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## Chapter 1

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### The inaugural ball...

**E**verything was perfect.

Every detail, from the lighting down to the tiny quiches currently being distributed to the first flood of guests, had been painstakingly chosen for this exact moment. Evelyn Berkshire closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose then slowly out through her mouth. Exactly six deep breaths, the way her meditation instructor had taught her.

Rowena, one of the sisters Evelyn had never known she had, couldn't believe she'd needed someone to teach her how to relax. But then, Rowena hadn't been raised as the daughter of two prominent lawyers and then passed off to a man who accepted nothing short of perfection. Rowena's husband Octavius had standards, but they weren't unreasonable. And every rule he'd put in place for her had been discussed and agreed upon by both parties.

And then there was Teagan, the third in their recently discovered trio. Teagan wasn't as footloose and carefree as Rowena. Quite the opposite, with her "kick ass and take names later" atti-

tude. She'd never in a million years put up with a man pushing her around. Paddling her ass, the way her fiancé Luca occasionally did, was one thing. But she'd never bend or break. Teagan was a warrior. Not weak, like Evelyn.

But she wasn't weak any longer. Straightening her shoulders, Evelyn lifted her chin. She couldn't afford to be weak, not tonight. Too much was riding on her being able to carry out her part of the plan.

"You look lovely, my dear."

It was a testament to the strength she'd borrowed from her sisters that she didn't jump out of her skin at the sound of his voice and that she could stand here, in a sea of people, and let him touch her without screaming. *One more night*, she reminded herself. Fixing on what she hoped was the last of her fake smiles for a long time, she turned to face him. Branson Montgomery. Pride of the Pacific Northwest, with his stunning good looks and diplomatic charm. Governor-elect of Oregon. The man she'd agreed to pledge her life to.

And the monster that haunted her every waking moment.

"Thank you," she murmured in the quiet, genteel way she'd been raised to speak. God, how she despised it. Especially now, when everything in her wanted to scream and shout and bring the roof crashing down with the force of her fury. But she had appearances to keep up, so she continued on as if nothing was different. "You look handsome as well."

The corners of his lips turned down in a slight frown, a look she was all too familiar with, as he tugged at the sleeve of his jacket. Her heart pounded against her ribs and she focused on taking another deep breath. *He can't hurt you here*. She repeated the sentence over and over in her mind like a mantra until she felt her nerves begin to settle.

Branson continued on, oblivious to her internal turmoil. "The cut is wrong. But it's too late to change it now." Giving the sleeve one last tug, he lifted his head to view the crowd,

smoothing the lines of his face into the pleasant politician's smile he'd perfected over the years. The smile she'd taught him, when she'd been nothing more than his public relations person, helping him work his way to the governor's mansion. "I trust everything is in place for tonight?"

Still holding her own perfect, fake smile in place, Evelyn nodded. "Everything is just as it should be, my love." It was a wonder she didn't choke on the words. Not that it was a lie. Everything was, indeed, as it should be. But she hadn't felt anything like love for the man beside her in a very long time. If she ever really had, at all. She'd seen the love between her sisters and their men, and it was nothing like the gentle affection she'd had for Branson in the beginning. And it was certainly nothing like the burning hatred she felt for him now.

Branson pressed his hand to the small of her back, deliberately digging the heel of his hand into a spot he knew would hurt her, and it took every ounce of training she'd had not to scream at the shooting pain. She'd provoked him last night. For the first time in their three years together, she'd deliberately pushed all of his buttons. It was a wonder he hadn't broken anything, but she had a plan, and she'd needed him to hurt her. The flash of pain she felt now was a small price to pay, in the grand scheme of things.

And because she had a plan, she smiled. She laughed at dull, boring jokes. She made small talk and asked about families she couldn't care less about. For two hours, she was the perfect partner to the perfect politician.

At a quarter to seven, the dainty watch on her wrist buzzed. As casually as she could with her heart in her throat, Evelyn tilted her wrist to view the display. *Yes or No?* If she chose yes, the plan would be set in motion, and her entire world would change. If she chose no, the people waiting in the wings would quietly back away and slip outside.

For just a moment, she considered pressing "no." So much

was at stake; not just her life, but the lives of the people she'd come to consider her family. But then the light caught the dainty bracelet encircling her wrist—her Christmas gift from Teagan—white gold, with a simple three-leaf clover, and the letter "E" on the second petal. Teagan had gotten the idea from the blankets they each had from their birth mother, with that same clover on each blanket. No matter what she chose, her sisters would be there with her, beside her, supporting her.

