd, that man is busy.* I inhale the cool mist-salted air. My stilettos resound off the natural stone as I descend a long passageway toward the driveway.

The coastline is on the opposite side of the house. I close my eyes and take a moment to imagine the waves crashing along the shoreline. At the sound of a deep groan, I look down, drawn in by a pair of earthy brown eyes, which ignite at the sight of me. Even darker hair falls over a brutal jaw, disheveled hair I've gripped while his head dove ravenously between my thighs.

As I stare, I wonder how to formulate the words. *Your mother's alive. She. Is. Here.* I look away. The intensity of River's gaze is snatching up thoughts straight from my brain. Thoughts I need to address pronto.

Fuck it. Snatch off the Band-Aid. I slink down a few more of the steps, blurting, "River, your fa—"

"Keep those hips moving just like that."

I stop walking toward him. River had texted that he would be here any moment. I look just past him through the hedge of palm trees lining the street where everyone parked. "Did Father and *Yéye* ride with you?"

“After the very social day we had?” he growls. “No.”

I can't believe it was less than twelve hours ago when my man had a *controlled* tantrum in a conference room over a canceled fight. Now, he rounds the post at the bottom of the steps. The look in his eyes incinerates my panties. Backtracking up the steps, I stutter, “Baby, I know you like to fuck after a match. Let me remind you that we're at my godfather's house. A lot of people are inside expecting to see you.”

“Does it look like I give a fuck, Tatum?”

In a few steps, he meets me. “You know it's a bad match when I don't break a single bone.”

“Bad match, my ass! You pulverized—”

Dominating fingers drop over my hips, pushing up the material. “So, I'm gonna break you instead, Tatum.”

“Riv—”

One hand latches onto my throat, cautioning me not to utter another word.

Another hand lifts my body about his waist.

I glance around. The aesthetics of the massive home offer a veil of privacy, but we're outside ... at night. As he pulls a raging dick from beneath his sweatpants, I stutter, “Right here?”

The hand tightens, and a cruel cock drives into me. River brings me down onto the stairs. As I fill my depleted lungs, River's mouth crashes over mine, teeth scraping my bottom lip, tongue battling for supremacy. He tastes so good, and I could never have my fill of him. With his knees planted for

leverage, I take the assault of his massive cock and the sharp hits to my spine.

Raw pleasure and suffocating pain pour over me. My eyes flutter backward. I can see the landing. Glimpse the front doors.

Someone could be watching us from atop.

Someone could jog past from below. They'd have to stop and peer through the foliage, but it's possible.

"River," I gasp his name like I'm drowning in a sea of eternal life. His face buries into my neck, the heat of his touch warming me all over.

"Take. This. Motherfucking. *Dick*. Tatum." The roar of his voice hypnotizes my pussy, sending my man's raging shaft super sliding like the hottest day of summer.

"Baby, ouchhhh, yesss, ouchhh." I alternate from praise to sobs. The tears washing over my face flow freely, like my cum baptizing his cock. River detonates seconds after, and my heart thumps against his stony chest.

The fuck is quick, daring, and breaks the barrier of nerves weaving my gut.

He helps me up, sliding my dress back over my hips.

I groan. "I need to clean—"

"No," River orders, claiming my face between his ruthless hands. "My cum will drip down your thighs. If it becomes obvious, I'll let you know."

Pure alpha move.

Voice gone hoarse from the force of our orgasms and River's bold statement, I nod.

Knuckles softly scuff my cheeks. “Now. You had something to say? Calling me repeatedly while I showered and changed at the arena.”

My best friend offers one of those bear hugs I could live without. The ones that break your bones. “What was so important, Stubby?”

I grimace. “Your mother ... is ... here.”

three

RIVER

I place Tatum on her own two feet, fingertips brushing over her skirt again, then I assess my everything.

Push a tendril of hair behind her ear.

Twist the pendant on her necklace.

Perfection.

“River, your mo—”

“I heard you.” Not a single shred of urgency burns in my voice, no fucking emotion at all. I take the hand of the girl I’ll love for eternity, and I lead her up the stairs.

Another hesitant attempt stutters from her mouth. “I think she’s ...”

My brow lifts as I look at Tatum. She doesn’t have the heart to finish her statement. She presumes the bitch’s Poto’s next con. Light from the sconces near the staircase catches her eyes, sparked in fresh unfallen tears.

“It’s okay, Little Bit.”

A snuffle is followed by a scoff. “I’m supposed to say that.”

I release her at the top step, fisting the wrought iron knobs, and open the double doors. Harrison spared no expense in the design of his home, nor in the choice of alcohol and tiny nibbles the servers offer. I search through the crowd. Every few steps, someone congratulates me or touches me. Handshakes come next, along with the asshole.

I squeeze Harrison’s bones between my fingers. It’s not that he’s a bad dude or anything. Shit, he’s the reason I had a match this evening. Still, his slimy face propels the urgency in my soul.

I push forward. Another hug, another handshake. My footfalls stall.

Fucking, Poto.

The sperm donor is fastened to the dining room table. A spread as far as the eye can see lays before him as he polishes off a lemon-pepper wing.

I snort.

It seems we do have a few more things in common, aside from the ability to rob someone blind.

I look to Tatum, lacking faith in myself. As I imagine stepping to Poto and inquiring about my mother, I realize I’m liable to stomp his skull in.

My woman nudges her chin, and my eyes zero on her direction. Heilani’s on a leather couch, restlessly tugging at her fingers. As if perceiving my presence, hopeless brown eyes link onto mine.

One time or another, we may've shared the same skin tone. Hers is a washed-out sepia, embedded with wrinkles, not so much with age, but I assume from the hard life she's lived. *Though, her hair is dark ... but it may be dyed?* Heilani stands, brushing down a dingy, flowing dress.

She places herself in my arms. *Fuck, she needs to eat.* My chin drops on the crown of her head, and I hug her tightly.

"I'm sorry," are her first words.

"You hungry?"

A myriad of emotions flickers across Heilani's eyes—shame, humiliation. "I-I was never there for you, Ri-River." She stops, clearing her throat. "You're concerned for me?"

I lift a shoulder. "You could tell me why while we eat. Or when you're up to it."

The woman I have no emotional connection to chews pensively at her bottom lip. Her lowered gaze finally meets mine. "I don't deserve ..."

And I don't know how a son navigates his relationship with his mother. Sure, I had models. Renee and Tatum were inseparable. All the MacKenzies are prime examples. Though, it's just different when you're on the opposite side of the window, looking in. I shrug a shoulder. "You're my blood."

A ghost of a smile finds Heilani's lips, and she nods. "Food sounds good. I bet you're hungry after the fight."

"I could eat."

Her tiny hands return to their previous pastime as we stroll toward the table of food. Although glaring at Poto, Camdyn speaks to me, asking, "Bro, is that your—"

I reply, "This is my mother."

He blinks.

Heilani sniffles. “I wasn’t always—”

“Mrs. Tagaloa.” He bends down to offer her a hug.

While my oldest friend switches up his usual calloused demeanor, I emotionlessly inquire, “That your last name?”

“Heilani,” she murmurs, “please just call me Heilani.”

four

TATUM

Just Heilani? I pluck a martini from a serving tray, eager for verifiable intel. Maybe even a vital stat to plug into the LAPD database to confirm Poto's plus-one is who she says she is.

Heilani started off on the right foot. I'll give her that. While Poto gave himself to gluttony, she awaited River's arrival, almost in deep concentration.

Of her past sins.

Or the story Poto concocted for consistency purposes.

Recalling the punishing rhythm at which River had taken me, I nibble the green olive, then tip the martini glass, only to choke on the clear poison when Harrison saddles up to me. In a flash, his debauched gaze devours my mouth. The hypocrite turns his platonic scrutiny on the scene unfolding before us.

We stand together on an opposing side of an illusory veil, as if we're on the same friggen team, observing River and his mother break bread.

He discreetly grits, "Who is she, Tatum? We've invested too much into River for a *random moocher* to come waltzing in, palms outspread."

Although I resentfully concur, I retort, “What’s it to ya?”

While we watch on, we continue our verbal spat. Harrison takes my question and raises me one of his own. “Did we not shake hands hours ago and transition into a new era? One where we heeded each other’s specialty.”

“Yes,” I growl.

“Your narcissism is showing, sweet girl.”

“I thought you were the egomaniac in our sorry-ass relationship, *Godfather*. Yes, we forged new ground—for River’s sake. I will not roll over and take your crap, though. Now, run along. Our fighter isn’t in the octagon. Relax.” A petty smirk cushions the edges of my mouth. “You deserve it.”

He laughs softly, though our eyes are still on River. “I *do* deserve a holiday of sorts. I had to secure your favor the hard way, Princess Tata.”

A memory jolts me into the past. *Harrison’s fingers all over my tiny body while I giggle in his lap, tushy rubbing over ...*

“You will *not* address me as Princess Tata,” I grit out, wrenching his arm beneath my fingers, stance threatening. I’m powerless at censoring myself in these moments where I can feel his hands featherlight all over my skin. Luckily, the guys, River and Camdyn, are attending to Heilani, and my father’s not present.

But the animosity abuzz in my veins flickers as a man at least six and a half feet stalks over. The silent force glowers at the hand clutching Harrison.

My godfather muses, “Tanner, this one and I have a few dark delights we delve in on occasion. You’re permitted to watch if she so chooses to choke me.”

Tanner lets off a chuckle.

“What’s forbidden?” I ask, eyes flickering between *Frick* and *Frack*. “Huh, how far is too far?”

“Between me and you, Princess ...” Harrison pauses where he’d insert the devious name, “nothing.”

I lick my lips. “If I kill you, Godfather?”

In one step, Tanner glares down the tip of his nose at me. “I’ve never had a client die under my watch. Never will.”

“Ah, I see. You’re Harrison’s bodyguard?”

“Correct, sweet lips.”

“Hey,” Harrison cuts in. “This one’s all mine, Tanner. You may call my goddaughter, Tatum.”

I chortle. “Harrison, it’s too late to play protective guardian. Leash your *mutt*.”

A vein throbs in the center of Tanner’s forehead.

Harrison kicks a shoulder. “Leash? Preposterous. With all the mangy Scots in my house.”

A loud voice cuts in. “Did you say *mangy*?”

We stop measuring egos, glancing over to the gritted, lowered snarl. “Tatum, I’m gonna—”

I clasp Willow’s arm. By now, her children’s father has risen from his seat, River too.

I pump my fists in the air. Exaggerating, I say, “That’s what I was saying! When River brought down Sanchez ...”

Harrison melds seamlessly into my exaggerated lie. “Our future champ moved like lightning! Where’s the champagne?”

The room swarms in compliance while I follow Willow out onto the veranda. A stern glower removes its hooks from me, softening as Camdyn strolls outside to push a single dreadlock over her shoulder.

“I’m lost,” he grounds out. “The fuck is wrong with this entire scenario? River’s mam and da are here.” He lets out a huff of confusion. “And the two of you look ready to throw hands?”

“What do you mean the two of us?” Willow edges out.

Mossy blue-green eyes flow from one woman to the next. He lets out an incensed sniff.

“Don’t lie to me!” The Scottish brogue, more consistent with his older brothers and parents, dominates the order.

I step forward. “Willow’s angry with me. I ... I put her on the spot. Earlier today, I asked why she refuses to marry you.” Until this precise moment, I didn’t believe the best friend I had since we were children over the girl who I was allergic to, upon first meeting, until River went to prison. I wonder how close Willow and I would’ve become if she hadn’t been my shoulder to cry on after River assaulted Harrison’s son, Spencer, at a house party?

“Appreciate the support, Tatum.” Camdyn seems satisfied. “Did you get your answer? I gave Willow two kids. She won’t marry me.”

Willow’s eyes are boring tiny stab wounds into my skin for turning traitor. She clears her throat. “Cam, I want nothing more than to be your wife. I’ve always said I needed to focus on school first.”

He gestures. “Miss PhD.”

“What does that mean?” Willow runs a hand along her beautiful, twisted locks.

“That- that means ...” Camdyn smiles, softening the menacing skull and knife tattoo on his neck. “I’ve asked you seventy-eight times, Lolo.”

“That many?” All the anger swirling in her evaporates.

As he mumbles that he’s counted, I edge toward the French doors, unworthy of my friend’s romantic gesture.

Willow’s chuckle is airy light. “Ask me again, baby.”

“Will you—”

“With a ring, Camdyn.”

“Let’s go home,” he commands.

“Boy, you’re always tryna get away from our sons for a night out.” Willow’s perfectly laid cough interrupts my retreat. “Give me a moment, please. Stubby and I need to have a quick chat.”

I grimace. Camdyn’s lengthened gait surpasses mine in seconds. His broad shoulders swell in pride, and he presses a chaste kiss on my forehead. He’s done that like three times in our lives, and I’ve always followed up with a prune face.

I bite my eyes, exasperated with myself, and he’s too elated to cease his lengthy swagger.

“My children are Scottish, Tatum,” Willow grounds out. “That *racist* pedophile—”

“That’s how he talks, Willow. Black, white, Hispanic, this isn’t a matter of race. His head’s lodged up his ass. He’s untrainable.”

“Harrison’s not your problem. Harrison’s your perp. You’re a *cop*. You comprehend full well what perp means, right?”

“Calm down. We both know I can handle him. I’ve taken your advice and that of your mentor. I’m consistent with my sessions.” A sigh drowns out the anxiety flailing through me. I close the space between my girl and me. Although we’re alone on the balcony, I operate like we’re stuck in a Lifetime movie, and an evil villain looms in the shadows.

Or a concerned citizen.

Or any of my guys. Not even gonna mention Father.

I love them all too hard, so they gotta stay in the dark.

“A man like that has no worth, Tatum.” She turns away, hands clutching the railing and issuing a deep, cleansing breath. “You’ve kept your distance until tonight. You’ll try again, I’m sure. Harrison’ll put you in another bind, Stubby.”

I nod. “Can’t lie. You’re right.”

Relief softens her creamy mocha features. “Appreciate us not getting into a verbal squabble.”

“Yup.”

“As you can see, it’s highly probable Cam will propose tonight. I ... won’t lie to him.” Her head lifts, and the agony returns tenfold, tightening her thick lips and narrowing her hazel eyes. “That’s why I’ve said no, Tatum. The day I entered the MacKenzie fam and was introduced as the future therapist, I felt conflicted about Camdyn and I. Shit, I’m still torn between my oath as a therapist and the fact that there shouldn’t be secrets in a marriage.”

“Especially now, you’re the designated family therapist.”

“Um, yeah! They have *all*—literally—made themselves my clients. One day, when I marry my best friend, I’ll let the clan decide if they want to continue bringing their issues to me.”

“Well ... Cam’s my bestie. You’re my bestie too. Grant me clemency.” My shoulder nudges hers.

“Tatum, I won’t randomly blab. Still, this exact scenario will transpire again.”

I endorse her truth. “Because Camdyn cares about ten people on planet earth. He will be deathly attuned to—”

“Girl, try zero. He cares about Clan MacKenzie. Me, you, and Riv, we are honorary Macks. But yup, and damn, I’m proud of you—although angry—I’m proud you’re picking up on developmental words. He is *attuned* with the needs of the people he loves.” Willow clears her throat, becoming serious again. “Sis, once we’ve jumped the broom, all bets are off if Cam asks.”

The walls of my throat tighten. I undertone, “Just have a proper wedding. No Justice of the Peace, please.”

We share a bittersweet laugh. “Alright, maid of honor. You have some rights. So, am I permitted to have a shotgun backyard wedding? Perhaps Elvis?”

Ahh, a quickie Vegas wedding. I grin and shrug it out. “A muscular, thong-clad Elvis, sure. Don’t worry about bringing cash. Your maid of honor *gots* this.”

“Ha! I was thinking Elvis as the officiant,” Willow quips, laughter ending on a sigh. “You need time to bring Harrison to heel. *Got that.* Exactly what is your master plan, Tatum Li?”

I look her dead in the eye and respond with one precise word. “Justice.”

five

RIVER

Two years ago, I set out to become a UFC fighter. Had to recall all the rules I'd long forgotten since throwing hands in prison:

Almost kill my fucking enemy.

Don't cross that thinly veiled line where the motherfucker's oxygen ceases for good.

Don't cross any of the lines created in the world of MMA.

I hadn't tasted blood in prison, not like the night when Tatum assumed she was *redeeming* Park. I hadn't murdered my enemy in the slammer because the guards on payroll maced the loser and winner alike when a fight got outta hand.

But prison created this thing in me that didn't mind endless blood.

And saving my Tatum initiated a lust.

I murdered four men one night two years ago.

But tonight, as Poto eats and drinks in honor of my win, I determine that disrespectful asshole will be my fifth kill.

After chatting with Heilani and leaving her to finish the plate she was reluctant to try, I've settled down across from Poto. The rabid animal never looks up, licking his glossed fingers and digging in again.

I clear my throat.

Poto's aroused from his food lust, shifting awkwardly in his seat. "Hey, uh ... son. I brought your mother just like we discussed."

A handful of beats pass, and my own flesh and blood is seconds away from pissing his dingy ass pants.

"Evidently, Poto, you fulfilled your end of the bargain." I push my hand through my hair, shoving the dark disarray out of my face for an unobstructed view of the liar.

I collect the darkness churning through my soul and try to recall sitting in the first pew of church with Renee and her family or Nan and her family.

Keep Rage on a leash, Riv.

For now.

"Thank you." I tip half a smile. Fuck me. This is what sociopaths are made of.

The edge of Poto's shoulders slides loose. "Welcome."

"Took you long enough. I thought you conned your own son outta twenty-five grand."

He hefts a laugh. "Shit, it did look bad, didn't it? But you know me, Riv. I'm prone to disappear. But I always pull through. No con. Just ... logistics."

Ahhh, there he is. Talking too much.

I place my hands into my sweats, grabbing the contents. In one hand, I'm clutching a bottle of whiskey. In the other is two shot glasses. I pour one for myself and let the liquid splash into the glass of my impending fifth kill—Poto Tagaloa.

My wrist flicks, and the glass jets over the polished tabletop. A greedy paw stops it. We lift our glasses.

“To my son,” Poto toasts.

“Touché, I wouldn't exist without you.”

Content in his boots, my father tips a brow. “To us then?”

Egotistical asshole. “Yup.”

We knock 'em back. The smooth, expensive burn kicks and screams all the way down my throat.

“This is good,” Poto praises, sliding his glass over for a refill. “I didn't know you had it like this, Riv. I'm ... Man, I'm speechless. I'm proud of you.”

Topping him off, I chuckle. Not because of his statement. As I figure, my father's counting my money. His eyes are a scale, assessing me the same way he taught me. Except he's appraising more than my designer kicks and sweats. He takes in the entire scene.

Harrison's house.

Harrison's pool outside, flooding blue light in the darkness. If it weren't for the chilly night, the party would've resumed on the deck. And I can tell, Poto Tagaloa sees himself there come summer.

A few minutes later, we've killed half the bottle when Tatum slinks inside, her sultry hips bringing her straight into my lap.

“Hey, *Shrubby*.” Poto nods.

“You know that’s not my name,” she deadpans, elbowing my rib for laughing with my father.

Poto offers an apologetic smile. “Listen, you should have our name, sweetheart. But that’s between you and him.”

She grins wildly. “I appreciate your support in us making it official, future father-in-law. Never pegged you for someone who championed monogamy. Tatum *Li-Tagaloa* has a nice ring, yeah?”

“Li-Tagaloa?” I cut in, eyes narrowing.

“We’re real men. You gotta drop Li,” Poto seconds.

Eyes sparkling teasingly, Tatum replies, “Oh, I know. That was for *Shrubby*. It’s *Stubby* to everyone else. Tatum to *you*, and I’m all in.”

My palm sweeps over her spine. “I was just telling my pops here that he and Ma are welcome to dinner.”

Tatum shifts in my lap, drawing stiffer than my cock. Her voice hollows out. “Just let us know.”

* * *

A tiny hand falls over Tatum’s lips as she stifles a yawn, body gliding into an arch that leaves me pulling her against my hardened dick as we step into the foyer of our home.

“Way to wake me up, Riv.”

“I thought forcing you to walk into the house would do the trick.”

“Boy, I sleepwalk, but I can’t deny the love you have for me right now.” Her gaze flickers between us. Then she groans.

I ask, “What’s with the face?”

“I’m wide awake now.”

“Fuck, you’re thinking.”

“Damn right, River.” The usual scrunch of her nose, present when verbalizing discrepancies in her favorite mystery books and predicting who the fuck done it, softens. That face has turned me into her bitch.

Tatum tentatively murmurs, “My gramps says, ‘Trust but verify,’ baby.”

While laughing, I envision Mr. Riley spouting off that very line. “Verify what?” Ain’t no way Heilani’s my mother. Screw concrete evidence, but I relish the moments when Tatum’s on her toes.

Baffled, Tatum sputters, “Granted, the scenario is backward. Usually, women seek out their one-night stands. There’s no ... nice way to—”

I snake my arms around Tatum, pulling her to my chest. “You’re a good girl, but you aren’t that nice, Stubby.”

An abrasive hand pushes my chest away. “Whatever, River. I’m looking out for you.”

At this point, I could divulge that Heilani isn’t my mom, but an angry Tatum fucks better. While leaving Tatum flustered, a wicked smile plays across my lips as I clutch her throat in my hand, bruising her lips with my own. “On. Your. Knees. Now,” I order. *I’ll bring you up to speed later, though.*

RIVER

Becoming the face of Emergence hadn't been my version of giving back to the community; however, the press conference where I verbally combatted a journalist solidified my place. So today, instead of pinpointing Poto's latest schemes, I shove aside the doors of the nonprofit. In the center of the lobby, a life-like poster of me causes my eyes to bug out.

I nod at the few ex-convicts crowded in the area, waiting for assistance with finding a new job, and head toward the back, where tiny cubicles house each of the few employment specialists. Most of the employees in this place are felons too, which makes the ones needing assistance less prone to be irate or ghost us.

Not Coleman.

The skinny, timid dude who needed a job has never had so much as a traffic violation. However, with the lobby always so crowded, Emergence needs him too.

I glance over the top of the cardboard-thin walls and see that Coleman already has someone he's chatting up.

While waiting, I look at my latest TikTok. The views were pushing a couple mil before I was labeled an abuser, but now, try over twenty million. My brow lifts at the sight of how my latest content has catapulted.

I won't look at the comments.

Ain't that crazy.

But as time trickles by, my resolve weakens.

Fuck it.

My finger brushes over the chat button just as the lady who'd been speaking with Coleman steps past me. She's older; wrinkles and ink mar her face. The mouth of a cobra is tatted along her nose, and the claws masterfully tuck near her jaws. *Who the fuck's gonna employ her?*

I darken the tiny cubicle as Coleman softly taps his forehead at his keyboard.

"How's Nixon?" I ask.

Coleman looks up at me, pointing a pen toward the whiteboard. "All the motivational crap isn't working. Got him a gig in San Pedro. San ... Pedro! For fucksake, Mr. Tagaloo."

"San Pedro isn't the worst lead we have."

"Oh, yeah? I actually circled around, had him at the worst place. Thought it would . . ."

I roll the tension from my shoulders. "How did Nixon do?"

"Nobody will keep him on rotation for a single eight-hour day. Last week, Wienerschnitzel fired him the second he walked in, and he was *in* uniform."

"C'mon, he's not even twenty yet."

“The lady that just waltzed outta here has more promise, and that’s saying something.”

I chuckle softly. “Did you refer her to that company willing to remove her tattoo?”

“She went there. She’s had three sessions already.”

“Three?” *Damn.*

“Yup, whoever did that,” he gestured to his face, “must’ve used Satan ink.”

“Gimme Nixon’s address.”

* * *

I arrive at the halfway house where Nixon lives in record time. We shared a similar background until Poto sprang Heilani on me. Except Nixon didn’t have himself a good girl to fall back on. Or the best friend to support him in a life of crime. He does resemble Cam a bit, though.

I jog up the porch and let myself in without knocking since the home now functions as a halfway house. The living room has been remodeled. An entertainment center sits front and center. There are emergency numbers post-noted to the front, along with each person’s parole officer—I guess if someone feels like snitching on someone else.

I sign in, then stroll up the unlit hallway and easily find Nixon’s room. After knocking, a growled “What?” greets me, and I open the door.

Narrowed gray eyes glare through me. A second later, Nixon climbs out of his bed, dressed in a flannel, jeans, and boots.

“You ain’t all talk,” he mutters.

“Nope. You do enough of that for the two of us. What’s up?” I lean against the tin desk, which seems standard for each room.

Nixon pays more attention to his fingernails than me.

“Nixon!”

“*Blaine*. I’m not using that asshole’s name.”

I roll my shoulders, cutting down on the tension. “Blaine. You’re back in the real world. What’s your next step, huh? Shadow Ryders?”

Blaine jolts into a standing position, coming close enough for me to reconstruct his face. I don’t blink as he shouts, “Shadow Ryder’s are my family!”

“Ahh, I see. How many of ‘em came to see you in juvey, Blaine? Or when you were transferred to prison?” It’s not that the Shadow Ryders don’t have a presence in prison. The top dogs turn their backs on the small fish. While I can’t say how much surviving was required of Blaine in juvey or prison, I fought any battle coming my way, got my kinesiology degree, and taught a class to new inmates, which brought me respect from the old heads and young dudes alike.

Blaine folds his lean arms over. “I don’t expect you to understand. You got family.”

I slap a hand at my chest. “*I* created my own family with people who always had my back *and* looked out for me.”

His mouth pitches upward at one side. “Ahhh, the good girl aspect. If I had a sweet piece, I would cuddle with her every night, not slap the bitch around and break her arm. Stop acting like you’re reformed, River.”

Rubbing my jaw, I nod, then invite Blaine to dinner. His head tilts. The little shit affronted me and hadn't gotten the rise he anticipated. *Good.*

TATUM

“Is this boy a lost MacKenzie?” I whisper to River, molding against his side while he flips Angus hamburger patties. The man-child he brought to our house is across the expansive yard, doing backflips in our perfectly christened MMA cage. The setting sun glints off the chains fastened to his jeans. *He wants to be bad, I see.*

“Nan would murder Big Brody for stepping out,” River finally responds, turning to lean against the Venetian plaster of our outdoor kitchen.

I shrug a shoulder. “If she knew. They love having kids. Big Brody could have spared her the pain and had another—”

“Stubby.” River’s growl reverts my attention to the platter of onions, bell peppers, and other freshly cut toppings.

I snort. “Stop staring at me like that, River. I did my job.”

“The veggies are all different sizes.” He points a stiff hand to the colors.

“Then eat your burger like me. With cheese, hold every-friggen-thing else, and stop your complaining.” I smack his ass, waltzing away. My short yet lengthy stride carries me

between the lollipop-shaped solar lights that'll give our dream yard a vibe once it's dark.

I climb the steps of the cage, and the guy flipping in my direction discontinues in a clumsy tumble.

“Aw, man, I was gonna dodge at the last second.” I smile at him. “My father would backflip across the canvas while Momma and I were stunt doubles, tumbling outta the way.” Chuckling, I offer an outstretched hand. “Tatum.”

“Blaine,” he replies, offering a lousy shake.

He's over six feet, slender like Jamie MacKenzie, but his following comment is shady as hell and unlike that gentle giant. “So, you were raised to dodge a blow?”

I wait a couple of beats, molding the comment like play dough, to confirm if it's me.

River's fake momma stressed me out all night—and how my man welcomed them to dinner. This afternoon, River texted me. It was mere moments after I called Spencer Herrington, Harrison's son, who ignored me. I'd called Spencer on a whim, or rather out of desperation since we were sort of friends growing up.

River wanted an update on what we could make on the fly. Feeling recently snubbed by the guy I once called *friend*, long, long ago, I wasn't in the most charitable mood. I almost replied via text: *Poto gets AIR PUDDING*. Instead, River had brought this kid home, and now, I wonder where Blaine's comment came from.

I crack my neck. “I don't really need to dodge a blow, like dodge *dodge*. I'm pretty tactical myself.”

Blaine smiles at the grit of my lips. *Okay, don't be 'day one' Stubby, who's defensive at every turn.*

I slap on a cordial grin, steering us toward stable grounds. “So, we have cheddar, provolone, Swiss, and jack cheese. I’m a cheese head.”

“I’ll take my burger without.”

“Oh... kay.” I waltz out of the cage and onto the tapered grass. This is so not a case of me having my guard up.

It’s *him*.

Not me.

Unless Blaine’s allergic, I don’t trust non-cheese eaters. And I surely don’t like them either.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, one R&B melody fades into another as we settle at the patio table. Blaine shoves his hand into the large potato chip bag, and I shift in my seat. Couldn’t he just pour himself some onto his plate?

Aware of my quirks, River snorts. “Ya know, we’re in the presence of authority.”

“What?” Blaine’s eyebrow pitches near his blond tresses.

“Tatum’s a cop.”

“Damn.” He washes down a cough with a can of coke.

River softly grounds his fist into my arm. “Next up, SWAT, right?”

“Riv-errr,” I growl, giving him a peculiar once over. “You know my plans.”

“I gotta point to make, though. Blaine, here, thinks I put hands on you.”

“He found out.” My voice mock trembles, causing River to scoff. “Pretty much every night. River puts his hands around my throat. Oh! In one instance, his handprint was on my ass for a week.”

By now, Blaine won’t remove the can from his lips. Choppy gray eyes peer over the brim, and his face begs me to cease and desist.

I rise and stand behind my best friend, drawing my fingers through his hair, pulling. “He is a badddd boy.”

Damn, I miss that one night where I was dom, and River crawled across the floor toward me. I gulp the saliva and thoughts of that night. “Very naughty,” I add.

“You had-had your arm broken,” Blaine finally snorts.

“Hmmm,” I muse. “You like social media *clickbait*?”

“Nah.”

“But you think River’s a monster who got outta prison and tosses me around, huh, Blaine?”

The shithead takes a juicy hunk of his hamburger, snarling, “Maybe.”

River’s tense beneath my hand that’s dropped to his shoulder. I apply the faintest pressure while asking, “You’re a monster too, yeah?”

Blaine stops chewing. “No. I just—”

“You’re aloof. Prone to verbal homicide.” I move my fingers to shape the symbolic quote marks. “*Say anything.* Can’t get a job.”

Blaine pops out of his chair. The wooden seat moves abrasively over the newly designed patio. “I can get a job!”

“My bad.” I nod. “Getting them is the easy part. Keeping them—”

“Fuck you—”

“Blaine,” River grounds out.

“Oh, nooo, mama’s got this.” I step around the table, examining the man-child I defined perfectly. “We invited you to our home. Feed you. And you’re judging motherfuckers when you need to look in the mirror. Every attempt is for your own good. So what? You blow out the opportunities from here to Long Beach or, shit, to Rancho. Is that it?”

“For your information, I haven’t blown outta every job!”

Though I gotta crane my neck to look up at him, I ground out, “Focus on you, Blaine. *Add a side of gratitude.* For your info, my arm wasn’t broken. I was shot in the line of duty. You should see the fuck-off who shot me.”

I leave Blaine silent and tense, walk into the house, and grab a cheese stick from the fridge, hustling up the stairs.

Once in the calming mocha colors of the master bedroom, I stalk in front of the standing mirror.

You’re acting like defensive Stubby. Resting my hands on top of my head, I complete Dr. Beck’s suggested breathing exercises.

After an encounter with Harrison friggen Herrington, my MO alters.

This moment is just like that.

Why?

I twist the reality of the situation around in my psyche.

“Riv wasn’t the only one affected by the slanderous lies.” And while I need to handle River’s parents, I’ve been pulled in a trillion different directions with no time to initiate my own revenge against Harrison. Not with this nasty feeling hanging over my head.

I slip my cellphone from my pocket and log into River’s TikTok.

* * *

Hours later, I’ve settled in the center of the bed, freshly showered and in a silk teddy, when River’s massive, confident gait brings him into the room. As I always do, even when I spend a second away from him, I exhale, pleurably drinking in the dark allure of his physique.

Tonight though, I contain my appreciation of his sexiness. “So, you dropped that hooligan off.” *Please don’t log into TikTok. Please don’t.*

“I did. And thanks to your motivating, the dude might pull his head outta his ass.”

I smile smugly. “Good. Now, do my senses betray me? Whatcha got for mama?”

“A little something.” From behind his burly form, River presents an oily paper bag, the aroma of which has my tastebuds all wonky. *Birria tacos*. Not just any street tacos, and I say that respectfully, these suckers are filled with stewed meat, spices, and chiles.

I instantly perk up, thinking of dipping one into the flavorful *consommé*. “Aww, River! Thank—”

“It wasn’t until I was halfway home, though.” Pinching the bridge of his nose, River leans against the nightstand, holding my craving hostage in a clutched fist. “That I decided I’ll let you watch me eat every taco.”

The grin on my face dissolves into a cringe. Dammit, he saw my video. *Oh well.* “I’ll fight you,” I threaten.

Tugging the A-shirt over his head with one hand, he shakes the bag again as an enticement. “Try me, Stubby. There was traffic on top of traffic. I fought through that shit and headed to the opposite side of the city for this grand gesture.”

Okay, I cave. I climb up, hips rocking as I crawl seductively to the edge of the bed. My eyes drag along stacks of muscles.

My tongue begs to tumble from my mouth like I’m the fucking animal in this relationship. *Shit, I am.* River’s the contained one, and I came upstairs because I lost my cool ... on friggen social media.

River clears his throat and taps an index finger against his seductive mouth. “I’m waiting.”

On my knees with the sheets in disarray around my legs, I reach up because, let’s face it, even on a high partitioned bed, I’m vertically challenged, and my man’s a beast. I drop my hand on the back of River’s neck. He lowers his face, and my mouth presses against his. Our tongues get lost twining around each other, and my tonsils vibrate as I moan against our fused mouths.

River’s fingers tangle in the tresses at the crown of my head, pushing downward. I sink my teeth at the muscle on his neck, then brush my lips roughly over a taut pec.

Between kissing the jagged planes of his chest and dragging my fingertips down his spine, I groan, “Baby, first tacos. Second, I repay you in head for the social media rant on your profile, okay?”

“Head. Now.” The hand becomes a fist, tightening around my hair.

“My tacos will get cold,” I whimper, nipping the alluring v-shape along the side of his hip.

“I *ate* the tacos.” River gestures toward the discarded bag. “That’s just trash. Had to clean out my car.”

My hand zips out to deflect his dominating touch. River’s bare feet slam onto the edge of the bed, and he pulls me down, flipping until he’s on top.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I grit, hiking my hips. River’s body’s tantalizingly flush against mine. I strive to mount him and fail miserably. Dammit, I’m vastly outta my weight class. No leverage. I picture myself as a hobo in the middle of a town square, thrusting my pelvis against a stone statue.

A humiliating sight.

“I was halfway home with your tacos, Stubby. Got a million TikTok notifications,” he grounds out. “By the look in your eyes, you regret that mouth of yours?”

“I regret nothing!”

River’s breath teases my heated skin. “No? You snapped. I wasn’t even checking social media. Your rant was the TKO Hot Topic on MMA radio.”

Uh-oh. Though not in the right frame of mind when I broke, my lips spread into a thick line. “I regret nothing!” *Or*

should I?

RIVER

I'm not furious with my woman in the slightest. As I've always said, Tatum's fuck face is miraculous when angry. I anchor my ankle around hers, flipping her effortlessly. I grip her thighs and slam her face into the mattress.

The feline backs her ass up against me. My iron grip latches onto the nape of her neck, pushing her into the soft bedding. I ground my cock against the supple flesh of her ass. The other hand swats so hard that she stutters my name. "Fu-fuck you, Ri-River!"

"No, baby, you're mistaken. I'm about to fuck *you*."

I tug the silk. Tatum pulls in the opposite direction. I snatch the clothing from her skin and pull my belt from my jeans with such force that the leather cracks in the air.

"River!" Alert eyes stagger over her shoulder, only to widen when I loop the leather around her neck. I bend down, slithering my tongue over her shoulder. "You're already so wet, Tatum. Good girl, I don't have to beat the *freak into you*."

As she chokes on a gasp, I slam to the hilt, her pussy fisting my dick from tip to base. *Shit*. The clutch of her cunt

would KO my junk if this were my first time. With my hands tightened on either side of the belt, I piston through her soaking core so hard my balls and pussy juice thwack to their own beat.

The sultry rasp of Tatum's voice is no more. She can hardly breathe, losing oxygen and squirting lust onto my shaft. As her knees cave and she's losing consciousness, I snatch the belt from around her throat, lifting her center.

The change in position resuscitates Tatum's shocked heart. She yelps my name while I massage her throat with one hand, snaking the other around her to tweak her clit. My lips drop to her shoulder, offering one single display of kindness. She arches and squirms against my chest.

I catch a frantic rhythm, pumping my cock into her cervix with each pointed growl. "Who. Is. The. Motherfucking. Boss?"

Trailing my fingertips over Tatum's vulnerable neck, I await what should be the simplest question of her life.

A cold, dark gaze clashes with mine. "I am, Riv—"

I take perverse satisfaction when my hands roughly shape Tatum's tits, and my mouth burns a path down her throat. My teeth clamp into her shoulder.

Sweet, luxurious blood floods my mouth while a tight, brazen, honeyed cunt clamps around me, and fingers claw into my forearms. She's pinned within my arms and fights like a lioness to get away.

While she's trapped, I lick the torn flesh where I've branded Tatum, press my chest into her back, and growl into her ear. "I'm going to release you now to clean my cock. If you say a single word," I chomp my teeth near Tatum's ear, so

she jumps, hitching a breath, “I will show the same attention to your clit. Got that?”

After a hesitant nod of her head, I let go of Tatum’s waist and bring her around until I’m lying in bed, and she’s settled next to my right side.

“River, I’m sor—”

I brush a thumb over her lips, ceasing her words. “Your mouth always gets the better of you, Little Bit.”

“I know.” She pouts.

“You have one last chance to make it right, or ...” I cup her pussy in my hand, palm teasing that scary little pearl.

Tatum lowers her face. My dick, blanketed in a sea of her orgasms, is rigid, long, thick, and ready to fuck past the back of her throat. Tatum slowly sweeps her tongue over the creamy trail, savoring the sweetness of her cum on my raging erection. My dick disappears an inch at a time past her pillow lips. Passion builds as her suppressed moans increase in volume, and the warmth of her mouth grows hot and sloppy.

“Tatum, fuck,” I groan. My fingers twine around her hair until I have leverage. I buck up, screwing her gorgeous face with rapid thrusts. She moves faster, urgent, tonsils gasping around my dick in swift pulsing movements.

“Shit,” I breathe. Her pussy has the same miraculous effect when racked with convulsing orgasms. On the verge of exploding, I pound down the resistance at the back of Tatum’s throat, letting the tingling sensation building in my balls take over. The feral animal in me roars as my cum invades her mouth, down her throat, and fills her up.

“You full?” I taunt, pushing unruly curls from Tatum’s face as she falls onto my thigh, resting there.

“Shuddup, River.” A whimper tickles over the taut, dark tribal tattoo on my hip. Looking up through subdued lashes, she adds, “Yeah, I’m pleasantly satisfied, despite I forwent half of dinner, then my tacos ...”

“*Your* tacos?”

“Yes, you ate them as payback for my impulsiveness.” She sniffs.

The callused padding of my thumb traces the gnarled, embossed skin at the slope of her neck. I sit against the headboard and drink in every curve of Tatum while she lies below me. Desire almost topples me, making me this mindless pleasure-seeking beast again. But fuck, the tears in her eyes are a mesmerizing sight. And I have mercy.

I relent. “Grab the taco bag, Little Bit.”

“But you ate them.” Tatum’s voice cracks in confusion.

“I left you *one*.”

The earthiness of her eyes melts into dark, furious cocoa. “One!”

“Know what caused this?” I ask, tapping at the bite along her shoulder. “That mouth.”

The side of my index finger plucks Tatum’s lips for good measure. Teeth clang together in a spiteful chomp. I show no signs of pain, though she executed an attack, which could slice straight to the bone.

After biting my finger half off, Tatum slides off the bed. She walks around to find the bag has fallen on the floor.

Digging through it, she mutters, “There are four and an empty piece of foil.”

“You still get *one*. I had initially planned on eating one on the way, so I did.”

“Two and two,” she gestures, skulking to my side.

“Nah. There’s still the question of my TikTok. So, three and one.”

“First of all, River, it’s technically *three* and two since you already ate one. I’m being generous offering you half. If I have to fight to the death for two, I will.”

Rolling my eyes, I decide I’m not addressing my defiant girlfriend. This is my old bud, my pal, my best fucking friend. “Why’d you snap, Stubby?”

Silently, Tatum hands over half the contents and situates herself in bed next to me. After dipping her birria taco, she takes a generous bite, letting her head fall back in utter contentment.

“Oh, my gawd,” Tatum groans.

“Talk to me,” I knead the thick flesh of her thigh in the palm of my hand. These are the few moments where I feel like the bitch in this relationship. Wriggling my jaw, I press further. “I’m not angry with you, Tatum. I’m proud of you. But to take your grievance online.”

A hand hides her mouth, either as a courtesy for chewing or something else.

My gut twists. Can’t be something ... else.

Tatum sighs. “Online ranting isn’t my MO.”

“No, it’s not.” I pull out my phone to navigate the apps. “Shit, and I thought I went viral after I was accused of putting hands on you.”

“What are the numbers?” Tatum nonchalantly inquires, dunking the taco.

“Thirty mil... .”

TATUM

Thirty million people! What all had I said in thirty seconds? No need to admit my mental instability. I take a few furtive glances at my reflection on the TikTok screen to see if I caught more viewers with *honey* or *toxic* drama.

I heave a sigh at the sight of my calm, collected expression. Fire restricted in the windows of my soul.

“I’m fed up,” I had said, voice heavy while drawing my legs up, chin to my knees, and offering myself an embrace that I sorely needed.

“I rarely let someone’s accusations shake me up, but this hit home. These gross fabrications have not only affected River Tagaloa, the man I love, but these lies also *offended me*. I don’t compromise myself for anyone. Nor do I condone ...” I paused.

Steer away from negativity. At that moment, I’d rather uplift and support. I had cleared my constricted throat and pushed through. “Let’s not give abusers the time of day. I’m a cop with the LAPD. I take my job seriously, which means I will always strive to come home. Anytime I wear that badge, I

assume a risk. I got hurt during a liquor store robbery—that’s not the end of the story. The end of the story is the cashier gets to say *I love you* to her little girl. She went home unscathed, and I guess ... I guess this time, I went home to a smear campaign.”

I paused, conviction tightening my voice as I begged, “May I empower you? I’m not talking to everyone. But I’m talking to some of you. If you’ve been victimized, woman, *man*, or if you’re in a DV relationship, come to King Kong Zombie Gym in LA tomorrow evening at six for a free class.”

Ohhhh, I did that.

“And for those that printed, or even tweeted, that vile lie, you ‘bout to make me *rich!*”

I laugh softly at how petty triumphed the conviction in my tone, and the video loops over. I reach past my man’s thick muscles to press the heart button and watch it again.

This time, for a fragment of a moment, the little girl who never fought for herself comes to a head, shining in vulnerability in the beginning when referring to *condoning* abuse.

I clear my throat.

River drops the phone and turns to me, palm warming my cheek straight to my soul.

“You don’t always let me in, Little Bit.”

I did, though. Before I turned sixteen and accompanied Father and the Herringtons to dinner. One triggering moment flooded my life with long dormant memories.

Dark visions I had repressed for so long manifested in the form of me clinging to my guys—Riv and Cam—over the

years and not readily permitting Willow into the fold.

River clasps my hip, sliding me into his lap, sincerity masking his grave tone. “I fucking need you, Tatum. Need you to always be real with me.”

“I am.” I gasp the lie, not allowing my gaze to find his. I tighten my eyelids; his forehead kisses mine.

“What are you thinking now?” A roar booms from his chest, demanding the truth. Eyes shine, dark and bright with the threat of punishment if I disobey him by not responding.

Or worse.

Lie.

I could uproot all the seeds of deception I’ve sown at this very moment. Tension douses my veins in the toxins of my trespasses as I link eyes with River. “I’m wondering how many people will come to Father’s gym tomorrow evening. That’s all, baby. Like you said a little while ago, my mouth got the best of me, heh.”

Like always, my next toxic lie becomes a chasm, scattering us further away from each other. A fresh flood of self-loathing pours over me because my lover and best friend *trusts me*.

River chuckles, accepting one version of the truth over the cold, hard reality *I* live in. Although there’ll come a day where I’ll need to come clean, a piece of me has wrestled with the notion of telling him for ages. Dr. Beck can’t help me with that. I’ll need Jesus.

* * *

By four in the afternoon, two hours before my impromptu self-defense session, the line wraps around the corner. That won’t

account for stragglers. Next, the local channel five news station arrives, catapulting my call to action to the next level.

River, along with Park, Bao's oldest foster youth who will turn eighteen in a couple of months, head outdoors to entertain the crowd. I roll my shoulders, and I watch Father close his laptop through the glass wall of his office.

"I'm proud of you," Father says, stepping out of the room to place a flyer in my hand. The contents explain that this evening's self-defense sesh will be conducted in forty-five-minute intervals to accommodate everyone.

"Nice work." I anxiously chuckle.

"Breathe." Bao places a hand on my shoulder.

"What he said." Father backs toward the double doors of the building, clutching the remainder of the papers, which he'll assist with handing out. Suddenly the noise level shifts as River slips inside.

I fold my arms. "What are you doing? Someone might call CPS with you leaving Park out ..."

River draws his hands up as if to display he means no harm. A moment later, Blaine materializes from behind my tall, beefy significant other.

My head cocks, top lip curling.

The uninvited ex-con clears his throat. Blaine edges out, "Saw you on the news a few minutes ago and thought you needed help."

My brows raise. "Not from someone who's content prejudging—"

River elbows Blaine, and he takes a tentative step forward. "Hadn't thought of it like that, Ms. Taga—"

“*Excuse me?*” Father grinds his teeth.

“We aren’t married yet.” I saddle up next to Father, looping an arm through his thick, tattooed one. “I’m still a Li.”

“Still?” Father breathes out, clearly annoyed.

“Alright, give the dude a chance to start over.” River chuckles.

“And a job, ahem,” Blaine co-signs. “Just for the afternoon. Not a real job, but I would like to volunteer to help you all in any way I can.”

Damn, did I say I’m a sucker for bright blue eyes? I shake his outstretched hand. “Don’t choke on your chains.” I gesture to his neck. “Father, get him a King Kong Zombie shirt. Riv, introduce Blaine to Park. Let’s go, guys.”

A few seconds later, I murmur about a few more fliers, then step into my father’s office to call Spencer Herrington again. I feel like he’s the key to taking down his father. Somehow, someday, that little asshole will help me.

* * *

During the first session, Bao and I stand before men, women, a couple of teenagers—which wrenches my heart in half—and a few children, whose parents had attempted to apologize for bringing. Park and Blaine are in the MMA cage with them, playing around and demonstrating flips.

As everyone fans out, a small smile plays on my lips, and the anxiety of just what I got myself into dissipates. I watch Park, recalling how two years ago, he played on his cellphone with imaginary adhesive on his palm until River took him down in the cage.

I nudge my chin to Bao. “We gotta plan his eighteenth birthday.”

Bao blinks skeptically, looking at the crowd. “Too busy.”

“Ya know, I don’t mean *now*, *Yéye*.”

“All my boys have party, if want party.”

“But Park was your worst case.”

Bao snorts. “Lies! Jhang worst when young.”

“Whatever, as I said, we got some extra planning to do. And you *will* help me, old man.” I advance on him in exaggerated, giddy menace.

Never deterred by anyone’s stance, Bao’s arms fold over. “I ring—you bluff.”

I call your bluff. I decide not to correct him. He may sit this one out and perhaps the rest of the sessions we’ve had to segment. At the glass doors, River offers a nod of encouragement and then steps out, closing them behind him.

“Hey, how’s everyone doing this evening!” I shout, instantly hushing the room.

I get a few cheerful smiles, primarily just necessary silence.

“I called you all here today,” I begin, my voice carrying far, “to let you know that in some instances, you can fight your per ...” I pause, clearing my throat. “Perpetrator.” *Fuck, Stubby. Get a handle on yourself. They might think River actually harms you.*

“As I’ve said on social media, I’m a police officer with around three years on duty.”

A few faces twist, deterred by my background.

“I’m not here to blow the whistle. But I will say in certain instances, physically fighting might be the worst option at your disposal. If your partner has a gun ...”

You suck at this. But as I berate myself silently, I sense my warning isn’t lost on them all.

“A solitary self-defense lesson won’t change your lives. It *may*, however, boost your *confidence*. In life, the only safety is *believing in yourself.*” I stop myself from saying more, such as removing yourself from the situation.

Leaving your abuser.

That takes more than fucking courage.

And my hypocritical ass still has ties to my own. But that ends now. While I slowly create connections with others, I pray the confidence I instill in them seeps into my bones, too, because it’s the eleventh hour for Harrison and his scheming. He just doesn’t know it yet.

RIVER

Last week, I couldn't be prouder of my woman. I carried her into the house after midnight because she refused to turn anyone away and blurted out that she would continue to give self-defense lessons once a month for free. While she nodded off in the car, she mumbled about Park's eighteenth birthday.

Now, she's arrived at my afternoon training with her father, and she's at *it* again.

"Baby." I run my hands over Tatum's slender waist as we stand in the cage.

A throat clears, followed by the harsher threat of her father. "I just offered a job to a stranger. Have you called him?"

I push Tatum away, and she falls dramatically into the fencing with a chuckle. "Scary ass."

Hiding a sly grin, I turn to address Jhang. "I'll call Blaine now."

Jhang climbs up the steps, spine straighter than ever. "Probably should before I renege."

“Father,” Tatum groans.

Jhang thumbs over his shoulder.

“Am I getting kicked out?” She takes a dramatic gasp.

“Time for real training. I don’t know how the force allows you to train while on disability.”

“Well,” she muses, “anyone who uploaded online about my training saw I favored one arm and had my two favorite guys train with me last week.”

“*Two* favorite guys.” My teeth grit.

“Yes.” My coach offers a toothy grin. “Her two *favorite* guys. *Her father* and that bag of bones.”

Tatum cuts in. “Don’t call *Yéye* a bag—” as I take a cheap shot at her father.

Yeah.

Cheap. As. Fuck.

There are rules in MMA.

First one, don’t disrespect the cage. The second, if you’re inside these walls, *stay* ready.

Jhang’s wearing sparring gear, so the padding near his chin takes the blow. Although at a disadvantage, he reacts with smooth speed, dipping beneath one fist, yet unable to counter once I have my hooks in him. Jhang kip-ups from the ground.

Tatum snorts. “I get it. I get it. I’ll leave already. I have lunch with Hodges today.”

I can’t say I’m not jealous. We’ve done a couple of doubles since he joined SWAT, and Tatum seems to see the dude as a fucking god or something. Or, at the very least, her mentor.

“But before I go, boys,” she snaps, “Bao has his thing for all of his foster kids. I understand that he doesn’t give anyone special treatment.”

Jhang snorts. “Except for you, daughter. You’re his favorite.”

She kicks a brow.

I lift a shoulder. “Bao’s not emotional. Though, I’ve seen him *almost* smile at you.”

“Me too,” Jhang adds. “And I play *xiangqi* with that surly, cantankerous man.”

Tatum snorts. “Father, forgive me for having a lot on my plate, sheesh. Perhaps more ... depending on if Hodges and I are chatting about what I think we will during lunch.”

There’s that smile.

The one I’m confident is for her ultimate dream of climbing the ladder at the LAPD, but then my appreciation shoots to shit cause she’s headed out to lunch with another dude.

“If you’re busy, go.” Jhang shoos.

“I’ll leave once I’ve delegated roles for Park’s birthday.”

Jhang runs a heavy hand over his shoulder. “Okay, Daughter.”

She continues with the obvious. “Party at Bao’s because that’s where they all are, which—”

I cut in, steering Tatum back. “What do we gotta do, Stubby?”

“Father, you’re on *celeb* duty. Reach out to Killer Ka—”

“No.” He stomps a foot.

“Yes! Reach out to Vassili “Killer Karo” Resnov for a—”

“You remind me of Renee every day.” He laughs tensely, fingers gripping the cage as he stares down at her. “But today, I’m not liking it.”

“Thank you, Father. Compliment or not, I’ll take it. Park would like a signed photo and Vassili’s presence, or preferably both, at—”

Jhang lifts a shoulder. “Okay, a signed photo—*if* I can get ahold of him.”

Vassili Resnov is one Russian Jhang abhors with his whole heart. He’s fought a few of them in his time, but Vassili was stomping on heads while Jhang was phasing out. The rookie was one of Jhang’s veteran fights.

“If I can find him,” he repeats, irritated.

I mutter, “I wouldn’t mind a photo.”

“New coach, too? No job for that wannabe biker,” Jhang tests.

“Never mind.” I laugh as Tatum now points to me.

“That brings me to you.” I harden at Tatum’s raspy tone, which was always meant to slide up and down my cock.

“Anything for you, baby.”

“No job,” Jhang growls.

“I was just ... fuck ... damn.”

She chortles. “Father, stick a pin in it. River, you’re in charge of the playlist.”

I choke on a laugh. “You gotta be shitting me?”

“Do your job, Riv, and you’ll be my third favorite. Arrivederci.” Tossing the peace sign, Tatum swaggers toward the exit.

“This was a setup!” I growl. “Music this day and age is shit! Pure shit!”

“I’ll do the music,” Jhang says. “Riv, find that senior citizen.”

While holding the door open, Tatum shouts, “Father, you’re older than Vassili, remember? And he’s a *hot as fuck* senior cit—” I climb up the cage, swinging a leg over, and she slams the door. Like I’m deterred by her running away. I jump down and hop the partition on the wooden floors separating the training sessions for the classes and run across the room as Jhang laughs.

By the time my eyes peer through the bright sunny day, Tatum has pulled her Lexus in reverse.

“Stubby!” I swat a hand at the hood of her sleek car as it lurches forward, and I dive out of the way. “You gotta come home sometime, Stubbyyyy!”

TATUM

With a grin plastered on my face, I waltz into the cop bar, grab a woven basket with peanuts from the counter, and say, “Two beers. Put ’em on Hodges’s tab.”

The bartender glances around. “Where’s Hodges for confirmation?”

“Be here soon.” I wink and strut to a table at the rear.

I shake my head, recalling River’s face. Damn, being in love with your best friend is the life.

My cellphone vibrates in my jean pocket. Wondering if Hodges is running late, I pull it out only to see a blocked call.

“Not taking the bait, Harrison,” I mutter.

I thought I’d set my issues aside after popping off on TikTok last week. Then I answered an unknown call, and Harrison groaned about jacking off to my statement. River was waiting in *his* lobby for some meeting or another. So, I guess Harrison felt *safe* and pulled that move. He’s called from the blocked number once last week and twice yesterday. Friggen crackpot’s escalating.

Bottles of beer are placed in front of me, easing the anxiety-induced hammering of my heart.

I smile at the server. “Hey, I’ll take a steak sandwich, and if Hodge has a favorite, get his usual.”

“Roger that.”

As the waitress strolls away, I wriggle the fake smile from my face, returning my attention to the thorn in my side.

Patiently biding my time won’t cut it. While Harrison’s gotten crafty, the edicts from Dr. Beck will only get me so far, and that was because we weren’t in close proximity.

Then here comes fucking Poto with his *mama* nonsense.

I can’t fathom how quickly to rid myself of Harrison or how Poto’s impromptu appearance might connect to all my godfather’s schemes in some form or fashion. *Where did that come from?* Gawd, my life reeks of the conspiracy fiction I set aside my second year in college because it consumed too much of my time. *Keep sticking to the crime fiction, Tatum.*

I pull the beer bottle to my lips, recalling our pre-Tagaloa vs. Sanchez confrontation.

“I’m the victim here, not you,” Harrison had said.

“What do I do about my *delusional victim*,” I murmur about Harrison, tipping the brew back just as my name is called. My gaze flickers up to Hodges, who’s more accurately the urban Terminator. He’s traded in the uniform of the boys in blue for SWAT gear. Hodges proudly wears a shirt emblazoned with his career across his massive chest. Jeans cleave to his thighs as he settles across from me.

If I weren’t a fool in love from day one ...

Hodges gestures to my arm. “No sling?”

“I’m good.” I took that sucker off the night before River’s match. I couldn’t look fragile before the eyes of my greatest adversary.

Hodge’s granite-carved forearms drop onto the table as all his focus lands on me. “When you get off disability, you gonna give us a shot?”

“Us? Ahhh, you’ve assimilated perfectly.”

“Best mentor on the force, Li. Look, when you came to the LAPD, you didn’t have support.”

“Who you telling?” I wriggle my brows. “This lunch is on you, right?”

He glances at the beers already cluttered on the table and uncaps one.

I chew my lip. “You were late. Had to pass the time.”

He shifts in his seat as a mixture of a chuckle and a murmur about traffic falls from his lips. “Tatum, we got a couple of contenders for when Dotson retires—”

“Dotson’s *finally* leaving?” I gawk.

Hodges nods.

I grab a peanut and go for his eye. Hodges slaps away the rogue nut at the last minute. “Two weeks, the job’s *just* about yours, Li.”

I smile like every day is my motherfucking birthday. “Mine? All mine?”

“Just about.”

I fold one arm over the other. “What’s the catch, *Jason Hodges?*”

His mouth tips to the side. “We, uh, vote our guys in.”

“Rushing?”

“C’mon, that’s taboo to say. We each have a contender. In your case, Nessa and I are rooting for you.”

I run a hand over the back of my neck, mentally assessing my already full plate and how my dreams hardly factor in since the liquor store robbery. Not to mention—Harrison’s unstable.

Poto’s another fire requiring extinguishing.

Heilani’s either friend or foe. For starters, I need her friggen last name.

And Park—that kid deserves to enter adulthood in style.

Sensing my hesitation, Hodges makes an assumption. “You going domestic?”

“No. I’m not giving up. Just ...” I fork a finger through my curly mane.

“I see. The bullshit online.” Hodges places his hands over mine. While I grew up getting noogies from Camdyn and River, this is different. Feels intimate. When our eyes connect, I slide my hands from beneath his, tucking them underneath the table. Then I roll my shoulder. “Two weeks, I battle like a Spartan?” I cork a grin.

“Among other things.”

“Heh, *non-rushy* things?”

“Yup.”

The waitress returns, sliding our plates in front of us. She smiles at me, but her smile widens and lingers on Hodges. *Girl, I get it.* She basically trips over herself as she walks

away. I snicker, hefting my steak sandwich, and nod. “Consider this a preemptive celebration lunch then.”

He chuckles softly. “Just don’t order seconds.”

* * *

The evening wind whispers over my skin while I stroll past imports toward my therapist’s building. I meander around the cascading stone fountain when my cellphone vibrates. I instantly answer River’s call. Hesitant, I say, “Hey?”

“Babe, where are you?”

“You disabled Find My iPhone?” Though chuckling, I wonder if I’d be relieved or appalled if River discovered my weekly sessions. I dash my palm through the cool water of the fountain.

“I’m playing this trust game with you until you prove otherwise.”

Ahead, the glass doors whisk apart, and I’m opposite the *or otherwise* portion of his statement. I wince.

“Stubby ...”

“I don’t have a comeback. I’ve already been threatened that you’ll hop on a plane, a tiny boat, ski across the Alps to find me.” I let a bittersweet smile furrow the edges of my lips.

“I’m glad you remembered. So, I’m taking you to dinner tonight. Any place you’d like. Just one catch.”

“Hmmm.” I run a hand through my hair, freshly flat ironed. “I’m good with caveats *if* we do dinner in San Fran. Oooh, at the place we went to after your UFC training thingy a couple of months ago.”

His deep voice melts into the receiver. “No can do. That overrides the catch.”

“Forget the catch.” I lean against the smooth stone, listening to the tranquil torrent. “You said anywhere.”

“Anywhere in the greater Los Angeles area. Just gimme a spot, I’ll call. They have to have reservations for four.”

“By four, you mean Cam and Willow.” *Damn, I found out that they were engaged on social media. And Camdyn’s texts. My girl hates me.*

River replies, “Not them. My, uh, Poto and Heilani.”

I stiffen, shifting off the water fountain. “Dinner with the in-laws tonight?”

“If it’s too short notice ...”

I avert my eyes from a redhead strolling into the building as I turn to leave and ask, “What’s your mother’s last name, River?”

He murmurs, “I don’t fucking know, baby. Tagaloa. Maybe if Poto was drunk enough when they met.”

“Okay. Dinner tonight. The Italian spot, the old one that smells like dust and real pasta.” I chuckle, mashing the car alarm button and strolling away from therapy. The engine comes alive as I exhale the tension of my first missed session.

“Okay, no therapy today,” I tell myself a few minutes later after I’ve gotten off the line with River and begun navigating the streets. In ten minutes, I’ve called dispatch from my cellphone, provided my badge information, and received Poto’s address.

As I’m en route to his crappy neighborhood, the radio, which was on mute, prompts a call. I’d canceled my therapy

session through Dr. Beck's office just before dialing dispatch. Now, Dr. Beck's calling *me*.

I hesitate. "Hey ..."

"Good evening, Tatum." My shrink's calming tone surrounds me from the vehicle's speakers. "You have my number?"

"Well, yes."

"Ah, I wasn't certain."

Hands wrenched around the steering wheel, I say, "I called reception. Did they not ..."

"As a matter of fact, I was advised. What's so important that you're unable to attend?"

My jaw sets. "If you must know, I'm having dinner. With River's people."

Dr. Beck's genuine interest irks me for some reason as he asks, "You're preparing dinner for his father?"

"No. River's making arrangements for a restaurant." *Damn, now it sounds like I'm not pressed for time.* Clearing my throat to gather my thoughts, I say, "Last week, I shared how Poto introduced us to a fraud. I'm inclined to investigate that fact further before dinner."

He lets out a sharp breath. "Tatum, River's an adult."

"I understand," I bite out. "But we're a team."

"I'm glad you say that. Let's transition our sessions and prepare to invite River, in say, a month's time?"

"Invite?" Tires scream as a stop sign materializes out of thin air.

“Since you’re very health conscious,” Dr. Beck utters, “let’s try this scenario, shall we? A person’s on a diet. They’ve lost, say, an applaudable one hundred pounds with only twenty more to go. Then they begin to complain that the scale hasn’t budged for weeks.”

I push down the visor to block the setting sun. “Sure. I’ve heard that a time or two.”

“Stick with me, Tatum. You’re not one for the cliché *tell me how you feel.*”

Yup, those were my lines. “I’m with you, Dr. Beck.”

“We’re at a plateau. You’ve attended therapy consistently in the past, although resistant many of the times.”

I’m not resistant; I’m all for self-advocacy.

“You have engaged for the most part.”

I snort, quite miffed. “For the most part?”

“I would hate to see River become your crutch when I’m positive that he would rather play a role as a pillar for your support here in my office. Next week, I don’t want you to choose another variable then slowly decide that you can manage Harrison.”

“I *can*,” I retort with a hushed, lethal bite. “I can handle him. I can call the office tomorrow to see if you have cancellations. If not, you have my word. You’ll see me next Thursday per usual.”

Pressing the off button, I wriggle my clutched jaw and pull along the curb at an apartment complex that rivals the one where we assisted SWAT during a shootout when Hodges was still on the beat. Luckily, Poto’s home is across the street. A crumpled duplex.

“Well, this is like a stakeout.” A few minutes later, I become restless and text Willow.

We good?

Pressure builds behind my eyes as I watch the three text dots tinker, then no bubble. Two beats later, FaceTime lights up. I click the button to accept her.

Willow appears, mascara lighting her already honey eyes. “I’m tryna be angry with you here, but that face. It’s not your typical RBF.”

I bubble up in tears, laughter, and grief. “You hate me.”

“You’re supposed to be powwowing with my mentor as we speak. You’re in your car.”

I nod pitifully. “Yup. You mad, though?”

“About the Scottish statement. *Very.*”

I bite my tongue from speaking. Had I defended him in a roundabout way? “I wasn’t trying to invalidate your feelings, Willow. I promise you. I’m gonna get him.”

“Before we leave for Vegas?”

“You better not!” I let the goodness of this moment overtake me, swiping the unfallen tears.

“So, where are you, Stubby? If not therapy?”

My chest expands in an inhale that I desperately didn’t know I needed. “I feel like Drake circa 2011, ‘Doing It Wrong.’ ”

“Damn, you’re dating yourself.”

“Heifa, you’re older than me. Drake’s *Take Care* album was my shit when I stared at Riv like a creeper.”

Willow's head tilts. "So, you're admitting you were a creeper."

Yup. I glance across the street as a woman wearing spandex exits with a laundry basket. "Nope, Willow."

"Whatever. Now, where are you?"

"In front of ..."

The door opens again. This time *Heilani* exits.

"Hello?" Willow shifts on the FaceTime screen.

"Poto's place." I lower in the seat as the two women look in this direction before they slink toward a hatchback and place their laundry baskets inside.

So, the bitch needs to hit the laundromat before din-din.

Willow asks, "What are you doing, girl?"

"I'm taking up photography. Toodles."

RIVER

I've tucked a black button-down into a pair of tailored slacks when Tatum arrives home. I stop at the banister as gorgeous eyes widen, peering up past the chandelier with a brow lifted.

Baffled, Tatum mutters, "You're in a friggen tie? How did you?"

"YouTube. I learned to do this shit myself. Thank you for being late."

"Babe, we need to talk." Tatum's voice grows heavy as it reaches me.

"Yes, we do. Get up here. Get dressed."

"We should call off dinner."

Tatum will be hotter than Red Rooster tonight, and I can't wait to slam into her angry pussy. Authority backing my tone, I command, "Speaking of tonight, Tatum, I'm taking the lead. What I say goes."

Slinking up the stairs, Tatum folds her arms over. "What you say?"

“Goes.” My index finger dribbles her bottom lip. Then I clutch her ass so tight she pushes at my chest. The other hand fits snugly about her neck as her legs wrap around me, attempting to show a similar dominating edge. I walk us toward the bedroom.

“You can’t fight me,” I warn.

“I can try.”

“*Try me* tonight, Tatum! I will break you.” The hand on her curves swats down so hard her breath catches. Tatum lifts her hands to defend herself, but I press her into the mattress, me on top. One hand tugs her waistband open, slides into her jeans and panties, and attacks her clit while the other torments her neck, keeping her from striking me.

“Do you understand?” I command.

Tatum’s erratic breath caresses my jaw. “No.”

“Oh?” I lift a brow. I twist the tiny pearl in my fingertips.

Breathless, Tatum lets out a few panted gasps.

I hook a finger into her cunt, getting her off in a few quick thrusts, and her wet walls shatter around me.

I deny my own carnal craving and ground out, “What I say goes?”

A begrudging nod is followed by me taunting her clit again.

“I’m saying yes,” she replies like a tortured animal.

I remove my hand from her pants, letting my glossed fingers run over her lips. My tongue catches the sweet nectar. Before Tatum returns my affections, her mouth bruises against mine in a hard kiss.

“Good girl. When we leave dinner, I’ll explain everything.” *For now, I need your hotheaded ass to respond as usual. My girl doesn’t listen, and I don’t hurt her near enough.*

“Now get dressed, Tatum.”

* * *

Sometimes I wonder if maybe this sonofabitch didn’t kidnap me from a park. Which I slowly had learned was precisely what occurred to my best friend, Camdyn’s, little brother.

Jamie was taken.

But I suppose that would’ve been more probable if I were white.

I watch as the tea lights on the white and red checkered tables paint over Poto’s face and look this bitch over, verifying I came from his raggedy-ass nutsac.

Though a terrifying mental image, he’s got a good jaw. Same as me.

My height too.

And if I were on the outside looking in, I’d say the bastard has my eyes, but I’m not admitting it.

I smile at Heilani as she orders antipasti as a main entrée.

Lying bitch won’t use me yet. I haven’t pegged if my father’s backhand coerced her or if she’s playing the nice guy while waiting for me to do something stupid—like what I intend to during dinner.

“C’mon, Ma, you can’t just have a salad,” I reply.

“Oh, yes, she can,” Tatum bites out. “Poto ordered lobster.”

Here we go again.

Déjà vu.

Except lobster has replaced Poto's pancake order.

"What's it to you, *Shrubby*," he counters. "You're on disability and giving away your time. Time is money too. Riv, this girl living off of ya?"

I laugh him off and tell the waitress to bring an extra lasagna for Heilani, wondering if she's playing the coy card. With the order finished, the waitress is elated to excuse herself.

"Shrubby living off you?" Poto asks again.

I shrug a shoulder. "You were living off me for a little while—two years ago—and also when I was young."

"Ain't that the truth," Tatum mumbles into her wine.

Tugging an index finger into the collar of his faded polo, he mutters, "I'm sorry about disappearing."

"I'm good, Dad." I stop myself from grimacing. I've rarely called Poto any variation of *father*. *Don't be too kind, Riv, or this asshole might get leery*. I connect gazes with the man who's worse than dead to me. "Tonight isn't about our estranged relationship. Though I hope this dinner marks the beginning of many."

"Look at it this way," Tatum adds. "River will take *surf and turf* when it's on your tab."

I jab my best friend.

Poto reaches across the table to take the house wine. "I can afford to take my son out. Won't be a place that has *market price* on the menu. But I'm game for Sizzler."

“That’s fine with me,” I reply. “Anyway, while you and I work on our relationship, I want to buy my mom a house.”

I’m staring straight at the woman as I say this.

“I’m speechless. Thank you.” The liar utters the first words she’s had tonight, aside from a greeting and a food order.

“River ...” Tatum grounds out. “We should’ve had a chat earlier.” My vicious glare shuts Tatum up.

“Stick a pin in it, Tatum,” Poto suggests.

“Now you know my name, *Poto*?” Tatum stands, her chair scraping against the tiled floor.

I remove myself from my chair as the eyes of confused patrons land on us. My chest is to Tatum’s shoulder as I reach down to press my mouth near her earlobe. “Sit the fuck down, Tatum.” *You’ve done well.*

* * *

“I am livid, River!” Tatum growls as I navigate the streets leading home. The headlights flood the sleepy road, which winds into the hills. Tatum scoffs. “A house, a fucking house.”

“I told you to let me take the lead! You couldn’t do it.”

“I tried!”

I let out a menacing chuckle.

“What’s so funny, River? You blindsided all of us! All. Of. Us.”

I yank the wheel, pulling over to a gravelly area overlooking a lit-up downtown Los Angeles. We’re both passionate people, so Tatum’s out the second I am. I come

around to her. In the dim moonlight, my eyes adjust to her narrowed ones.

“That bitch is thirty-three. Riv, you’re twenty-five! Her name’s Constance Nash.”

I bring Tatum to the hood of the car and push her until her meaty ass causes her hips to curve at the edges. My tongue demands entrance into her mouth, tangling with hers until the sensation of dying for oxygen overpowers us. Pulling apart just a little, I let out a husky chuckle near her ear. “I can’t wait to have you, Little Bit.”

“Oh, I’m Little Bit when you want sex?”

“Want? You must not have understood. There’s no want here; I *will* have you,” I growl, breathing in the scent of Tatum’s perfume. After unzipping my pants to free my dick, I shove the thin strip of her thong to the side.

I dive deep in a stroke so hard that Tatum’s ass dints the car’s hood. “I’m not a man who appreciates waiting.”

Fingernails chew tiny crescents into my shoulders. Disgruntled that she’s not drawing blood, Tatum moves her palms to my neck, fingertips digging into the flesh as I plow through her creamy, wet cunt.

“I hate this!” Tatum groans.

I growl, TKOing the depth of Tatum’s pussy, over and over. “You. Hate. *What?*”

Slender fingers tug into her hair. Addicted to my touch, Tatum stutters, “N-no. Not this, this is ... Ohhh, shit! Right there, motherfucker! Yes, baby! I love this! I hate when you fuck me and—”

Though ready to bathe her entire channel with my cum, I pull out. The night air cools my hot, raging shaft.

“River, no. I meant when we screw, and I’ve got something to tell you.” Wild fingers clasp my shirt, attempting to pull me down. With a whimper, rounded hips thrust upward. “Don’t stop. Please.”

“Too late.” In a split second, I’ve lifted Tatum from the front of the car, spun her around, and brought her hands down.

“You ain’t a cop tonight, Tatum. You’re my little fuck toy.”

She hikes her tight skirt up. I spit on my dick to fuck viciously into her ass.

Grounding deep into Tatum’s puckered core, I nip her shoulder blade. “You were so scared—”

“Never!”

“When I first got you to do anal.”

I pull out and spit on my dick again. Just a little more loving is all my dick needs, and then I’m coasting into her anal passage again in shallow, quick thrusts.

Tatum removes one hand from the car to work her clit.

“You’re not afraid anymore?” I taunt, teeth clutching her earlobe.

“I don’t fear shit, most of all you, River.” She groans. “Yesss, right there, baby. Keep that momentum, or I’ll give you something to—”

My fingers brutally control the back of her neck as lights skid across the road, and an SUV zooms by.

“Don’t be afraid, baby.” I bring her up. “Just keep your concentration on me fucking this still virgin-like ass.” My

hand swats her.

Tatum rides out an orgasm as another driver slows, watching us in the shadows as they coast by.

“That’s right,” I soothe, “don’t tense. Don’t crush my dick with your tight ass.”

“I’m gonna cummm, River!”

And I follow.

I would follow Tatum Li anywhere.

But as Tatum rests against the car’s hood, I lean into her quivering figure. We remain connected to each other for a while. Tatum purrs with pleasure.

The headlights of another car spill over the windy street, and I adjust my dick, zip up, and lean against the car.

Tatum’s tongue darts over her lips. “You’re psycho.”

“Haven’t shared my plan yet, Stubby.”

“What plan?” Her rasp causes my cock to twitch for more.

“The one where I murder Poto. I can’t kill that bitch, Heilani, or whatever the fuck you’d like to call her. I’m not that man, and my greatest weakness is right here.” I clutch her cunt between us. “Would make me a hypocrite to murder a woman.”

A gorgeous pair of brown eyes roll away from me.

“So, you can do her in for me, Little Bit.”

That dreamy gaze lands on mine. “Kill Constance, you mean?”

I nod. “I’m purchasing a house.”

“Riv—”

“Shhh, haven’t I always told you to trust me?” I grip my woman’s face, planting my lips on her forehead. “Won’t be a grand thing. But you inspire me. Every day, Stubby.”

A mumbled, “Thank you,” sighs in my direction.

“A house with a couple of bedrooms. A shelter for victims of domestic violence.”

Her face melts into shock, compassion, then reels back. “I don’t know whether to praise you, Riv, or contemplate the irony.”

We walk around the car, and I hold the door open for her. Tatum slides into the passenger seat. I round the sports car and get in.

“I remember being a kid. Poto raped women in front of me. *His girls*.” I toggle the stick shift, drifting back into drive. “Because he was in a relationship with them, they had no right to be tired or say no.”

“That’s ... wow. I’m speechless.” Compassion threads Tatum’s tone.

“A lot of instances, they were young women, impressionable. Every once in a while,” I grip the wheel, clearing my throat, “every once in a while, one of the girl’s mothers would call, begging them to come home.”

“Jesus,” Tatum exasperates.

“Some of them took a little longer than the others to return home. Constance has time. That woman comes to her senses before I take her to the house I intend to purchase ...”

Tatum groans. “You’ll show her mercy?”

“Yup. She’s got time to come clean. If not, you can end her, or if you aren’t feeling it, maybe I’ll push her down the

stairs. But I'd rather not." I chuckle.

"I ... can do it. I'm protective of you anyway, River." She finally laughs along.

"Clearly, you need to calm down, baby. I had this covered the entire time."

"Then why?" Tatum turns in her seat as I glide into the garage. "Why did you leave me in the dark tonight?"

"Because you don't listen. Your natural response at dinner was as I expected. While your antics worked in our favor tonight—"

"My *antics*?"

"You *must always* trust me, Tatum!" My voice booms. I hadn't realized how seriously I took Tatum's behavior. The hesitant feeling I had after her viral TikTok causes me to take a ragged breath. Sometimes, it feels as if Tatum is keeping something from me. That can't be the case, though. We're always honest with each other. *Right?*

"Trust me," I tell her again, palms brushing over her shoulders.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. As I said, things are going as I've planned. Poto thinks I'm buying *him* a new house. Shit, as domineering as he is, and if I were dumb as he thought I was, he'd snatch the place right from under Heil." I pause.

Sort of was hoping I really had a mother.

I clear my throat. "Anyway, revenge is on my mind. And by the way, the second we step inside, you're still in trouble."

“But you said my reaction was what you desired,” Tatum sputters.

I kick a shoulder. “You have a head start.”

She jolts out of the passenger seat as I leisurely roll the window down and shout, “In five, four, three ...” *I’m gonna get you.*

thirteen

RIVER

“I will fight you, and I will win.” Tatum’s groggy voice breaks through a solemn trance of me staring at her like a creeper. Closing her eyes, she tucks the feather duvet into the outline of her body.

“Wake up, baby. I want you.” I came until my balls felt like twisting off last night. Thinking about it has sent my arousal tightening my cock. I run my hand over my addiction.

Beneath the covers, I hear a subdued curse. “Fuck you. And call yourself daddy again.”

I laugh, abdominals vibrating. “Damn, girl, you probably could take me down while asleep.”

I pick up my phone, getting out of the bed to slide the sheer curtains aside.

The invincible woman I awaken with every morning whimpers.

Sunlight is her kryptonite.

“River, you hate me.”

“Furthest thing from the truth.” I jump onto the bed, my legs tight around her blanket-sheltered body.

After groaning, Tatum says, “I hate you then.”

“Can’t, Tatum. You’re my best friend.”

“Actually ...”

“Actually?” I growl, going hulk smash on the sheets until she’s in my arms, laughing groggily.

Still sightless with her face in my chest, Tatum muffles out, “I knew Cam first.”

“He replaced you, then.” I grin.

“Whatever, I replaced both y’all’s asses.”

“You traded me in for Lolo?” I’m framing her peaceful face in my hands. With her eyes closed, Tatum allows the faintest smile to glow. My lips touch her forehead. “Doesn’t matter. I will be your fiancé soon enough.”

“Doesn’t matter.” She tosses back my line, finally opening her eyes. “I’m wearing the ring already, so you are my fiancé.”

I tap her cute nose. “Not until I ask.”

“What do you want, River?”

I shake my head. “I’ll take pussy in bed and a side of non-microwaved bacon.”

“I can do ... let me think. None of those things.”

“You can’t?” I lie back, pulling her with me.

“Bacon fights back, Riv, just like me.”

I laugh. “God, I’m blessed. A gorgeous woman I adore. If you could cook, this would be heaven on earth.”

“I *can* cook. Just not bacon. River, you’re a morning person, but I’ll be damned if you’re not being a little too much this morning, babe.”

“Counting my blessings.”

“Count them tomorrow, River.”

“No. *Now*. Poto’s dying soon. Also, my woman has SWAT training in five days. You need to prepare.”

“As I said during the drive to the restaurant last night, it’s not guaranteed.”

“Your determination will see you through, Little Bit. We have five days to work out.” I let a shoulder heft. “And last, Sefina’s under fire since he appeared on the MMA show, talking all that shit while I sat with Alex.”

Finally, my girl grins with me. “What are people saying?”

“The bitch is scared,” I snarl, running my hands together.

“Good. River, you’re all for showing respect to the UFC world and your competitors, but Sefina’s out of his mind. If I were a man—”

“You are not, Stubby.”

“I would fight anyone who had something to say. I would’ve put you down a long time ago. Gave you two minutes of fame.”

“He *fears me*.”

She climbs into my lap, luscious thighs gliding around my waist. “That’s right, River. He’s a bitch!”

“See.” I clasp Tatum’s face. “We’re living our dreams. You got us here, Little Bit. This is all because of you.”

The light catches her eyes as she groans, “River, your talent ...”

My chest swells with pride, and I reassure her. “No, Stubby. Your tenacity got us here. Never forget that; I won’t.”

fourteen

TATUM

Five days later ...

My Lexus staggers to a stop over unpaved gravel near a few other cars, which have also created their own slots. I look through the windshield at the abandoned skeleton of a building. A sign on the sunken roof with a couple of misplaced letters creates The Cozy Inn.

Looks like this place got raided before closing. I snort, gander roaming over the multilevel with missing doors, bashed in windows, and concaved roof.

“What in the world are we doing for the SWAT competition?” I undertone, running my sweaty palms over a pair of compression pants. I’m also wearing a skin-tight long sleeve top and hiking boots. I replaced my usual purse—the only part of me that makes me feel like a chick regardless of what I wear—with a backpack equipped with a water reservoir. I reach for the long straw and take a hydrating sip.

“Okay, Stubby, Riv trained you for today,” I mutter. The last few days, we replaced our lazy at-home time for training. Usually, our house is reserved for *us* time since River’s always

preparing for a match. Even now, with UFC cutting down his fights, we're slowly gearing up for his next battle in Colorado, which is forever from now. But for the past couple of days, my man's self-implemented circuit training, all the challenges he's imposed, prepared me for today.

With River in mind, I'm seconds away from getting out when I get antsy.

My dream is now!

Riv prepared me.

Conflicting thoughts zip through my mind. I pull out my cellphone and try Spence.

Yup. Spencer Herrington. For the umpteenth time.

It rings as it had a few days ago.

I growl, assuming he pressed ignore.

"Best not to leave his funky ass a voice mail anyway," I mutter. *Might tell him how I really feel.*

I dial again.

This time I wonder if the Richie Rich bitch blocked me.

"Eh, wishful thinking that I'd get rid of Harrison and score myself a ticket to the team in one single day."

I will be SWAT, though. Today's *that* day.

I climb out of the shiny car River surprised me with a while back and stroll to a beat-up pickup truck. Hodges closes the door, a white A-shirt melting over his thick, dark brown muscles. His appreciation of my physique is on the same level. Whereas I smile and allow my eyes to find his, Hodges's gander takes a few additional seconds.

He places on a platonic smile. "You ready to join us?"

“Yup.”

Nessa Vallarta, my first and only lady crush, closes the passenger door to Hodge’s truck and strolls around the bed. The SWAT chick, with rainbow nails, is ripped all over and has a jaw that looks like it can cut through leather as she winks at me. “You got this, Li.”

There’s a whistle, followed by a lust-induced snort. “Jason, Nessa, y’all brought the eye candy—”

“Mathias,” Vallarta growls.

Of course, I’m the one the guys have to check out.

I turn around, looping my backpack as an olive-toned guy with enough muscles to be in River’s weight class offers an approving grin. Mathias extends a hand.

While Hodges completes introductions, my smaller hand squeezes Mathias’s. I ground out, “When I beat whatever dude you put your faith in, don’t think it wasn’t anything other than fair.”

Mathias sniffs appreciatively, and he heads toward the building.

Vallarta takes my shoulders. “Trust me, Li, you handled Mathias just right. You didn’t take the bait.”

“What bait?” I cock my head.

Hodges laughs. “You didn’t flirt back.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, we’ve cautiously entered the building. Sun illuminates a path in certain areas. Where it’s pitch black, I’m

thankful. Mathias upkicks onto the stage in an old conference hall.

“Here are the rules,” he begins as I glimpse the *dreamers*, like me, to the *confident* SWAT members who went to bat for them.

Mathias says, “When I whistle, you’ll grab a note from your sponsor. Sidenote, we aren’t on LAPD grounds. You fall from one floor to another or catch a deadly disease,” he hefts a shoulder, “that shit’s on you. Your presence indicates your consent to be here. Any pussies should leave. Now, while you’re running around this disease-infested motel, the only weapons allowed are these.” He holds his hands up. “We got a couple of guys from the Omega team here to help us keep y’all in order.”

Shit, sounds like Mathias’s SWAT friends will crank up the challenging aspect of his weird game.

“Once you find your room, pick up your gift,” he advises. “This gift will send you into the city. We got a five-mile radius to cover. Once you’re at your designated location, there’ll be a burner phone with your name. First to call wins. Everyone else dies.”

Nobody laughs, except the guy who articulated the lame joke.

Mathias lets out a shrieked whistle. I run toward Hodges and Vallarta and snatch the piece of paper, muttering a thank you. I veer into the lobby of the inn. Without electricity, one guy fumbles with his phone and cusses as it drops between two wooden slabs. I seek out the natural lighting from a busted window and read my note.

Second floor, room 204.

Adrenaline reverberates through me as I sail up the stairs. A man in black tactical gear swings an arching hook that slides just over the crown of my head. I grip his shoulders, sending my knee into his privates.

With agile pacing, I coast down the long corridor. Another strike comes wildly from another trained Omega SWAT member, who had flattened himself against a closed hotel door. The hit clips my jaw. He pulls me into a bear hug, and I struggle to maneuver from his touch. Arms pinned awkwardly behind me, I heft my hiking boot up, bringing it down.

What sort of old, school video game craziness is this!

Peering through the dark of the hallway, I focus on the man's hand clamped down on my shoulder. My teeth sink into his flesh, and I thrust forward. I might be mentally shit-talking how *nerdishly* serious SWAT takes their recruitment festivities, but my strength's draining from battling the boys.

Finally, I arrive at my designated location.

Heart pounding in my throat, I kick in the door.

The flooring nearest to the door has weathered away. The room's on the larger side—possibly was a suite. Across from me is a mattress. Dead center is a tiny black box. I level out my arms, a single booted toe measuring out a plank. With the sunlight unable to reach the entire room, I thank God for the lack of sight below.

“Hey!” Someone slams a hand against the inside of the wall, jarring me out of my thoughts. I lose my bearings and grip a plank. The wood shifts over the caved area. As my feet skid on the uneven plank, I spread my weight out, regaining my equilibrium, and shift onto the fortified flooring near the

mattress. I step onto it, grip the cheap velvet box, and slide it into my backpack.

To the broken flooring, I mutter, "Easy does it."

Like tiptoeing on a tightrope, it takes me three times as long to cross over. Once into the hallway, I charge down the steps. My boot lands on a step and crushes into the wood, ankle scraping as it descends.

"Shit," I growl, clutching the railing. A guy chuckles, vaults past me, and down the steps.

Oh no, he didn't!

Extracting my foot from the wooden step, I let adrenaline surge where pain will undoubtedly follow.

Later though.

Outside, my pupils scream, adjusting to the natural sunlight as I sprint over the unpaved parking lot. Giggle guy's muscular frame has slowed him down. When I reach him, I let my foot stretch out, boot toppling him over.

Petty. I know.

I've run half a block, laughing on the inside when I realize I should open the cheap jewelry box.

Inside is a key to a locker at Union Station.

Thank you, Jesus. I don't deserve this small blessing after letting my pride get the best of me, but I'm headed in the right direction.

I pace myself. Five miles. I can do this. River and I *do* this.

One mile in, I decide to cut through an alleyway.

"Tatum!" A loud voice calls my name once I'm dead center of the alley.

I turn around. Two dudes block the entrance, dressed in black. I don't recall them from Hodges's team or as one of the Omegas, but they must be SWAT. One hoists a sawed-off shotgun.

Didn't Mathias say no weapons? Maybe he meant just for us.

Last time I was in an alley, I had on Kevlar and an unexpected partner. I square my shoulders. I've got a dream to seize. *Not today, Satan.*

RIVER

I once lived in my own horror story—pre-Tatum, Jhang, Renee, and all the people I hold in my fucking heart and would die for. Poto's women walked on eggshells after the honeymoon period ended. One lady, in particular, was a godsend.

She held down the house. Cooked. Cleaned. Worked a nine-to-five and still had time to assist me with homework. All the while, Poto was riding a disability scheme where he spent his meager check and *hers*. Poto never understood her worth, and once she removed the blinders, we were evicted and had to live with his friends.

I can remember starting to think the way he does. How could I not? He was my only constant, and his friends thought just like him. *How can I rob people? How can I con them?*

This morning, I cooked Tatum the breakfast of champions, and *I* washed the dishes. That lady who made a house a home for us had the same role, but with the black eye Poto gave. I know Poto, honest to God, sees me as easy prey while he planned his screw-River-over 2.0 plan involving that bitch

Constance. Seeing shit like that and realizing my path wouldn't have diverged so drastically has kept me humble.

So, when Jhang's first words to me are, "You're late," I place a Starbucks in his hand.

Tatum's father puts the coffee down on the gym's half wall and places a hand on his hip. "Remember when I told you, you don't have shit to prove to nobody?"

Fuck me. Today is all about memory lane. "Never thought I did."

"Well, I was wrong. You do now, Son."

Son?

Renee got comfortable calling me that against her husband's discouragement.

"This smear campaign," he pushes a few fingers into his hair, annoyed, "where the hell did it come from?"

"Does it matter? Tatum's taking everyone who had something to say to the cleaners."

Laughing, he sips the coffee. "The only good thing to come out of it is a paycheck with my daughter's name on it. But as for you, the organization is sticking to the contract. No more extra fights."

"Now I look like scum, no additional fight night." I snort. *I am the motherfucker they always saw.*

The dude with tats all over his body. I should visit Camdyn's tattoo business and have him ink the bottom of my feet. Do not leave an inch untarnished.

It's crazy how the mind works. Harrison gave me an image. This bad motherfucking image in the cage. Then he

spoon-fed them the dude I never thought I would be growing up.

Someone tangible.

Someone you could trust.

My mouth twists like a jackknife. “If I figure out whoever started these schemes, they’re dead.”

Jhang points a finger at me. “The twenty-year-old me is right there with you on that, River. But I’m the father of the woman you’re cohabitating with.” He pauses, turns away, and starts for the office instead of the octagon.

“I’m gonna propose to her formally at the match in Colorado. With Park’s birthday the same weekend, Tatum will never see it coming.” I bite my eyes shut, sulking. *Do the good guys still ask for the father’s permission?*

Jhang snorts. “That’s *months* out.”

I heft a shoulder. “Park’s turning eighteen, so it’ll work like magic. Tatum’s our designated party planner. She’ll be too busy harassing us into assignments. I see by the look on your face that you don’t like my idea?”

“I hate it.”

“With all due respect, Jhang, too bad. A UFC engagement was always my plan. So, talk to the organization about speeding up the timeframe. If they squeeze me in for some surprise Tuesday night tussle, I’ll pull out all the stops then.”

“Humph! From Tatum’s lips to my ears, you’re already *engaged*.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, head falling back. “She found the ring.” *If I tell Jhang his hotheaded daughter proposed to me ... Nah, I’m not that stupid.*

Opening the door to his glass-walled office, Jhang groans. “Enough talk about you and Tatum.”

I almost roll my eyes. When we were kids, there was never enough talk about *us*.

“*Just respect my child. Don’t talk to her,*” Jhang had begged. One time he elaborated that it didn’t matter my background. Any nutsac would’ve gotten the same threat.

Jhang claims his seat, saying, “Listen, if you find out who dismantled all the good Harrison has done, let me know. We will handle it.”

No, thank you, bro. “Sure.” I change the subject. “How’s Blaine?”

“Aside from horsing around in the cage with Park on occasion, he can mop the floors as good as the next.”

“Blaine arrive on time?”

“Yup, he calls me mister and doesn’t leave a moment before five.” Jhang waves an annoyed hand.

I gesture. “How is he in the cage?”

“Not you. But he ...” Jhang pauses, slips his ringing cellphone from his basketball shorts, placing the call on speaker. “Harrison, my man. River and I were just discussing you.”

“Good. I intended to call you a little earlier, Jhang. I just got off the phone with the authorities. Saw a young woman being ambushed in an alley. Two unsavory fellows were after her.”

“He watched?” I mutter-whisper, scrubbing a hand over my face. Prime reason why I’ll never respect Harrison as a man.

“I hope she’s alright.” Jhang sits forward. “Maybe you should come into the cage with me. Then you won’t have to pay those bozos.”

“Ehhh, they make me look good.” Harrison’s chortles aggravate my ears.

Jhang laughs with him, then rolls his eyes. He presses the mute button briefly. “Make him look *important*. Probably for the best.” He taps mute again. “So, what did you want to discuss, Harrison?”

“I’m a little concerned that the organization may nip River’s fights to the bare minimum. Follow the contract and not take into the equation that attendance increases as well as concession and merchandising when our guy is headlining fight night.”

“What can we do?” I find myself gnashing my teeth together.

“In a nutshell, nothing. You’re guaranteed your fights. But I think we can persuade the masses. Get some money in your pockets for—”

“It ain’t about the money.”

“River, I know. You love the cage.”

Jhang segues into the conversation. “That’s where Riv and I agree. Nothing compares to the octagon.”

“I’ve jumped through enough hoops. I joined a nonprofit, though I wouldn’t take it back if I had to.” I slam a hand against my chest. “I just ... never considered it. I want to fight Sefina, Harrison. Fuck the organization. You and I have our own contract. You get me a belt. Are you gonna get me the belt, or am I wasting my time?”

The man in question sniggers. “You sound like me, River.”

“Here’s where we diverge. I don’t need A, B, C to execute my goals.” I settle back, chest expanding with each anxious exhale.

Harrison sniffs deeply. “I’m having a good day, despite the issues that require navigating.”

“A. Good. Day?” With a sharp bite in my tone, I say, “Have I not made myself clear? Get me Sefina, or we are done!”

Harrison offers a confused chuckle. “Hold it there, River. Maybe we should’ve had this conversation in person, at my house. I had sea bass flown in for din—”

“You a fucking idiot?” I grit out, but Harrison doesn’t respond because Jhang has mashed the mute button again.

“Start your drills, River. I’ll handle Harrison.” Jhang gestures toward the door. “One way or another, you’ll fight Sefina, and we will get them to treat you the way they had when you arrived.”

Good. Fight night was my proposal plan. The way things are shaping up, I’m liable to wait half a year to battle some *nothing* fighter. I shoot Stubby a quick text.

You better be having a better day than me, Little Bit.

TATUM

Adrenaline drained from my body while Ubering from Union Station. Now, as I trudge through the parking area of the rundown inn, the last shock of epinephrine fizzles out. Foreboding snakes through me at the sight of the vehicles fanning out. *I came in last.*

Vallarta slips her cellphone into her army fatigues, and she, along with Hodges, offers a comforting smile.

“Who got here first?” I ask, heat building beneath my eyes. “Tell me it wasn’t the dude I tripped.”

She pats my shoulder. “Nah, Li. The guy in the green joggers.”

Eyebrows tugging together, Hodges mumbles, “Although, he left after you.”

Maybe Mr. Green cheated? Whatever, Stubby, sore loser ain’t my style. I tap the burner phone in my hand that we were to use to call in on and reluctantly hand it over.

“Well, I appreciate y’all for the opportunity. Oh ... and my cellphone. May I have my cell back now?”

They exchange glances, and Hodges asks, “What phone?”

Irritation rising, I shuffle in a cleansing breath. “My iPhone.” To gloss over the ally scenario, I quickly explain the situation.

Vallarta sniffs. “So, in this alley, two strangers approached you by name?”

“Yup.”

“Asked for your phone?” Hodges inquires.

And I gave it to them, woah ... “I-I fought them first, somewhat.” Head ducked low, I brandish a hand over the nape of my neck, kneading profusely.

Vallarta probes, “But you returned the illegal shotgun to one of your assailants?”

“Under the assumption they were from Omega SWAT, yes!”

As Hodges suggests reviewing traffic cams, I touch a hand to my temple, feigning exhaustion. “Let’s keep this between us. Cop gets robbed. Sounds ... ridiculous.”

* * *

An hour later, skyscrapers are a distant memory, and I’m navigating a suburban town when a call appears on the dash.

“Oh no, Dr. Beck.” I groan, then answer with a less than chipper greeting.

“Are we initiating a trend?”

“Look on the bright side, this time last week, you called *twice* before I responded.” A couple of cringeworthy beats

later, I do the honors and chortle. “Hey, I had stipulations when we first met. No asking how I feel.”

“You’ve a new stip?”

“Yes, laugh at my sorry excuse for a joke, and I’m so very sorry,” I let out a huff, pausing at a stop sign to softly bash my brain against the steering wheel.

“Tatum, take this seriously.”

“Have mercy. I had my SWAT thing today.”

“Oh? How did that go?”

“Awful. Listen, charge me for the hour. You’ll be happy to hear that I’m in the process of slaying my dragons.”

“When I say, ‘Vision is the antidote to division,’ what does that phrase mean to you?”

I’m too focused to ponder wholeheartedly, so I pull a thought out of thin air. “If I don’t have a vision, an idea where I’m going ... I’ll uh.” My gander sweeps toward a lofty yet modestly designed home.

Spencer’s home.

“It’s like, um, without vision, people perish.” *No, that’s different from division. That’s worse.* “If I don’t have a plan, I’ll be torn in different directions.”

“Yes. Life is a bumper car ride. You get hit from every side.”

At first, my mouth sets to refute Dr. Beck. Harrison’s my sole tormentor, yet his manipulation acumen has covered me in quicksand with no oxygen. Instead, agreeing, I mutter, “A collision in each direction.”

“Exactly. As it appears our first tactic will not work, you’ve engaged your abuser. I now ask, what’s your vision, Tatum?”

This is it. The moment of truth.

Soft light arcs across the windows. The evening sun dashes along the horizon. Trees full of life surround me, and I swear, come summer, one of the little kids on this street will resurrect their lemonade stand and make a killing because all the neighbors are friendly. I’m stuck in the 1970s. Back when bad shit didn’t happen, well, except for serial killers. But they couldn’t slay everyone.

“My vision,” I undertone, speculating, then let my shoulders and spine erect in a confident manner. “I imagine Harrison suffering, lots of suffering—once I score the proper intelligence. And then,” I pause again, pulling parallel to rose bushes.

“And then?”

“I’ll wear my enemy’s blood in place of my tears. See? I’m evolving, Dr. Beck.”

A few minutes later, I breathe the pungent scent of cow manure while slamming the door to my Lexus. “I can’t imagine Spence not living in the city,” I murmur.

I did, however, guess that his cocaine habit would A, leave him undesirable to the female race, B, leave him destitute, and C, leave him foaming out the mouth while he lay dying.

I had one thing right. A search of the police database indicated that Harrison’s demon spawn is the only inhabitant in this cookie-cutter model home an hour from Los Angeles. I stroll up the fragmented stone walk, glancing into family-style shutters. *This ain’t a playboy’s home.*

I've put on a leather jacket, though it's not cold out, to conceal my nine and bang on the door.

Banging.

Ringling the bell.

Causing a ruckus.

The door opens. Five feet, seven inches of the same ol' same ol' stands at the door. No fake tan, though. His lips curl in vexation. "What the fu—"

I nudge the tip of my police-issued weapon against the pink of his nose. Spencer's hands raise in defeat.

I pistol whip the thin guy across the weakest part of his jaw.

Running the side of his hand over his busted lip, Spencer spits. "What the fuck are you doing here, Tatum?"

I grip his hair, bringing Spencer to his knees. "You should know."

"You're crazy!" He lashes out.

A few more knuckle strikes later, I've calmed myself, and Spencer has had a change of heart.

"You done talking shit?" I ask.

"I forgot how much of a bitch you could be. But then again, you were always nice to *daddy*."

I slip the gun from my back pocket again. I click off the safety and look down the barrel at his conniving face. A stench permeates the air, one heavy with urine.

"First, it was all fun, games, and a friggen expensive doll Momma said I didn't need. Then I peed ... I peed in your father's lap when I realized that-that ..."

“What sort of fetish—”

I squeeze the trigger.

Spencer bows over, fingertips jabbed in his ear. A bullet pierces through the stucco a fraction away from his face. I help him to his feet, leading him through the house and into the living room, where there’s a wet bar.

While Spencer moans on his couch, groaning about the ringing in his ears, I delight in his alcohol.

“Are my ears bleeding?” Spencer’s voice trembles up an octave and down a few more as if he’s considering how loud he’s speaking.

I shake my head. “Can you hear me?”

His eyes bite shut while I chase one whiskey with another. He groans, “Yeah.”

“I was a little girl, Spence. You walked in one time.”

He expels a hesitant murmur while palming his left ear. “Walked in on what? This isn’t about the way he touched you at that restaurant?”

There’s more question than accusation in his tone, so I pour another round and hand it over this time.

Hands claiming the glass, Spencer takes a parched gulp.

“I sat in your father’s lap. He played with me.”

“I remember that. He never played with me when we were young ...” Spencer’s eyes widen as realization dawns on him. “Oh shit, Tatum ... Oh shit . . .”

I tilt my head. “Took you long enough.”

He holds the glass up, and I pour him more. This second round doesn’t have half a chance as he guzzles it down.

“I hated you, Tatum. I hated Ri ... Oh, gawd. Ohhhh.” He takes a deep breath. “None of this was *ever* about you two having an affair. That’s not what I saw at the restaurant. It was about back then when you were little.”

I nod, offering him another round when he takes the bottle.

“I saw-saw him looking at kiddie porn once.” Spencer’s voice fades. The bottle hides the red flush of embarrassment and disgust. “I was twelve. The second I asked my father,” Spencer stops, clearing his throat, “he got in my head. Made me think *I* was looking at five-year-olds on *his* laptop.” Spencer’s hands wash over a distraught, blanched face.

I settle down across from Spencer, seeing my own shocked reflection through his tormented eyes. “I never even considered after that, Tatum. Dad thrives off accusing you. Or me. Or my mother.”

Inside, I’m trembling at the notion that I *alone* no longer harbor my secret. I concentrate on all that matters—condemning Harrison.

“Spencer, I called you weeks ago because I thought you were estranged from your f—”

“I am! I partied my way through college. The second I got my degree, I returned to California, but not in the epicenter of my dad’s world. I—”

“*Then* today, I was attacked after reaching out to *you*. Was that coincidental?”

“You were wh-what?” Spencer gasps.

“Was it coincidental?”

“How should I know?” The shock is evident in his voice. “I don’t have that kinda pull. I’ve partnered with a small law

firm.”

Finger on the trigger, I sit my gun in my lap, letting the severity of my power hang between us. “Make me believe you, Spence.”

“Look, Tatum, I’m sorry.” A staggered gaze flits over my abrasive demeanor. “I just convinced my mother to separate from him. Tatum, I want Harrison dead. I have a few insurance policies. You want dirt on me? There ya go. Conspiracy to commit murder. I just need to get a few ducks in a row. Unless you ...”

Spencer’s Adam’s apple skyrockets again as he mildly insinuates that I could liaison with him by murdering his father.

Stoic, I order, “Show me these policies. Give me any information that you have on your father. Any other fetishes, any legal deeds. Tell me everything, Spencer.”

RIVER

Trust is a valuable commodity. In prison, it indicates how much chow you'd add to your spread when you and your crew got together. Or if another inmate has your back, so you don't catch a 115—an additional infraction—during rec.

As I stare at the interaction between Park and Blaine, my instincts flair.

I'm glancing through the gym window at the alley where they horse around, laughing, and carrying trash to the dumpster.

They bump fists, and my eyes narrow. *Did I just see an exchange?*

Bao's in the front of the building, already warming up his car for the drive home this evening.

Chuckling reaches my ears as Blaine slams his hands into the metal bar at the back door, pushing in.

I position myself so that the two idiots will have to get past me to call it a night. My arms fold.

Coolly, Blaine lifts his chin.

Park stops short. The smile shakes off his face. “Hey, Riv ...”

Instead of being a hypocrite and attacking Blaine, I pour my wrath on the kid that should know better. “What was that out there, Park?”

“Wha ...”

“Park,” I growl. “I may have taught you some moves in the two years I’ve known you, but you ain’t gonna see your eighteenth birthday *lying* to me.” When I met Park, he was a social media butterfly in the cage before I taught him some respect.

The ex-Shadow Ryder drops his face to the ground.

Park stammers, “I-I tried to sell Blaine some weed.”

My forearm clamps the teen’s neck, and I jerk him against the wall. I reach into Park’s pocket. “Nice try.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s what happened.” Blaine finally speaks. “I got my own stash. We laughed it off.”

I pop Park’s baby soft cheek with the plastic sack of marijuana. “As I saw it, you gave Blaine twenty dollars. That’s why you got this shit.”

Blaine snarls, “Chill, that shit’s legal.”

I let Bao’s foster care testimony go and shove Blaine into the wall. This time my hands dig into his shoulders. “Legal for adults. Park’s still a kid! But you can go, Blaine, since we got ourselves here a little street pharmacist. I’ll handle *him*.”

Satisfied, Blaine tosses a two-finger salute.

My rancor pivots back to Bao’s ward. I search for any signs that the teen had lied and see his surprise at how quickly

he was left to hang by my Emergence brother.

I'm not hiring any more ex-cons. I'm not built like Jhang Li. The motherfuckers I trusted on the inside had more time on their books. Blaine's sentence was short. For all I know, he could've snitched his way out.

"You're getting entrepreneurial and shit. Who you get the drugs from?"

"A kid from school."

I lift a brow.

"I won't do anything anymore. You take them. Please."

I place the contraband in my pocket. "This all you have?"

"Ye-yes. They told me, um, if I couldn't sell it, I wouldn't get more."

"You don't plan on getting any more, do you?"

His head whips around like a helicopter.

"Think real hard, Park. Do you wanna meet the next UFC champ in the cage?" *I'll be damned if Sefina or the organization cuts me out of that chance.*

"N-no."

"Good. Also," I run a hand over my stubbled jaw, "Tatum believes in you."

Park's face falls. I expect he's waiting for me to say that *I* believe in him too. Well, fuck that.

* * *

Around seven p.m., I stop myself from lighting up. Though for the first time since joining UFC, no new dates will hit the

books until my next match. Still, I have to stay ready—no weed and chill for me.

I wrap my knuckles on the quartz counter in the kitchen, dialing Tatum's number. "Okay, so your phone is off. Did you remove me from Find My iPhone because . . ." *I will find you one way or another, Stubby.*

The iPhone slips from my hand, clattering into the sink as a call comes through.

"Fuck," I breathe, picking it up, only to notice a random 310 number displaying across the screen. I answer with a snarled, "Hello?"

"H-hi, River? It's your ... Heilani," Constance says, nerves lacing through her speech. "I was calling to say—"

"What is it, *Ma*?" I fix a taunting grin on my face, leaning an elbow onto the counter.

"*Ma.*" She toils with the lie. "I didn't think you'd call me that so soon. I didn't think you'd offer me a house either."

You second-guessing fucking with me? I scrub a hand over my face. "We both know what it means to come from nothing, *Ma*," I repeat the term, this instance lacking malice. "You endured Poto. And I have the feeling you never came around for a very good reason."

"River, I'm so sorry ..."

Then decline the house, bitch. "So, since I know what it means to struggle, and I had people willing to lend a hand, I'm extending the gesture. Look, I'm a bit testy right now. Let's chat some other time."

"Is there anything I can do, River?"

“Aside from,” *coming clean*, “uh, meeting with me and my realtor in a couple of days to look at houses, no.”

A muffled sniff is followed by a hesitant sigh. “Despite everything, you’re a good man, River.”

“Guess so.” I hang up, chewing on my knuckle. A good man wouldn’t take Constance’s sorry ass out of her misery.

“I’ll leave that to Tatum—if she’s willing,” I mutter.

Around eight, I’ve settled at the edge of the bed, calling Tatum again. This time I ramble after the beep. “Harrison saw a woman being accosted. I trust you and know you wouldn’t place yourself in that situation, but—”

I hang up.

I’m having full-blown conversations with the voice mail system.

Around nine, I threaten to snitch. Telling Jhang Li that his only child hasn’t returned home or called is a sure way to piss Tatum off. Instead, I do the next best thing. Gripping my cellphone in hand and tugging into a leather jacket, I stalk to the garage. I’m darkening the doorway when the garage door slides up. Tatum’s ride zips in next to my SUV. A look of defeat in her eyes, in the way her shoulders sag, and how she slinks over mitigates the venom washing through me.

“Where you going?” she asks, rounding onto the balls of her feet to place tiny kisses on my jaw.

“Where you been?” I leave my jacket, keys, and phone where they fall, lifting Tatum around my waist.

I taste the alcohol on her breath, steal her oxygen, and claim the shreds of her sanity with a hard, crushing kiss. Once

our chests are left heaving, mine crushing her perky tits, my eyes ask the questions my heart refuses to utter.

“Someone else made it,” she murmurs. The defeat in her tone shreds my heart in two.

“Hey,” I dip my head, hands kneading the nape of her neck, “the fuck I tell you about doubt, huh?”

The doubt and insecurity flitting in her eyes urges me to put it to rest. And the best way I know how is to wrap her thighs around my face and suck her little pussy to orgasm. I pull Tatum away from my waist, her thighs staying glued tightly, as I shovel her compression shirt from over her head. With each step, I’m nipping her flesh, biting into the slope of Tatum’s shoulder until she forgets her sorrow, replacing it with pain.

She pants, wiggling against me as I flip her onto the couch.

“River, I should shower—”

“Because you ran hard today, worked out?”

“Well, ye—”

“I’m a man, Tatum.” I burrow my nose in her ass and let my tongue stiffly lap at her cunt. “Mmmm. You never tasted better than after a workout, baby.”

“But I—ohhhh, ohhh, ohhh ...”

“Oh? Would you deny me?” I growl against one soft cake, then sink my teeth into the pillow cushion of her ass.

“No, I’m not denying you.”

“I think you were. Don’t you worry. I’ll shower you and forgive you soon enough. But after you’re clean, you will be thoroughly punished.”

eighteen

TATUM

Two months later ...

“We must shed the doctrine that we’re a product of our past. We don’t have to be prisoners to the darkness,” I declare, slowly strolling around the gym as the loud, eager strikes and grunts of my pupils pervade the air. Each one has learned the flawless technique that I, along with Bao and Father, have taught them. Throughout the passing weeks, I’ve found myself having to scrutinize a person less and less and providing compliments or the following credo.

After a sip from my canister of water, I add, “Make a choice. Don’t allow yourself to be the victim. I can’t beg you any more than that. Make. A. Choice.”

Wearing a ghost of a smile, I bow my head as the sweaty group comes to a halt. Although many people disappeared after my social media rant, I’ve noticed a change in those who brighten my day every week—like Nan MacKenzie. The same confidence has lengthened my spine too.

And suddenly, I realize my life has tugged at me, but it’s not tumultuous nor scattering in all directions. I’ve evolved. I

returned to the beat in a part-time capacity while my attorneys pressure every slanderous leech. Decreasing hours freed up time to do more important things, like doing outreach for the community—or ruining Harrison’s life.

At first, I considered taking a play out of his rulebook. Harrison had said, “*But you forgot the media aspect. I’m too wealthy to give a damn about what others think.*”

With his statement and my favorite crime trope, I created the idea of a *red herring* based on Spencer’s intel. I would produce the illusion of an accuser based on the type of women Spencer saw his father hit on in the past and have said mystery woman anonymously expose Harrison online. Then I realized the attorneys he employs would be on it like a shark to a blood bath before other *real* women had the guts to speak out.

So, I’ve reevaluated my schemes, and I’m focused on the path less chosen.

I consulted with Spencer, and he recalled another young woman, the daughter of their family friend, Marian Holloway, had become withdrawn as they grew up. *Had Harrison’s behavior adversely affected her life?*

What if I had spoken up as a child?

That thought wears away at my heart all the time. But I need to speak with Marian. I’ve attempted other avenues, one of which stares at me now with a look of gratitude while running a forearm over a sweaty, russet face. I lift my hand briefly, offering Uncle Malcolm the faintest of waves.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, the ex-UFC combatant sits across from me at the iconic Creole restaurant, Harold & Belle's. A server places bowls of steamy, fragrant gumbo in front of us. Malcolm snorts, then excuses his desire to laugh. "Your momma and I loved this place."

"Oh." My eyes sweep over the intimate atmosphere of close friends and lovers. I murmur, "Momma never brought me."

"Probably on account that it was our thing. And ... oh, never mind." Malcolm lifts a spoon. "You have questions for me?"

Hesitantly, I settle back against the leather cushion. Gumbo wafts in my face, and saliva pools in my mouth at the thought of my first bite. While my stomach's ready to *throw down* and my uncle proposes a remedy to this awkward meeting, I nudge a shoulder. *Stubby, you can do this. Prance down memory lane with the man you've had a handful of encounters with.*

"My questions can wait. Please tell me more."

Malcolm's dark eyes sparkle, and the past materializes between us the second he opens his mouth to speak. "Renee ... she always burned her mouth on the gumbo. Every time—never failed. Little bitty thang shoveled enough in her mouth for third-degree burns. Got so bad that one of the waitresses recalled the previous time when we arrived and gave our usual order. She almost slapped the spoon from Ren's mouth to save her."

A fuzzy vision flashes before my eyes. I'm not sure if it's because I'm desperately, yet sorely, losing sight of Momma or the threat of tears blinding me. Dabbing a finger there, I

murmur, “Thank you. Stories like this help me visualize her, ya know?”

“It keeps her memory alive.” He nods. “Renee had this obsession with soup.”

I take a lavish bite, hiding my mouth behind manicured fingers. Eyelids fluttering, shoulders bouncing softly, I delight in the rich, flavorful seafood stew. This type of food is what the soul is made of. For a while, we’re content in each other’s presence like never before.

Once my spoon finally strikes the bottom of my bowl, I recommence our conversation. “Um ... when you asked Father, my um, father for money—”

“I never asked for anything from your father.” Malcolm breathes out and scrubs a few fingers into his thick hair. “Actually, they were married. So, in a sense, I did.”

Ah, I see. Uncle Malcolm and I have a defensive nature. But a soft smile edges my mouth as he acknowledges our dreadful trait.

“Momma always gave you the money? Did Father seem stressed—more than the usual?” I gesture, fingers wrought, not uttering that the *usual*, indicates her bouts with sickle cell episodes.

Malcolm takes a generous bite, eyes shaded slightly in consideration. “Maybe a little.”

“Was that around the time he and ...” *No, can’t be. Harrison was always around. He was my godfather, after all.*

Also, I measure how in-depth my query can go.

I don’t wanna plant seeds that there’s trouble between Harrison and myself.

So, I redirect the conversation away from the bane of my existence. “Was Father still offering Marty help?”

“Ah, Marty from Slaughterhouse. Let me think ... The dissension between us Rileys and those Slaughterhouse scum had gotten so bad—all of that time is a haze.” Malcolm pauses, then lets out a contrite laugh. “As a matter of fact, I doubt they were still affiliated then.”

All right, look through Father’s eyes, I tell myself. Harrison was a mentor, someone less sleazy appearing than Marty, who could propel his career.

Affluence is important in Chinese culture. Father was honored to have the Harrisons as my godparents.

Is it safe to assume my slimy tormentor wanted to weasel himself further into Father’s life? Cut out Marty, say, if Father was still sending over some of the young boys and men he worked with at King Kong Zombie.

Harrison would want those potential star athletes for his agency. Could my parents’ money problems around my mother’s death not have been money problems but *sneaky, manipulative, Harrison motherfucking Herrington problems!*

“What are you thinking, Tatum?” Malcolm asks.

A renewed vigor charges through my veins. Less timid, I sit straight as a rod and target our history. “I know when I went to see my godfather two years ago, you said to come to you, not him. Was that just you trynta be an uncle for once or ...”

Malcolm tucks me under a scrutinizing gaze. “Tatum, has *he* hurt you?”

Pausing two beats, I assume an oblivious nature. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t like the way he looks at *women* in general. But you are still my niece. You’re a Riley, Tatum.”

“No. He hasn’t.” Deception flows out of my mouth with ease. I curb one side of my lip and jut my chin to Malcolm. “I’m like you, I guess. I want to keep all my pennies.”

A brow tips.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that you’re a cheapskate.”

He waves a hand, unaffected.

“No, really, I can’t keep hating you for a rant at a funeral and ... and things beyond your control.” *Like Harrison playing tickle monster with me when I could’ve easily been at your house.* “I don’t like Harrison. Never did. I was always a little slow to like people, though.”

“Let me scale this back. I was honestly shocked that you said we’re alike.” Something akin to appreciation sparks in Malcolm’s features. “Now, in response to being slow to warm up, that’s the furthest thing from the truth.”

What?

“Tatum, you weren’t shy like Ren. At age two, you flew out of your momma’s arms to jump into the cage. It was the second round. Jhang had a nasty gash on his forehead. Pop and I caught you at the last second.”

Twiddling with my fingers beneath the table, I mumble, “I did?”

“Courage was your middle name when you were a tot. I meant to remind Ren of that once. But I ended up asking her for money again. While I was acting a fool during my heyday, I should’ve focused on how you’d begun to clam up.”

RIVER

Sweat drips from my face and onto my bare chest as I pound the treadmill in my home gym. Though my stomach's growling for dinner, I'm restlessly waiting for my cellphone to go off. Tatum took the initiative to hang out with her uncle today. I've been waiting for a call or text from her.

Two miles in, the cell rings. I remove the iPhone from my basketball shorts and instantly answer—sight unseen.

At the sound of Park's cautious tone, I pop a closed fist against the red button on the treadmill, halting my evening run. Can't recall the last time he's reached out to me. Of course, we see each other most days at King Kong Zombie, but he's a teen. Ghosts the place the second he clocks out.

Glaring at my iPhone, I ground out, "Doesn't sound like you're getting ready for your birthday party tomorrow evening. What do you want?"

"Tsk. The *surprise* party?"

"What. Do. You. Want?"

"Sheesh, I regret calling you." The vulgar song in the background takes a front seat in our conversation as Park

stalls. “Nevermind! Byeeeee!”

“Hang up, and I’ll reconstruct your face. Tatum put in too much effort into your ungrateful ass. Now, where are you? Bao doesn’t allow that kinda music in his house.” My teeth gnash together at the thought of the sorry excuse for a playlist I concocted earlier today. It wasn’t that I intended to wait till the last minute, but when Tatum’s in party-planning mode, the list of things she has to do often includes her best friend. *Me*.

“I’m not home, Riv.”

“It’s not a work night. Moreover, it’s a *school night*, Park.”

“Alright, well, forget denting my skull in. I won’t make my eighteenth birthday party tomorrow night because I’ll be dead. And you don’t get to do the honors.”

I let out a chuckle, running a towel over my face. I’m exhausted, and here Park is, dramatic as he was on our first encounter. “Dude, where are ya? If you need a ride home, fucking say it.”

“Alright, I need a ride home. I’m at the Shadow Ryder Clubhouse,” Park’s mumble spreads thin.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan. The little delinquent needs assistance after all. As I search for my keys, another call comes in from Tatum.

“Hey,” I answer, “I was beginning to wonder how lunch went with your unc.”

“We’re at one of my great, great-aunt’s houses, and she can cook. Should I send you directions or bring home Tupperware? Beware, they’ve pulled out old photos, but they seem like the type that will send me home with pounds of foil-wrapped eats.”

I imbue a cuss word inside of my fisted palm. *Great*. Just when Tatum's reconnecting with the part of her family that my appetite can appreciate, this shit happens.

Exiting our gym, I chew my lip and consider the rare times I've lied to my woman. *Can't have Stubby disappointed with the idiot*. "Take all the Tupperware they're willing to give you. I'm helping ... Jhang. He has a lead on Vassili."

A long beat is followed by Tatum's gasp. "Father lied to me. He said he got the signature."

Fuck, must've occurred in the last few days. Jhang was still harping the same old tune. I let out a forced chuckle. "A hundred goes a long way in LA if you inquire with the right individuals."

"Oh, Riv, I'll ask my fam for a casserole dish. Just help Father."

"You can ... count on me. Take your time." I hang up. I'm not in the business of keeping secrets from Tatum, but I'll snitch on Park once I've brought him home, *unscathed*.

* * *

Away from prying eyes, a one-story ranch house unfolds in the center of an untended orange grove. The Shadow Ryders have made it their own. The only things these motherfuckers are mindful of are the Harleys and lowriders parked in one area. All around the home, members have tossed bottles of half-empty beer. Short skirts tip back drinks, gyrating on guys or each other. Dudes in leather cuts collect in certain areas or parade the prizes they have for one night.

At the entrance to the lot, I climb out of my SUV. In another cluster, Park's busted Honda lays in a heap. *Damn, he was proud of that bike.*

The atmosphere shifts as I stroll the crowd, searching out the only Chinese guy here. The music's cut once I arrive in the center of the yard where Park's pushed about—a one-man mosh pit.

Bao's idiot foster son comes alive, decking the dude in front of him when he sees me. "River!"

I don't know if the kid expects us to hug it out, but I snarl, "Let's go."

Running a timid hand over his forearm, Park mutters, "They won't let—"

"He ain't leaving. Neither are you!"

Lifting a brow, I slowly turn to address a dude whose long silver hair falls into his narrowed gaze. CAP is stitched into his leather vest. Cap exclaims, "Ohhh, I like that look. That's the *you fuckin' talkin' to me?* look. Blaine told us all about that."

Grrr. Blaine. Should've known.

I ask, "Where is Blaine?"

"Hey," another more subdued voice calls, and I glare toward the culprit. Eyelids low, Blaine chuckles tipsily. "I'm here, bro."

"You ain't no brother of mine," I growl. "I'm leaving with the idiot."

"You got one thing right." Cap laughs, trigger finger dead on Park. "That right there is a fucking idiot. You are too."

“Excuse me?” I growl. The muscles beneath my jaw run taut.

As I’ve stepped toward Cap, a hand’s placed on his shoulder, drawing him away from me. A guy closer to my age assumes his position, legs extended wide as he cockily smooths down his cut, allowing me a view of his title.

Vice President.

“That cunt was getting too nosy.” The VP juts his chin over my shoulder to Park, who’s found his way behind me. “Had us wondering.”

“Stop wondering. He’s not an adult yet,” I assure him.

The Vice President laughs. “Pays to stay alert. I can tell you ain’t no cop. Some of those,” he gestures to the ink at my neck, “look familiar.”

I keep my eyes trained on him. “I’m vouching for Park. We good now?”

“No.” He walks away. As if for added effect, his gang hems me in.

A dude, Stevo, I presume from the name on his vest, steps forward. “I had a gun to your friend’s head. But he started stuttering that you were a champ, then Blaine vouched for him.”

Not appreciating where the conversation is headed, I growl out, “The fuck do you want?”

“*You*. You’re tonight’s entertainment. Live, you can take the *chink*. Die, he dies too.”

RIVER

In forty-eight hours, I'll hit the cage, snatch my next win, and officially propose to Tatum in front of millions of viewers. But tonight, I gotta battle a member of the Mexican Cobra Cartel.

To the fucking death.

Like the bitch who appealed to Emergence for a job, reptile scales are inked over the Cobra's clean-shaven scalp. All over his face too. The Cobras operate throughout California and even have their hands in most of the dealings in South LA. *Fucking great. I guess it's better to kill the guy than let him run off and snitch to the cartel.*

The gang leaders bring us to the center of a grassy area. Tools, like breaker bars and steel wrenches, are dumped, cluttering one space of the patched grass. While I doubt the Shadow Ryder's pitch in for Molly Maids, I suspect they dropped the tools here for a reason.

Cartel Dude is pushed over toward the chromed items. As I stroll in that direction, the VP sniggers. "Where the fuck you goin?"

With an amused glint in my eye, I sarcastically ask, “We bashing each other’s skulls in like ape-men, right?”

“How fair would that be? A UFC professional like yourself, weaponized. I heard fighters like you are special. You got insurance on your hands and feet, yeah?”

Rolling my eyes away, I offer a trivial nod.

“That makes you a valuable sombitch. Superman.”

“That’s not right!” Park shouts. Two club members thump him upside the head, instantly cooling him down.

“I’m so sorry ...” His mouth trembles.

My indifferent gaze lands on Blaine, who appears sober and looks away.

“Just one more thing, ‘fore we can get started.” The VP whistles, and a woman in a tight mini skirt and tits the size of ripe melons saunters over, grinning like sugar.

She invades my space, tits crushing my chest. I step back. I’ll survive the night, but if Tatum smells perfume on me ... I. Am. Dead.

A red silk scarf unravels from her bra. “I’ve got faith in you,” she purrs as her soft fingers wrap the scarf around my eyes.

Glossed lips fall over mine, and I growl, pulling away from her sultry touch. “Stop.”

“Ahh, I like this one.” I hear the VP’s voice again. “So, here’s a piece of advice. You remove that blindfold, and you get a bullet between the eyes. Are we clear, Rage?”

There’s no response required.

A whistle sounds, and I move forward with inhuman strength. I stall to a round of laughter.

Fuck.

Gotta pace myself.

Bao said, *“Fight, all focus. No anger.” I got this.*

The air shifts as a tool strikes in my direction. In the dark, I jump back to a round of cheers. The cartel guy gasps, eager to have ended me in one fell swoop.

I wait for the crowd to die down. Even Park shouting to your left or right has fucked my attention. I’m spinning around when a long, heavy cylinder thwacks across my face.

I roar, letting the blood flow from my mouth.

“River,” Park calls again.

The next hit batters my ribs. I clasp the steel, hot chrome in my hand, yanking it. Cobra Dude moves to defense. I claim the darkness as my own. Hearing charged, I dart in the direction of his footfalls and nervous gasps.

“Ahhh!” My opponent shouts as I bring him to the ground. I grapple over him.

Moving swiftly, I deliver a punishing blow to his jaw. A punch to my left eye causes the silk scarf to slide free.

A whistle pierces through chaotic screaming, silencing the night.

I’m frozen, and so is my competitor. I look up into the barrel of a shotgun—ominous punishment for not fighting blind. Gritting my teeth, I wait for the impact of a slug.

The VP chuckles and, with quick hands, moves the weapon like a cadet at ease. “Kidding. That’s this fucking

beaners problem now.”

“Let him fight!” is chanted while I sniff the blood leaking from my nose.

There’s a crowd of them, only one me, and despite how stupid he is, Park has to turn eighteen tomorrow.

The adrenaline shocking my core mellows some as I sit on my haunches. I realize that my breathing is at less than 50 percent. That strike to my ribcage almost did me in.

The VP makes us come to our feet, and the Mexican can see his death looming imminently.

Blood throbs beneath my jaw where he got me good. The humanity in me causes me to nod my head to him.

Sucks to be him right now.

Cobra Dude nods back as if accepting his fate. He heaves a sigh and knuckles down.

In a ferocious fight of wills, we trade a couple of blows.

After a quick ground and pound, I duck below a hook and circle behind him. I shove the loser to the ground, painting my knuckles in his blood.

With a sense that the Shadow Ryder’s might splatter my brains on the ground if I don’t transition into overkill, I overindulge in the act while glaring at the defeated Cobra. I slam a massive blow to his shin, and his bones shatter beneath my heel, leaving him in a twisted, broken heap.

Dude trails blood as he retreats, shuffling away on his favored leg. Grass clings to his sticky, blood-stained fingers.

He crawls.

The Shadow Ryder’s chant.

I glance across the area, looking at masks of greed and spite.

I stalk him, dropping him back to the ground. The bottom of my boot slams into the Cobra's face, again and again. The first strike took his life. The remainder appealed to the Shadow Ryders. After all, they sought a blood bath. Damn, and I thought my very own father would be my fifth *and final* kill.

RIVER

For the first time in our relationship, an argument didn't fuel our desire. Against Renee Li's edicts, I allowed my woman her side of the bed and designated myself to my side. By morning, birds squabbling outside our windows awakens and reminds me of last night. *Shit, I was an ass to Stubby. I didn't tell her anything about all the fucking blood so she wouldn't worry about Park.*

And the dead dude. I won't have my woman aware of any more crimes I've committed. Not if I can help it.

I roll over, watching the sun's glow fall over Tatum's rich, brown complexion. My fingertips brush the curve of her hip where her usually velvet skin runs rampant with the mayhem of her courage.

"Oh, River," Tatum's sultry rasp twitches my dick. "Stop messing with my scars."

I replace the adoring touch with reverent lips. "I fucked up last night."

"No, baby. You were hyped up on adrenaline from ... whatever fight you got into. This morning is another thing

entirely. You're fucking up *now* by waking me." The curves of Tatum's body wiggle in protest as I pin her arms down.

"You can't get away from me, *Honey Badger*. Listen, I know love ain't perfect, but our love is true, Little Bit. Even when I mess up. Right now, I'm atoning for last night. Gimme a kiss, and then I'll share what happened."

"No kisses. I'm angry. And why are you bringing up that silly name again?"

"Yes, one kiss."

"I should fight you." With a half-smile, Tatum leans up, letting her finger trail over the bedlam across my chest, following the lines that took hours to perfect. "You confirmed that you didn't have any broken bones last night from doing God knows what."

"Just some bruising. Tatum, I know when I've got a rib swimming around in my gut. Honestly, it looks worse than—"

"What about your fight with Oleg in Colorado, huh? You're already under fire for smacking me around, River. You just gave them more ammo."

"So what?"

"So what?" Tatum climbs around my waist, popping me in the arms. The warmth of her cunt sitting on my tarnished ribs combats the dull ache there. Tiny, combative hands start for my face. "So what? That's all you've got to say about last night, River?"

I chortle, swooping her into a bear hug. "I already look like shit. Spare my face, Stubby."

The sweetest sound melds into my ears as Tatum chuckles too. "You're not as easy on the eyes, but I've a thing for

lumberjacks. You did, however, get your ass beat, Riv. So, what happened?”

“Got in a fight.”

“I gathered that. The other guy must be dead because he beat you down better than anybody in the cage ever ... Oh shit, the other guy *is* dead?”

I run a hand over my face. “I won’t look like shit in two nights. I’ll go to that cryotherapy place today. First thing tomorrow too. I’ll be mindful of my ribs in the cage. They’ll be good as new soon enough.”

“Riv-errr, is the other guy dead?” She presses at my chest again.

“Very.”

“Of course. You had to.”

I tip my chin, silently agreeing.

But Tatum doesn’t end the conversation. A battery of concerned questions flies in my direction. “You dumped the vic somewhere remote and isolated? Are you okay?”

“I didn’t.” My palms sweep over hips that swell and remind me how good God is.

Now her hands cease mine. “What. In. The royal. Fuck, River?”

“You heard me correctly, Stubby. I didn’t dump the body.”

“*River.*” A hand brandishes my face with a loud smack.

Saw it coming.

I deserve it for keeping a hysterical Tatum in the dark when I returned home last night.

The act doesn't calm her like I thought it would, though. Tatum assaults me with tiny pummels of her fists. "You left the body to be discovered and examined, River. Are you friggen crazy? I'm not living without you again. I'm not!"

"Relax. Ain't going back to prison." I slide her from my waist in an attempt to climb from the bed. Slender legs get their hooks into me. Thighs aggravate the throbbing in my ribs, so I lay back, allowing Tatum's reign.

A pointed finger pokes my chest. "Never envisioned myself as a detective, River, but allow me to polish up on my interrogation game, shall we?"

"No! This is why when I came home last night to you running around searching for an icepack and asking questions, I didn't say shit. You're a *cop*, Tatum. Never forget that."

"Well, forgive me," she snorts.

I offer a cocksure grin. "You're forgiven, Little Bit."

Tatum's head tilts. "Okay, we're past the sarcastic part. *Who, where, what, and why!*"

I tick off each answer on a stiff finger. "*Who*—a Cobra Cartel member. *What*—those fucking Shadow Ryders. *Where*—their clubhouse. The *why* is because all of 'em are assholes." Clearing my throat, I add, "Stubby, if the dude's corpse resurfaces, it should lead authorities to their clubhouse. His DNA was all over the place. Now, stop asking questions. The less you know, the better." I take her face between my hands. "The *less* you fucking know, baby, the *better*."

Tatum clutches a pillow beneath rigid fingers, swinging wildly in my direction. I sacrifice a feathery assault on my face to save my ribs from crunching as she growls, "Okay,

Detective Tagaloa. What about the blood you trailed into our house?”

I rip the pillow from her clasp, launching it across the room. I share how I spent my night after our argument. “My clothes are in bleach in the garage sink. I’ll torch them.”

“Good idea, River. While *I* ensure your car and everything else is satisfactory.” Anxiously, Tatum’s tongue darts over her lips. “Before we remake any of the *CSIs*, help me understand why. That’s all I ask.”

I gesture with stiff hands. “Park.”

“*Our* Park? *Yéye’s Park?*” Laying back in bed and tugging hair through her fingers, Tatum groans, “Is he? I won’t say it! Shit, I almost died convinced I had defended him!”

“Relax. The last I saw of that delinquent, he was sneaking through his bedroom window. He survived.” Forging my teeth over my bottom lip, I add, “I didn’t tell you initially because you snapped at the sight of the blood. He was tangled up in Blaine’s mess.”

The cutest pair of lips twist around. “So, Bad-Mouthing Blaine is fired?”

“Yup. Jhang will never know. Bao either. Are we understood?”

“No!” Tatum grapples up, but I bring us back down, turning until my weight shifts dangerously over her.

“Stubby. The look of horror in Park’s eyes was enough.”

“Good. So, the second his eyes land on me *and* a leather belt—”

I rest a comfortable hand on Tatum’s throat, stalling her rant. “Eighteen, Little Bit. He’s eighteen.”

“Excuse me. The Black side of my family would still get that ass!”

“What part of the look of sheer torture in the man’s eye don’t you—”

“River, he’s not a man; he’s a child.”

“He is today.” I touch my lips to feminine snarly ones. “You will have your birthday bash, Tatum, and neither Park, nor I, nor anyone you hold dear to you will ever see that fucking Blaine kid and his tricycle crew ever again. Are we good?”

“Almost. I’ll go make the appointment for your cryotherapy today and tomorrow. Have fun freezing your balls off.”

Claiming Tatum’s wrists over her head, I wink at her before sinking my teeth into the side of her tit. I snarl, “Now, run along and make that appointment for *two*, Stubby, because we’re a team.”

TATUM

My life has become a literal and proverbial balancing act.

Without being fully cognizant of my grievance, Uncle Malcolm agreed to return to the devil to keep our enemy close to unearthing any documentation that Harrison had wronged any of his athletes.

I'm still in search of Marian and have an all-points bulletin out on her for questioning of a *robbery* I handled a few days ago. Let's call this misappropriation of resources for a good cause.

Now, I have a cake in my hands. Fondant shapes it into a life-like gaming console. The sweet treat cost a fortune. If I could've predicted the future, I'd be clutching a Costco sheet cake and waltzing through sliding glass doors instead of slowly easing my way out into the chilly air, balancing hundreds of confectionary dollars.

I'm just outside when my new cellphone vibrates in my pocket for the second time. The impatient trill indicates how someone's called repeatedly.

My leather booties clip across the stone. As I reach my car, the caller has ditched their last attempt for the third.

Fucking Harrison, I bet. *But how did he get my new number?* Since his hooligans no doubt robbed me of a recording that wouldn't have been necessary anyway—I uploaded it to the iCloud to begin with—I've delighted in my boring mobile life.

I've placed the cake onto the front passenger seat floor when I glance at my phone.

“Chicken Little?” I groan, pressing the officer's cellphone number. “Li, speaking. What's up, O'Toole?”

“I know you're off duty today. Still, if you can muster it, I, uh, would like to chat with you down at the station. I'm doing paperwork all day.”

“Regarding?”

“A ... MacKenzie.”

I press the engine start button. “Huh?”

Typing stalls and Chicken Little's voice drops. “*Jamie MacKenzie.*”

“Awww, Jamie. What has he done?”

“Just come to my desk. One of the detectives is making a ruckus about a couple of diaper sniffers dying. So, I had to place Jamie in holding.”

Glancing through the driver-side mirror, I peel into the lane. “Diaper sniffers? Oh, pedophiles.”

“That's what I'm saying. New hotshot detective says a serial killer has started murdering child perps. Who the fuck cares?”

I laugh a little, navigating the backstreets. “Ventura County had a vigilante assaulting all the known pedophiles in the area. If I were those cops, I would’ve looked the other way.”

The typing begins again, but Chicken Little is clearly in the mood to chat as he chuckles. “The boys gave ‘em pizza and everything. Not every day we’re blessed to cosign street justice.”

“Rare, indeed,” I mutter to myself, closing in on the station. “So, Jamie. I’ll be there in five.”

“He’s in the last holding tank. If you’re uncomfortable, I can accompany you to chat with him.”

“No, I got it.”

My index finger almost brushes with the end-call button when Chicken Little adds, “I didn’t enter your friend into the database. We usually just take him upstairs to—”

“Usually?” I grip the steering wheel, stomach roiling uneasily.

“Yup. Granted, it’s been a while. I was a rookie the first time Jamie ran away. We found him, and Nolan himself chewed us out for not bringing the kid straight to him.”

“*Detective Nolan McGregor*”

“The one and only. Listen, if that weird motherfucker starts to creep you out, maybe get Nolan.”

* * *

The gentle giant sits like the lone wolf, which is not a word I’d ever use for the MacKenzies as a whole.

But Jamie MacKenzie never melded well with his family anyway.

He pushes dark blond strands of hair from his face, and the flattest yet most gorgeous turquoise eyes click in my direction. Jamie has my best friend's eyes, but there's no teasing, joking, or any sort of emotion reflected in his gaze. *Ever*.

He's not even broody or stoic. His impassiveness unnerves me to the core, so I smile harder, pulling the barred doors apart.

"What's going on, Jamie?" My singsongy tone ribbons between us with no effect.

"Nothing." Jamie ascends to his full height, and my head tips back to take in the quiet storm.

He's muttering appreciatively when I dart to the left, blocking his exit. "I heard you don't normally have to sit in here. Why didn't you appeal to your unc—"

"Nolan's hardly my real uncle. Besides, I've known you pretty much all my life. You're a cop now. You have pull as evidenced by this." A callused finger gestures toward the gated exit.

"Ah, I'm still chatting with you." With a wide, toothy grin and a sardonic tone, I say, "I miss the politer Jamie, though."

Still glaring past me in anticipation of a soundless exit, Jamie pushes a few long strands from his angular jaw. "Tatum ... There was a misunderstanding."

"Okay, let's start there." I shift my weight as we've come to a halt. "You're attending UC Santa Barbara."

"Graduated with my master's already. Next up, PhD." He doesn't blink. "Can I go now?"

“Ha-ha. Nan sends me an invitation to all your brothers’ graduations. Your last event was high sch ... You’re-you’re shitting me?”

The ghost of satisfaction manifests on an attractive blank face. “Not at all. My parents aren’t aware of my degrees, and they *will not* be. Thanks again, we square?”

“Why?” My arms fold over.

Jamie rubs reflexively at his jaw. “Why does my mother meet me on a biweekly basis in Northern California? When Leith graduated from Michigan, she allowed him a wide berth. Camdyn received the same respect. Our younger brothers will too. Hmmm, I’m the anomaly.” His contemplation creeps to an indignant halt. “Tatum, I’m simply this frail thing that everyone concerns themselves with.”

Why do I feel shards of my soul stripping bare as he speaks?

I’m a frail *thing*. That’s evident in Jamie’s gaze. Only one facet is missing: pity.

The once pariah silently calls me an equal and laughs. “Although, that’s not the misunderstanding that occurred yesterday evening. Is that what you’re referring to? Last night, right?”

Though overwhelmed by Jamie’s truth, I sputter, “Skip the sarcasm. Last night you assaulted someone. A *disabl*—”

“Disabled? Hardly. A person has assumed wealth, and you’re blinded by their lies. Only perceiving what’s selected for you, like sheep.”

“*Excuse you?*”

“Not you, specifically. Your cohorts. The cop who hauled me in requires correcting. Needs to observe, inspect, enforce. Yet, I digress. His fatuity will result in a lawsuit for another unlucky individual.”

“Then tell Nolan! Or consider Internal Affairs.”

“I’m not regurgitating my grievances. I’ve had time to sit and ponder. I’m reformed.” A frivolous hand sweeps around the cell. “I appreciate the concern, Tatum.”

At Jamie’s next step, I grip his lean arm.

Steely eyes fall from my face, piercing into my hand. I hold tight. “Alright, Nan’s not aware you graduated already. So, you don’t like people in your business? Nolan included.”

“Yes.”

I let go, my demeanor questioning. *Why me?*

Jamie sweeps a vexed palm over his temple. “Nan may be the matriarch of our family establishment, but my mother has her sore spots. *Me*. Now that we’ve gotten the preliminaries out of the way, I really must leave, please.”

At the vague thread of sincerity in his tone, I crack. “But wait, Jamie, please. Camdyn always looked after you. He would be worried.”

“Cam fought all my bullies. River helped. You as well, Tatum. But this isn’t the part where we chum it out like old pals.” Pinching the bridge of his nose, Jamie exhales in astonishment. “This is the longest conversation I’ve engaged in unrelated to school or my mother in ages. Ask yourself why I disclosed so much to you. Why did the *mute boy* share private details of his life just now, Tatum?”

I snort. “Wow, you’re taunting me? This is the thanks I get—and trust me—I have never needed validation for supporting your ungrateful ass in the past, Jamie.”

“I remember you helping fight my bullies. Actually, now, you’re Los Angeles’s *Shero*. During my last visit with Nan—”

“That’s your mother. Call her—”

“*Nan* shared how proud of you she is. How she attends your weekly self-defense classes, never misses a single one.” I don’t know if Jamie’s resentful or not. The tone of his voice never increases or dips or bleeds in any form of emotion.

He’s all factual.

Precise.

Then he pulls the beating heart right out of my chest with a passive inquiry. “No one ever disclosed to Camdyn the spat you had with ... hmmm ... Harrison . . . Herrington a few months ago?”

“Wh-what?” *Jamie knows that Nan had the boys rough Harrison up. Of course, he knows. Just not Cam. Oh, shit!*

“My clan encouraged Harrison, so to speak.” Jamie’s penetrating, aquamarine eyes scan the holding tank as if uncertain of what’s permissible. “Cam was kept in the dark. Otherwise, my *good brother* would have corrected Harrison himself.”

I hold my chin high. “No. Cam never knew.” *He would’ve murdered Harrison.*

“Thought so.” Jamie smiles, yet it doesn’t reach his eyes. “You and I have our own secrets. Nan will keep yours until you’re ready, and I only speak to *the* MacKenzies when

required of me, so rest assured, I will guard yours with my life,
Tatum. Now, I honestly must be going.”

RIVER

Vail, Colorado

Everyone pulled through on their end of Tatum's dictatorship, giving Park a birthday party, which left him beaming in pride. Now, my indescribably sexy woman stands to her feet. Even in a crowd of people, she's easy to find. I can feel her.

Boos and heckling grate my ears. I haven't heard this much aggression since I was dethroning Berserk in an underground match years back. This is a first in my UFC career, hearing the negativity louder than the cheers.

At least forty thousand people bemoan how Oleg has circled me for the last two and a half minutes.

The greatest fear of his life is in a position to lay him out. But he's a merry-go-round as I let him come to me.

Annoyed by my smug grin, Oleg lifts a leg, tossing it toward my liver. The bitch's toes never touch me.

Gripping his ankle in my hands, I give a menacing smile, watching shock cloud his gaze. I tug him down to the canvas. An ear-shattering horn overshadows my flawless takedown. The ref dashes between us, calling the first round.

I sit on my side, glaring at the four-year veteran.

“You are in his head. Now listen,” Jhang steps in my path.
“He’s on the defense. Bring Oleg low and finish him!”

I look toward Bao, whose raisin face speaks volumes, but his lips don’t.

“I got my chi.” I press my hand against my heart.

“*Ugh*, chi. Him loser anyway.” He waves me off.

“Yup, he’s a loser, *Yéye*.” I smile, never slighted by his diss and let the bottle of water cool my insides, then climb to my feet.

We come back to the center of the cage.

Well, I do.

Oleg favors the edge.

Fear’s got him there.

The only thing is ... if I get Oleg against the cage, that’s his end. I let the first twenty seconds fall away.

He’s circling me again, feeling me out. Thirty-five seconds the boos start. Half my mouth’s tilted. Oleg’s eyes beg me to *move*.

It’s the Mexican all over again.

But tonight, I give UFC a show, and then I propose to the woman I love.

TATUM

Raw, unfiltered energy flows from River while warring thoughts of burning desire and benevolence flow through me. I'm in a trance as he dominates his opponent with the size and appetite of a god.

As the ref calls the round, Camdyn, whose arm encircles Willow, slings the opposite one around my neck. "That's my dude. Taught that motherfecker everything he knows."

"You wish, Cam." I shrug him off, laughing. Camdyn turns to Willow, giving her a lingering kiss. I can't help but notice the shift in Camdyn and Willow. Even as we boarded the airplane to Vail, subdued giggles and lingering touches passed between the newly engaged couple.

I let my eyes flicker to the second row where River seated his father. Poto is so friggen unaware that River's on to him. He's more than at ease. Why wouldn't he be? His son footed the bill for his plane ticket, hotel stay, *and* dinner comps. With arms extended, the bloodsucker hollers, seconding Camdyn's statement, yet declaring *he* taught his son everything. At his side, the ever-meek, fake Heilani winces at the sight of a King Kong Zombie member assessing River for damage. The bitch

ain't all that great of an actor; however, remorse lingers in Constance's gaze.

The electric-charged area settles down collectively. Once the second round is signaled, we all launch onto our feet. The heckling commences. It reminds me of the legendary match between *Kimbo Slice* and his long, forgotten adversary. I'm sure people hear "Bring Oleg down!" a thousand miles away on repeat. Agonizing heat assaults the backs of my eyes at the enthralling sight.

Momma, you would be so proud of Riv.

Fisting my hands together, I press them to my mouth and watch the flawless movements. When I was a child, my father's submissions were everything to me. Now, my River is my all. He does the dance, the one that leaves me in reverence of him—another flawless submission under his belt.

As the energy in the room lights up strong enough for the earth to be viewed galaxies away, I watch River straddle the cage.

Commentators question *Rage's* strategy when he comes to his feet on our side.

"Thank you," he says, removing the microphone from one of the anchor's hands.

"I'm not the favorite at the moment, but I hope you all don't mind." His eyes are on me, and my heart jets up into my throat, knocking swiftly at the narrow column before tumbling out of my ajar lips.

"What are you doing?" I mouth as my dark, alluring, and so very beautiful *Rage* takes my hand, pulling me up on wobbling stilettos. Beneath my ankle-length silk slip dress,

I'm trembling. Every inch of me shudders. He escorts me up the octagon steps and into the cage.

"A couple of months ago, my woman found the engagement ring I had for her, so I let her have it."

I look up at the Jumbotron, which has captured my nervous daze. *Best not to stare.*

Camdyn's on the partition at the opposite side of the cage, handing River something.

"So, like I told my woman, I got her a new ring. It's not as grand as the one on her hand now. Guys," River continues to talk to the crowd, "don't be cheap, go broke or go home."

He waltzes back over, swagger unmatched and muscles rippling.

Every inch of him shines in delicious sweat. River's eyes brim with passion while mine are chock-full of tears.

"Tatum, you know what I'm gonna ask you now."

I'm surprised when my head bobs up and down, and I eagerly say, "I do."

"Little too soon for I dos," he responds charismatically.

Offering a good-natured eye roll, I laugh as the entire world laughs with me.

Awes and chuckles permeate the atmosphere as River drops to one knee.

He snorts. "Good thing I didn't break any bones tonight."

I offer a complementary smile to his cocky demeanor.

"Tatum, I was never a good guy, but you made me better and continue to do so every day. I not only love you for the man you make me—a better man—and there's no better place

for me than in your heart because you've been in mine since the day I set eyes on you. I've loved you longer than I have loved myself, harder too."

The tenderness in his voice caresses my spirit in light.

"It ain't gonna be easy, Tatum. I am who I am, but if I keep fighting for you every day of my life, I think at least I will somehow touch your level and be worthy of your love too. Marry me?"

"Yes! Yessss, you're mine!" I cling to his sweaty body. River sucks in an indiscernible groan. The altercation from the other night still aggravates his center. Although I attempt to loosen my hold on River, he instinctively crushes me to him like our connection could save his soul.

"I love you, Riv." I sniffle as applause surrounds us. This was the moment River had been waiting for.

For us.

For me.

And I couldn't be prouder.

RIVER

Little Camryn was still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when we all headed toward our hotel rooms after the match. You can't promise a seven-year-old nothing unless you intend to keep said promise. So, after midnight, Tatum and I found ourselves indebted to the little swindler in negative degree weather—shit doesn't make any sense—and wearing swim trunks I had no idea Tatum had brought us.

Now, we're standing inside the closed door of the cabin. Tatum's wearing both the hotel's complimentary terry cloth robes. She peeks from directly behind me as if Mother Nature ain't scary enough. I roll my eyes. *Hiding from a seven-year-old.*

"Is he out there?" Tatum's grumble is muffled by her face smashed into my shoulder.

"Take a look for yourself." I scoot over so she can take a look at the hot tub off in the distance. White snow surrounds the area and a little butterscotch kid who's ten times more fearless than me.

“Just great,” Tatum groans, “he has a marshmallow mustache *and* a full mug of hot chocolate! Camryn will want to stay outside until the break of dawn.”

“Why did you bring our swim trunks?”

She sputters, “We’re on vacation, Riv.”

“Again, I ask why?” I snarl at her, looking toward the fire crackling in the hearth on the opposite side of our cabin.

“Well ... my momma said when on vacation, you pack an LBD—”

“What?” My eyes tear away from Little Camryn chilling in the hot tub.

“Sheesh, Riv. I wasn’t mentioning my monthly or anything. But while we’re on the subject, she said always to be prepared with an LBD—a little black dress—tampons, and a swimsuit or two.”

“Alright, then you go out there.”

“No, the Black part of me ain’t having it.”

“The Black *and* Chinese parts of you are wearing the only two robes this place has to offer. What about me?”

Her gaze flickers to wear Camryn has made himself nice and comfortable. His tiny head barely peeks over the side of the wooden railing. *God, one of us has to go out there with him.* While Tatum found the most luxurious resort for us to stay, the place isn’t kid-friendly. Everywhere there’s a wall or a chalkboard outlining rules that children must follow.

No kids in the hot tub ALONE.

I fold my arms over just as her cellphone vibrates between her breasts. Exhaling deeply, Tatum answers, “I know you see

your son outside, Willow. I've got a visual on him too—yes ... yes ... But—yes ... Well, Cam's from Scotland. And he's *white, white*, so let him go out."

The smile I was hiding fades when it becomes apparent that Tatum's losing the argument. Her nose furrows in determination. "Alright, River's on his way now—"

I raise my voice. "And Stubby."

"I understand that breaking promises to a little kid ..." My woman trails off, bottom lip poking out, then she hangs up.

"So?" I cock a brow.

"She said that *Camdyn* said there'll be a lot of carving knives in our future if we don't follow through with our promises."

"Did he now?" I flex my fingers underneath, feigning menace.

A part of me wants to toss Tatum out and lock the door behind her. But she looks up beneath a fan of lashes with the most gorgeous pair of brown eyes I've ever seen. "Okay, best friend. We can do this."

I nod.

I unlatch the sliding glass door and gesture. "After you."

My girl knows me well. She takes my hand, and we step out into fucking Antarctica.

* * *

The hot soak was just what I needed. Listening to Camryn talk our ears off and Tatum attempt to answer each of his bizarre questions reminded me why I just placed another ring on her

finger. She'd even returned my robe on the way out of the tub. We've returned to our cabin and showered. I watch the warm glow over Tatum's skin and help her towel off.

"Thanks," she murmurs.

I'm about to kiss her breathless when she twists the diamond from her engagement finger and places the rock in the palm of my hand.

"What are you doing?" I pull a brow.

"Well, after Ryn asking how the moon can't melt the snow, I'm not sure I can handle many more questions, so this better be your last." She pauses, eyes lit up.

"What?"

"I'm beginning to appreciate our little blessings, such as us enduring frostbite to play in the hot tub with Ryn."

"How's that?"

"Because we would've already had sex by now." Tatum slides closer to me, palms sweeping over my wet chest. "Anyway, to answer your question about the ring, I'm making room for my new ring." She marvels at the white gold band with infinities etched into the simple design, similar to the necklace Renee had given her.

I take Tatum's hand. "First, we don't just fuck. Second, you gotta keep the flashy one."

"You bought the new one without suggestions." She places her hand near her heart. "It means more."

I snort. "Honestly, Stubby. I didn't purchase the first with anybody's suggestions, except ... I mean, Harrison mentioned a jeweler. So, yes, if that's what you mean." I gesture to her tight, tiny fist. "That'll turn green."

“Boy, you lie!” She chortles.

“It won’t, but the ring wasn’t even half the price.” At the look on Tatum’s face, I concede. “Put it on, end of story. Time for my winnings.” My arm loops a slender waist, tugging Tatum to me like the barbarian that I am.

As my tongue runs the sweet swerve of Tatum’s breasts, she stitches her fingers through my hair. “River, just one thing before happy time. I’m not wearing the old ring. You know what infinity means now? Even though I’m sure you knew what it was when—”

I cut in, pulling a nipple into my mouth. “When my good girl shyly mentioned it during our first real conversation.”

Tatum dips her head away from my scrutiny. “Yup. I suck at the art of seduction and conversation. Let’s forget that day for *so* many reasons.”

“I wouldn’t erase our worse moment. It has made us grow together. Enough talk, Stubby. I couldn’t shut the fuck up during my proposal earlier—”

“No, you were perfect. Spoke from the heart.”

“I was a nervous wreck.” I shrug a shoulder while the sweetest pair of lips brush my jaw.

“Can I tell you something, Riv?”

“Look, I know I’m guilty of saying you weren’t shy while angry with you, but we can’t still be at the point in our relationship where you gotta ask. Little Bit, say anything.”

Tatum twists the new band around her engagement finger. “It’s something important. I’ll tell you in a few weeks.”

I pant. “Shit, Stubby. We got a baby on the way?”

“No,” she exasperates, wiggling from my arms. “My father —”

It dawns on me. Like a ton of fucking bricks crashing atop my head. “We *had* a baby! When you were sixteen, and I was in the slammer. You—”

“Good lawd, River, have you lost it!” Tatum settles on the edge of the hotel bed. A complimentary lotion bottle lays next to her hip. While threading her fingers through a fur blanket, she sniggers. “No more movie night, River.”

I crouch down. “So, we didn’t have a kid? Still sounds ... big?”

A gorgeous face slowly tracks up and down. “You’ll give me a few weeks, and you promise not to overreact.” Tatum erects a slender pinkie between us.

“Little Bit, I can’t promise anything until I’m aware—”

“Please?”

I lock my finger around hers and, as always, marvel at her smooth, unblemished skin compared to my scarred, tatted flesh. I kiss Tatum’s knuckles.

Seconds later, her eyes fall over my rippling skin. “Riv, sexy time now?”

I chuckle at her innocent choice of words. “Yup.” Dropping to her knees, Tatum replaces the consistent throb along the side of my rib with her mouth.

I clasp a hand through Tatum’s curly hair with one hand as she transitions to nips and nibbles on the sides of my abdomen, slowly working her way down.

“Mhhh.” She stands tall. “I’m always the fully naked one between us.”

A gasp tumbles from Tatum's mouth as I lean down, pinching her nipple between my fingers and flicking it with my tongue. "Just needs some Red Rooster."

"Nope. I'm the best taste you've ever had. No add-ons required." She presses firmly at my chest.

Laughing, I've fallen to my knees, tossed a thigh over my shoulder.

I stroke Tatum with my mouth along her slit, and my hands memorize the shape of her hips.

I kiss Tatum's pussy, long, luxuriously, leaving only one of us out of breath.

"Oh, River, baby, I love it when you make love to me."

I glance up at her, lips glossed in her honey. "You cast a spell on me, Little Bit. I will make love to you all night long."

My mouth trails a scorching fire along her neck and breasts, sucking and prodding her belly button.

By this time, Tatum aches with need. Senses overloading, Tatum falls into me. "River, I need ... I need your dick," she cries.

I roll us over onto the floor. With my woman writhing on the fur rug, she slips her fingers between her thighs. I incline my head, making a low, contented hum before replacing her wet fingers with my tongue.

Slick-fisted hands assault the rug around us. Every nerve lights up where I stiff-tongue the fuck out of Tatum's cunt until we feel so connected that neither heaven nor hell could pass between us.

Tatum's rolling over a sea of never-ending orgasms. I don't expect it when her hips launch fully off the floor. I'm sure her

shouting can be heard throughout the entire resort. I press against her body, dick sinking in slow.

Fingers dig crescents in my ass, coveting more.

“We have all night,” I whisper against Tatum’s mouth.

“I know, but ...” She sobs, shivering while my fingertips race over her goosebump flesh. “You feel so good, Riv. I’m gonna die.”

“Stay alive for me.” I pop a pert nipple into my mouth, holding it there while grinding the full length of my cock into the depth of Tatum’s core. I’ve gone so deep she clenches against me.

Fingernails draw blood.

Breath teases my jaw.

Tatum stutters until she can’t control herself any longer. Her release is so strong, it almost tips me over the edge. A tidal wave of cum massages my cock, and I pray with all my might that I’ll last all night.

After all, my woman deserves it.

TATUM

Two weeks later ...

Angry geese let out high-pitched squawks into the early morning as webbed feet trample the emerald lakebed. Uncle Malcolm and I pick up our pace, running at the park in his Long Beach housing community.

“These little dudes are ruthless,” I pant, glaring over my shoulder.

Malcolm laughs, removing more feed from his hoodie. His lengthy stride keeps him parallel to my retreat.

“You’re tryna kill us, Malcolm!”

“Nah. These guys have a set time they like to be fed.” He pauses to dump more feed for the geese. As we settle into a swift pace, he adds, “They will not be ignored.”

“Well, I was open for a laidback chat. It’s nice out here.” I glimpse the sun presenting itself across the lake. “But if you’re gonna keep playing goose evangelist, then I’ll get to the point.”

Malcolm jams his hands into his hoodie, gesturing that he's all out. "Despite the geese, this is a good place to run. I got a belt after making this area my morning regimen."

"I'll tell Riv."

He nods as we continue to meander along the pathway. "Tell him I said he's one of the good ones. Helluva match in Colorado, and his proposal."

I smile fondly. "It was a very eventful time. I know we were supposed to meet to talk earlier about what you've uncovered, but we ended up staying a little longer. Kind of a funny story."

He pauses. "PG story?"

"Oh yeah. Despite the proposal, very PG. Unless you count the gnarly, twisted leg of a seven-year-old."

"Shit," he mutters. "Kid okay?"

"Yup."

"Do tell."

"My godson, Camryn, who will definitely be a UFC champion one day, unless he chooses any other more challenging endeavors, is the kid in question. We all went *beginner* snowboarding. One stunt attempt later, his mother, who is usually quite composed, bawls her eyes out, waiting for the ambulance. Then the five-year-old, their other son William, has streams running down his face."

"I bet."

"Camdyn, their father tells Camryn to *man the fuck up*. Did I mention that I hadn't looked down the slope until Ryn was roaring that he *is* a man? At the sight of his leg, I hurled vomit down the side of the mountain."

“Did you hit them?”

“Almost.” I chuckle. “I’ve seen Father, River, you, and a slew of men bloodied and bruised. I honestly don’t know what got into me.”

“That’s crazy.”

“We stayed at an Airbnb, even accompanying William to the Museum of Nature & Science. So, that’s my news. We were parents for a while to a good kid. A really good, quiet kid.”

I twirl my new engagement band, delighting at the notion of us blending into parent life in the future.

A few miles around the loop, I settle onto a bench, allowing much needed oxygen to fill my lungs. “So ...”

“Aw, man, we’re chatting schemes now. I was interested in more stories of my niecey-poo’s life.”

I shake my head, laughing. “Oh, no!”

“Okay, no niecey-poo. Listen, I have a financial adviser looking into everything Harrison has touched concerning any contracts I’ve had with him.”

“Good idea.” *I should’ve done the same with River. All of our business paperwork is in the home office. Riv wouldn’t have to know until ...*

“I got the best—rather not accuse Harrison of something without concrete evidence.” Malcolm elbows my arm. “See, your unc can think like a cop. While waiting on that, I did schedule a meeting with Harrison. Tried to look around the office while he excused himself for a chat with his bodyguard. Since I didn’t know when he’d come back, I chose not to push it.”

“Understood.” A year ago, I wouldn’t fathom *asking* Malcolm to do my legwork, but despite our ragtag team, a bittersweet smile mellows out the tension in my face. *This is bonding. Woah!*

“Thanks, Malcolm.”

“I’ll stay on the lookout,” he promises. “And the second the adviser reaches out, if Harrison has cheated me, whatever beef you have with him won’t matter.”

Although Malcolm punctuates his wolfish grin with a wink, intuition crawls over my spine. The very best fight my uncle ever had just might still be ahead of him.

“Thanks, Un ... Uncle Malcolm. Um, I know Riv invited you to his past matches, um.” The olive branch slowly erodes as I gulp. “I’m formally inviting you to River’s next match in Tennessee. Though, I’m not sure if you’d be interested.”

“Nah, nah, nah, now, you’ve already invited me. So I’ll meet my niecey-pooch in Tennessee.” Malcolm bumps a shoulder against mine, smiling. And this time, I have no qualms with the nickname. I’m sorta hoping that the term sparks a new era in our once tarnished relationship.

* * *

Around lunchtime, I’ve swapped out joggers for jeans and a blazer. The melody of a string quartet on a restaurant portico has replaced the goose’s cackle. I pinch the bridge of my nose, stymieing a headache while gliding past white-linen tables. The constant click of my heel stalls at the sight of Spencer’s company.

My once *frenemy* climbs from his seat, brushes down his tie, and pulls me into a platonic embrace. “I’m sorry for blindsiding you, Tatum. Don’t kill me. Mother’s here to assist.”

His tone’s genuine, and if I contemplate hard enough, I remember when we were kids, I honestly thought he was my cousin. Father’s side of the family did have a lack of good cousins.

As he removes a chair for me, Bethany’s assessing gander stops over every inch of me like a bulletin of key points. The mechanisms in her psyche are readily readable:

When did her husband take an interest in me?

What did I have that she didn’t?

Bethany nods from her seat, voice aloof. “Good afternoon, Tatum.”

Agitated, I stand awkwardly as insinuation congests the air. Assuming the proper volume for the time and place, I hear an emotive pitch in my tone as I ask, “Did you know?”

Bethany nervously sweeps a hand over her shoulder. “Well, you don’t waste any—”

With a swallow of emotions, I cut in. “Did you?” Although not drawing attention from the other patrons, I can’t help the sniffling of tears that never should have been.

“Not entirely, Tatum.”

Without a word, Spencer places a hand over mine. It’s not one of those pretentious gestures but more calming and affectionate. I thank him for the seat he offered.

As I settle in, I say, “When in reference to helpless children, grown-ups should not take their instincts for granted.

With that being said, I'll refine my inquiry: Did you *feel* something off?"

An irate mouth pulls tight, only to fall into a shameful dump. "I acknowledged Harrison's fondness of you, Tatum. I had a refined upbringing. We don't *do* such reprehensible acts. We don't even think of such—"

"*We* apologize." Spencer settles down next to her.

Bethany's brow twists at her son's suggestion. Her expression never changes, but the quiver in her voice makes me believe her when she utters, "I'm s-sorry."

More time than necessary blankets us in unmalleable silence. Though contrary to my upbringing, I'm not at the point where I'm capable of forgiving Bethany. Luckily, Spencer becomes the perfect buffer. "I brought Mother along so that maybe she can provide insight for your cause."

twenty-seven

RIVER

“So, you’re here for Heilani?” Poto darkens the doorway of his duplex, jamming a hand into a dingy pair of jeans.

“Yup.” A cocksure grin spotlights all that I need to convey.

Stalling, he drops a shoulder against the doorframe. “Son, that match a few weeks ago was amazing. Did I thank you?”

I love how readily he’s incorporated that trusty title—*son*.

Contemplatively, I rub a hand over the nape of my neck. “Yeah, you thanked me.”

“When’s your next match?” Poto playfully erects his dukes.

“Four months.” I gulp. Waiting for my three guaranteed matches hurts more than an ankle lock submission. “Unless ...”

“Unless what?” Eager palms rub together.

I glance past Poto into the four-by-four living room.

Looking over his shoulder, he suddenly realizes something. “You wanna come in?”

Fucking cringiest moment of my life. What son ever has to ask their father to enter his home? I hadn't meant to get out of my ride, but Constance's phone number was inactive. I reply, "Eh, Ma and I have an appointment with the realtor. Second showing and all."

He waves me off, removing himself from the doorframe. "Your ma's still dressing. That realtor probably thinks this is the one with you returning to the same house for another look. Beer or coke?"

This is the one.

And so, it begins.

My father allows me into the shitty lair he calls his own.

"I'll take a brewsky." Before stepping one foot inside, I inhale the grimy Los Angeles smog, preferring it to the ass permeating the living room. The carpet has a mushy consistency as I walk over it in my steel-toed boots. A slew of Netflix options is on the television screen on the wall. I ain't a betting man, so I stroll past the couch Poto nudges his head to and lean against the pony wall, which separates the kitchen from the living room. This place makes Tatum's old studio apartment look like a well-loved family home.

Poto slides a beer bottle over the counter. I clutch it, uncork it, and gulp down the crisp, cold draft.

"Nice?"

I almost roll my eyes. *Not bashing a Budweiser, but whatever.* "Sure. Ma, I'm here," I call out.

"She just got outta the shower, son. Take it easy. So, this house ... can I roll with y'all? Maybe see *her* house, too?"

“Ehhhh.” I run my hand over my jaw. *This is the last time Constance can be honest. Will she clam up with Poto around?*

“Nah. You know what, though,” I point the bottle at him, “when I swing by to drop *Ma* off, you can follow me to the MacKenzies. I never quite *formally* introduced you to all of them.”

What once appeared like a prime opportunity doesn't strike Poto with the same interest. Over the years, he reiterated the same plea, asking if Clan MacKenzie had any *missions* they needed assistance with.

I was fourteen, playing employment specialist to my father. He wanted in on Clan MacKenzie's life of crime so bad he could taste it.

Though his eyes don't shine like Christmas, Poto rubs his hands together. Scheming script runs before his eyes as if he's calculating the assignments the clan might need completing before he can snatch the house from Constance's clutches. He finally smiles. “Alright. Sounds like a plan, son.”

* * *

A few days ago, the five-bedroom home on a quiet block in Inglewood went into escrow. As I pull into the narrow driveway, the skyscraper-like palm trees draw shadows over my SUV and the freshly stuccoed walls. Inside, the sellers also installed new carpeting. Though not fully renovated, the place is solid, and the home is ready to become a shelter for those in need.

As I open the driver's side door, I catch the faint smile on Constance's face as she slowly grabs the handle. I climb out, hoping that she seizes this final opportunity to . . . *live*.

“I remember when I first showed you this place,” I tell fake Heilani, looping an arm over her shoulder to head up the narrow pathway. “It was the day after Tatum and I returned from Colorado. The realtor said this house would fly off the market, remember?”

Constance’s eyes spark in memory as I open the home, sweeping my arm before us. She’s the first to enter. Instead of reevaluating Poto’s schemes, the bitch gains confidence with each step.

She meanders around the wall that separates the tightly confined rooms, entering the kitchen. “I can’t wait to open the walls, bring this home to the current century, son. I’ll have my cous—” She stops with a slight cough, “Um, some of those less fortunate handymen who sit outside Home Depot knock the walls down for cheap.”

Ahh, the less fortunate? Venom tightens my veins. Lips pinched into a cool smile, I suggest, “Just make sure they’re not demolishing load-bearing walls.”

The scrawny meth head beams up at me, eyes full of fresh elated tears. Without a single idea of what I had just recommended, she asks, “What does my son like to eat? Once we get this house in order, your old ma’s making you anything.”

The taboo word ricochets through my ears.

Son.

I’ll never understand the emotions surrounded by that word.

And Constance has never felt more comfortable deceiving me.

I jerk a shoulder in response. “I like lemon-pepper wings. Bake me a coconut cake.”

“Oh, I love cake! Your father loves wings. I love—” While making quick work of the dust-covered curtains and ties, Constance pauses to stifle a sneeze. “Achoo! Excuse me.”

“God bless you.”

“Thanks. As I was saying,” she replies, peering through the area, “I love coconut frosted cake. Yo-you get that from me.”

My brows lift, astonished. “That right?”

With a vigorous nod, fake Heilani sails past me. In a few hurried steps, she’s entered one of the smaller rooms. “Ever since you first brought me here, I kept telling myself *this* is the perfect nursery.”

An eerie jolt jets over my spine.

I’m panicking. This is what panicking feels like! Narrowing my eyes, I catch up with her, growling, “Come again?”

“A nursery, Riv. For your younger brother.” An affectionate hand drops over a flat abdomen. “When Poto brought me from Samoa, one thing led to another, ya know. Now, your little brother’s on his way.”

“Brother?” My knees go weak. *Fuck, I’m not murdering an innocent.*

Conflicting thoughts war in my psyche.

Each one striving to dominate:

Kill them.

Spare the baby.

But what if this is another lie? An unassuming reason to introduce Poto into the home I purchased.

Rolling a fond palm over her flat tummy, Constance asks, “I understand you and Poto are making peace with each other. But you wouldn’t allow the baby to grow up in a broken home, would you?”

The fuck I wouldn’t!

I survived the streets for half of my miserable ass life.

Time to strike the *honor thy mother* stipulation from our relationship. I stalk toward her, fury smoldering my flesh. “Constance, *are* you pregnant?”

Skin flushed with torment, Constance stutters, “Di-did you just call me—”

Past events deluge over six feet of muscle with ferocity. My hands seize the fraud’s throat, applying firm, taunting pressure. “Bitch. Are. You. Fucking. Pregnant!”

While a lethal rage infuses my tone, she stammers, “No-nooo.”

“No, what?” I bark.

The flesh beneath my palms runs hot from Constance’s embarrassment. “Sorry, River. I’m not expecting.”

The bitch’s speech increases in pace, listing off excuses. Once she realizes throwing all the blame my father’s way won’t grant her mercy, she switches gears.

I deflect the blow to my jaw, pinning her wrists above her head with one hand.

The other conquers her throat again. Though my tone’s light, a strain weaves through it as I murmur, “Little too

fucking late for apologies. I'm a person. I have feelings too.”

I gulp down my emotions—that tiny desire to have a family. I twist my hands swiftly, leaving her neck at an impossible position. Constance's body drops onto the new carpet.

One wayward lamb down.

Time to slaughter my greatest monster.

twenty-eight

TATUM

River said he'd be out all night, and the less I know, the better. The ink's still wet from all the signatures on the house. I'm guessing Constance had a change of heart, or my man's handled his shit. Either way, he told me to go out. Be seen in public until he calls.

I had a slew of unaware alibis. The last two, though, may very well keep me out of the slammer if River's actions are ever prosecuted. However, they didn't get me out of the bind I sorely needed assistance with.

Meeting with Bethany didn't unearth anything new, except that Marian, the young lady similar in age to Spencer and me, moved out of the country with her family. Now, the woman who I intended to interview has been stricken from the board. A tiny part of me prayed that finding her would lead to a dead end.

That Harrison had only harmed me.

I think back to earlier when Bethany embraced me like a mother would and apologized a thousand times.

I didn't know how anxious I was until the precise second I forgave her.

Now, I'm navigating the furthest part of Los Angeles. I drove past Camdyn and Willow's exit a while back. They were supposed to be my last shield for the evening, but I couldn't do it with their being newly engaged like us.

So, I'll drown my sorrow in a personal pan pizza.

It's probably a good sign that I should call Dr. Beck and not pour my emotions into calories after a sedentary day of driving to the boondocks.

A few blocks away from my favorite pizza joint, I spot a mini skirt with legs for days, sauntering on the curb's edge of a liquor store. Beautiful kinky blond coils furrow in the wind. The mixed chick with a *bad* attitude is infamous around these parts.

Devi's a few teaspoons lighter than Willow. They share the same hazel eyes, except this prostitute will cut her gaze at you like a shank to the liver.

The wheels of my ride glide to a stop. Widening her legs provocatively, Devi leans her forearms into my opened car window, lips corked, as her head lowers.

"Hey, baby?" A velvet tongue curls over plush, glossed lips until her eyes land on me, then it's all stab-flick glowers and sneers.

I return her original affection. "Sup, Devi?"

"Aw, Officer Li, if I assumed you wanted to ride my face ___"

I cut in, "Barf."

“Heh, don’t act like you weren’t *looking after* what you desire. All that hounding me. ‘Here, take a vitamin C pack. It will keep your pussy nice and tight,’ ” the prostitute mimics.

“Devi, get in the car before I haul you in.”

“You undercover?” She starts to back away.

“No. This is my ride.”

“Then naw!”

I lean my elbow onto the center console and call out, “I’ll pay you a hundred just to chat.”

“Don’t harass me, Officer Li.”

Arms wrap around a slender midriff. Devi stalks away.

“Two hundred.”

Slamming the shift into reverse, I peel backward, only to receive death threats and anarchy. A Los Angeleno cuts around to my side, declaring to half the city that I’m a *cunt* before skirting off.

Unfazed, I call out, “Three hundred, Devi.”

“Fuck you!” Shifting in her stilettos, she strolls the other way.

I shift gears and dip my head to continue our negotiations. “Five hundred dollars, bitch.”

The door opens. “Okay, *bitch*. But I don’t eat carpet.”

Glancing into the side-view mirror, I ease into the lane. “Relax. I’m taken. I’ll pay you to—”

“Screw your man?” A grin flickers over Devi’s face as she turns in her seat, letting her legs glide to the side. “Listen, a

girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, but I'll ride your fiancé gladly."

"No." I take a cleansing breath. *Stubby, stop seeing red. You can't kill her.*

"You love him, Officer Li?"

I nod.

"I saw the proposal and everything. How does an evil bitch like you get such a good man? Or does he put hands on you? Is that his flaw? They all have a flaw."

Heat pools behind my eyes. "River's perfect."

As we silently coast down the street, I realize the jezebel's scrutinizing gaze doesn't metaphorically massacre me. I wonder what brought Devi to the streets. While the LAPD rarely has training to understand the people we interact with, I made it my mission to be more empathetic. Can't accomplish that without education.

There's a strong correlation between those who are sexually abused and Devi's occupation.

As I stall at a stop sign, I ask, "What do you like to eat, Devi?"

"Doesn't matter." She loops curly strands behind her ear. "What do you need me to do?"

"We can chat over a warm meal."

Her shoulder hefts. " 'The rich would have to eat money if the poor did not provide food.' "

I kick up a brow.

"Russian proverb." Devi waves a nonchalant hand. "I'll eat whatever you buy."

As I drive away, something hits me. *Her urban accent disappears on occasion?*

* * *

Less than twenty minutes later, anticipation shrinks my stomach as we settle down at a booth away from the pitiful pizzeria arcade, a conclave area with a handful of old-school video games.

I glance at the woman who wouldn't make much of an alibi given her occupation and offer a warm smile, sliding over the laminated menu.

“Nothing like their garlic chicken pizza. But of course, order whatever you'd like.”

“Okay.” Not sparing a single glance at the menu, Devi drops the bill of fare into the slot next to the napkins.

For some reason, her disinterest sends adrenaline charging through me. *I can't just bring myself to discuss Harrison, not yet.* I ask, “You want a salad too, Devi? Or soup? The Italian wedding soup is—”

“If you're buttering me up for someone's fetish, stop it. I can disconnect myself from taboo and give it the same mindless treatment as missionary. I can moan on key.” She ends on a melodic note and cocky wink.

The thought of her seducing someone for a livelihood makes me queasy.

Devi glares at me. “Hey, if you're gonna stare at me with ... with contempt, I'm out!”

“I'm not.” Again, I'm getting all philosophical while ruminating over her choice of words. Most people from the

hood don't go around tossing *contempt* into their daily jargon.

So, what the hell separates her from me?

What makes us different?

My brows tug together as I muse over her enhanced vocabulary in certain instances and the Russian proverb.

I clear my throat. "I need you to screw someone and gather intel for me in his house."

"You wearing a wire?"

"No."

A sardonic head tilts. I climb out of the booth and move toward her side. Nonchalantly, she gropes me. Hands sweep over my breasts, around my hips, and along my spine.

All mechanics.

No desire.

The pimple-faced waiter gawks, clearing his throat. I put in the order, and he's still blinking when Devi grits that he cannot afford her.

Once the horndog excuses himself, a curious gaze lands on me. "What's the risk, Officer Li?"

"The man in question has bodyguards."

"Should I attend to them too?"

"No"

"So, I gotta assume you don't wanna fuck this person," Devi inquires as we receive Michelin-star service. Pimples has returned with two pre-made salads in hand. He waits, seeming eager for me to answer.

“Kick rocks.” Her frizzy hair shags as she gestures. “Why not, Officer Li?”

I tip my head. After a moment of thought, I say, “He’s old.”

With a knowing look, Devi says, “Oh.” She wiggles around, and I grow uncomfortable as our eyes connect. The room spins around us as words that aren’t necessary become a silent utterance between us. At this second, I don’t shun, condemn, or feel shame for what Devi’s had to do to survive. Because we both have had the same start in some way and have survived the best way we know how.

As understanding passes between us, a fragment of a smile descends on Devi’s lips. “Alright, Officer Li. So, the dude’s old. Like just lay there with his oxygen mask or ...”

“Harrison’s perfectly capable of doing things with you. He’s, um, my sources say he has a penchant for young women. And that among his associates, they’ve been known to purchase a woman, or women, for the night. But you’re twenty-two and hardly look eighteen.”

“Yup. One of my regulars says not a day over fifteen.” The left side of Davi’s mouth contorts, and she stabs a few lettuce leaves.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not what you think I am, Tatum. ‘I am who I think you think I am.’ Charles Horton Cooley.”

Although dwelling on *finally* dethroning Harrison, I lie. “Understood.”

RIVER

The ultralights of an eighteen-wheeler pulling out of wrought iron gates washes over Poto's toothy grin. The driver, having seen me before, nods in my direction before I drive into the lot. Poto emits a low whistle of appreciation as he surveys MacKenzie Freight Lines. Though dark out, the outline of big rigs trailing across the massive compound appears like individual golden nuggets before his eyes. We climb out of my SUV. As I pass the trunk, I wonder when the scent of Constance's body will become apparent.

Until earlier, my father was supposed to be in that small space, rotting away. Then I reconstructed my game plan. As if cued by some satanic cult classic, Camdyn bursts through the doors of the main building, sporting a similar grin as Poto. Though both dudes' cheesy demeanors are for vastly disparaging reasons. Except, one could say they're both greedy.

Poto covets money.

Cam craves *his blood*.

“Bro, I found my old katana. My playlist is ready with classical mus ...” He stops, glimpsing Poto, who’d reached back into my ride for a whiskey-laced Slurpee.

Sucking the sugary, toxic confection, my father extends a hand.

Blue-green eyes glare at the gesture, then target my direction. “What is he doing here, River?”

Which is Camdyn-speak for *what is he doing conscious?* The original plan was for Poto to be in the trunk, not Constance.

“Willow’s talking wedding plans,” Camdyn rants, “fecking double wedding plans. I didn’t bombard you with nuptial *blether*. Why are you fecking with the plans we have?”

I groan. The way Camdyn’s going about things, one would think we were on the way to a strip club tonight. He’s very particular about torture.

“Gimme a sec.” I place a hand on my father’s shoulder, telling him to stay in the massive semi garage. I follow Camdyn into the office, consisting of a single desk and paperwork.

“River? Talk to me, bro. I just wanted to marry my *lassie*, make it official. Not discuss various shades of pink or blue. I don’t give a feck about chartreuse.” His Scottish brogue grows so thick I can’t distinguish the rest of his statement. “You promised me a body!”

“I brought the body, Cam,” I growl.

“You did?” Sudden confusion fades out the animosity.

“*In* the trunk.”

His voice pitches with excitement. “There’s another bod
—”

“Yes, Cam. Listen, cut the body in a million pieces for all I care long as you get rid of the bitch for me.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“Also, I brought you another body. A *warm* body.”

At this precise second, my best friend resembles his son during Spider-Man time. His obsessed gander falls toward the tinted door to the dimwit glancing around the cab of a shiny blue Peterbilt. Poto’s imaging the wealth of stolen goods hauled on that ass at any given time.

“He doesn’t have to die this instant, yeah?” Camdyn speculates.

“Nope.” *Torture the fuck for all I care.*

Camdyn knocks his fists softly together. “Alright, Little Brody can cut up and do away with your ma—”

I growl, “The bitch wasn’t—”

“Semantics, semantics, Riv. I’m in my happy place. Warm blood is *my* Christmas.”

“Well, do me a favor. Get my father’s hopes up.” I chuckle with a shake of my head. “Tell ‘em you got a job for him. A high-paying mission. Doesn’t matter. I wanna know how his face changes after he realizes he’s been fucked over.”

* * *

I left my father in the hands of a madman.

A man I always knew as a psycho throughout the years. There were things Camdyn MacKenzie would do that I would

never be a part of. Even as a thief, I knew when to ghost my friend for a while.

I'm gliding onto the on-ramp, lamp posts whizzing by as my foot eases off the gas. Suddenly, ninety miles drops to eighty. By the next exit, I'm barely pushing the sixty-five speed limit when I transition toward the ramp.

"The fuck are you doing, Riv?" I mutter aloud.

I find myself coasting past Cal State, slowing once I've arrived at the section of potholed, industrial streets.

At the gate, I zip down the window and jab the intercom button.

"Why the fuck did I come back?" I slap at the small box. Aside from the trucker initiating an overnight shipment, only a few people were in the lot. But that was less than thirty minutes ago. I clutch my cellphone and try the bastard's number.

Each call skips straight to voice mail. I slam my fist onto the steering wheel, giving it a good honk.

One of the mechanics, a red-haired MacKenzie, materializes at the wide entrance of the garage and nods his head.

He disappears. A second later, the gate tracks open.

Uncanny energy thumps through my veins as I've parked and jogged across.

The guy stuffs his hands into his jumpsuit and hesitantly says, "Cam's down . . . the hatch, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know." *What I'm not certain of is how long the motherfucker toys with his prey.*

I let myself into the office. The rug and desk, which usually conceal a dummy door, are pulled away.

I stop short, letting air charge down my lungs.

Fuck. I signed my father up for torture.

Lifting the door, I lower my head and descend into a cement coffin-like area extending maybe ten feet in every direction.

It's like a morgue down here. Camdyn's on the opposite side of a cement slab where my father groans, missing one foot. Music blares from a pair of earbuds. As if feeling my presence, my friend looks up, wiping a hand on the blue plastic suit he's wearing.

With a click of his tongue, Camdyn advises, "Bro, you shouldn't see this."

I gulp, descending the last step. Though duct tape has muted Poto's lies, a bleached face turns agonizingly slow. Questioning eyes find my sincere gaze.

I cross the room and place my hand over his hair, rubbing it from his face like I would if this were our last moment together and he was slowly dying in a hospital from underserved karma.

Eyes pleading, he whimpers.

"You should go," Camdyn urges, placing a handsaw onto the counter full of torture equipment. He leans back. "Need a moment, Riv?"

"No." I look the killer in the eyes. "I need a gun."

"Alright, then." Removing the gloves from his hands, Camdyn takes a long pull of tequila. He hands it over.

As I down a good portion of the poison, he opens the drawer, hand surveying various guns, and stops on a simple nine.

After a trade-off, I nod my appreciation so that I may complete the job required of *me*.

Killing my father.

thirty

RIVER

I squeezed the fucking trigger. Camdyn asked me if I was good a few seconds later. I looked into the eyes of the devil and determined that I would be all right.

And I am.

I arrive after midnight, tugging out of my jacket and leaving that motherfucker by the garage door.

Guilt doesn't follow.

As I walk down the hall, I kick one boot off and the next.

Not a cup's worth of shame comes after that.

As I start for the stairs, a glow comes from the sitting room down the opposite hall.

I skip the banister, strolling into the room that Tatum and her Bao designed, some sort of feng shui room since the old man had complained our house numbers were wrong.

Asleep, Tatum's curled up on a sofa, crime fiction draped over her face. I softly remove the paperback from over her closed eyes. A smile comes to fruition, and I drink her in with aching tenderness.

The slope of her brows.

The shape of her nose.

The contour of her cheeks, then my eyes fall over an enthralling pair of lips that have been the source of my courage, love, and release.

My peace.

I'm at peace after murdering my blood.

And my gawd, I wanna drink her mouth right now. Permit the taste of Tatum to overshadow the dark marks against my soul.

I squat down, letting the heat of my callused palms sweep over the velvet warmth of her brown sugar thighs.

Eyes the color of fresh earth flutter open. "Mm-hmm, Riv, you're home?"

"I'm starving, Little Bit."

"What would you like to ... oh ... *me.*" She giggles, a crimson burn lighting over her cheeks. I settle onto my haunches, fingers tucking beneath her tight shorts and tugging them down.

Though all I crave is at the tip of my deviant fingers, I argue over her like the protector I am. "You were supposed to see a movie with Willow and the boys and have a slum party."

"Did everything aside from the *slumber* party, baby." She imbues a yawn in the palm of her hand, then frames my chiseled face in her hands. "Had to be home for you, Riv. How did it go? Is ... there good left in the world?"

Did Constance come clean? is what my woman means, yet there's still too much good in her to hurt me by uttering my

father's lies.

“Sure there is.” I let my thumbs glide over her slit. “Here's all the goodness on God's green earth.”

Hips writhe, drawing me closer to the nectar at her core. With each twirl, Tatum moans. “River, you know what I meant.”

“The answer's still yes.” My touch is whisper-soft, alternating from circling her folds to brushing that thick swell of her cunt lips. “*You* are the good in this world.”

Though her eyes were tugging tight as her pleasure began to peak, Tatum huffs. She untangles herself from the oncoming climax to furrow her fingers in my hair.

Eyes hooded in lust, I drop a smoldering kiss over her clit, sucking the facet of her arousal into my mouth. Tatum clasps my hair harder. Instead of the fireworks of ecstasy, her eyes shine in apology for another man's indiscretions. “Oh, Riv. You *had* to kill her?”

“Yes, Stubby.” With one hand, I claw into the curvy flesh at her hip while two fingers stab the depth of her sopping core.

As I settle on my haunches, a low rumble builds in the back of my throat. I'm a man possessed, and soon enough, I won't be able to respond in human form. The animal in me will have his time.

To cease my woman's need for an emotional connection, I growl, “I took *two* lives today, Stubby. As I've said, I am ravenous.”

“Understood.” Voice laced with invitation, Tatum pushes her hips over the edge of the seat, murmuring, “And a feast you shall have.”

The fingers stitched through my hair finally pull me closer instead of tugging away. While working her hips in tandem with the hard impale of my tongue, it isn't long before Tatum's screams play on repeat. "Yes! Yes, yes!"

I work magic on her pussy. My mouth, my hands, softly tweaking her clit, until a sudden warmth blossoms across my chest.

I lap at Tatum's cunt in pride as she funnels all her energy into squirting.

Tatum's soaked.

My fucking face and chest are soaked. The seat's soaked.

"Wait." A husky cry proceeds Tatum tugging away from me.

"I'm eating your pussy, and you want me to motherfucking stop!" I pant.

Tatum hooks her thigh over the opposite side of my head, twisting her lower body until we're on the ground. She flips again, and her face is next to my pants.

I stand corrected.

"Ready for round two, River?" With a giggle, she moves the zipper down titillatingly as she frees my cock. I viciously attack her pussy. Deep, stiff tongue thrusts cause her gasp to drive my member into the depths of her throat.

It's not long before she erupts.

Drinking from Tatum is like tipping planet earth and downing all its clearest streams. I could bottle my woman's cunt juice and quench my thirst after every match. I drink some down, hold the rest like a connoisseur, then flip in quick

succession until we're sitting face-to-face, and she's panting, mesmerized by my moves.

“Riv,” she groans. “I’m supposed to taste you too. Why did you ...”

Silently, I ease myself into her cunt, which grips me tightly with the added pressure applied to her ass.

When Tatum’s tongue drags up my throat, I place my mouth over hers. She deserves a taste too. She drinks down the succulent nourishment that her pussy offered, and I bite into her lip to stop myself from breaking her back.

“This is why I didn’t cum in your mouth, Tatum,” I growl, bashing her insides with each punch.

She would’ve choked on my dick.

And not like usual.

Probably would’ve died from cock asphyxia.

My cock takes shallow, brutal dips into her drenched channel until she mewls in pain.

“It hurts ... So deep, River.” Tatum pushes away.

“Shhhh.” I lock my hands at the top of her head, holding her into position.

With her hips lifted, Tatum grounds into me until I can’t take it anymore, and I’m thrusting like a fucking banshee.

“Take. This. Fuckin. Dick.” I growl like a wraith. “Take all this dick, Tatum.”

“Oh shit, oh shit, ohhhhh, my stomach! River, ouuuch ...” Her body goes limp, and another tsunami of cum washes over my cock. I slip down.

There's so much of Tatum's orgasm that all I have to do is open my mouth and catch her honeyed waterfall.

"River, fuck me!" Tatum's raspy voice grows incoherent. As I mount her and fuck her body into the floor, she curses, praises, and thanks me.

thirty-one

TATUM

Last night, I hid my struggles behind my smile and seized the unbreakable contentment I have in River's presence.

There was no room for triggering emotions or dark platitudes. The place my mind goes to, and I can't dig myself out of.

Last night was perfect. *And* after I execute my plan, the promise of all my good times that revolve around my man will spill into my *every day*.

I will be happy for no reason.

Heart stalling in my throat, I glance out the balcony over the dew-misted grass and await the call to connect.

While snuggling in a plush robe, I take a furtive peek toward the farthest side of the bedroom. Dozing serenely, River's propped the pillow over his head. I'm usually the late riser, but he murdered a lying bitch last night and also ... his father.

Come on, connect. After this call, I'll feel a little more comfortable about tossing Devi to the wolf next weekend.

In a low drone, I ask, “Hey, Jamie?”

“Who is this?” The mistrust I extend to the world that doesn’t revolve around my guys reverberates through the connection. I’ve had the phone number for Camdyn’s younger brother for years now. I clear my throat and proceed. “It’s me, Tatum. Were you asleep?”

I slip out onto the balcony, favoring the thick cotton surrounding me. Fog blankets the grass and creeps in tiny ripples along the MMA cage and covered patio.

“Obviously not, I answered.” The distrust proliferates in an acerbic tone. “You’re not reconsidering our secrets?”

I assess the proper way to ease his cynicism. “We don’t know any of each other’s secrets. Not really, Jamie.”

“That depends on the outlying variables.”

Pinching my mouth in a line, I glance over my shoulder where the sliding glass door frames my bed. River’s shifted, deep in slumber. I murmur, “Let’s set aside this need for an agenda or conspiracy, sheesh.”

“Well, then get on with it.”

“I need your help.”

A tight chortle chafes my eardrums. “You have suitable connections, Tatum. My entire hypocritical family.”

“Why would you ...”

“Everything is all ‘let the clan in,’ ‘be honest.’ But Nan—”

“Your mother,” I grit.

“I love my *mam*, Tatum. We don’t see eye to eye. In fact, we never did. Which I’m attempting to explain, yet you

constantly remind me—a genius—of the nuclear structure of my family.”

Although, I’d never ruthlessly speak of my mother-daughter bond, I mutter an apology for interrupting. “Sorry, Jamie, go ahead.”

“Nan has kept a secret from Camdyn to abet you. In every other scenario, they tell each other everything. If I wake up and utter to one of them that I’d like to slit my wrists, by midday, they’re holding an intervention.”

“That’s suicide.”

“A life is *a life*, Tatum. How’s my existence any more valuable than those who’ve incurred the wrath of Clan MacKenzie? Some of their victims aren’t even afforded the chance to ... change. There is *no* consistency with them.”

You’re starting to remind me of Devi.

Instead of attempting to quote long-dead philosophers, I wing it. “Listen, Jamie, family is ... branches of a friggen tree. Um, growing wild, deviating directions, but guess what they have in common?”

Absolute silence.

Okay, genius. I slowly press on. “They share the same roots. Yes, your mother treats you differently from *six* other sons. Yes, Nan’s sheltered you. Yes, ahem, she murders people with the same uh ... hands, which she affectionately used to change your diaper. But—”

Jamie hisses, “What do you *need*, Tatum?”

“We both know ...” The words exasperate the oxygen in my lungs until it no longer exists. I press through. “Both know

what it feels like to be touched without our consent while young.”

My words uproot the conversation. The total silence on the opposite end of the receiver scares me. Timidly I add, “We were mistreated even when we hardly understood the meaning of—that-that such atrocities occur in the world ... Jamie, you still there?”

“Yes,” pitches against my ear, thin and hollow.

“Good. I need help righting a solitary wrong and maybe more. So, if you’re available next Thursday at five p.m., I would be grateful.”

With my heart galloping in my chest, I anticipate Jamie’s agreement.

The call disconnects, and the rattling of my heartbeat sputters to a halt. *Really?*

“I just bared my soul to ...” Huffing, I glower across the backyard where daybreak has disintegrated the foreboding mist. I’m a second away from redialing Jamie’s number and reminding him of the kind boy he once *was* when my cellphone lights up with a concise text:

Send location.

* * *

I rarely have the first glimpse of an awakening River. Yet, I stood out on the balcony for a bit longer. Now, my man settles into a seated position in bed. His gaze is like fire, scorching through bone to marrow, sweeping over my robe. I grow hot all over. Tiny electric volts claim my throbbing folds as I stroll

into the bedroom, leaving the fresh morning air to infiltrate the room.

I peel out of my robe and saunter like a centerfold model, suppressing a shiver. In my panties and bra, I ask, “Good morning, love of my life. Would you prefer breakfast in bed? Or breakfast *on* the headboard?”

A hearty laugh transforms the plains of his abdomen into pure savagery. “As much as your second suggestion tempts me, Little Bit, I’m a big dude.”

I jerk a shoulder. “Real food first, then?”

He nods. I drag my fingers through River’s hair, leaning over the firm bed for a chaste kiss.

Our lips pull apart, and River mutters, “Let’s redo that. You’re thinking.”

I pour more energy into tasting his lips, battling his tongue with mine, and feasting on our shared connection. Once complete, I murmur, “I was thinking about having your baby.”

A paw clasps my hip, tugging me onto the bed. “I can’t wait to watch these tits feed my child.” His mouth mops over the bow of my breast, leaving prickly goose pimples. “I’ll get a taste of milk too.”

“Who said?”

“Who said I was asking?” River growls, threading my nipple between his teeth.

Fingernails dig into the sinew of muscle at his shoulder, creating crescents. The other clutches thick strands of pitch hair as I stave off a burst of agonizing pleasure and torture.

“Alright, that’s enough for now.” River’s imposing chest heaves, causing my hand resting there to follow the path of his

exhale. “Time for omelets.”

“You really love me.” Nose canoodling with his, laughter flutters between us.

“Tsk, tsk, I’m teaching my lady how to julienne.”

“Julie, what?”

“Cutting technique.” River scratches his cranium contemplatively. “Keep telling myself to instruct you, but ...”

“Riv, what the fuck is julienne?”

He clasps my hand like an eager boy whose body hit the growth spurt of the century. River tugs me downstairs and into the kitchen. My ass slams down onto the marble island countertop. A sharp *shing* breaks the silence as River pulls a knife from the cutting board.

“Knife play? Oh, hell n—”

A burly arm secures me to the spot. With a cruel, sultry wink, River says, “Haven’t I always told you how tiny you are, *Little Bit*.”

I snort, shoving away an onslaught of kisses. They’re peppering my cheeks, nose, and neck, all over, leaving me reeling in infectious laughter until I sight the discarded knife.

River rolls his eyes, one stiff arm jailing me, as he reaches over for an apple. He orders. “Cut this.”

“Oh.” I’m released and jump to the ground as River retreats to the stainless-steel refrigerator.

He returns with all the veggies required for the perfect breakfast.

I sit the apple on the cutting board and start to tiptoe away. River clasps me by my waist from behind. “Not so fast,

Tatum.” A harsh nip at my ear leaves my bones begging for exile from my skin.

“Shit, River. That hurt.”

“Not as much as smiling ... while I eat dinner on Tuesdays.”

A gasp is snatched from the depths of my chest. “But ... *I* cook dinner on Tuesdays.”

RIVER

“But . . . *I* cook dinner on Tuesdays,” Tatum says as it slowly dawns on her.

She prepares our food once a week.

Once. A. Week. I. Suffer.

Sinfully sexy eyes cut in my direction. At a standstill in the center of the kitchen, I await Tatum’s next attack.

Damn right she will.

The gorgeous hothead lacks patience. Hiding a devilish grin, I turn toward the contractable glass walls to let in fresh air. My gander adheres to Tatum’s reflection. A sweet ass swallows lacy floss. She’s returned to the cutting board.

My hands just graze the latch when something torpedoes in my direction.

I grip the apple, aimed for my head, then turn, an exaggerated brow lifted.

“That all you got?” I ask.

Hoisting the sharp knife, Tatum kicks a shoulder.

“You wouldn’t.”

Snorting, she says, “The belt, the cuffs, the friggen clit clamp. I should strike up a game—one where *you’re* the center of attention.”

She waltzes over. A tiny hand presses me against the cool glass I’ve yet to open.

The blade’s tip draws a path over the tattoo of Medusa’s hair, scratching my golden complexion until it leaves an angry mark.

I’m so hard right now.

Our breaths draw hot and ragged.

“Tell me to stop, River,” Tatum whispers.

“No.”

“Okay,” comes her almost inaudible response. Skin slides apart on my pec where she’s applied more pressure. Blood trickles softly there.

Tatum steps close enough for her warm breath to become a balm to the small incision. A tongue flickers out; glides up the path. Fisting the knife at her side, Tatum extends on her tippy-toes, and I taste the subtle copper from her mouth.

Alluring, challenging eyes find me again, and a voice that has ridden my cock to orgasm murmurs, “Tell me to stop.”

“You could never bring me pain, Tatum.” I tilt my head off the glass wall to kiss a pair of taut lips.

Still claiming the knife in one tiny, fisted hand, Tatum’s other fingers stroke over my hips until she’s hooked them beneath my boxer shorts. I remove my hips from the chilly

glass to assist her efforts, leaving me naked and my throbbing dick owning the space between us.

A slender palm takes ages to slide provocatively over the length of me. I spit. Tatum spits, lubing up her palm.

Honestly, I'm not all that into handies.

Five years of them made me sick to my stomach, but I'm on the ride of my life as she slowly turns a beast into a raging bull. Single-handedly, she draws about my release.

I'm breathing harder.

Eyes hood in arousal.

Scent heightened. I could sniff out Tatum's wet cunt a hundred miles away.

But when she lifts the opposite hand, still cuffing the blade, I clutch her wrist in a way that could shatter all the bones there. My other hand retrieves the knife that was falling from her immobilized fingers. I switch up, clasping Tatum's neck with the knife cuddling her throat as she's backed against the counter.

She gulps with her throat bared, looking up at me with the sexiest pair of fear-sparkling eyes.

Sick pleasure moves through me as her body goes still.

I twist the knife until I'm clutching it in my fist, and a sharp cry sputters past her lips.

No blood.

No real pain.

Just a little mind fuck is all she needed.

"You would never hurt or leave me, Tatum." I tweak her nipple beneath cruel fingers, pulling them taut so she's numb

when the tip of the knife pricks there.

“Ri...”

Mouth a whisper away, I add, “And I would never make you physically bleed.”

I stop myself from piercing her glorious tit. “But you better suck me off *quick* because I. Am. Insatiable.”

Drawing down to her knees, Tatum pulls me into the depth of her desire-pooled mouth. An urgency overcomes her. I claim the base of my cock, pull out, and slap the side of her face.

“You are my good girl. Act like it.”

“I’m sor—”

I ram my dick so hard into Tatum’s throat that the tip of me jabs her tonsils. Shifting my hips, I punch, punch, *punch* like I’m slamming into her spasming pussy.

“Don’t apologize. Just know that I love you.” More stiff stabs knock the back of her throat as I growl, “Love corrects. Now. Get. Me. Off.”

It’s not long before my load jets down Tatum’s throat. As the last bit of my cum releases, I pull out just enough to gloss her lips. Clutching the slender column, I bring her to her feet as she licks up the last traces of my semen.

“Now,” I order, “you will learn to julienne. I may look up a few cooking classes soon. Something we can do together. Would you like that?”

She smiles eagerly. “Very much, sir.”

I stretch my tensed shoulders. I’m a different man when hungry.

At the counter, I model the proper way to hold a knife and then pick up a bell pepper. “Of course, you need a good grip, but your hand holding the veggie is highly important too. Let your hands work together. Got it?”

Tatum nods.

I step aside, gesturing with a stiff hand for her to proceed.

Sometime later, we settle on the outdoor table, a feast of cheese and veggie scrambled eggs—Tatum couldn’t quite flip the omelets—and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

“So, last night?” Tatum chews pensively. “We never got around to discussing how you feel?”

“I look any different to you?”

“No, Riv. But—”

“You look different.” I eye her, mouth pushing up to one side.

“Good different?” Tatum’s hesitance hides behind the drink in her hand.

“A little relieved.” I push a few chaotic strands from my eyes.

Earlier, I lied.

Tatum is the only person in the stratosphere who can bring me pain.

Not a good TKO.

Not a submission where the other guy turns victor.

Not my first L.

Only her.

And I love Tatum possessively.

I sit forward, executing all my attention on the one I love.

“I’m happy,” she says. “I could never bear it after your father’s reappearances. I always could tell when he came around. You avoided Cam and me. Or you were mean. So, I’m happy.”

I nod.

“That’s bad, though, isn’t it?” Tatum groans. “I don’t want us to transform into complacent people. Desensitized to murder.”

“Listen, I can’t say that pulling the trigger on my own father didn’t change me. A primal urge overcame me in the split second it took me to remove the gun from Camdyn’s fist.”

She exhales. “Damn it, Cam and his ... entire family kill people. He’s still the boys’ hero. Nan and Brody are still model citizens—the perfect parents.”

“While my father was the definition of *he had it coming*.” *Shit. Is that too fucked up to say?* Dread coils in my gut as Tatum ponders my actions. “You still love me after what I’ve done? I killed people, but was murdering my father too far?”

Satiny palms reach across the table to claim my hands. “Oh, River. I’m madly in love with you. But I digress. *We* are crazy. We need therapy.”

“I’m crazy. *I* need therapy. You’re perfect.”

“Mm-hmm, am I perfect when I—”

“Yes!” I squeeze her slender fingers.

“Wake up in the morning?” Tatum finishes with a chuckle.

“The epitome, Little Bit. Hair wild like you just escaped the forest and everything.”

“Ha-ha! Am I,” she pauses to tap thoughtfully at her lip, “perfect when I cuss you out for waking me too early?”

“The definition.”

“Mm-hmm.” Tatum grins and juts her chin. For a moment, we’re watching a hummingbird, wings flapping a thousand times a second, zipping over one of my woman’s flowers.

Finally, she says, “Alright, you win. You need therapy. Wait! I have one more. Am I perfect when I have a period pimple?”

“The cutest.”

“When I get road rage and—”

“You said one more. Still, ain’t nothing sexier than a woman who dominates the situation.”

“Alright, last one.” With a beam that has the arch of a shooting star, Tatum asks, “Am I perfect when I cook? Now that I cut approximate sizes of every item?”

The eager hedonist in me that would crawl to her begging for pussy won’t even cave to this one.

“River!”

“I changed my mind, Tatum. You’re just average.” I dart from the seat, rocketing across our massive backyard with a mad half-Black and Chinese woman cussing me out in two languages on my six.

thirty-three

TATUM

Jamie's walking allure, leaving questions whipping through my mind.

How does he make a living since graduating with a bachelor's and master's?

Where does he reside since returning to the area?

Why, also.

Why return to Los Angeles if he felt so disconnected from his clan?

But for the barrage of worries, I've one truth.

He'll keep Devi safe.

First and foremost, he's silent as a monk in the Alps. For those reasons, he should be able to navigate Devi's comings and goings around Harrison for the night she's in the depraved, egomaniac's company.

Second, he's prompt.

I open the door to the basic hotel room I've rented in Beverly Hills, and my eyes flicker over Vans and jeans. A

hoodie conceals chiseled features with a few dashes of long hair peeking from the cover over Jamie's head.

"Hey." I allow him to enter the various shades of beige room.

Jamie settles onto the chair near the window, facing the lot below.

As he hasn't spoken, I initiate an icebreaker. "How are you?"

His shoulder lifts. "Meh."

"Want a soda or anything?" I gesture toward the mini-fridge of overpriced items.

After a vexed exhale, he mumbles, "I'll wait for your other guest."

"How do you know I'm—"

For the first time, his gaze locks on mine. "You're fidgeting."

There's an undertone of compulsion as if he's ordering me to stop.

"So ..." I begin again.

He slips out his cellphone, offering a smooth buffer between us. He never was one to enter a conversation.

An hour later, I stroll toward the door again to let Devi inside. She's traded in her usual mini for a bohemian, multicolored dress, which falls over her slender curves and sweeps the floor. A fedora tops her head, and jewelry, customary for chanting to the sea in Venice Beach, adorns her neck and arms.

"Jamie, Devi. Devi, Ja—"

“The Hindu mother goddess,” he mutters to neither of us in particular, tucking the cellphone that was his crutch into his pocket.

I lift a brow as Devi eagerly floats over to him.

“Yes. That’s what my name means. You’re the supplanter.” She lifts a hand. There’s an awkward pause, and I wonder if he will shake it. When he doesn’t, she mutters something about Jacob clasping the heel of someone.

The reference almost seems biblical and is backed with a salty bite.

Jamie doesn’t acknowledge the evil eye she’s often bestowed upon me. The girl turns away. A faint smile appears on Jamie’s face and disperses as she plops onto the corner of the bed.

That was weird. I clear my throat. “Alright ... Devi will be meeting with—”

“The old man, right?” she inquires.

“Yes,” I nod. “Jamie, you’ll be her pimp.”

“I *will* not,” he growls.

The prostitute seems to have forgotten that he affronted her because she softens herself when saying, “It’s okay. Ladies on my corner have our own coalition. We keep *all* our profit.”

“No.” His mouth pulls into a snarl. “I scorn duhumaniz—”

“If you refuse to keep Devi safe, then go.” *Please don’t go.*

Turquoise gems roll away from me in primal derision.

Relieved, I blurt, “So, you’ll stay?”

Jamie offers a *what does it fucking look like* glare.

Still taking a stand, I address the warmer of the two first. “Devi, I purchased you a nice dress. Jamie, you got a suit?”

His half-ass gesture leaves my teeth grinding.

“Look, this situation isn’t ideal, but it’s the best chance we have. Harrison will more than likely let his guard down after he’s satisfied.”

Tension binds us together, and Jamie cuts it into tiny, massacred ribbons by folding his arms. “Devi shoulders all the risk in this scenario.”

“Eh, Jamie,” Devi jokes, “your intelligence has failed you in this respect. The real risk is on Western Avenue after midnight.” Her attempt to curb his contained fury ends on a sorry chuckle that she further reels back by clearing her throat. “We’ve all been through hell, Jamie. At least we’re slaying Tatum’s demon.”

* * *

On Tuesday, Spencer gives us the go-ahead, indicating that he’s offered his father a peace offering since assisting Bethany in their divorce.

Spencer tells his father he’s purchased a high-class call girl.

Devi. Gift wrapped in Harrison’s favorite attire.

Jamie hasn’t said a single word to us since his initial disdain days ago.

Upon arrival at the hotel today, Devi’s late, but I doubt she meant any harm. Also, I scheduled the meetup with time to spare. As Jamie stretches out on the bed in a suit, shiny shoes

resting on the frame, he continues to read from his iPhone when Devi enters.

“Oh, it’s hot out there,” she exaggerates.

Though I toss a brow at her show, Devi pulls out of a trench coat, revealing hardly concealing lines of leather that hug her nipples and ride over her snatch.

She’s displaying herself for Jamie, who refuses to look.

Oh boy, she likes him. I can’t tell if the feeling is mutual because he would never objectify her.

Thick red lips tuck beneath a snarl as Devi stalks into the bathroom. I follow after, sliding into the room and shutting the door behind me.

The young woman who desperately needs to survive and learn to thrive has her palms planted heavily on the countertop.

“Devi.” I wrench my fingers, wishing I could’ve hugged her while we were younger and pulled her into my life.

I know I was violated, but the difference between us is that someone still loved me.

Good parents made me resilient in all the ways that count.

River’s love made me fight.

A questioning gaze sears through me. “I uh ...” *Damn, should’ve brought the dress inside.*

“Yes, Tatum? Your friend hasn’t said a single word to me since I signed up to do this. I’ve grown accustomed to chauvinism. I could switch up my tone and,” her voice transitions properly, “recite a Shakespearean Sonnet, offer a compelling dissertation on Greek philosophy and the Bible, or is your friend atheist? We could discuss Darwinism.”

Offering an approachable smile, I share, “His family is devout Christian. I’m not sure if he is, though. People often lose religion when hurt.”

“Or they draw closer. Where’s the slutty dress?”

* * *

Hours later, I’ve prayed for my and Devi’s sins and applied cold compresses to my face when there’s a click, and Jamie reenters the room with Devi in tow.

“I’ll take a shower.” Her faint voice hardly draws above a whisper.

Harrison’s expensive cologne seeps into the room. I thank Jamie and follow Devi into the bathroom again. The dress heaps at her feet.

The tight strings intricately wrapped around her golden complexion and curves are tattered, some fully severed.

There are claw marks on her back that weren’t there before.

As she wrestles with the sophisticated shower heads, I lower my head in shame.

We speak at the same time. I don’t quite catch her statement because blood pulses like adrenaline in my ears.

Am I closing one *horror story* of a chapter in my book?

Or am I opening a scarier remake?

“You go first.” She gestures with a wave of a hand.

I restlessly ask, “How did it go?”

“Harrison ceased all business discussion upon my arrival; however, one of his jarheads indicated he has a meeting with his banker about PLR this afternoon. Seemed important. He fucked me while I sucked my thumb. I called him daddy a few times, nothing out of the ordinary. He bit, scratched, and tickled my asshole. He also invited me to his house.”

I shake my head. “No, that might require more—”

“More assistance?” Jamie’s hard tone tenses my shoulders. I hadn’t heard him enter the bathroom. “More help from my clan than what I can offer?”

“Yes,” I groan.

He snorts.

“Since your mother isn’t asking questions,” I mutter.

“Necessary questions about why the clan attacked *him*, Tatum,” Jamie hurls at me.

“I feel ashamed still, Jamie. Fuck! Is that alright with you? Too ashamed to ask everyone for help.”

“Yeah? Because,” he wriggles his jaw, “because allowing unbroken people into the darkest, dirtiest parts of your life fucking ... it *sucks*, for lack of a better word.”

By now, Devi, naked as the day she was born, steps between us to push harshly at his chest. Although she’s protecting me, a sick little part of me sees this as her way of assaulting him for not staring.

Or leering.

Or jeering.

Or desiring her.

“She’s not broken,” Devi declares, shoving an inanimate mass of stone again and again. “I’m not broken, and *you* aren’t either, Jamie. We are all who the fuck we are!”

With her short stature, Jamie’s heated gaze sits over the crown of her head. Ignoring her, he regards me. “If the intel Devi has acquired doesn’t meet your needs, say so.”

Aggravated, the promiscuous part of our trio stalks to the shower.

Jamie takes a menacing step toward me. “She *will not* visit his house, on my watch or otherwise.”

I huff. “I wasn’t asking Dev—”

“If Tatum needs me too, I will,” she replies coolly, letting the water run over her head. “And I am not *she* or *her*. I have a name.”

Swaggering into the shower, Jamie clutches her biceps. While hot water laps over his face, suit, and shoes, he commands, “You are not going to his home, Devi. I cannot confirm your safety, *Devi*. Do not defy me, *De-vi!*”

In an instant, he’s wiping the water from his burning hot face and tossing the towel against the marble wall. Jamie exits the spacious bathroom in less than three strides, slamming the door behind him.

I glance at his retreating, stoic form. I need to go after him. But I move toward the shower.

“Devi,” I groan.

“Tsk! Only man that ever looked me in the eyes,” she mutters, somehow in a trance from his intensity.

With a ghost of a smile riding her beige complexion, I assume an older-sister stance. “You will *not* go to Harrison’s

house. Say it!”

“I won’t go,” she huffs, opening a tiny signature shampoo.

“Good.” I let out the exhale that begged for freedom the second Jamie entered. “PLR, you said?”

The cold front Devi gives off now is chillier than the one she had when walking away from my car. She hasn’t acted like this since halfway through pizza. Devi mutters, “Yup. PLR. That all you need from me?”

I stall. This isn’t the moment where I’m dressed as the boys in blue, offering a whore a vitamin pack.

She’s human.

All prostitutes are.

Until this precise moment, I saw us transitioning into a new era—a *sisterhood*. Stacking up my shoulders, I ask, “Devi, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

Lathering her hair into a sudsy cloud, Devi blatantly ignores me by humming an old Billie Holiday tune. As if Devi didn’t have a multitude of layers before, her harmonizing and music choice leaves me stunned.

“Devi.” I find myself imploring my friend to let me in.

She drones on. “In my solitude ...”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask for her cellphone. Yet, I instinctively realize this isn’t the time, and Devi’s an in-your-face type. So, I’ll find her on another street corner in a couple of days and chat. For now, I’m a little in my feelings too. So, I match her icy demeanor. “Alright, I’ll leave your money on the table.”

Girl, it doesn't have to be like that, though. I stall. A two-finger salute whisks me toward the door, and her soul blends another blues melody together. I walk out of the bathroom to see an empty room.

“Aww, Jamie ...” I open the hotel door, mentally repeating *PLR, PLR*. The corridor is free of hotel guests and staff.

Great.

I trail back into the room, remove crisp hundreds from my wallet, and all the spare dollars I have, paying Devi extra for selling what's left of her soul.

I type in *PLR* into my iPhone notes and open the bathroom door. “I'm gonna get you an extra day here, okay?”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

I keep wondering what has changed. I feel like it happened when I asked about *PLR*, and she changed the subject. Or perhaps Devi's miffed because she saw Harrison as a yet to be tapped out piggy bank?

“Close the fucking door, Officer Li. You're letting in the cold air.”

Fuck it. I don't know what she's been through, and Devi doesn't know what I've endured either. Maybe this is the usual for her clients the second after they take from her.

Great, I just became a friggen John.

RIVER

“PLR?” I mutter the acronyms to a dummy investing account while Harrison’s mug flashes over the television screen. Sort of reminds me of what Jhang warned his old manager had done to him.

Local news, E! News, TMZ. Everyone’s snatched a piece of Harrison for misappropriation of funds. My fist wrenches around the coffee tumbler as I enter our bedroom. I’d brewed Tatum’s favorite. Usually, caffeine encourages her to slide out of bed on such a cold morning. But she turns from a position snuggled in blankets, watching one of the news segments, to offer a wince.

“Do you think my godfather stole from you?”

I heft a sigh, place the coffee on the nightstand, and slide under the blankets.

A warm, athletic body saddles into my lap, mitigating the rage charging my muscles. Tatum smothers a wake-up yawn into my neck and muffles an apology.

I brush my palms over her thighs. I recall when the three of us met for lunch, and Tatum admired their *shared* jokes, so I

tread lightly. Decompressing my gritted teeth, I mutter, “I will not kill another soul.”

With her lower body clinging to me, Tatum’s torso pushes away. She trails a finger over what I must assume is still my taut jaw. “Say it a few more times with feeling.”

A forced chuckle breaks out. “I googled half the financial analysts in Los Angeles by nine this morning. Each one I’ve called already has a backlog of basketball players and hockey dudes Harrison has worked with. It’s probably best for me to wait it out, even if the bastard stole one-motherfucking percent of my income.”

Thumbs draw over the deadly ink on my arms. “Definitely ideal that you don’t react too soon, Rage.”

I roll my eyes. “Your pop has worked with Harrison too. Should we call Jhang, get his thoughts?”

“Aw, my River. What’s next, a townhall?” Tatum chuckles, mentioning the small-town romance she’s coerced me into watching on Netflix. In it, everything’s settled by collective arguments.

Swooping my arms around Tatum’s middle, I crush her to me. My heart swells with perverse satisfaction as a *real* cry catches in her throat. I growl, “You wanna be on my shit list for mocking me?”

Though threatening, I ease off the anaconda grip and receive a nasty pop against my shoulder.

“No. Just giving you a bright side, River, by deflecting the real issue. Now, if you desire rough play, let’s ...”

The doorbell rings.

“You expecting a package?” Tatum asks.

“Nope. Fuck them. Let’s set the rules for this roughhousing.” I rub my hands together. “Safe word or tap out?”

“I’m a *G*, Riv. A girl like me doesn’t even have to tap ...” She pauses to cut her eyes at the ruckus below.

I ignore the delinquents playing ding-dong ditch. “First to tap out, it is. And it’ll *always* be you. Alright, I’ve fucking had it!”

The incessant shrill has me sliding Tatum from my lap when she groans, “Who the heck?”

I roll my shoulders, stalking to the top of the landing with my woman trailing at my heels. “Put some clothes on while I correct the person on the opposite side of the door. Or don’t.”

One of *my* white tees caresses the apple of Tatum’s ass, the bend of her hips, and the swell of her cunt. She winks. “I prefer the latter.”

I hustle down the stairs and grip both knobs, smile menacing. Maybe I’ll unleash my fury on whoever’s on the opposite side.

Harrison and company.

In a checkered golfing polo shirt and a pair of dopey matching pants, Harrison enters. He doesn’t catch the slitted eye of confusion *I* cast in his direction because he’s gesturing to the sour-faced guard at his side. “Stay,” he orders.

I size him up, keeping my distance.

Three reasons you shouldn’t hit him, Riv:

You fucking hate prison.

Two, you fucking hate prison.

Three, the neighbors may have seen him, and you motherfucking HATE prison!

I contain the undignified monster in me and speak in a voice that's not of my own—one concealing psychopathic tendencies.

“I'd ask what brings you by, but as I imagine, it's to beg me not to drop you. And I don't mean as an agent.”

“River,” he grovels.

“I wanna sound all intellectual right now and say things like, ‘if you're in breach of our contract' ...” I take a few menacing steps closer to him. “But we both know my capabilities if you've crossed me. You know, I was really *comfortable* as a thief—”

“*Please*, listen—”

“But I'll be damned my karma returns to me through some sniveling, cunt-faced asshole. Do. You. Understand?”

Something happens.

Something I'd never in a million years expect to see.

Not because my father scoffed, saying said action would make me look like a pussy. But because Harrison has never looked more like a cunt than this precise moment, letting out a tiny sob.

That snowball magnifies in velocity with him heaving a hard cry.

“I've been accused of—” Harrison swipes a lone tear.

“Is that my problem?” I gesture toward the front door. “Figure your shit out. Then we can talk.”

“My attorneys—”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” I slam a hand on the wall beside Harrison’s face. “That’s a conversation for you and your attorneys, Harrison. The less I know, the better. *For you.*”

“It’s all lies.”

I rest my palm on Harrison’s trembling shoulder.

“For your sake, you better run, hide, and never show your face around me if you have made it my problem.”

“Listen, have whoever you need to look over every single transaction. I’ll front the bill, whatever they charge. I’m confident that I haven’t—”

My mouth kicks up into a cocksure grin. “Good for you, Harrison.”

“I still plan on getting you Sefina. Regardless of how they sling me through the mud, River. For you. For my goddaughter.” He looks just past me now as Tatum slowly trots down the steps, having replaced my shirt with a hoodie and *my* sweats.

“Hello, godfather,” she says, sliding beneath my open arm, and I claim her to my chest. The angel soothes my demons. “Maybe you should forget about working for River and focus on all the heat you’re in. I’m so sorry such a good man like you is going through this. After all you’ve done for my family, you don’t deserve such an ill fate. I’ll pray for you.”

I plant a kiss on Tatum’s forehead. “Well, I’m saying this to the two of you. If Harrison deserves the smear campaign that’s descended upon him, Tatum, you can hate me later.”

Harrison sniffs.

“Shuddup!” I growl. “I’ll fucking kill you. I know you had my back when people ridiculed me, but I’d like to think if I

weren't on the receiving end of you screwing someone—”

As if my statement of the past revives hope in Harrison, he cuts in, “You have to believe me—”

“Then, and only then, I wouldn't be doing *this*.”

My fingers clutch the weak meat at Harrison's collar. With his howling, I raise my voice. “For now, I'll oversee my own UFC issues until advised otherwise. You get me Sefina, all you'd like, but that will not negate me breaking my foot in your ass if you've crossed me.”

Tatum opens the front door, wiggling her fingers at Harrison's bodyguard and ushering her godfather out. Once completing the Bonnie to my Clyde, Tatum closes the door, leaning against it with a huff.

A hesitant gaze, brewing in tantalizing desire, flickers over me. “Riv, am I insane for getting all hot and bothered when you threaten a life?”

I lift one of her legs around my waist, planting myself in her way. I'm seconds away from crushing down on Tatum when the warmth of her smile hypnotizes me.

That smile spikes holes in any devilish schemes I've ever had for another soul. “I'm not intending to murder another soul, Stubby. Crazy thing though, I've collected more bodies since leaving prison.”

She sighs. “Don't I know it. You were always meant to be a protector.”

“Just your protector. So, if anyone ever touched you wrong, they're dead. If Harrison cheated me, maybe I'll just break his legs and my foot in his ass, as promised.”

“You do that. I’ll finish him off since I wasn’t any assistance with fake Heilani.”

I shake my head, fingers thrumming over Tatum’s hoodie and bringing it along with the shirt over her head, exposing her perky tits. “You just keep being my innocent angel.”

TATUM

Two weeks later...

The term misery loves company has never sounded so sweet to my ears. The media has sheared the sheep's clothing off the wolf and stuffed him with feathers, only for Harrison Herrington to be paraded far and wide for public ridicule.

On the news, the Feds entered his agency, leaving with cardboard boxes. An FBI representative gave a brief statement, indicating that further investigation is imminent. The people passed judgment.

Maybe it's not all the penance Harrison owes in his life, but I'm just getting started.

Without a phone number to call Devi, I've checked out her usual stroll every day. And on a whim, I purchased an expensive hardback philosophy compilation during my godmommy and boys' date with Camryn and William at the bookstore.

The gift-wrapped book has slid across my backseat ever since. For now, I tuck the thought of a peace offering into my

memory. Willow spins around before me in a white gown. She sashays to the elevator music in the tiny bridal store.

“C’mon, you’re not even paying attention.” Her shoulders fall.

“It’s not *the one*.” I purse my lips from my comfortable position in a velvety princess seat.

“Girl, I’m getting married in my soon-to-be in-laws’ backyard in October. Hello, a backyard. It doesn’t need to be all fancy-schmancy.”

“Hah!” I snort. “You’re saying that like I’m running out of time. My dubious intentions are playing out perfectly, so have your Halloween wedd—”

She sulks back into the changing room, mumbling, “Not Halloween. We just like autumn, damn.”

“Whatever. Wait till next October. We can put our coins together and have the wedding my momma would be proud of. And yours too.”

The wooden slats bite open, and Willow peeks pointedly through the door. “Come again?”

“I’m the tomboy, not you, Lolo. A wedding *this* friggen October? You’re having *my* blah wedding, for goodness’ sake. Not yours.” I fold a leg over the other, declaring, “That’s too soon for planning for you. Again, I say, I’m not the *much ado* about nothing type.” *Damn, Devi would get that.*

“Excuse me? Just because I’ve got a clutch on my wallet doesn’t mean I’m having *your* wedding, Stubby.” She opens the door, trim runner’s body in plain sight. “I have kids. *Again*, I’m money conscientious. The second Cam and I spend too much, I’m liable to regret it and rethink how that small fortune

could've benefited the boys for college or sports. Camryn's into *everything*. God forbid William climbs out of his shell."

As my cellphone vibrates on the mirrored table, I notice a call from Jamie.

A friggen ... call ... from Jamie.

"Shells are good," I murmur absentmindedly, reaching for the phone. The back of my knuckles collides with the flute next to it. I groan as glass and champagne dash over the marble floors. *Dammit, Stubby!* I start to rise.

"Don't worry, ma'am." The attendant hurries over. The glint in her eye warns us not to even *think* about leaving the store without purchasing a wedding dress.

As the ringing ceases, I dodge the softly tossed fur-covered hanger that Willow pitched in my direction.

"I'll try on the next one." She closes the door again, and I apologize to the attendant, who's returned with a broom in hand.

"Who's calling?" Willow inquires through the French door. "You seemed insistent. At least they didn't call back."

"Jamie, uh, I mean." *Friggen too late to sputter now.* "Jamie."

"*Our* Jamie?" The door opens again, and Willow's clutching a dress that's all tulle and Cinderella.

"Yup. Returning my call." I clear my throat, buying time for an excuse. "I reach out every blue moon to see how he's doing at Santa Barbara."

"Oh. Camdyn said he might go with his mother next week to visit with him. Lord knows Nan still treats him like a baby,

but it's good that all the checks and balances don't fall on the same person. He might grow to resent her."

I choke down a chortle.

"Tatum, I always forgot you're just as close in age to Jamie as you are to us." She pauses and grunts. There's a silhouette of her shifting downward to step into the new dress. "So nice that you keep up with him. So, it's not all just MacKenzies, ya know."

"Yup." I glare at the glass dragging across the smooth floor and wince at how it clatters into a wastebasket.

"Speaking of shells. My William's just like his Uncle Jamie. Won't say a word." Willow's voice carries through the slats. "Anyway, I called him the other day. I think he had an exam, so the call was quick."

No, he's a friggen liar.

The door to the fitting room flies open just as the bridal consultant has returned from dumping shards of glass. Startled out of my musing, I glance up at Willow and pant, fanning my face with flapping fingers.

"I know ..." she croaks just as I say, "This ... is ... *the* ... one."

Money signs flash in the attendant's eyes as Willow and I initiate our own sobbing competition.

"My mom ..." My girl's bottom lip wobbles.

Standing, I finish her thought, saying, "Is looking down from heaven and telling all the angels that she's proud of *her* daughter."

God, I crave a fairytale wedding now.

“Shit,” I groan as we clasp hands like weirdoes.

“What?”

“I’m harassing you. No Vegas. No backyard. No Justice of the Peace.”

Illumination flickers in a gorgeous pair of hazel eyes. “Ohhh, Tatum, you wanna wear a dress.”

The countdown is brutal—my attempt at nonchalance doesn’t go unpunished.

Willow’s tone becomes lush and hypnotizing. “A dress like this and high heels and flowers all over. That’s what you want.”

I ground out, “Yes.”

“That’s what the fuck I’m talkin bout, girl! I taught you to wear stilettos for a reason!”

I imagine my toes during a lavish wedding ceremony and reception. “Every good deed,” I mutter, letting faux irritation mature into a giddy chuckle.

A couple of hours later, Willow and I’ve grabbed the boys from their grandparents’ house on my way to her home. In the passenger seat, she scoffs, scrolling through her cellphone.

“What’s up?”

“*Your* pal. Camdyn bought a new car.”

“So, Willow, does that mean no margaritas?” I start to glance over when Camryn questions us from the backseat. At that exact moment, a football sails past the windshield.

“Mother ...” I throttle the cuss word, slamming the breaks. Luckily, the little shithead who through the ball had no desire to run into oncoming traffic after it.

“Damn kids think this street is the park,” Willow mutters as her son repeats himself.

“Mommmyyyyyy, what car?”

“A Chevy. You know your dad.” Willow huffs. “River’s with him. And yes, Tatum. We’ll have endless margaritas. You’re in luck. They’ll come with entertainment.”

“What?” I snort, knowing full well what she means.

“The side of ass whoopin I have for the boys’ dad.”

I shake my head, this time not diverting my eyes from the road. “Actually, I only needed one glass. Tonight’s *the* night. And the menu at our house includes River’s fav chicken wings—a thousand of them. He thinks one chicken wing is one calorie. So, salad is the side dish and cake ... and *bitter revelations* of how Harrison ...” As my voice dips to continue the conversation, I’m interrupted by a pipsqueak in the backseat.

“Cake?” William’s subtle query is trampled by his brother begging for cake.

“Ryn,” Willow growls, “cool it. Stubby’s making paper cake.”

I shake my head, turning into their lot. “Shaved coconut does have a certain consistency.”

“I want cake too.”

“No,” Willow cuts in.

“But my leg.” Camryn pouts, pointing to his snowboarding injury.

“Kid’s got a point. Godmommy will come by bright and early tomorrow with your cake ... if I survive the night.”

“You will.” His confidence softens my heart.

If I survive the night, rings in my ears.

“Get out,” Willow orders, and what obedient little soldiers she has.

She turns to me. “River loves him some *you*. And I’m so happy for you that you’re taking this step. Your honesty will open doors in your relationship that you never knew existed. God’s got you.”

“Awww, now I’d rather the endless marg—”

“No. Take your ass home. No drinks for you. Get ready for tonight, and your life changing for the better because you have the man of your dreams, and *he* will support you.”

“I know that, but I can’t pray anymore that River ...” I shake my head, whining coming to a close. “Okay, margarita rain check. I got this.” *Next step, navigate how River and I will permanently handle Harrison and/or reconfigure my mindset at how my man perceives me.*

No, forget that; River loves me unconditionally.

An impalpable calm floods over my skin as I repeat the mantra. “I got this.”

“You got this,” Willow replies, getting out.

As I’m backing up, my cellphone trills in my pocket. Jamie’s number pops up on the dash.

I answer mid first ring. “Hey, is something the matter?”

“Yes,” he hisses. “Devi is dead.”

RIVER

“You get a call this morning?” Jhang asks. Clutching the cellphone, I lean against the wood slab counter in Clan MacKenzie’s kitchen.

That’s why I’m here. I arrived minutes ago to discuss the matter of Harrison with Camdyn and Leith. Now, the older MacKenzie boy taps into Harrison’s online resources. The other has disappeared, leaving me to stay out of Leith’s way while he works his magic.

I lower my voice and reply, “Yup. Got a call from Federal Agent Jatkowski.”

“I take it Harrison hasn’t screwed you over. I don’t know whether to sigh in relief or ...”

I help him out. “Be concerned that he has a Fed on the payroll.”

“I’d hate to think so, but yes.”

Less than a minute later, my thumb pops the end-call on my iPhone.

Leith leans on the opposite side, typing faster than I could fathom as Camdyn enters the room, dropping a duffle bag onto the counter.

“Did you get my car, brother?” Camdyn asks.

“Wait,” I cut in. “He’s too busy—”

“Oh, no,” Leith snorts. “I’m a lad of many talents. First you,” he points to Camdyn, “the Chevy Nova checks out. Stolen from some bloody small town up north. Clean. Nontraceable. The dealer wants cold hard cash. Sixty minutes . . . ten minutes ago. On the corner of San Pedro and ___”

“C’mon, what I need is more important than a car!” I growl.

Leith holds a palm to his chest, then adds, “While I’m thoroughly insulted you’d say such a thing about a fucking *Chevy Nova*, I’ve confirmed Harrison sent blackmail photos to the lead federal agent investigating PLR.”

My teeth grit.

“*But* the lad may have very well loved you in one way while fucking everyone else in the arse.”

The tension clutching my shoulders loosens. “So, he didn’t?”

“No.” Leith rubs the back of his neck. “He didn’t screw you over, River. Tatum’s father, yes. Everyone else, yes. You were the last of his clients. Perhaps Harrison converted before signing contracts with you.”

Still unsure what to make of this news, I blink a few times. “I still don’t like him screwing Stubby’s father.”

“Me either.” Camdyn picks up his duffle bag.

“I’ve an idea.” Leith taps his lips. “Harrison got rid of the Feds for us. Nevertheless, Mam won’t sanction any festivities with them involved.”

“But they’re gone now.” I smile.

“I’ll get you Sefina.” As Leith speaks, I’m left speechless. “Let’s give Harrison the last laugh. The second Sefina decides to fight you, Harrison will come sniffing after ya. He’ll claim to have had his hands in it, yeah.”

“Or so he thinks.” Camdyn chuckles.

“How will you get me Sefina?” I rest my forearms on the counter.

“A couple of fake tweets. He’s bad-mouthed you repeatedly. As soon as Sefina,” he tosses a thumb at his own chest, “sends a tweet, Harrison’s gonna place himself in your good graces. Sefina’s followers will be on that bloody tweet like flies on cow dung, so even if he backtracks, it won’t matter.”

“And we will bring that bragging fucktard to my basement. Fuck yeah,” Camdyn roars. “How long do I have to grab the ride?”

“Thirty minutes. DMV paperwork will be in the mail the second you get the car in your hands. Text me, brother.”

* * *

Leith bragged that Sefina would text me the second we climbed in an Uber as we headed out the door. Not twenty minutes later, Camdyn tosses a duffle bag over to a man in a gray suit in the parking lot of a diner. He then pitches himself against the hood of his new ride.

“I’m gonna fucking cry.” He chortles, pawing original paint.

“Mm-hmm.” I’m not listening. *Sefina’s* Twitter rant picks up steam. Leith tied in the proposal and everything.

“Hey, bro! I’ve asked five times what did Leith tweet?” Camdyn claps a hand over my shoulder before opening the driver-side door.

“*Little Boy Rage*, fuck.” I stop to chuckle.

“Aw, my brother added a note of authenticity. Little Boy —”

“Hey,” I growl.

“Little Boy Rage, good thing you proposed to Little Cop Girl already. Ready to get your ass handed to you?” Camdyn swipes his palms over the steering wheel. “Aww, sweet, rudimentary, to the point. Get in.”

I hustle around the rear and slide down into the seat. The engine roars like it’s gonna launch itself from the framing and jet into the next century.

“Powerful.” Camdyn whistles, letting her rip.

Not long after, the ocean unfolds to our left while he drives toward Ventura.

“Riv, Harrison call?”

“Calls *and* texts,” I mutter.

“Never fails. Bitches are predictable,” he mumbles. “I know a good place for lobster rolls.”

“Long as I’m home for dinner.”

“You cooking?”

“Nah.” I laugh as the pavement zips by so fast it blurs.

“Then why be home for dinner?”

I push his arm. “Let Stubby hear you talking shit.”

“Man, so dudes’ trip is out. I was thinking lobster rolls in San Fran, but there’s this place in Santa Barbara that’ll have to do.”

“Shit, maybe you should go without me.”

Camdyn’s attention detaches from the road as he offers a questioning look.

I elaborate. “Go up to northern Cali and wait out the ass whopping Willow has for you. You’re getting married. You can’t go purchasing big-ticket items without her consent.”

“First of all, it’s my birthday.” He grumbles.

“Is it?”

“Could be. I stopped giving a fuck after twenty-one.”

Laughing and shaking my head, I glance down at my phone. “Sefina’s on Sports Network.”

A beat later, Camdyn swerves for the exit. After flying off the freeway, he pulls into a gas station.

“That was quick,” he replies, looking over.

I turn the iPhone sideways to play the live broadcast.

On the screen, a sports analyst sits before a news mockup. Sefina’s on a tiny monitor to the side of the display. The sports analyst says, “Thus far, you’ve been adamant that River “Rage” Tagaloa is not on your level. What prompted the change of heart?”

While donning diamond earrings and three chains, the idiot continually swipes at his nose to showcase an expensive watch. “I uh ... woke up.”

“Bitch, looks like you woke up after a night of dick,” Camdyn snorts.

“And it wasn’t a change of heart.” Sefina glares into the camera. “He’s still trash. It’s time that *Little Boy Rage’s* fans abandon him, once and for all.”

“Once and for all.” I shake my head at the cliché.

“Cheesy, ain’t it?”

The commentator asks Sefina his strategy when my cellphone lights up.

I accept Harrison’s call.

“River, don’t hang up.”

“I answered. Get to it,” I clip out, although I’d rather ask why he hadn’t cheated me too.

You stole from everyone else.

Why not the man who sent your son to the hospital?

I’m still in contemplation when Camdyn says *we* are on our way.

He presses the off button on my phone.

“Our plans are coming together smoothly, Riv. Champagne included.”

Police sirens wail in the distance. I glance in the rearview mirror at the omen while Camdyn charges onto the on-ramp.

“Listen,” I tell him. “Champagne. Let that motherfucker get his guard down. Then we take him.”

“I know the drill.”

“But I gotta have dinner with Tatum tonight.” *She made it seem important.* “Don’t kill the cunt until I return with Stubby.”

thirty-seven

TATUM

Accusation hangs in the air when Jamie opens the door to an immaculate home.

Not an apartment or a condo—a friggen turn-key, luxurious oasis.

What's his occupation? How does he make money? Those are questions one would ask someone they cared for. Someone whose mental health they are concerned about. But all those questions are far removed from my mind as I sulk past the threshold.

“Do you think something ...” Voice drawing shut, I frantically push away the onslaught of tears showering my cheeks as I stand in the center of an art deco foyer.

Is this my fault? Terrified of the answer, I choose ... safe. “Did Devi call you?”

“We never spoke, Tatum.” Contrite, Jamie’s teeth sink into his fisted palm—a subtle form of self-mutilation.

All the emotion Jamie avoided seeps into his tone, spills from his eyes, and shakes his extremely tall, lean frame.

“Devi talked incessantly on the elevator to *his* room. I never said a word to her.” Jamie looks at me suddenly, regret forming on somber features. “I got a call last night. The person said it was her phone.”

“What?”

“The prat taunted me. Said he was dumping her.”

Frigid ice makes its home in the depths of my heart. “Wh-what? *Who?*”

“Not Harrison.”

“I-I’ll fix this.”

“You’re not *restoring* an inanimate object, Tatum. Human life is gone because of you.”

Loud, ugly tears fall from my cheeks as the sides of my closed fists bounce off Jamie’s muscular chest. “You know what I mean. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

I break. Friggen break like clay beneath a steel hammer.

“*I feel like Drake circa 2011, ‘Doing It Wrong.’*” My very own muttered statement to Willow slings in my face like shit.

“Who did it?” I desperately croak as Jamie pulls me into a stiff embrace.

“One of his bodyguards,” Jamie replies. His usual turquoise eyes are a balmy cobalt. “I met with him this morning.”

“Where is he?”

“Dead.” He transitions, returning to his original state.

Stoic.

Standoffish.

Antisocial.

Hands push me away, the comfort coming to a frosty halt.

“Harrison’s bodyguard underestimated me, Tatum. Now, out of respect to you, I will give you twenty-four hours to handle Harrison your way.”

“I ...”

Manic hands clasp my cheeks. “Do *not* hesitate, Tatum! You don’t handle him; I will. I don’t operate under Clan MacKenzie. We both know I never will be like *them*. That doesn’t renounce my capabilities.”

I nod slowly. “I’ll handle Harrison.”

“Yes, you will. Devi’s in my trunk. I’d ask you to accompany me to bury her somewhere more worthy, but you’re running out of time.”

“I’m sor—”

“Don’t be. She put her faith in you. I did not.”

* * *

The strong scent of burned rubber floats into my nostrils as I skid to a stop in front of Harrison’s home in Malibu. I flick away a fresh torrent of tears, contemplating how *I* got Devi murdered.

Bethany had said she’d taken the home in the Hills, so on a whim, I decided to try this one before heading to Harrison’s business.

A loud thrumming of adrenaline pumps in my ears as I stalk past a pale blue muscle car. The classic’s unseemly

between two imports.

Please be here. I swear I will snatch Harrison from the pits of hell.

I will find him.

I will make him pay.

I stalk up the lengthy staircase over the steps where River screwed me in the night.

Devi never had this.

Never had love.

At the multi-story front doors, I ring, bang, and slam the flat of my hand against the frosted glass. “Harrison!”

The door opens, and a reserved maid sputters, “Miss Li, what is the matter?”

I’m not crossing the threshold into the lair.

I will shoot him where he stands.

“Harrison here?” I ask.

“Yes, ma’am. He has company. Would you—”

All the best of my Black ancestors backs my growl. “Tell that muthafucka to come outside.”

“Al-alright.” Fidgeting with a duster, her tennies pad across the marble as she stalks away.

Less than a minute later, the man himself slides out of the door and starts to pull it flush when my hand sails across his face.

Specks of spit rain away as I retrieve my prickled palm.

“Tatum, I’d offer to take you straight to my room to flog me, but,” he glances at the just cracked door, “let’s hold off on

our lover's quarrel?"

I. See. Red.

Worlds implode. Embers crash. The last time devastating, tormenting memories snatched the floor from beneath my feet, I was sixteen. And *Fear None*, a term that was as familiar to me as my own face, was cast into oblivion.

No, this motherfucker should *fear me*.

I target his deceit, listing them off, even his silly-ass antics to swiping my cellphone. "You had me ambushed in an alley! Just to steal my iPhone. Did *I* roll over like a bitch? No! You think I need a cellphone recording to prove to anyone who loves me what you've done, *Godfather*? You had me attacked!"

"You almost ruined my business. *Almost*, Princess Tata." A wink accompanies the uptick of his thin lips.

"I have one question before you die, Harrison. Why the girl?"

His brows push together. "What girl? Oh ... the half-breed. She's always welcome at my house."

Voice trembling in fury, I say, "You had her murdered. That was the last straw."

"I wouldn't—"

"Don't lie to me."

"First of all, you cavort with murderers, *not me*. Second, what would I gain?" He pinches the tip of his nose. "It was raining when the whore made her leave. I offered her a ride." Discernment blanches his face. "Fucking mongrels—why do I employ ex-convicts? One of my overnight bodyguards, whose shift started an hour ago, took her. He's not here yet."

Although I'm assessing Harrison for the lying scumbag he is, I alone shoulder the blame. Maybe Devi was here for me ... searching out another way to make him pay? Maybe his bodyguard found something incriminating on her, and she intended to bring said evidence to me.

Or maybe Devi had acclimated herself to this cruel world and was here for *money*. Intuition refutes the latter, and I choke up. "Tell me the truth!"

The parasite's gaze sweeps over me, and his malicious grin causes my temperature to drop. "You recording us *again*, Tatum?"

The walking scum facilitated everything. Although pretending to be oblivious moments ago, Harrison had Devi murdered. *Oh, my gawd, he probably knew Jamie's identity all along.*

He chuckles softly. "Doesn't matter if you're recording us, Princess Tata. I won't say another word. Won't fuel all your conspiracies."

"Conspiracies?" I croak.

"Such as the conspiracies you told your friend."

My heart sinks.

Devi came back for me. There's no way around it. *She went back to him for more information. For ... me.*

"Enough on that. There's only one liar in this conversation, and she's young, hotheaded ... delusional just like her pretty half-bred friend."

"Well, you-you and your 'sit on my lap, lemme tickle you,' ... 'lemme give you teddy bears,' 'lemme blind you with

collectible Barbies' ...” My voice breaks. “You *ruined* my life, Harrison. And you-you are dying today.”

I reach forward, clamp my hands on Harrison’s shoulders, and my knee is seconds away from bursting his balls.

The biggest fist I’ve ever seen in my life sails out, striking Harrison’s temple. My oppressor’s eyes flutter closed. He’s unconscious before his body slams on the concrete, and the door is shoved open.

In his stead, two figures have emerged.

Two men who always thought they protected me.

As my tongue adheres to the top of my mouth and my eyes stare unsteadily between the two, Camdyn thrusts his boot into the side of Harrison’s body, pushing him out of the way.

The venom that funneled through me is now apprehension.

I ask, flustered, “Wh-what are you guys doing here? Did you,” I stop to clear the shame from my throat, “hear ...”

I open my mouth, ready to offer excuses to my best friend and fiancé.

The words have drawn into tense spheres clogging my throat. River brings me to his chest, and an ominously velvet tenor melds in my ear. “There something you wanna tell me, *Tatum?*”

My eyelids crush together, biting tight. I stutter, “Yes. B-but not like this.”

RIVER

Clan MacKenzie handled the bloodbath—the dismemberment and disappearance of four of Harrison’s staff.

And now, the jack-of-all-trades has made himself comfortable in the basement—pissed-his-pants *comfortable*.

Vomit trails his chin, his linen shirt, and the cement floor.

I recall the first time I came down here. Camdyn said Nan wouldn’t allow any of the boys to murder anyone beneath their home. His parents taught them to keep their victims alive. And with torture handed down through their lineage, they created an art form outta slow, passionate butchery.

My brother, who once offered a museum tour of the basement and welcomed me into his family, isn’t down here with me.

Neither is Tatum.

While I avoided her for five years, my Little Bit never stopped.

She always came to me.

We had this sort of connection—or maybe I was going insane in the cage—that I could sense the second a prison guard came to get me.

To offer the chance to see *her*.

I said no.

It's early morning now. Gotta be. There are no windows to confirm or deny that fact. I haven't spoken to Tatum since we road in silence from Harrison's place.

Bones weary and blood pounding beneath my knuckles, I ram a fist into Harrison's gut. The chains linked around his wrists and the cement beam above skip.

Two Brodys—the father and son—the latter affectionately called Little Brody, crack open a bottle of whiskey.

Leith emerges from a stainless-steel cabinet with glass tumblers.

I shake my head, though my tongue's on fire for water. Lungs and limbs screaming from exertion, I won't cease. Sleep will claim me before I stop bringing Harrison suffering.

It ain't enough.

And while I still haven't wrapped my mind around recent events, I determine that any affliction I give will never be enough.

Beside me, Big Brody punches an arm into his even larger son. "Little Brody, you've replaced muscle with fat recently—love'll do that to you—help double team 'em, yeah."

Leith shakes his head. "No, River requires no help."

The beard swallows down his drink. "Eh, Da, what are you saying? I'm fat?"

“Aye.” Big Brody tips the whiskey. “Fatter than a fecking cow. Maybe no scalpel today. When our champ here grows tired, you work out.”

“*I won’t.*” I grit out, my roundhouse sending spit and blood fanning in an arc from Harrison’s mouth. “Just keep reviving him for me, please.” My query is punctuated by my hands clutching Harrison’s throat.

“How could you?” I pant. Beneath my palms, his oozing bodily fluid of puke and blood grows slimy over my skin. “She was a little girl!”

Dark eyes peer open.

“Sor—” Harrison gurgles, upchucking blood.

“Yes, sorry.” A feminine voice trails down the cement steps.

Familiar.

Raspy, but not the sultry rasp I loved the first time my girl uttered a word to me.

A fresh apron covers the front of Nan’s muumuu. “I spoke to our girl,” she says, pausing to huff. “Encouraged her to take this time, have relief.”

My eyes are questioning. *I need to help Stubby.*

Nan sniffs. “Tatum agrees that I should be here.”

I nod, not quite comprehending what she means about her presence or the wetness that forms in her brown eyes.

Nan asks, “May I take over, River?”

Though polite, I realize in the MacKenzie crime family, any utterance of “May I” is used sparingly. I understand it’s just a gesture.

“Yeah.” I can hardly speak. The back of my throat is drier than sandpaper.

“Good. Tatum needs you, Willow, and Cam. You all are her team.” She turns away from me. “Brody Boy, adrenaline.”

“He’s up,” her husband mutters.

“Adrenaline, now. His full lucidity is required.” Her pinched lips form a cruel grin.

The hardly twenty-something Lachlan makes a gurgling noise, hastily rising from his seat and discarding his half-sipped whiskey. He mutters something about his stomach not strong enough for this and trails up the steps.

While my heart attempts to pull me in the same direction, I’m rooted in the same spot.

Nan turns to Little Brody. “Get me the *good* pot,” she orders, Scottish brogue thick.

With a grunt, he rises, heads to a closet, and lugs out a pot that could feed her clan. Water spills over the side as he brings it over.

Is she gonna waterboard him?

Harrison sucks on oxygen as Big Brody stabs him in the chest with epinephrine.

Although Big Brody had already started to back up, Nan’s hand guides him out of her way, and she becomes the center of Harrison Herrington’s world.

“Well, hello.” Nan draws her fingers into his hair. “It is my pleasure to tell you the next proceedings. Now that you’re good and tenderized.”

With a grunt, she reaches down into the pot of water, muttering, “Nice sharp blade is a nice sharp blade.” She clasps a butcher knife within her fisted hand, rusted from blade to wooden hilt. “This right here is how my mam worked out, cutting up cows on the family farm. She was a biggin, just like me. I ain’t no wee lassie.”

A big one?

Nan looks lovingly at the knife. “You could say this blade has special powers. That rust hits your bloodstream; you are fecked. And I’m gonna cut you up—slowly.”

The flat of the knife taunts his blanched, gaunt skin. I attempt to gulp, but my Adam’s apple lobs down in my throat, choking me.

I’ll get a bottle of water and then either ... return here ... or support Tatum. As I stalk slowly up the steps, Nan says, “This ain’t no sharp knife, you old fool. The combined efforts of me and ol’ Bessie here will leave you praying for death.” They are the last words I hear as I stand at the top step. Letting my forehead rest on the steel door, the horror story of how I treated Little Bit after the party, during the five years in prison, and once I came out of the slammer sinks into my gut.

Never thought I deserved her. Never felt as true as it does right now.

I’m closing the door when Leith says, “Hold it.”

He takes the steps two at a time. The door fastens with an electronic click.

Leith juts his strawberry head behind us. “She gets to *gnawing* in someone’s flesh with that thing, and I can-can’t stomach the fecking sight. Can’t wrap *me head* around it.” He pauses to draw the side of his open hand over his forearm like

he's sawing into skin. "Bloody fecking in-depth. I thought stabbing someone was maddening. But that consistent movement, it'll make you a bit crazy."

He whistles as the door clicks, Little Brody emerging from the opposite side.

Leith chortles. "I knew you wouldn't make it."

"Gotta take a leak." He tugs his beard.

Leith nudges me with his elbow while calling after his brother. "Then you'll grab some popcorn and return, eh?"

At the lack of response, Leith laughs as we start into the kitchen. "Told ya. Listen, Riv, go be with Tatum. She honest to God needs ya."

At the fridge, Leith removes two Dasanis, throws one to me, and hops onto the wooden-island countertop.

Go be with Tatum.

Refreshing water drops the inferno in my chest to a simmering burn. Hearing a faded yet clamorous shatter of glass, Leith and I glance at each other.

"What's that?" he asks. "If Da knew someone was acting like a *bampot* while we were downstairs—Feck that! If Mam knew, she'd have all our heads!"

I stroll toward the darkened French doors, which lead to the pool, as the cracks of bursting glass grow in intensity. Gripping the knobs, I open both doors.

On the side of the house, motion lights glow in the night as glass sprays in all directions.

Holding an alloy bat, Camdyn stands on top of his new Chevy. The bat whips through the air, shattering the

windshield of the classic he had been searching for, for years. He even claimed he would sneak the ride into a few wedding photos.

Ain't no reason to ask what the fuck's possessing him because he's shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Don't want this ride now, Willow," he grounds out, hopping onto the grass.

On the opposite side, Willow holds Tatum in her arms.

"I had that slimy, rapist asshole in my trunk. Don't want that either." Glass from the rear light erupts in all directions. With each hit, the restored body sags.

Running a soothing arm over Tatum's spine, Willow hisses, "You're acting like our kids. How many times must I tell your evil twin to use his words? Now, *use your words*, Cam!"

"Use my words, Lolo? *Okay.*" The bat hits the ground with a *thunk*. He stalks over, growling at Tatum, "Fuck River. Fuck your father. I am your brother, Stubby. You could have told me. You *should've* told me!"

I watch as Tatum seems to stare through him.

As he leers down at them, Leith stalks past me and clasps Camdyn's shoulder. "*Nugget*, you're scaring them."

"Stop!" Willow gasps as Camdyn sends a hook, powering through his shoulder. Leith sidesteps at the last second, tossing a fist of his own.

Grinding my teeth together, reality charges through my veins. I stalk toward them, ready to stop the war between two blood brothers.

Tatum's plea cracks through the night, freezing everyone where they stand. "Stop, please."

thirty-nine

TATUM

Three months later ...

Over ninety days ago, when River drew me to his chest, fervently corroded with mistrust, I plunged into the nightmare of all my wrongs.

Never speaking up in the first place.

Devi ...

I haven't lost myself in River's arms since the truth became this diseased anomaly between us.

Haven't curled up in his lap.

Haven't tasted him.

Haven't inhaled his scent and held it there like the obsessed lover girl that I *was*.

However, I *have* engaged in meaningless conversation with him in Father's presence. I've inserted encouragement when necessary. Such as suggesting that Sam "The Samoan Savage" Sefina tends to scream like a banshee the second before completing his signature move.

It's like I've embodied what Momma had: her smile, her assurance that everything is A-friggen-okay so that Father applied himself to MMA and not her *silly* ailment.

She called sickle cell disease *silly* as a form of minimizing it when an episode vexed her the most.

I've taken an extended leave from LAPD. Only River's aware of that fact. But I still dread the days when I go out in public to teach my self-defense classes.

And I dread supporting him. Ninety days ago, I couldn't fathom that thought. But I literally break out in sweat near my fiancé.

This afternoon, as I grip the doorhandle to King Kong Zombie Gym, I hitch a breath and train my facade. *Stop stressing. Start moving.*

"Tatum!" My name's called from behind. I spin around just as Park jogs up to me, too stuck in his own world to notice that I haven't quite mastered the art of fakery. A kiss peppers my forehead, and he hustles in.

In the same instance, Bao has pocketed his keys in his knit vest, meandering past a discount store in our same strip mall.

"Hi, *Yéye*."

"I no like what I see."

I bubble up in pathetic laughter, smoothing down the front of my tee. "Am I ugly?"

"Dark."

Eh, I've been called dark for a half-breed before. "Here I thought I had all the light of Jesus inside my soul."

He grunts. Could it be the religious talk, or does he see the girl who placed urges and desires over another person's life?

As if he perceives the lies, Bao waves me off. "You go, go pretend. Make Father happy. That all you know."

"No, it's not, *Yéye*," I croak.

"Center of *your* world."

"Excuse me." River's new sparring partner stalls, wearing a backpack slung over one brawny shoulder.

I turn back around, and Bao has walked inside. The fighter holds the door open for me. I thank him and walk in first.

"*Yéye*," I growl. "Get back here! The center of my world, what?"

In a few hurried steps, I've caught up with the man of my similar tiny stature.

"What is it?" I undertone.

He frowns. "Forgot."

"No, you did not."

"Old man," Father calls down from the cage, "you harassing my daughter?"

With a snort and an eye roll, Bao claims his usual chair and folds his arms over.

This is pairing up to be one of those days.

"Get up here, Tatum," Father orders, amusement in his dark eyes. "You're so much like your mother—an eye for the most peculiar things. So, let us know if River so much as squints his left eye before he sets up a submission. I keep telling Rage, here, that he's ..."

I killed Devi. The single thought fueling my depression loops in my psyche, reinventing itself, but in the same tired package.

Seconds later, Father's head tilts.

"No response?" he asks.

"I ..."
What had he said? I can't keep it straight. Voices taunt me every second.

Devi.

Jamie.

Even that bitch, Harrison, has something to say.

"Stubby, come help me." River calls me up. He hasn't asked shit of me in ages. Or perhaps he has. I couldn't break through those fucking voices. Could hardly hear more than one single shred of speech. I climb the steps.

A stolen opportunity is in River's grasp the second I strut to his side. He inclines his head to whisper in my ear. "I miss you."

"Tsk," Father growls, "you are sleeping with my daughter every night."

I'm turning to address my father when the strongest pair of arms ever to engulf me encircle my waist, and River drops his mouth to my earlobe. I hear a soft kiss, though numb to a single caress.

"You have to let me hold you, Little Bit," River whispers as my body begs for space.

Suddenly aware that we cannot return to the past, my hands thrust abrasively into River's chest.

Father booms, "What's going on with the two of you?"

“Nothing!” Well, there’s one thing we agree on. Though it’s quite uncanny that we speak in unison.

“Alright!” Padding shreds from Father as he nods like he’s about to throw hands. “Alright, everyone out of the cage besides River and me.”

“Father!” I gasp.

“Close your mouth, Tatum.” He points a stiff finger at me. “If River’s harmed you in any way!”

“Why would you say a thing like that?” I growl, offering Father a pointed look.

“Figure it out, Stubby,” River whispers, spite dripping in his tone.

I turn a shocked pair of eyes in his direction. Blood drains from my body as I stare at him. But as if that statement hadn’t dug its claws into my heart, River slides a forearm against my waist, firmly shifting me toward the octagon door.

“But—why would you guys fight?” I ask, looking up at him. “River, you’d never hurt me.”

“I have hurt you!” As he shouts, a fist jams against his jaw.

“I thought so!” Father roars.

“I hurt him first!” I scream. “I hurt River first.”

“Doesn’t matter to me.” Father pivots from his back foot to bring his entire opposite foot charging through the air.

Deflecting the kick swiftly, River reaches in, and I clasp him from the back.

“You guys, don’t!” My efforts abet Father’s counterpunch.

After the foul strike, I throw myself between them.

“Father, we are all family! You stay fucking neutral.”

A parental finger wags in my direction. “Choice words with your very own father. What would your mother think?”

“That I’m a disappointment. She ... is ... *disappointed* in me,” I croak.

“Ren would never.” Father clasps my face.

“She’s not,” River groans, pressing the butt of his palm into his eye where Father punched him.

“She is. Because I hurt you, River. I lied to you. I denied you the right to be there for me.”

Father stutters, “T-Tatum, were you unfaithful or something?”

I heft my shoulders. “Or something.”

* * *

At home, I press frozen peas to River’s eye, standing to the side of him. I can’t place myself close to him. There’s a slight tremble in my fingers.

His deep voice pours over my wounds, but there will always be scars. “Why can’t I touch you, Little Bit?”

“You can,” I whisper.

River snatches the peas from my hands, and the bag dashes against the ground. Tiny green globules scatter.

I step back a few paces, veggies embedding in the bottom of my tennies, as River snarls, “Why don’t you *want* me to touch you!”

“I’m dirty.” The truth ejects from my lips.

No second chances.

No reeling it back.

Just the words permeating the air.

“What did Harrison do to you?” he asks.

I love River so much that tears slam my cheeks.

“You can’t get away from me, Tatum.”

“I know.”

“I’ve been patient. I will always strive to put your needs before mine, but I deserve an answer. At least, I hope you’d give me a fucking answer. *Please.*”

I head to the cupboard to grab a wine glass, but mostly to divert my eyes from his. *Alright, I haven’t quite looked at his gorgeous face in a while.*

I mumble, “Tickles. Toys. I liked the tickles at first. Then I tortured the Barbies.”

The silly part of me that always defended the fact that Harrison never penetrated me begs to shout that out. To assure River I’m not wholly tarnished.

The fearful part of me leaves him sitting there to nurse his own black eye as I grab a bottle of Chardonnay.

forty

RIVER

I settle into the chair at Camdyn's shop. Around us are the fruits of my best friend's talent. On the walls, after having been tatted by Camdyn, are famous larger-than-life celebrities and influential motherfuckers that follow each other.

Fuck.

Social media.

I haven't posted in a while. I continue to employ a PR company, as Harrison suggested. Someone argues with Sefina as requested by the contract we had to sign for our upcoming match.

Camdyn breaks into my thoughts. "You wanna cover this Medusa bitch on your chest?"

"Yup."

Miffed, he adds, "You covered the *Fear None* I did when you were fifteen with someone else's whack-ass prison art. Now you want me to—"

"Put anything *else* there, bro," I growl.

“Fool, you still have space.” He glances over my legs. “Something tiny on your shin like a moth. A fucking superfluous moth.”

I let a shoulder kick. “You can do that too. Cover the cunt first.”

While I explain how the Medusa prison tattoo represented Tatum at the time, Camdyn gets to work. He doesn’t draw the new tattoo out first for my approval.

But I’d trust my brother, even if tattoos *were* permanent.

Nothing’s permanent anymore.

Hours later, I stalk before a standing mirror and glare at pure mastery—at the new representation of the friend we’ve both loved for years.

My entire chest is black, save for a section where there’s a heart trapped in jail. A heart created out of the swirled sections of the cunt’s hair. It’s Tatum’s heart, clutched in darkness, yet still, it’s somehow capable of surviving.

Still appraising, I ask, “How much?”

“Nothing,” Camdyn grumbles. “I didn’t mean to go off on Stubby. I just, just remember not being there for Jamie when we were kids. Motherfucker was my closest, and then he wasn’t. Can you tell Stubby I wasn’t there for the two of them when they needed me? Tell her I’m sorry.”

“No. She’s shut the world out, including me. Best to tell ...” I cease, letting my words hit home for myself. “Best to tell her via text. Gotta go.”

* * *

One thing that's different between Tatum Li and me, among all the other crap changes, is she cooks more—bland meals with no soul, no feeling.

It gets the job done, though, because I ain't *tasting* her food. I'm just eating to survive. The part of me that will never stop being obsessed with her sees the meals as her *display* of love.

Tatum places a plate of unsalted baked chicken, green beans, and boxed mashed potatoes on the kitchen table. As she returns to the island to grab drinks, I pick up the plates from the kitchen table and head to the open glass wall, which she glared at me earlier for opening.

I move to the patio table, place both plates down, and look at hot, dark coal eyes, ordering me to return the meals inside.

I point a stiff hand at the outdoor area that took a pretty penny to design.

A begrudging compliance causes her stiff stride to stop before me. The shatterproof glasses slam onto the tabletop. Lemonade spills over the edges.

I sit.

She sits.

We go through the motions of silent prayers. Or at least, she might. I ain't feeling it.

Slender fingers that haven't adorned my skin in months clasp a fork, and I grip my cutlery.

Chew tediously.

Chew some more.

Then I pick up my cellphone and pause for a moment. In the past, Stubby would bite my head off for going electronic when she slaved away.

But that's when she put her heart into something.

A couple of weeks ago, I spent countless hours surfing Amazon, reading book reviews on non-fiction material about molestation survivors. I purchased a couple of them and tried to implement their suggestions in our routine.

I get people don't transform overnight, but I'm sitting across from a zombie still. Desperate for us to have one meaningful conversation, I shoot off a rapid text.

Tatum glances over her phone, mouthing my message. "I miss you ..."

She forks baked chicken with one hand and takes a bite.

I polish off my plate in a couple of bites and power off another text.

"Yup. I'm rude," Tatum agrees, removing a lifeless gaze from the screen of her iPhone for another bite.

"I hate you so much right now, Stubby." *C'mon, Little Bit, just react.*

She swallows the transparency we desperately needed long ago and mutters, "I'm sorry."

"You ain't never gotta be sorry, Tatum." I wash down stale nutrition with tart lemonade and pray to God that Tatum continues talking.

"I am. I'm sorry, and I did something stupid, and I can't take it back, River. I just-just need a moment to deal." Tears emerge in Tatum's eyes as she runs a hand through her hair.

“You know I love you. I’m just *in my head* a little. Give me time.”

Disappointment tightens my jaw. “Lemme tell you what I do know, Tatum. I’m pissed that you didn’t come clean long ago. Angry at myself.” I pop a hand at my chest. “Angry I was too stupid to notice the tension between you and Harrison.”

“You tried at the restaurant in Beverly Hills,” she murmurs, rubbing a thumb over her brow. “Still burns me alive that you apologized.”

I wait for more, but Tatum’s full lips pull tight to stop whatever thoughts torment her from escaping. My gaze flickers up toward the darkened sky. Whereas I want to insert cussing, fighting, and shouting it out, I let my fingers tuck underneath into tight fists.

“Tatum, you can be stuck in your thoughts all you want, but I can’t.”

“I’m sor—”

“I couldn’t get my head out of my ass to see that it wasn’t just me, a jealous man. I’m disgusted that you had to do *all* this without me.”

Her mouth opens, and my breathing stalls. “Little Bit, say anything.”

Tatum measures out her words. “I owe you an explanation. And I see you’re growing tired of my apologies.”

I mutter beneath my breath. “Alright, then I’m fucking sorry if it seems like I’ve rushed you.”

“Thanks,” she whispers. “Give me some time to process my thoughts. I’ll tell you everything. You already know about Harrison.”

As an icy front breezes over my heart, I hold my tongue. I don't know shit, honestly. But I just promised to be patient.

RIVER

Days have passed since I thought a couple of silly text messages might initiate a discussion between us. Now, I'm seated wide legged, arms folded, glaring at Dr. Beck. One might say I should be grateful. But every second here, my jaw draws tighter, and I grow more cynical than I've ever been.

Another man has gotten *my* woman to open up places where she won't allow me. Sunlight spills into the room where Tatum's settled on a velvety couch.

"I feel dirty," she murmurs, looking down at her fidgeting fingers.

In what world does a grown man listen to another one?

Why can't I refute the bullshit Tatum's saying?

Lies directed at herself.

After a prolonged silence, Dr. Beck asks, "Why do you feel dirty, Tatum?"

"My father made River think I was," she lets a sigh stutter from her chest, "too good for him. Then River was friggen brainwashed with that notion the first time we were intimate."

I growl, “You are still *perfect*, Tatum. Only *I’ve* had you.”
Only I will.

Dr. Beck holds up a hand. “River, let her finish.”

I plant my elbow on the armrest and gesture that my mouth’s sealed.

“You were saying that you feel dirty, Tatum,” Dr. Beck assures.

My hard glare bores through him.

“Tell us more about why you feel that way.”

* * *

Thirty minutes later, we exit Dr. Beck’s office. Tatum’s deathly quiet in the corridor. Each step we take feels like I’m fucking sinking. By the time we reach the lobby, we appear to be strangers departing at the same time.

My hand guides the small of her back. It hurts like my first round as an MMA virgin when she tenses beneath my fingers.

We don’t walk out into the sunny day. She moves just to the side of the sliding glass door.

“I’m gonna head home,” she says. At this moment, I realize my woman hasn’t said my name in ages.

Not in anger.

Nor ecstasy.

Not at all.

“Alright, I’ll drop you off—”

“That’ll inconvenience you. It’s pushing two o’clock. With the traffic, Father’ll complain that you’re late.”

“Doesn’t matter, Tatum.”

“He’ll say you’re not ready for Sefina. He’ll say ...”

I lock eyes with her. “I only care what *you* say.” *Fucking say something, anything, without your therapist present.*

While the only place Tatum Li ever belonged was in my arms, at this second, I’d cherish a touch of her brown skin without her recoiling. Chewing her bottom lip, Tatum murmurs, “I’ll Uber.”

“No,” I grit, removing the key fob and placing it in her hands.

Without another word said, Tatum slips out the doors. She’s gotta be relieved not to have me trailing after like a sick puppy.

The doors swoosh open again as a blonde enters. I gaze after Tatum while she strolls past the fountain toward our SUV. A foolish thought enters my mind.

Catch the Uber now. Follow her home. Ensure she doesn’t do ... something crazy.

The muscles in my shoulders bunch at the sickening notion. I turn away, starting past the atrium.

The secretary, wearing headphones, pauses mid-discussion, but I stalk past her.

Past that fuck, Dr. Beck. I glare at the door while strolling by.

Say my woman’s dirty again, and I’ll put you in a chokehold.

At the right door, I twist the knob and allow myself into the room of the solitary person *I thought* could help us years

ago.

The person I trusted.

The chick *my chick* trusted.

Behind an oak desk, Willow's face lifts, just slightly astonished that I entered without permission. Looping a slender dreadlock behind her ear, she clears her throat. "Well, hello, River."

"You lied to me!"

With a brush of her hand over a light blue blazer, Willow retorts, "Alright, I'll backtrack. You cannot *stalk* into my office. I could've been with a *client*."

"*I did.*" I point a vehement finger at her. "And guess what else I did."

I clearly intend to accuse Willow of everything.

Hurt people have a knack for tossing fingers, so Willow shoulders the blame as I grit out, "I just imagined my woman doing something unforgivable because she won't talk to me!"

A peculiar pain prickles my eyes.

Sorrow overcomes Willow's features. Standing, she comes around the table to offer a box of Kleenex.

I frown. "I don't need that."

"Big tough guys are allowed to cry, Riv."

The edge in my stance slowly diminishes.

"How's therapy?" Willow inquires.

"Peachy. Your people are telling her she's dirty."

"Dirty? Hmmm." She ponders while rounding the desk to her chair to settle down. "Care to offer context behind Beck's

name-calling?”

Forking a hand through my hair, I sit. “Tatum’s calling herself derogatory names like—”

“Dirty?”

“Yes.” I snap.

“And Dr. Beck’s validating her feelings?” Willow gestures, slowly twirling her wrist.

“Validate my ass!”

“Listen, Riv, I wanna own up to something. I didn’t offer you that choice.” She points to the door. “As you said upon arrival, I ignored your feelings to stay true to Stubby. I apologize.”

“Thanks.” I pause to scrub my face. “No, I don’t want you to apologize. Don’t need an apology.”

“Shit, looked to me like you were begging for one.” She chuckles. “But I need to apologize. Your feelings are valid too.”

I groan. “I’m not tryna make this all about me. But maybe I have. To be honest, Tatum’s more than my woman. She’s my best friend—so I always expect us to handle all our shit together. Now, I’m reading theories on *revictimization*. I’m a man,” I gesture with my hands stiffly pointing at my own chest, “getting advice from another man for the first time in my life.”

Willow offers a wry chuckle. “Excuse me? Your King Kong Zombie training team is pretty much all males. And look at you, doing your research.”

I snort. “I try. But my training’s different.”

After forking her bottom lip beneath her teeth, Willow suggests, “Alright then, this is all new to you. For *three months*, you’ve had an *idea* of what Tatum’s endured.”

I blink a few times as her words sink in.

“She’s had years upon years of having this ordeal *live* inside her. It’s her grief. It’s her feelings of fear, dirtiness—as she explained—remorse.”

I hang my head. *I gotta fucking shut up and listen.*

Listen to Dr. Beck.

And most importantly, listen to my woman once she finally opens up.

“Roger that,” I mutter my appreciation.

As I start for the door, Willow says, “Hey, I have an idea.”

Scrubbing a hand over my jaw, I mumble, desperate, “Shoot.”

“If I’m not crossing the line ... I really just want Tatum happy.”

“I’d give anything.”

“Camryn has been asking to cook his godmommy dinner for months. If I bring Ryn and William over, say, tonight or any night you—”

My heart charges at the thought of breaking through the monotony of our dark lives. “Tonight works.”

“Alright, I’ll bring them by. They’ll be dressed to the nines. They’ll cook *gourmet*,” Willow quotes with tucked fingers, “PB&Js. You can have dinner prepared for right after they leave. But Tatum has always loved the boys like crazy. Maybe she’ll crack a smile?”

* * *

I place all my hope in two dudes who don't even come to my chest stacked up on top of each other and a friggen Chicago-style pizza.

Per Willow's instructions, I've removed the peanut butter, jelly, and a butter knife so that once the boys arrive, they can *cook* the best meal I'll have had since Tatum decided the kitchen was her sanctuary.

I groan at the smell of fresh, hot pizza, sliding the box into the oven to hide it for later.

"Why did you buy *that*?" Tatum asks, emotionless.

I turn slowly, jutting a sarcastic brow. "Your favorite?"

Not long ago, I surprised her with this gesture while showing off the new octagon I'd assembled in our backyard.

"Open the box. If that scent doesn't drop you to your knees, I'll take this L."

"Nope. You're always meant to be undefeated ..."

I wasn't even meant to fight. Just put her first. As the memory fades, Tatum launches more accusations.

"Why did you buy a pizza?"

"What's the problem, Stubby?" I slam the oven door shut.

Running an anxious palm over her forearm, Tatum replies, "It's just ... The boys are around the corner. I know that because Ryn texted me like a thousand times since this afternoon. One message when they were getting on the freeway. Another about a hobo that mooned them."

“Sounds like they’ll be here shortly?” I offer, leaning an elbow against the counter.

“Yes.”

“Good. I shoulda invited the kids long ago.”

The most alluring pair of lips twist in contempt. “*What* does that mean, River?”

“This is how I get you to *open your mouth* outside a blasted therapeutic setting.” I stalk closer to Tatum, and the doorbell rings.

“Trash the pizza. Riv. You’re on a diet.”

“You’re delusional, sweetheart. Never been on a diet, never will.”

Laser eyes dart over Tatum’s shoulder as she stalks away. “If you can’t square up with Sefina in—”

“Three *months*, Tatum. You need a reason to argue? Should I send the kids home?” I ground out as the doorbell creates a commotion. “I doubt you responded to a single one of Camryn’s texts. We have therapy homework anyway. Do I finally get the chance to talk?”

forty-two

TATUM

Momma said vengeance isn't ours. Yet I took injustice into my hands. I sought revenge instead of falling to my knees.

Letting go and letting God.

One big mistake after another created a tornado that turned around and imploded my *own* life.

I'm stuck on that part.

After all of Harrison's wrongs, I succeeded at screwing *my* life over.

Murdering Devi.

I blink and realize that I'm standing at the front door. My skin pulls taut over my flesh.

What was I doing just now? Recently, time is meaningless. I inhale the fading aroma of pizza.

Oh, I was arguing with Riv because the pizza triggered me.

I shared that very meal with Devi the day I blinded her with money. And I've bottled my frustrations only to erupt on River.

Well, he never saw me for five years so ...

Bull, Stubby. River apologized; you forgave him, so grow up!

Although illusory masking tape muzzles my lips, my heart begs for my River. To start from the top, to build the story from the foundation of my insanity.

Why had I partnered with a vile leech, Harrison, in the first place?

To share how it wasn't just my obsession with River but an intrinsic need to play out my parents' love story.

To be the woman who supported her man.

To cling to a modicum of my momma from when she was alive and happy and with Father, and she created my oldest, proudest memories.

The other night during dinner, when he texted me that adoring message, I created a cliffhanger when I could've just wrenched my friggen heart out already and told him how my plans ended a life.

The man I love cuts into my mental affliction. "You gonna get the door, Stubby?"

With sweaty palms, it dawns on me that I've clutched the doorknobs awkwardly for a while. I let in the sunlight.

"Aw, there's nothing like those MacKenzie boys." I've spouted this line a slew of times when William whines that Camryn's rude or stingy. One would have to listen intently to hear the exaggeration in my tone—the stiff attempt at a light, airy greeting.

I'm not looking at the five- and seven-year-old but *through* them.

Page boy hats.

Suits.

Vests.

Easter shoes.

It'd melt a grandmother's heart and a young woman's ovaries.

Across the lawn, Willow waves. My hand moves in a stiff parody of her efforts. I let her sons in and close the door.

“So, guys, what are you making?” River squats to William's level. “PB&Js or PB&Js?”

“Eh, sandwiches are for babies.” Camryn cuts a pair of turquoise eyes at William. “He can make those. I'm cooking my auntie's favorite macaroni salad.”

On the opposite side of a looking glass, I feign interest as River suggests we're too starving to wait for such an elaborately prepared dish. He even suggests pizza.

“Nah.” Camryn strolls off, claiming our home as his own. “Macaroni salad will make godmommy feel better. Hillary swear—oh fuck, can I say *swears*? Nan says it's in the Bible not to.”

River catches my attention, grinning. “Can he say swear or fuck?”

Though I'm still pulling in bits of information, Camryn prattles, “Everyone tells me not to say swear. But Aunt Hillary *swears by* everything.”

I just nod when Camryn mentions Willow's sister.

In the kitchen, River assists William with spreading jelly on bread.

“The trick to getting a good spread on the peanut butter,” River says. I miss the last part as I slide onto a stool on the opposite side of our massive island.

Camryn opens his backpack and pulls out a salad kit with lettuce and shaved carrots. “Got any macaroni noodles?” he asks me.

“Of course.” My attempt at enthusiasm collapses, and so does the effort of quirking my lips upward. I point to the pantry. *Did Devi have kids ... Would she ever have gotten off the streets and started her own family?*

A few minutes later, River tells Camryn to *boil* the macaroni, and the kid retorts, “That ain’t how Aunt Hillary does it.”

Slapping two slices of bread together, River snaps, “You want it edible or not?”

Camryn’s adorable yet dictatorlike expression turns curious. “Edi—*huh?*”

“Edible. Meaning you can eat it.” River drops his elbows to the counter and plants his chin on his fists encouragingly. “Pick one up. Try it.”

I must be late to the party because the elbow macaroni bag is empty, and Camryn’s digging his fingers into the bowl where he dropped the salad contents. He fishes out an uncooked noodle. The vehicle for many favorite dishes crunches between his teeth. “Tastes good enough for me.”

* * *

I eat the salad, careful to avoid uncooked noodles, washing down the dry leafy vegetables with a glass of water.

Next up is television.

William asks for a book. River humors him by picking up four hundred pages of my murder mystery and improvising. Camryn giggles profusely, lying on his belly, facing the television. The screen *watches* me.

A while later, a hand grabs my forearm, and the crown of my head might as well smack the ceiling. I remove myself from River's touch. "Camdyn's here for the boys."

"Okay." My intense gander sweeps across the room and drags over the man who *was* larger than life to me since forever.

Still is.

I just don't see him. I refuse to acknowledge the disappointment River harbors.

I must've spaced out again because River snatches me into his arms.

"Let me go. The boys—"

"*Left.*"

What? I spaced out? That's bad. Now, River grips me tightly. If I were in my right mind and not cloaked in shame, I'd perceive the *hint* of heat radiating from River.

Anguish blemishes his stony marbled jaw.

But I tug away, and River fights for control of a world I no longer have my teeth sunk into. Entire days have passed me by for months. Still, I recall bits and pieces of this one. *Had I hugged the boys goodbye when they left?* And how long has it been since River told me Camdyn arrived until now?

River's on the defense, although he offers a fraction of the tactics he would an enemy in the octagon. Still, his clasp *hurts*.

It physically aches to fight back, to remove myself from his touch. As I push away, the backs of my calves bounce off the coffee table. I smother the accompanying yelp and almost fall back.

Hands sweep over my waist, hemming me in and crushing me to his chest.

“River! What are you doing?” *Don't touch me, please!*

Yup. That's what shame does.

Makes you wanna run and hide.

A loud smack reverberates off the den walls. Blood boils beneath my palm.

The granite of River's jaw slowly blooms. His blood throbs beneath his skin from my slap. Tone constricted, he snarls, “I'm fighting back.”

“I'm sorry. I'm not trying to fight—”

“Yes. You. Are.”

“Just let me go!” I heave as River drags me to our personal gym, and my feet hit the padded ground of the sparring area. As he strips, I hustle past.

Arms loop around me from behind. I growl, “Are we fighting or ...”

“Definitely fighting.” River hauls me to the center again. He drags on a pair of protective mitts.

Slowly allowing oxygen into my lungs, I moan, “Stop being a douche.”

“You're angry! Take it all out on me.”

“Oh, you’re *begging me* to punch you.” As he offers a pair of gloves, I go for his face.

Dipping swiftly, River lets out a carefree laugh. “No rules like back in the day? Consider raiding a bottle of Jack from our liquor cabinet. Trying to attack me with that might even your odds.”

“Shut up before I kill you.”

With a cocky grin, River offers himself up. “All I hear is talking, Stubby.”

Growing furious, my bare hand zips past his jaw. Friggen animosity backed that sucker up.

“Aww, I knew you loved me, Stubby. You won’t even hit me. Can we hug it out now?”

This time the mitt on River’s hand absorbs the hurt I meant to inflict on his chest. I release every ounce of energy I have into punching, kicking, and even attempting to grab his shoulders so I can execute my tried-and-true ball smasher.

But he’s smooth. *A River*. Riveting. Flowing in perfect synergy.

Harrison never feared me.

River catches my punch.

I played myself.

My man bats away another cruel effort.

I didn’t even pay the heftiest price.

My forearm slides over a fresh flow of sweat across my face.

The next swing is out of control. I’m a huffing, panting mess, twisting myself up with my very own legs. I stumble

into River. His arms catch me, and I swipe my foot out in a last-ditch effort to hurt him any way I can.

As he collapses, he brings me down too.

“How dare you.” I gasp, clutching the ground to garner purchase.

“You have the audacity, Little Bit.” He pins me beneath him.

“Let me go!”

Just when I think he’s gonna laugh tauntingly, bleeding emotion guts his tone. “My heart’s on my sleeve. I cried over you, Tatum.”

That cuts through the fog in my brain. I stutter, “What?”

“Earlier. In Willow’s presence, no less. I shed a tear.”

But who’s crying over Devi? Who knows she’s dead?

Tension surges through me as I push at his chest. “Didn’t I tell you to let me go?”

River removes the padding and grips my arms. “*Just talk to me!*”

RIVER

Cold dread sprints through my veins as Tatum tugs out of my arms.

She walks away.

The walls of the gym tighten in around me. The home we gutted, designed, and made our own has now transformed into our prison. The thought makes me insane because now I'm following after her.

I catch up with Tatum at the bottom of the staircase.

If she can go the detached route, I can too. "We have homework."

"Yeah. Sorry. We can discuss Dr. Beck tomorrow."

I want you so bad. I can imagine the taste of you on the tip of my lips.

"Ahh, sorry," I jump the first step, blocking Tatum's escape. I smile down at her. "You keep apologizing. I don't know why."

"Because."

“*Because* what, *Honey Badger*?” I reiterate the word, brow menacingly cocked.

She clutches the banister. “Why that stupid name? Riv, I’m sor—I’m not in the mood to argue. You say I start all the arguments recently. May I head to our room?”

“You’re dirty,” I ground out. “C’mon, *Honey Badger*. Give me what you got. We’re to touch while you explain what you already explained in therapy. Dirty and angry. Take it out on me before I take my frustrations out on you. Make no mistake, I just held myself back.” She doesn’t move, not one single muscle to touch, slap, or refute me. My hand strikes, clutching her throat firmly.

My heart damn near TKO’s my ribs with all the harsh pounding. I can’t fucking feel the love, not the way Jhang had when getting on Ren’s last nerve. I’d always envied them that love. I’d always wanted it for us.

I dig harder. “You’re *dirty*, Tatum!”

Because my fisted hand wraps around her throat with no room left, Tatum’s chin is pushed high. Flat eyes look through me as her small feet dangle over the steps.

I growl, “I *loved* these eyes.”

There’s no question there.

“They *were* so gorgeous. Mahogany jewels.”

There’s no fight.

No feeling.

This isn’t working, douchebag.

I ignore intuition and force her to feel the brutality of my palm, crushing the passive heartbeat beneath it.

“How do you see me now?” she finally grounds out.

“Well, I’m glad you ask.” The hand dominating her throat brings her to me, nose to nose.

“*Dirty.*” I claim the lie as my own truth. “And I still love you.”

Tatum slaps my forearms and swats harshly at my jaw. The hits become forceful.

Closed fist.

Fiery.

“Fuck you.” She gasps for air.

“Can I fuck you, Tatum?”

“No!”

“Because you’re dirty?”

“Yes.”

The same hand that restrained her slams her over my back, and I bring Tatum up the stairs. Kicking. Screaming.

Calling *herself* names that I’d kill another man for.

I lift Tatum from my shoulders, treating her gorgeous body like garbage. Her tiny frame sails across the bed.

Tatum allows herself to tumble, roll, not giving a fuck about traction. At the last possible second, she catches herself from falling to the ground like trash that didn’t hit the wastebasket.

Now I feel dirty.

Fuck Dr. Beck. This is bullshit.

I’ve determined the asshole got his degree while incarcerated, like me.

I kick the jeans from my body and undies, too, until a beast dominates the area between us.

“Why would you wanna fuck me, River?” She looks at me like there’s one idiot between us, and it ain’t her.

I scoff. “Why would I be attracted to my dream girl?”

Climbing to her knees, she chuckles. “Are we done playing, Riv?”

She laughs a real laugh for the first time in ages. I seize it as an opportunity.

Deep-seated laughter rips through my snarled mouth as I grab a pillow tossing it at Tatum with enough conviction to knock her head off.

She ducks.

The pillow smashes into a lamp, sending glass crashing against the wall.

I gesture to where the pillow has fallen. “For a woman dumb enough to call herself dirty, you ain’t that stupid, *Honey Badger*.”

“Stop calling me that!”

I saunter around the bed, snatch Tatum, and crush down over her, letting her take all of my weight. She’d always begged to feel all of me. I’ve held part of my muscle mass away from her—not today. I. Crush. Her.

I’m reveling as I transition to defense, ducking flyaway fists, ripping the shirt from curvy flesh, and tearing the bra from her body.

“You are so fucking dirty.” My lips curve into a dark, razor-sharp grin. I scratch her skin, obliterating her silk shorts.

“So dirty.”

“And unworthy of *you*, River. You thought that you-you weren’t good enough when we first ... but I’m—”

“Yes, unworthy.” I thrust a single digit into her slick core. “Harrison put his hands here?” *Damn, Riv, that was a low blow, but taunting isn’t working anymore. She’s closing off again.*

“Fuck you, motherfucker!” Her entire body bristles in volcanic fury. “He didn’t touch me there, you *bitch*.”

“I know he didn’t, Tatum.”

Face contorting in agony, she taunts, “What’s next, huh?”

I place my cock at her folds. Though disgusted with myself, I’m just crazy enough to appreciate that we have a conversation going. “He touch you like this?”

The head of me slides back and forth.

Though tears gleam in her eyes, not a single one falls. Tatum snaps, “No.”

“While I don’t know much, baby, I knew *that* too.”

My hips slam against Tatum’s body as I bring myself so deep within her clasp that her body grounds into the mattress.

“Oh, River,” she cries.

“You’re supposed to beg me to stop. To not touch you.”

Soft breath teases against my nose as she pants.

“I love you,” I say, fully seated in Tatum’s channel. Her silence becomes my hope. I look into her tear-stained eyes and moan. “My God—”

“Shuddup,” she pants. “Don’t say something sweet!”

My husky tone lowers. “I’m amazed by the amount of pleasure you take and give every time we fuck.”

Her eyes ground shut.

While my neglected, throbbing erection screams for fight night, I rock steady into her. My heart asks, “What are you thinking, Little Bit?”

As she blinks, tears stream over her flesh. “That you’re still saying the types of things a man would to—”

“To his good girl? To his *Fighter Girl*,” I say, recalling how Jhang once whispered *Fighter Girl* to Renee during their quiet feuding. Although they rarely fought, I’d go to war with Tatum every day of my life in exchange for how her parents went to blows. No matter what, you could still feel their love.

“Don’t. Don’t call me Momma’s nickname. I don’t deserve it.”

“I see. You’ve forbidden me from loving you because you’re dirty?” I heave a sigh, my eyes dropping from hers for a moment, finally understanding. When I gaze back at her, I give her a cocky smile. Dick pounding her cervix, I say, “Guess what, Little Bit? I. Love. This. Dirty. Pussy.”

forty-four

TATUM

I shimmy my hips up, removing myself from River's taunting embrace.

He can't say sweet shit that buoys my broken heart and stitches that sucker up.

He can't say that *then* agree with me.

I *am* dirty. He doesn't know it all. He doesn't know what I've done.

My fist launches.

He saw it, but he takes the pain.

I snarl, "I don't feel like having sex. You have options."

Derisive laughter insults my ears. "Pick a bitch, Tatum. Any bitch who wants to fuck. Is that your offer?"

Now, I'm the stubborn woman that we both abhor. "Yes. It's my job to keep you satisfied. And when I can't do that, you have the right to ... to be pleased."

He calls me stupid.

I twist and jerk. Seconds later, those attempts are thwarted. A bear grip firmly presses me to the one I love.

“C’mon, *Fighter Girl*. My *dirty* girl. I’m challenging *us* to complete your therapist’s requirement right now.”

An impulsive comment pops from my mouth. “We can have an open relationship. You screw any woman you’d like until I’m of sound mind.”

“No. You’re ready. You’re nasty.”

“I’m not nas ... I’m dirty. That’s all I hear. In my head. That I’m dirty. And a *murderer*.”

River runs his hand over my face, and as I shy away from his tender touch, he pops me. “Harrison earned it, Stubby.”

“I killed someone, Riv! Someone who didn’t deserve it.”

“Might be a bad time to say this, but there was a lot of murdering going on. You’ll have to—”

“River,” I groan, “this isn’t. I wasn’t ...” My eyes bite shut for a mere moment. “You won’t understand. I’m a murderer.”

His chiseled face tilts in disbelief. “You sleep with a murderer every night.”

“Oh, I get it. You’re agreeing with me because you just wanna fuck.”

“One, I do. Two, that shit’s literally true, Tatum. And three, not only do I wanna fuck, I want my woman back. I miss *you*, Tatum.”

“Well, tough shit.” I put all my energy into rushing out of bed, but I’m pulled back into an endless River.

He forces me on top of him, fingers crushing my hips. My sarcasm becomes my karma as he sneers, “Yeah, *tough shit*,

Stubby.”

I lasso my hands around his throat and embrace his cock like my pussy’s dangerous. Damn, I put too much faith in my sex. River’s thick, long member impales me and roughly stretches my screaming walls. As I tighten my hands around his throat, attempting to hurt him the only way I can, my pussy feels him.

Feels the depth.

The thick girth.

The steel of *him*.

I throw my head back and set shit off, riding my man’s cock ragged.

“I hate you, River.” The threats are dulled by the raw gasps clawing my throat.

Breathe bitch.

No matter how I curse myself, I’m hypnotized by the slick titanium of him.

I rock my hips, ass clapping over River’s balls.

With sweat flooding my flesh, I screw my fiancé in quick, shallow thrusts.

I pant, “Oh, damn, oh damn.”

His cock is tearing my pussy out.

No.

I’m tearing my pussy out with his cock.

I clasp tighter to River’s thick throat and ride blinding, orgasmic waves until I’m certified. The lack of air I’ve caused him tingles my own lips.

“Cum, motherfucker!” I growl. “Cum so I can cum, and we can stop!” Pride makes me lie.

“Oh, you haven’t cum?” A cruel brow lifts, and River tugs my hair until we’re placed in an awkward position. I’m still choking him. Well, that notion’s laughable. He’s causing my follicles to scream.

“Nope. Not a single orgasm,” I lie.

“Lick every single one of your four orgasms from my dick.”

“It wasn’t four.” *More like seven if we count the mini bouts of ecstasy.*

“Clean my dick, Tatum.” The hand ruthlessly holding my hair lets go.

I retract my hands. The muscles jerk from all the effort in choking him.

I climb down low until my nose presses against the sheen of his raging member.

A trail drips down the base and onto his balls. I swipe that first.

The restless beast shifts. All heavy, furious muscles.

I relish my essence on him and lick, leaving a pristine, glorious dick erect like a skyscraper.

As I climb back up for more angry sex, I’m spellbound by the devotion in River’s touch.

River snuggles me in his arms, and he crawls into a part of my heart I never knew existed. “I still need you, Tatum.”

River wraps me in a soul-searching embrace. Time is insignificant. The problems of the world cannot penetrate.

“Can we heal together?” he asks.

I choke on a sob. “Okay.”

“Fuck me angry, though. Can’t waste this.” He plucks the side of my mouth, creating magic.

A genuine half-smile pulls there. My hands press the center of River’s chest, and he falls back with me on top again.

Looking up at me, River moves his palms in sensual circles at my hips.

While my pussy sits atop the thick dimensions of River’s cock, I smile innocently.

Invitation contorts his rock-sculpted features.

Just push down.

Plunge.

But I don’t. My hands lovingly glide along his muscles.

It feels like I’m massaging a tiger when he growls deep in his throat. Eyes drop to my lips in exchange for a kiss.

“Anticipation,” I murmur, “is more thrilling than ...”

Another growl in protest.

“Then a quick fuck.”

Earthy brown eyes roll away.

His body tenses beneath me.

He’s going to break. Pin me down.

Just when I suspect River might lose it and toss me around like he had while bringing me upstairs, the sweet caress transitions to carnal depravity. My hands interlock around his neck again. The skin across my knuckles pulls taut. River tightens his massive neck as my hips swivel downward. His

pump upward is in perfect synergy. He responds to the ferocity, tongue swirling passionately with mine.

Sucking in his bottom lip, I lift my hips until my feet are planted next to his hips for leverage.

“Damn, girl, fuck me.” His hands slap my ass, hunkering down on their meat while I screw him like a rabbit.

Every inch of me is ablaze as I swerve on him, tugging his neck again. River pops up into a seated position. My thighs wrap around him, and our upper bodies crush.

My teeth sink into his slick flesh, and a groan rumbles deep from his throat.

“Keep it up. I bleed, Stubby, you bleed.”

All the cruelty in me drains in a flash. I tauntingly grip his hair, tugging harshly with my chin tipped, brow high, voice raspy. “Not tonight.”

“You’re so fucking insufferable, Stubby. Get that pussy up here before I take over.”

I let his hair go, shoving his chest back again. “I run this, River.”

I climb up to his face, sex perfectly seated over a pleasing mouth. His tongue has me drowning in screams of ecstasy. All the love songs ever created meld into my mind as my treasure rocks and surges over his tongue. I inhale and exhale deeply, signaling my surrender body and soul. And after sex, I *will* bear my heart to him too.

TATUM

Crisp air whispers across my jaw as I silently watch the first signs of light bleed across the sky like a tiny drip from a leaking ink fountain. We traded in our customary nakedness, limbs tangled in each other, and sex-scented linen for compression attire and hiking boots.

River's hands meld over my hips as we stand at the base of the Mulholland Trail.

Looking up through the dawn at him, I murmur, "I've this feeling that I'm not eligible to make any complaints for the next week or so."

"Try a good year." His smile hides against my forehead as he presses his lips there.

"Damn, 365 days of my best behavior?" I nod slowly, letting the high of being in his presence sink in. "Alright, starting in fifteen seconds, though, because I have one complaint. Angry sex took all my energy."

Arms that exceed the girth of my curvy, athletic thighs swoop around me, bringing me up. "River!" I gasp.

“You exerted energy—complaint noted.” A paw smacks my ass. “I’ll carry you up.”

A steely chest stifles my carefree laughter. I readjust myself in his arms. “No, baby. I was just going to pass on the usual suggestion that we start off in a sprint per the norm.”

When he continues to trek up the incline, I affectionately push him. “Hey, I don’t qualify for special treatment. You can’t hold me.”

“One way or another, I should’ve held you this entire time,” River replies, lips brushing warmth over my cool cheek. “I should’ve seen the signs that you needed me. Then I got fucking angry at myself and made this about me and not you. So, is it okay if I hold you for a while?”

The whole world goes still for a second. All of Mother Nature’s noises come to a halt as River slows to a stop, awaiting my answer. My heart liquifies into my chest as I lose myself in his eyes.

“You are holding me.” I huff, half a smile emerging on my lips. “You’re being everything I don’t deserve, Riv.”

My desperate plea for some sort of malice behind his love goes unanswered.

“I remember this was our first date after getting out of the slammer. Can’t recall our discussion.” While ascending a particularly steep incline, River speaks without shallow breathing or any change in exertion. “But we were about here.”

I glance around at the bluff, a couple of trees embedded in the rocky area.

River continues, “We both acknowledged that my Little Bit was independent.”

I smile, though we're supposed to arrive at the Hollywood sign before the sun fully flushes the horizon. A part of me wants a better visual of my beautiful Rage.

The man who will go to war for me.

The man who fought through the haze of shame and sorrow that conquered my mind these past few months.

"I always meant to tell you," I murmur once we arrive at the fencing area just above the tourist attraction, and River places me down.

I look up at him, sight adjusting, as the sky melts into a distinct lighter blue.

Throat heavy, I climb the fence that separates the lookie-loos from the real diehards. River comes down after me.

Holding hands and pushing our center of gravity to the backs of our hips, we slowly descend the decline until we've positioned ourselves and our blanket next to the massive H.

"I said I would ... and I had every intention of telling you the entire sordid story, *that* evening no less."

"I remember. You made a point of being home for dinner."

"I hoped after I shared everything, *we* could figure out how to really make him pay." I wrap my arms around myself, and River plants himself behind me. His legs block a bit of the draft, and his arms suppress the rest, becoming my safe harbor.

He nuzzles the nape of my neck. "I believe you."

My throat draws tight. "This is the part where I tell you exactly *what* brought me to Harrison's place. It's a long story."

* * *

Sometime later, the sun glows over us by the time I've spilled every sordid detail. Burrowing the back of my head against his chest and my cheek at the sharp angle of River's jaw, I say, "My shutting you out wasn't all about feeling dirty and knowing that you'd see me differently. I'm totally to blame for Devi's death, Riv."

I expect a friggen PTSD moment, where my heart slaughters my rib cage as I await his response.

That moment doesn't come.

I'm not this silent mess anymore.

I've blossomed into a woman from the girl who once strategized an ankle bar restraint, when necessary, and who paired her infinite hoodies with her Converse shoe collection.

Finally, River says, "First, I will never stop seeing the girl I met on day one. Your outward appearance, though gorgeous, wasn't the only reason I fell for you." He growls into my ear. "If you had my children and put on two hundred pounds—"

"Boy!" I gasp.

"All I will see is *you*, Tatum. All I'll ever see is *you*."

Knuckles work over my spine as he speaks the truth, holding me tightly again. "Look, you had sign after sign telling you that doing things alone wasn't working in your favor. Still, Tatum, you didn't pull the trigger alone."

"I—"

"I might not be backed by a slew of degrees, but for all we know, Harrison lied till the end. We may never know why your friend returned to Harrison's place."

Although truth molds against the lining of my stomach like liquid acid, a small atoning smile perches on my lips. *Devi* was

my friend.

Some people are in our lives for a season. But I pray that before Devi died, she knew that I saw her as a friend too, and she didn't return to Harrison as a means to *pay* for my friendship. She had so much to offer. I swipe a rogue tear. "Thanks, Riv."

"For what?"

"Calling Devi my friend. I'm gonna stop bashing myself for what happened to her. She went to bat for me. My appreciation of her needs to be the end of the story. Not this self-loathing crap." I mumble, "Dr. Beck's going to love this breakthrough."

River matches my bravado, but I can tell he's all in now. "Guess I'll return to therapy with you, Tatum. Which I'll gladly do, long as you're real with me."

"I am." I loosen my hold on River's arms and look over my shoulder at him. "You think Cam and Willow have gone back to sleep?"

"After you rang their doorbell at three this morning to apologize and woke up Ryn?"

"Oh, they are so not asleep." I scratch my cranium. "I'll text them an apology for that later."

Squeezing me tightly, River adds, "We're at the part where things work out for the best, Tatum."

Pure contentment glides over me. "I always pretend to be so confident. *You* are fearless."

"I am because everything I do is for us—that's how you operate too."

"But I—"

“But besides that, since I’ve put a ring on your finger, I’ve always included you.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “I had an entire game plan I executed alone.”

“We’ve both made mistakes. You gave me an ultimatum a while ago.” Thrumming the backs of his fingers over my shoulder, River groans. “I hadn’t realized being incarcerated still had a hold on my mentality. Now, I could kick myself in the ass.”

I hide a smile beneath my palm. “I can help there.”

“Oh, you’ve been helping with that, Tatum. You slapped *last* Thanksgiving dinner out of my mouth when—”

I twist my body, knees planted on the blanket outside his hips. While pushing River to the ground, I purr, “Let mama make it up to you.”

RIVER

Samoa

Three months later ...

Half a fucking year. I've never waited so long for a match since entering UFC. The organization canceled my Tennessee match to place all the focus on this one. Creating a frenzy, they capitalized on my and Sefina's success, the tension, and our heritage.

The wait, though, was a blessing in disguise, and Dr. Beck proved his worth over the upcoming months. I'll never forget what he said. *"When people endure loss, two reactions are common: grief or fear."*

Grief is good.

Fear will mess you up.

Ain't no transitioning through life without one or the other. The time between me finding out about Harrison and Tatum finally opening up, I could tell she struggled with something dark. I was always half-joking when asking her to murder Poto's bitch—if necessary. Although nobody ever expects

their father to con them, they sure as fuck don't expect to vindicate that wrong by murdering them.

But still, my woman was never meant to end a life, regardless of what Harrison had put her through. And she had the hardest time grieving her friend alone.

Harrison took something from my woman that we can never get back. A piece of her innocence. To this day, she refuses to share with her father, and I've made my peace with that. However, I won't fathom something happening to my children that I'm not allowed to vindicate.

Since the night I pushed Tatum to speak, we've drawn closer.

Loved harder.

And today, we connect while on a tour of Samoan culture. I watch as Tatum struggles at weaving palm fronds.

Her eyebrows furrow in genuine attempt, and she sticks her tongue out at me. "We all can't be patient like you, Riv."

I remove my concealed cellphone behind me, which is already on the camera app, and take a shot of her.

She tells the woman assisting her with the leaf that I take photos of everything. The girls arise, and while I follow the rest of the tour to a tattoo demonstration, Tatum, Willow, and Mrs. Riley head to a hut with a few female natives.

Jhang and Tatum's gramps are already seated inside the small room. Camdyn pushes my shoulder. "Would be a good time to get a tattoo that means something. But you don't have any space left."

"Weren't you telling me to tatt my toes?" I ask.

“Yup.” He looks around, then lowers his voice. “Where are the lassies?”

I hawk a thumb.

“Looks like Tatum’s been real happy recently,” Camden says. “You’re doing good, bro.”

I look up as attention is called to the front but notice a peculiar look on Jhang’s face.

Sometime later, we guys have meandered to the shore. The men cooked, adding a note of humor to explaining recipes and food rituals while they’ve smoked various meats.

At a melody, we all turn. Embers spark the air as our women, who’ve traded their clothes for my people’s attire, twirl around. Their hands and arms float softly as their bodies bend, wind, and curve sensually. Our ladies break off from the group of Indigenous Samoan women still entertaining. A round of applause lifts into the evening air.

“Not too bad for a tomboy,” Tatum murmurs, hands twining over her abdomen as she moves sultrily toward me. “You approve?”

“They took the city out of you.” My lips move reverently over her forehead, though I’d rather kiss every other part of her body.

Pulling Tatum close, I drink in the soft floral scent of her. Although we’re standing with the sea breeze brushing over our skin, I grow hot and hard at the thought of having her. As if she can sense the hunter in me, begging to devour her body, Tatum looks up and smiles.

“Riv, someone once told me that in Samoa, they must live differently. Giving in lieu of stealing ...”

“Treasure their women.” My voice grows heavy with insinuation.

Tatum’s sparkling gaze shifts around, emphasizing how a horde of vacationers surround us, *including Jhang*. “I know these are your people, but with all due respect, that can’t be correct. I was told Samoans *treasure* the earth more. Worship the sun.”

As I nip Tatum’s earlobe, she trembles in my arms. My cock twitches and I growl in her ear. “Praise their women’s cun—”

“Praise the ocean,” she murmurs, pinching my waist. “Father’s a few feet away from you. And I much prefer to stick to the original quote that concluded with ‘Devote themselves to the ones they love.’ ”

I squeeze tighter. “Can I devote myself to you tonight, Stubby?”

Behind us, one of the tour guides lights a torch and continues along the darkened area, lightening others. The warm glow flickers off Tatum’s skin. Pensively, she taps a finger over her lip. “Devotion? Tonight? Hmmm, we’ve got a few more stops on the itinerary.”

“You *are* the itinerary.”

She moves on quick toes as a wave laps closer to shore.

“Answer me,” I order, taking Tatum’s arms.

“But the water.” Her laughter’s teasing. “Okay! As long as my gramps stops asking the tour guide to repeat himself, I can squeeze you in for a quick—”

“Quick? That ain’t vacation.” My hand drops along Tatum’s outer hip, and we stroll toward a gathering table.

“Alright, we can have all the sex you want in two days. You have a bedtime tonight and tomorrow for obvious reasons, River.”

“Bedtime?” A deep, slightly Scottish brogue cuts in.

We both glance over at Camdyn.

I ask, “You heard us?”

“More than I bargained for.” He hawks a thumb. “Someone’s selling crystals, so Mrs. Riley wants us to pray real hard over the food.”

I laugh as Tatum shakes her head. “Oh, Gram. She’s not into any of that mess.”

Tatum heads over to where her Uncle Malcolm is, loops an arm around him, and chats with her grandparents.

“Bachelor party night? Or postpone because of your bedtime?”

I shove past Camdyn as he laughs.

“No, really, bro. What time must we return you to the hotel and get you into beddies?”

Turning around, I walk back. “First off, your wedding isn’t that close where you impose a bachelor party—”

“But I read about destination bachelorette parties. Why do the ladies get—”

“Perfect. That brings me to the *ladies*, Camdyn. See if Willow lets you get strippers without me.”

I offer a two-finger salute.

At our table, Tatum drops an arm over Jhang’s shoulder. She’s deep in conversation or threats, rather. “You have two

choices, Father. One, accompany the guys in their mayhem. Two, I grab that cute—”

Jhang picks up a wooden cup. “Toast time!”

Though there is a round of agreement, Tatum says, “Korean hottie, who’s still staring relentlessly at you, even now. Invite her to the table.”

His eyes roll away as we all turn, blatantly catching a glimpse of a woman who looks familiar. My brows pull together as I ask, “Did she follow us to breakfast at the hotel?”

“I think so.” Mrs. Riley takes on a playful tone.

Jhang’s fingers squeeze around his cup. “I am not ready.”

“I’m sure Ren—” Tatum’s Gram starts.

“Third option,” he cuts in. “Midnight training. And you’re *all* included.”

“I like the sound of that,” Malcolm agrees, and Mr. Riley seconds.

Tatum huffs. Since she’s recently encouraged him to date again, I suggest, “Jhang, you’re more than welcome to join us. Camdyn’s throwing himself a bachelor party.”

Camdyn chuckles. “Damn right, I am. I expect to have a couple of bloody parties before I’m off the market.”

“You *are* off the market,” Willow growls.

Jhang snorts into his drink. “I’ll wait until next year. Watch *you* at your bachelor party, Riv.”

“Join us then too.” I tuck my woman at my side, lifting my cup and commencing a toast. “To my Tatum. You moved heaven and hell to bring us here. And yes, you can give me hell sometimes, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

forty-seven

TATUM

“To my Tatum,” River begins the toast. Father mutters to himself, and I can’t quite tell if it’s the claiming or my previous suggestion of inviting the flirtatious woman to dine with us that’s responsible.

I smile, stubborn like my father, and listen to River while the last sliver of sun crests the ocean’s edge.

“We made it,” River declares. “I know the day after tomorrow seems like a means to an end, but all that we’ve done to get here, all that we’ve been through ... damn. Tatum, you are the other half of my soul.”

Minutes after our lips lock, drinks clang together, and cheers emit into the atmosphere. Laughter becomes the focal point of our night as I dine with all the people I love the most.

Later, taxis line the edge of the road. Just as my father’s climbing into the one with my grandparents to head back to the hotel, I catch his arm.

“Not so fast, Father.”

I gesture to Willow to stall as she slides into the ride beside them, and another driver’s prepared to take the guys. I give

River a sign that he will need to wait as well.

“Father,” I squeeze his hands in mine as best I can.
“Momma would be—”

“Now isn’t the time.”

“Oh, so we’re cutting me off now?”

“Bao’s at the hotel. No telling what the old man has gotten into today.”

“He’s gotten into *sleep*. He could sleep through the next world war, Father. And you are about to get into fun times with the guys.”

He’s not even looking at me, so I move a few steps over, blocking Uncle Malcolm’s suggestion that they hit the hotel bar.

He’s a reformed alcoholic, and I already heard Malcolm offering that as an alibi to Father earlier. Besides, he’s yawning too.

“We’re holding everyone up,” Father suggests.

“I’ll return to the LAPD,” I reply, folding my arms over.

It took a while to realize that SWAT wasn’t a real dream of mine, just a vehicle to show myself that I’m to be feared. That I am a big girl and able to fight my own battles.

He sulks. “But I’ve added *daughter* to King—”

“Kong Zombie *and Daughter*. Yes.” I shrug a shoulder, not feeling his pain, although I’m in a career I can be proud of, working for my father.

“Daughter,” my father grovels. “You’ve been a valuable asset to Riv. He gets the belt two nights from now. That’s not the end of the story. He will have to continue to defend it.”

“Alright, sounds like we understand each other. You’re gonna go out tonight with the guys.”

A stiff mouth holds his grumbled arguments at bay. As Father strolls to the car with the rest of the guys, I follow after. My attention splits between River and Camdyn. “Just play wingman for him. What he does next is up to him. Riv, I expect you by ten. Cam, you can probably finagle another hour from Lolo. Father, actually just be at the arena tomorrow morning for press conf—”

Father slams the car door in my face, offering the stink eye.

I stroll toward the last ride, sliding inside with a huff. Willow switched cars once Father *agreed* to the bachelor party.

Willow undertones, “Are you done issuing assignments, drill sergeant?”

“They all have their marching orders,” I groan. “Now, it’s up to Father to actually enjoy the vacation.”

* * *

Sometime later, beneath the low lighting, I sway in my seat as Willow and I have settled at a place boasting lounge vibes. We sink into ultra-cushioned chairs. Around us, whenever someone orders bottle service, the track changes, and all the servers whistle while heading over to the chosen table.

Pure club vibes.

“Tatum, why are you previewing the menu?” Willow lifts her strawberry and vodka slurry, adding, “We’re here for as many of these drinks as I can stomach. We already had dinner.”

“Relax, you’ll fit in your dress. I asked the concierge about the chicken wings, and I was told this was the place to go.”

“Ohhh, you’re sooo bad. Ordering River’s fav.”

I pop my index finger on the exact entrée I plan to order, then sip down the rest of my sugary concoction. “So what? First, I’m scoping out the place, so Riv isn’t disappointed if the wings suck. Second, I’m sure they’re getting an eye full of the ladies.”

“Hello, Tatum, you sent your father as a buffer.”

I chuckle tipsily as our waiter stops in front of our table. After ordering double the drinks we just had and chicken, I return my attention to my girl. Dropping an elbow on the table, I reply, “I told the guys to help Father flirt. I’m sure the second they pulled up to whatever establishment they’re at, they fulfilled my orders, and Father was released. Since you decided not to budge on the October wedding, which is coming toward us like a derailed train—”

“Ain’t it, though?” Willow hitches a breath.

“Perhaps one of us will get the double wedding.” I point a hand to my chest, and Willow pushes me softly, shaking her head. “What, Lolo? I don’t mind sharing my special day with Father. Lord knows he didn’t shirk his duties. Harrison took a good fortune from Father, and he still put a down payment on our wedding venue. Friggen Chinese side of me doesn’t play when it comes to tradition.”

“Girl, if your father walks down the aisle for his *own* bride, who will walk you?”

A whistle cuts through our chatter, and another song drops. Willow and I stand on our chairs, twirling slowly like hookers

while the other patrons clap for us. An expensive black label bottle and our beloved slushy cocktails adorn our table.

A few minutes later, we've laughed and settled back down. Willow repeats herself, "So, who's gonna walk you down the aisle, boo?"

"Oh, yeah." I contemplate for a second while lining up a couple of shots. "At this rate, I'm finally ready for him to fall in love. Besides, the venue is expensive enough for a mass wedding."

"You deserve it." She smiles.

"Thanks. Also, before Riv came home from prison, if a woman looked at my father too long, I'd mention Momma like she was at home, waiting for him to bring a carton of milk. I kinda owe Father. It might be part of the reason he's turned into the Pope."

Willow tosses back a double shot and lets the strawberry drink shrink the agonized tautness from her expression. "Aww, you little hater."

With shots in both hands, I quickly mutter, "Was hating on you and Cam for a second too." I down the toxic tequila like a beast.

"I had a feeling. When we first got together, you were on my head." Willow lets out a weary groan. "But that last little spell, waiting for Riv, girl, I was catching déjà vu."

"I was that bad?" Too anxious for a response, I suck heavily through my straw, then clutch my head. "Brain freeze."

Willow sympathizes. "You missed your baby, though. So, I couldn't hate on you *hating on me*. Now, we're living our dreams."

“We’re all so happy. My entire family,” I loop an arm around her, “Father too.”

Willow must pick up on something. She says, “Stubby, let him stay that way if you need to. I see a difference in you that I like.”

A smile forms on my face, but our waiter has returned, eyes drifting to our bottle. “Need another?”

“Yup!” I high-five his outstretched hand.

Willow giggles as I settle back next to her. “He’s gonna have us crawling out of here.”

“We’ll call the guys. That’s why we have them. To save us, ya know.”

She nods.

“Back to what I was saying, I’m good not telling Father. There’s no ulterior motive backing my decision not to.” I place a hand on my sternum. “I got that shit off my chest. I’m doing so, so, so, so, good.”

“Okay, queen. I’m not drunk enough for you to start singing yet.”

The DJ must’ve been sent straight from heaven because he mixes in old-school rap with today’s pop. Willow and I accept another round of bottle service or cheer for the tables surrounding us.

My girl scoots so close our hips touch, and the sparkle diminishes from her eyes as she speaks. “Hey, do you see that woman across the room?”

“Woman?” I shift in my seat.

Willow dips until our shoulders are touching. “The older waitress. She was staring at you both times all the servers came to drop off our bottles.”

Aligning my vision to Willow’s, I glimpse a plump waitress serving an area across the lounge. Our eyes connect, and her shoulders seem to straighten. She weaves around the tables toward us.

Our guy, who has racked up quite the tip, looks at her as she passes. With his back to us, he serves the table adjacent. The smile on his face falters when the chubby woman stops at our table. Tension roils off our waiter in waves. Like him, Willow and I wonder about the reason for her presence.

The Samoan woman hesitates. “How is everything?”

“Good.” Willow speaks, but the stranger’s attention is on me, and I’m drawn in by the darkest shade of eyes.

A thick, long braid covers her name plate. When she shifts to remove our empty shot glasses onto a tray, her healthy hair doesn’t move. She says, “You look familiar.”

Our server cuts his eyes in our direction, attempting to finish his other order.

“Tatum Li is quite the celebrity in the sports world. Perhaps, you saw her on the local news representing King Kong Zombie Gym or River “The Rage” Tagaloa,” Willow suggests.

The perfectly selected smile on the Samoan’s face slips, and something akin to desperation flits over her skin, drawing it taut. She stutters, “I—”

Another woman whisks her away, putting a hand on her shoulder. The older waitress hurries off as the second woman replaces her. “Are you all enjoying yourselves?”

A General Manager's nametag rests on her left bosom.

"Yes." Willow smiles.

"Everything's perfect," I second, still overcome by a sense of familiarity.

The GM smiles again, then scurries after the waitress, and our server stops in front of us to reiterate the same sentiments. Once we've assured him that everything's peachy, Willow and I glance at each other in confusion.

"Looks like she got reprimanded for coming to our table," Willow says.

"Weird," I mutter, glancing at my cellphone. A text from River pops up, but he's calling before my fingertips can brush across the screen. Out of nowhere, blood rocks my eardrums as I answer the phone. Without the pretense of a hello, my man shares three words that sink my soul: *Your father knows.*

RIVER

Mere minutes ago ...

Tatum had created a list of sights to see and shit to do for every moment of our week in Samoa, having said we would experience all my culture come hell or high water.

At the end of this week, as everyone prepared to return home, I intended to tell her that the two of us were staying an additional week.

My little dictator, though persuasive, is a train wreck when she sets her mind to something, so the added time was for us to chill.

Now, if I could just skip all the shit in the middle—fighting Sefina, Jhang Li, and everything else in between—we'd be good.

There's something off about her father that I can't quite put my finger on. While Camdyn and I attempted to play the wingmen at the first bar we passed by, Jhang didn't have eyes for any women.

He knocked back more whiskey than should be legal, and now, his heavy, awkward steps carry him through the posh

entrance of our hotel.

“Get your father-in-law.” Camdyn nudges his chin as we follow after him.

Jhang almost falls into a pair of vacationers who are just arriving, possibly from a red-eye flight. Jhang mutters at me, “I already had what the two of you had, River.”

As he falls over the couple’s luggage, I place my hands out to help steady him.

“I don’t need your help,” he slurs, jolting up to his feet and staggering a few paces to the row of elevators.

“Chill, Mr. Li,” Camdyn cuts in, slamming a thumb into the button.

“Nah, no chill here. I need money.”

“What do you need money for?” I ask as we step inside. He damn near broke my arm to place a down payment on the five-star hotel in Beverly Hills for next June.

A June wedding is what Tatum finally agreed to.

“Maybe Stubby and I can help,” I add.

“You can find *Harrison*.” His stiff finger points somewhere between us. As the elevator jolts upward, he says, “I never liked that motherfucker.”

“Then *why* did you?” The aggression backing Camdyn’s tone douses instantly, a tensed hand running over the back of his neck.

“What? Why did I *what*?” Jhang lifts his chin, sizing up the taller Scot.

“Maybe he’s dead.” Camdyn lifts a shoulder.

“Cam,” I grit in caution, “just ...”

The elevator opens, saving me from elaborating.

“Just what?” Jhang picks up a brow.

I place a hand against the framing to stop the doors from sliding shut, then cock my head. “I don’t know about my bro here, but you and I got shit to do in the morning, Jhang.”

And suddenly, my coach, who had tripped his way through the hotel lobby, straightens to his full height, which isn’t much.

I reckon he wasn’t all that drunk to begin with.

“About tomorrow, let’s all head to my room and have us a chat,” Jhang growls.

* * *

After a long walk off a short ledge, we leap into the frying pan. Camdyn and I take different sides of Jhang’s hotel room. The strawberry blond sits on a chair near the framed window, and I drop a shoulder against the wall near the exit, legs locked about the ankle. Kinda makes it a little hard for Jhang’s glower to pace between us.

The man in question tosses an accusatory index finger to Camdyn. “I’ve known you damn near all of your life. You and Jamie still had *baby teeth* when coming to my gym for classes.”

“Yeah, Mr. Li.” Camdyn drops his head into awaiting palms.

“And you,” Jhang points in my direction, fully lucid, “for the first year, I regretted not letting the cops handle your ass. Renee called me an idiot. Felt like one twice in my life.

Watching you watch *our daughter* then when you went to prison.”

That hits a nerve.

Bounces on said nerve.

Aggravates the *shit outta said nerve*.

With my blood pressure elevating, I snarl, “Well, I did time for the wrong reason, so that makes *me* the fool. Feel a little better now?”

“Ahhh, yes, actually I do. I’m also sort of feeling like sitting tomorrow out *and* the day after that.” For emphasis, Jhang settles at the edge of the bed.

Tomorrow is a conference and weigh-in.

The day after ... I prove that Tatum’s undying faith in me was well deserved.

“Okay, fuck this. Li, with all due respect, you gotta coach Riv,” Camdyn says. “Harrison did bad things. He’s dead. Not missing like most people speculate. So, just understand that River has always had your best interest at heart.”

“He cheated us.” Jhang rolls his eyes. “Our best interest, my ass.”

“No, he cheated—”

“Cam,” I growl. “Yes, he cheated *us*.” I tuck my lips into my mouth. A second later, I lift off the wall. “Good night, Jhang.”

The old man tests me. “I’ll be heading home in the morning.”

Camdyn snarls, “Harrison *fecking touched* Stubby!”

As my razor beam glower shanks Camdyn like he stuck a finger on my dinner roll during chow, the slight intoxication he was under fades.

“Oh, shit,” he grumbles.

“Harrison *touched* ... Tatum?” Jhang falls from his seat, square on his ass at the foot of the bed. “Harrison? That old—bluhhh.”

Vomit upchucks onto the carpet. As Jhang relieves himself, I text Tatum.

Realizing that won't do, I call her.

“Don't ... fucking ... leave,” Jhang orders, pulling himself onto his feet and hustling into the bathroom.

“You just had to,” I growl at Camdyn.

“Mam says shit that happens in the dark always comes to light.”

“What about your shit? The fucked-up shit you do, huh?” I ask to the soundtrack of Jhang vomiting into the toilet behind a closed door.

Camdyn slides a hand over his shoulder, kneading it there. “Maybe I'll catch heat for my actions one day.”

The door opens, and Jhang places a white towel over the soiled floor.

The silence begins as three dudes stand awkwardly in a motherfucking hotel room.

Will this set Tatum back? Her depression scared the fuck outta me.

Half an hour later, at the knock on the door, the tension shifts as I pull it open. The girls stand side-by-side, arms

looped around the other.

“Riv?” Tatum looks up at me, beautiful eyes charged with disappointment and confusion.

“Daughter?” Jhang pushes past me, enveloping Tatum in a desperate embrace.

Held tightly, Tatum slits questioning eyes at Camdyn and me.

“I did it,” Camdyn offers. The chin he held up so unapologetically dips low.

Willow suggests, “Let’s go, so they can talk things through.”

“Really, Cam. Now, of all times?” Tatum snarls at him.

Jhang pulls her at arm’s length, asking why. Instead of lowering her head, Tatum says, “Father—”

“You worked with Harrison. Helped him get this asshole to where he is. Was this all for *him*?”

“Okay,” I cut in. “I’ve had it up to here. I’ve felt to blame, and I don’t need any further help in that department. I won’t fight, Jhang. Does that make you feel better? And yes, she worked with him for *me*.”

“No!” Tatum shouts. “Not just for him. For you, Father. For you! And for me.”

“Then explain it to me. All of it.”

“Okay. But let’s go for a walk.” Tatum bristles, turning to Willow and Camdyn, who are nearing the door.

“I didn’t mean to,” he mutters to her.

“I know, you big dork. We’re on vacay. Go do something before tomorrow, okay?” She offers them a small wave.

Once they've left, Jhang runs a hand over his wet face.
"Tatum, help me understand."

"Riv, baby, I'll come to the room in a little while."

"I'll bring her." Jhang claims her hand as if she's a small child.

I stall. "You sure?"

She nods.

* * *

The next morning, my cellphone's alarm blares.

"Shit, I almost forgot I set this," I mumble, lifting an arm. Still grasping at darkness, I feel out the nightstand until I'm clutching the iPhone. "Stubby ..."

For a girl who hates to awaken on any given day of the week, my woman makes good use of our vacations, setting our alarms for activities.

Yoga was it? Or are we supposed to swim this morning?

Oh ... Shit ... Last night. I groan, flipping over in bed. I expect half my body to crush down on Tatum. I'm tangling in sheets instead.

Of course, I waited up. She came back, though barely sharing a couple of lines, mainly saying we could talk tomorrow. When Tatum kissed me and implored me to get some rest, I suspected that she wasn't as far gone as she had been those past few months.

But she wouldn't just leave our room, though?

I dial Willow.

“Tatum with you?” I ask.

“No ...”

“Can you call her Grams while I call Jhang?” I pinch my nose.

She hesitates a moment, then offers, “Alright. I’ll have Mrs. Riley try Malcolm too.”

My finger hovers over my coach’s number. The entire King Kong Zombie squad’s here for tonight but did he back up what he’d said about leaving?

Like a pussy, I call Bao. “Old man, have you seen—”

“Ah, River. I think of you just now. Tomorrow, you defeat loser?”

“Oh, good, there’s another loser.” I glimpse around the room and confirm that Tatum’s travel purse and cell are missing.

“Of course, that Savage. With name like that, him always lose.”

“Heh, Stubby with you?” My heart stalls.

“No. Me, Jhang, go to buf-fit. Eat breakfast. Him so old, face prune. He eat, eat, eat pain, eat worry. He afraid you lose. I tell him no.”

“Bao, ask him—”

There’s shifting on the other end as Jhang has taken the phone. “About last night . . . I’m not giving up on you, Riv. Tatum reminded me that we’re hotheaded. I’m your coach. But I always need to be in the circle, regardless of the circumstances.”

“Understood.”

“For a while now, I was getting mixed signals from you. I thought Tatum cheated then you ... then everything seemed okay, but during the tattoo demonstration yesterday afternoon —”

I think back. “You heard Cam and me?”

“Yes. Now get your ass down here before I eat my weight in potatoes and eggs.”

“Getting dressed now.” I cringe while adding, “Stubby with you?”

forty-nine

TATUM

I woke up this morning with one thought on my mind—a random ass thought at that.

I wasn't contemplating how Father and I survived last night's poorly-timed revelation.

But River.

I swear I'm so friggen in love with that boy, I'll have to beg God to let me in heaven. Swear I love Him more.

Anyway, River was on my mind because of his *eyes*.

I was halfway through the hotel lobby, iPhone battery on 2 percent, having forgotten to stick it on the charger the night before and too pervaded with urgency to turn back when I saw Gramps lugging golfing gear right outside the hotel doors. I begged him to tell everyone about my plans and asked for his iPhone as well.

Now, I'm seated in the back of a taxicab with Gramps' cellphone. Though it's at a whopping 100 percent, it's useless as ever.

I scrunch my face up like him for the facial recognition. I've tried various changes to the number for the passcode he gave me when I asked to use his phone.

"This sucks," I mutter, pitching the cellphone into my clutch. While my ass continually taps the hard patent leather seat beneath me, I glance out the window. Once we left the main tourist streets, we transitioned to dirt roads. Other vehicles have created their own path and did a shit job of doing so.

After ages of twenty-five mile-per-hour driving, no music, and a window that won't roll down, I ask, "May I use your phone? I'll give you an extra—"

"You calling where?" The driver looks at me pointedly through the rearview mirror.

I'm almost tempted to pay him his rate for this far. But the ocean's far behind us, as well as the restaurant where I inquired about the second waitress.

The general manager gave me the woman's address, whose eyes remind me of River's, for a fee.

I'm running out of paper cash, so I ignore the driver's flippant remark.

"How much longer until we get to ..." I've set my mouth to properly pronounce the name of the small town since the driver had corrected me profusely the second I got into the car. But the next time my ass plops onto the seat, I'm lifted so high my head smacks the ceiling.

"Ouch!" I groan. At least the high bun cushioned some of the blow.

Not nearly enough.

The car pauses abruptly, the back left side dipping.

If I thought last night was the wrong time, this destiny is not my own. I slide out of the seat and into the humid air.

Thank God I brushed my teeth and slathered on more deodorant.

“You stay, or you pay,” the man orders.

“It’s hot in there. Are you crazy?”

“You stay, or you pay,” he replies.

“How much?” I growl, reaching my breaking point. As I start into my purse, a bird zips between us, whistling as it flies.

* * *

Father and I called down to the hotel lobby about his incident. While housekeeping cleaned the carpet, we meandered along the grounds, avoiding the night swimmers and other party areas. We found a palm tree-studded oasis where a bird whistled a tune, causing us to realize the silence we were delving in, and we spoke simultaneously.

“You go first,” I suggested.

“You worked with Harrison at my suggestion?” Father speculated. “Oh God, it was my suggestion. I brought them to the house. Practically forced him on you.”

I plucked a leaf, attempting to braid it the way they taught us earlier. Something to cease the anxiety. “Wasn’t all you, Father. We had to help Riv.”

“And you say it’s because,” he gestured with his hands, “because it reminded you of Ren?”

I smiled fondly, letting peace transcend over me. “I was losing sight of Momma.”

“Me too. It gets so bad that if I don’t watch an old video, at least a couple of times a week, I can’t hear her. Can’t see her beautiful face.”

Half a smile snuck over my lips. “Hey, I thought I had her face.”

Father quipped, “You’d be as gorgeous as my wife. Unfortunately, you have my genes, too, remember?”

“Oh, Father.” I laughed.

As if realizing he’d struck up some form of banter, Father’s chest puffed out unpleasantly, and his voice ribboned in emotion as he asked, “How can you laugh right now?”

“Because I’m happy.”

“Oh, God.” His hands hid his face as tears overcame him.

“Father, I’m blessed with family and friends.” I solidified my tone, reaching over to take his hands. “You are too.”

* * *

It’s been four hours, but I didn’t abandon the taxi driver. Or rather, there weren’t many opportunities to hitchhike. The only vehicles traveling this road were either returning to the beach area—and I’d be damned if I went this far to go back—or were trucks full of guys on their way home from work.

I’ve seen too many scary movies to test one.

By the time the flat tire has been fixed, and I reach the small town of the strangely acting waitress with the familiar

eyes, it's half past four, and Gramps' locked iPhone is still gassed up.

I've inputted his anniversary, every birthday of all the family I recall, and now the iPhone is disabled for another thirty minutes.

I slide out of the taxi, pay the driver, then spin on my heels. Before me is a one-story home with gravel roofing. Though half the size of the house River and I dedicated to displaced mothers and children, the place has character. Flowers line the dirt path.

Jesus, I woke up with renewed faith. Please don't let it be in vain. Air shifts through my lungs, and I take my first step, only to stop as the front door opens. The woman from last night has replaced her waitress attire with a floral dress. Her hair lays in a long braid over her shoulder, the same shoulder hiding her nametag.

Of course, I asked the general manager her name.

It was the *wrong name*, but people can change their past *and* liars will lie, or both.

Case in point, Poto Tagaloa.

We both freeze as if internally perceiving the reason for my presence.

The basis of my insane desire to meet with a stranger all lies on the cusp of one single question. "Is your name ... Heilani? I mean, it doesn't have to be Heilani, but. . . ."

fifty

RIVER

The pulse at my neck ticks. Seconds before I'm to step on the stage for weigh-in, Malcolm and his parents arrive. My questioning gaze bores into Tatum's uncle.

Jhang denied that she seemed different last night, saying, in fact, she helped him cope.

I'm staring at my last hope when the three reach us.

"Any luck?" My coach asks.

"Pops and Ma went to the police," Malcolm begins, causing Jhang to sit and my stance to widen as his statement hits like a freight train. "Since she appeared to just walk out of the hotel, they'll wait twenty-four hours."

"They took my statement, though." Mrs. Riley huffs. "Between this one losing his phone earlier." She silently mouths, "Going a little senile."

My brows lift.

Malcolm folds his arms as if he's still wrestling with his pop's declined mental health.

Mrs. Riley clears her throat. “It’s something we all meant to discuss with you toward the end of the week.”

“What’s that?” Mr. Riley looks his wife over.

“Nothing. Malcolm, tell River about how she left the hotel.”

“Mr. Tagaloa.” My name’s called. “You’re first up for check-in.”

“You need to wait,” I growl. “What happened, Malcolm?”

“The security at the hotel has Tatum leaving on video. She didn’t seem stressed or anything. On the way to the door, she was waving at someone, calling their name.”

“Okay, so,” I cut in, “exterior camera?”

Defeated, Malcolm’s hands jam into his pockets. “Picked back up when she got a taxi. We got the plates. Your friends are at the agency. The driver reported a flat tire, and he ain’t returned yet.”

“Where was he going with my daughter?” Jhang grits.

“Somewhere inland. Had a flat tire over an hour away.”

“Mr. Tagaloa, you must weigh-in now.” The request rings in my ears as officials escort me out of the room.

Each footfall’s laden with worry over my woman.

My baby presents as strong when she needs to. Ren had as well while silently dealing with sickle cell.

Little Bit, fuck, where are you, baby?

Music slams through me. Cameras are everywhere. One pans past as I stalk over the stage toward a scale. Two chicks scantily clad in UFC bikinis clap as they announce my name and stats.

Once I step down from the scale and walk to the commissioner to shake his hand, the announcer's tone increases in superficial quality, each word extended flashily. "The undefeated heavyweight champion of the world ... Sam "The Samoan Savage" Sefina."

At the sight of my adversary, flames flick around in my gaze. A team surrounds him, and they move into formation for *Siva-Tau*, what most people in the States know as *Haka*. Parading the UFC belt in one hand, Sefina leads the fierce chant.

Out of respect for the phenomenal display, I silently watch.

God, you must be walking with me today because if he had said one thing wrong, I would break.

Not in the mood for bad-mouthing today, I posture with my hands behind my back as Sefina finally climbs onto the scale, then steps over to me.

I'm in for the fight of my life in twenty-four hours—and I cannot wait. *Where the fuck are you, Stubby?*

* * *

At five, I have everyone meet me in the outer area where Tatum had scheduled a yoga session. Other than this, today and tomorrow might be the only days she hadn't implemented her iron fist to send us scattering in every direction for a new activity.

Everyone looks at me questioningly.

"Tatum had a plan for us," I tell them, "and we're sticking to it." At least until tomorrow morning, I will then be on the police's heads.

“I’m getting worried.” Jhang stretches his arms restlessly.

“You’re always worried,” Mrs. Riley tries.

I jerk a shoulder. “Let’s let the instructor—”

I pause as my cellphone vibrates in my compression pants.

“Stubby?” Camdyn asks.

“I’ve no idea.” I glimpse the long stream of international numbers and bark out, “Hello?”

“Don’t hate me” are Tatum’s first words.

Relief fills my soul, but I grit out, “I already do.” *Oh, thank God, thank God.*

“Okay,” her tone softens, “but you’re my best friend. Usually, that gives you twelve hours of stink eye—”

“I don’t—”

“But the second you set eyes on me, you will be sorry that you even hated me to begin with.”

“Wanna bet?” I fist the phone, glancing across the expansive hotel.

“Turn around.”

I spin, gaze fighting over the various alcoves and entrances of the hotel. Tatum materializes from behind a stunted set of palm trees, and she’s not alone. A woman with streaks of silver in her hair dwarfs her.

“Where have you been?” Jhang moves swiftly past me.

“On a mission,” she says, shoving fingers into her unruly hair.

I can’t remove my gaze from Tatum’s company, and she can’t take her tear-stained eyes off me.

The woman places a shaky hand over her face, stifling a sob.

“Father,” I hear Tatum reprimanding her father, but they are just a mirage in my peripheral. My eyes cloud.

I never expected to ask the four words, *Are you my mother*, because Poto taught me to rack up bad karma.

Steal.

Cheat.

Lie.

I thought I slipped past fate when Tatum fell in love with me.

But as I’m walking toward them and my knees go weak, the stranger calls me something in Samoan.

A word that one of the parents kept calling his son repeatedly while I went down to the tourist shop.

I think she called me son.

I lift my mother into my arms. “You’re my mother. Oh, fuck. You’re my mother.” My gravelly voice breaks.

She nods profusely. “*Mali’oli’o.*”

Tatum eagerly explains. “That’s one of the largest rivers in Samoa. Riv, that’s your name.”

Suddenly, my mother’s dotting kisses all over my face. “Your father took you from me. I have pictures of you and Poto. You need proof; I have it.”

My mother diverts to another subject as if scrambling for an ounce of trust. “Saw you on TV ... I knew it was you! I’m not on drugs. I never did drugs. Look, look.” She hastily lets me go, running a hand over her arms.

“What happened?” It’s true I gave that bitch Constance a pass, saying she didn’t have to tell me so soon upon our first meeting, but curiosity tightens my chest.

“Poto left our home. Tatum visited where we grew up.”

“Grew up?” I stagger a few paces. That motherfucker said he came to Samoa for a week of partying.

“I had you when I was young, still in school. My parents kicked me out. I moved in with Poto. I would catch you and Poto—well—him teaching you to steal from tourists while I worked. I kept begging him not to, so they wouldn’t take you away. I came home one day, and our savings was gone. My little boy was gone.” She snuffles.

Did that bastard not lie about anything? “What’s your name?”

“Kai Heilani.”

* * *

Later in the evening, Jhang has relinquished his hotel room—offering to bunk with Bao—so that Heilani could stay.

In the same room where my coach tossed his cookies, now clean, my ma pulls out a dusty old shoebox with photos of me.

We look through pictures, the last of which I’m at least four years old.

“I dishonored my family to keep you, *Mali’oli’o*. I had a very good family with lots of money. Big image. But this was the only image I lived for.” She hands over another picture.

I smile at a picture of me, appearing to learn to walk as Heilani steadies me.

She says, “I’d do it all over again just to see your smile. Poto was what you’d call an older boy, a bad boy. I only had you for four years. But I’d fight him again just to hold you as a baby.”

“You don’t, uh,” I run a hand over the back of my neck, “have to worry about my pop.”

“Was he good to you?” Her keen gaze washes over me. “You tell me where he is. I will fight him again. He’s the only person I ever fought. And I’m not afraid anymore.”

After all the lies my father spewed, I let his toxicity fade out as the truth sinks in. Ma was just doing the best she could to survive when he ran off with me. *My motherfucking pop kept me from Ma so he could survive below the poverty level.* Kinda reminds me of that one line from Guardians of the Galaxy: “He was skinny . . . Good for thieving.”

Even though I hadn’t felt conflicted about murdering him before, I now see his death as cold, hard justice.

A little while later, Tatum places a hand on her shoulder. “Miss Heilani, your son here has some fighting to do tomorrow. We hope you’ll join us at his match.”

“Oh,” she places hands over her mouth, “I don’t know if I can watch that fight. I will jump into the *ring*. No one touches my *Mali’oli’o*.”

“I can half understand why, but I’ll try to convince you at breakfast,” I tell her.

“I have it all scheduled,” Tatum shares. “A healthy meal at—okay, Riv, you’re looking at me real funky. I guess we don’t have to follow the schedule.”

I shake my head at her.

“I wish there were time to take you home tomorrow morning,” she says, “and feed you a real meal. This place charges so much just to cut a fancy piece of fruit.”

I pull her into a hug. “Ma, don’t worry about anything. After tomorrow, this one will forget she had a list of things to do, and I’ll take you up on the offer.”

Heilani sighs. “*Mali’oli’o*, Tatum, sweet dreams.”

Feeling surreal, I follow Tatum to the door, along the labyrinth corridor, and clasp her hand in mine.

“You did it, Stubby.”

A heavenly smile touches her lips. “It was a team effort. First step, faith.” Tatum’s tongue runs across her bottom lip as she contemplates. “Willow and I were at this place where she worked. She was steadfast for a moment, came over, then obstacles got in her way.”

“Did you know who she was last night?”

Tatum sighs heavily. “Had a feeling. I didn’t confirm it until a few hours ago.”

She starts to walk again, but in a single pace, I’ve surpassed her. “So, you went hours away, *alone*, to find her.”

“I wouldn’t say I was alone, River.” Tatum winks. “Gramps gave me his phone. He was supposed to tell you guys. While you were hugging your ma and I was giving back Gramps’ phone, Gram shared the bad news.”

“Ahhh, the dementia.” I squeeze Tatum at my side, aware she needs time to process that. We’re quiet the rest of the way to our room.

Once inside, I turn Tatum around, claim my girl’s wrists over her head, and slowly walk her to the wall.

“Before the fun—”

“Don’t ruin the moment, Stubby.” I nip her collarbone.

“Excuse me, Riv, this is important. About that thing where I can’t be angry for an entire year.” Tatum smiles up at me.

“Oh, yeah. An entire year of you pleasing me, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Well, I beg to differ. Today was filled with the impossible, every turn a challenge. So, I’ve officially revoked that caveat, right?”

TATUM

The arousal in River's voice sparks a deep agonizing throbbing sensation along the walls of my channel.

“Don't press your luck, Little Bit.”

All the things that could go wrong came to fruition today. I stepped out on faith, but every corner, a hurdle coerced me to turn back. I know River's fair share of wrongs can create a mountain, but he's been everything I needed.

So, he *deserved* this.

And though I'm mentally and physically exhausted, a tiny spark of desire consumes me.

We move in chaos.

His arm whirlwinds around my waist. My thighs viciously cling to his hips.

River hikes my dress over my ass, snatches my thong, shredding it to pieces, and shoves it in his mouth.

With my spine jamming against the wall again, I look up beneath subdued lashes and suggest, “You should get some

rest tonight.” I’m taunting him. There’s no way in friggen hell my man will let me go without nutting.

Shoving his pants down just enough, River removes a dangerous cock and lines carnage along my lips, teasing me back. “Pussy first.”

The ache of wanting his dick slamming through me crescendos as havoc slows to a torturous rhythm. We both look between us, watching bedlam glide, wetting and glossing with each stroke of my folds.

Gawd, I want him to take me so hard that I can’t physically stand to cheer him tomorrow night.

“You better get this pussy, baby, before I cum.” I pant. “I cum *first*, and I’m going to bed. I’ve had a crazy day.”

A low-seated purr tangles out of my mouth as his cock slithers out of reach, where my orgasm grows electric.

I wait in heady anticipation for full penetration.

This will be a quick, hard fuck.

I can taste it.

River’s hand weaves around the back of my neck, locking on. “You ready?”

“Oh, yessss!”

“Lights out, baby.”

He bashes my cervix, leaving me with only the ghost of oxygen in my lungs. My eyes bite shut. Tears stream my cheeks.

My pussy instantly contracts around the cock that’s battering my insides. He takes me in a long, delectable, dangerous rhythm. I chew into the side of my hand.

River grabs my wrist, pulling it away.

“Did I say you could do that, Tatum?” His tongue swipes against my lips, forcing entry. Whereas I hardly had the oxygen for existence, the fight between us extends to our tongues now. Flicking, twirling, begging dominance.

I lose on all counts—from my battered, slick valley to River’s teeth cleaving my tongue and asserting supremacy.

To my mind.

I lose my *muthafucking* mind as each thrust plows into me.

The intensity of River’s kiss has me flipping against the wall like a dead fish. His relentless deep dive sends ecstasy hurling into us at the same instant. I unleash my own ocean as River fills me up with exquisitely fierce waves of his cum.

Our heartbeats are the only thing left fighting when we catch our breaths. Giddy laughter overthrows me.

“Stubby.”

“It’s scientifically proven that if you don’t laugh after sex, it wasn’t good. Shower and sleep?”

“Yup.”

“*W*, tomorrow?”

“Fuck yeah, baby.” He smacks my ass, letting me down from his hold, and I favor the wall behind me. Looks like I’ll be needing assistance walking tomorrow after all.

* * *

All this time, I was chasing my parents’ love story, scrambling for what Father and Momma had—this untouchable energy about them.

I remember they could find each other from way across the room between a sea of emotionally charged people, kinda like now.

I wrap my arms around myself as music pounds my eardrums, pulses my chest, and River comes to stand on the inside of the cage.

He's just gotten blessed by the cutman. While the announcer praises the arrival of Sefina on the stage, River finds me.

It only lasts a second.

A nod.

He's got this.

My soul's elated. I was waiting for this very moment. To stand at peace without Harrison leering at me. To champion my man with arms raised while surrounded by family and friends.

The bell calling round one buzzes. Heilani's hand finds mine as Sefina charges forward. The love she has for her son consoles the part of my heart that will always long for Momma.

River nimbly dodges the strike, swinging into a spin kick. The power sends Sefina staggering.

River lunges downward, targeting his opponent's neck. Sefina rolls out of the way, shaking him off. They shoot up from the canvas, staring each other down.

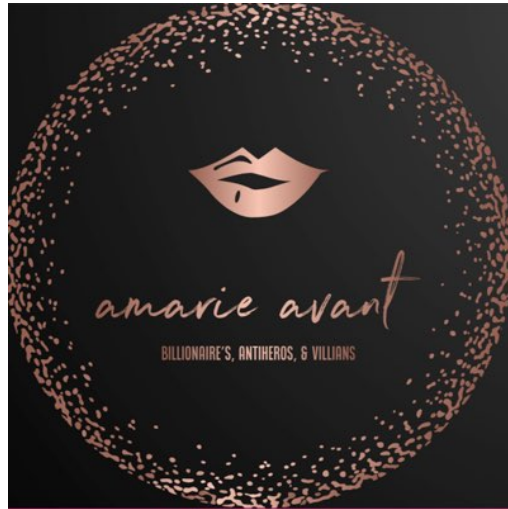
One has met his match, and the other is elated. At River's snarled grin, I know this will be the fight of all fights.

Blood.

Sweat.

But let's face it, no tears will be shed until Sefina takes his ass home, empty-handed.

Tonight, a legend *is* born, and I'll stick by River's side long after he continues to reign.



“God can restore what is broken and turn it into something amazing. All you need is faith.”

author's note

Thank you so much for finishing River and Tatum's story! I hope you wouldn't mind leaving a review of both books, that tells me if I've gotten better on my craft or need to steer the opposite direction.

I did a little something different this round. The [extended epilogue](#) is a bit longer than usual, and kinda has a feel of deleted and/or behind the scenes. In addition, you'll get some insight into what Jamie will be up to in his book, which is coming soon. Since the extended epilogue, encompassing a couple of chapters, is a bit of a smorgasbord, it can be read [here](#).

Thanks again for reading, reviewing, and keeping in touch.



write a book with me

I know we, as women, often imagine ourselves as the heroine in the romance stories we read. So, I want to have fun with you.

If you'd like to help me write my next romance, join me on [Patreon](#).

You could be orchestrating precisely how the hero slams you up against the wall, runs his mouth and hands all over your body, and ...

Yeah, you get my drift.

I also have swag.

Not just any swag.

Personalized swag.

Join me if you dare ;)

also by amarie avant

Crime /Romantic Suspense:

August.

Fear None & Fear Me

Fearless (Also in Audiobook)

Lawless

FEAR (Sexy Brit alert)

Black Queen, Dark Knight (Duet)

Zaccaro

Contemporary Romance:

Make Me Stay (Duet)

The Good Mistress (Dirty Billionaire Duet)

Sports Romance:

Dirty Takedown

Stalkers/ Obsessive:

Devil In Her Bed

Diablo Inside (Cuban Cuban!!!)

Billionaire romance w/ BDSM:

An Alpha's Desire

Ephraim's Hurt Room

Read them. Review them. Thank you and have a blessed day!

don't forget ...

I wrote Tatum and River's extended epilogue a little differently.

If you'd like to check it out and see how they're doing, check-in on the [MacKenzie Brothers](#), and see how River's mom has melded into the family, then grab the extended epilogue.

Within these chapters, readers will get a good idea of what Jamie MacKenzie will be up to in his story. Grab River and Tatum's [short story](#) now!

Lastly, my next series launching this June will kick off with DEVIANT ROYAL. The three-part series will launch back to back to back! I'm thinking one to two week intervals ;) The covers are scrumptious! So follow me on social media, join my [Facebook Group](#), and get ready for hot sex, murder, and mystery!

And I'm begging you for reviews ;)