Taking another of those deep breaths her meditation teacher was so fond of, she tapped the big green check mark. *Yes*.

Across the room, a woman emerged from a door marked Private, wearing a cheap knock off of the dress Evelyn wore under her cape. Her hair was cut in the same sleek bob style, with the side swept bangs and the perfect pale highlights. Evelyn scanned the room and found a second woman on the opposite side, in the same knock off dress, with the same exact hair.

If they'd stood side by side, most people in the room wouldn't be able to tell them apart. Unless they noticed the scar on Rowena's top lip. Or Teagan's flat, cop eyes, which were probably even now scanning the area in search of anything amiss with their plan.

At strategic places around the room, three men were stationed. All three were owners of S.E.A.L., the security firm that provided Branson's personal security. But they weren't here for Branson. They were here for her. And her sisters, though the men didn't know it yet. As far as the men knew, her sisters were tucked away in the surveillance van, safe from any potential fallout. Evelyn's tummy did a flip at the thought of how they were going to react when they learned about the real plan. She wasn't afraid of them, but she also hated seeing her sisters in trouble, especially because of her.

A silent signal from Branson's campaign manager let them know it was time for them to take the stage. Linking her arm with Branson's, Evelyn followed him up to the podium, where he was

to give his big inaugural speech. But before he spoke, she'd been asked to introduce him, as though everyone in the audience hadn't seen his face plastered on every TV screen from Maine to California over the last few months.

Still, it gave her an opportunity she otherwise would have missed. So she shook hands with the party leaders and stepped up to the microphone.

She'd learned from her mother how to silence a crowd. Not with raised voices or harsh demands, but with steady, dignified quiet. It didn't take long for the crowd to settle, and with one final, fake smile, she scanned the crowd, her gaze landing on her smiling parents. There was a tiny pang of guilt for the pain she was about to cause them. But it couldn't be helped. Not if she wanted to be free.

"Thank you for coming out tonight. Branson and I can't tell you how much this means to us." Gesturing behind her, she waited for Branson to smile and wave and for the applause and cheers to die down again. "All my life, I've waited for a moment like this. A moment where I could stand beside a powerful man and watch as the rest of the world discovers what I already know about him. And tonight, Branson Montgomery..." Evelyn turned to face him, giving the crowd her back, and reached for the simple silk tie at her neck. She met his eyes, and the smile she gave him wasn't the least bit fake or forced. It was fierce and proud as she tugged the tie loose and let the cape fall from her shoulders. "... the world will know what I've known all along."

The room exploded with gasps and shouts of outrage and disbelief. All around her, cameras flashed and people rushed the stage to get a better look. And through it all, she never broke eye contact with her personal nightmare, never let the warrior's smile leave her face.

She knew what the crowd was seeing; she'd chosen the glittering sapphire dress with its daring, backless silhouette for the sole purpose of exposing the mottled bruising she'd been hiding

nearly every day for three years. Bruising made worse by the beating he'd given her last night when she'd deliberately pushed all his buttons. And she'd been right; the pain was such a small price to pay for this very moment, for the shock on his face as he realized what she'd done.

"You fucking bitch." Branson's face had turned an alarming shade of red. *Good*, she thought. Maybe he'd drop dead in the middle of all this chaos and she'd be free of him forever.

But no such luck. He was on her in three steps, too quickly for her sisters or the men to reach her. It was like watching a movie as he raised his hand and brought it swinging down to connect with her cheek. The sound of flesh meeting flesh was nearly drowned out by the commotion surrounding them, but the backhanded slap hadn't gone unnoticed.

Or un-filmed, she was sure. Someone, somewhere in all of this, was recording every second of Branson Montgomery's downfall. Evelyn silently vowed to pay a thousand dollars to the first person who posted the video online.

His hand circled her throat, cutting off her air supply, and the first licks of fear raced up her spine. Evil, hate-filled eyes met hers. He was going to kill her, in front of thousands of people, and nobody was going to stop him.

Just as her vision began to blacken around the edges, the fingers around her throat released. Someone grabbed her and dragged her off the podium, pushing through the screaming mob of the rich and famous. *Jason*. The security firm's tech wunderkind was the one hauling her toward the back exit they'd identified weeks ago as their escape route.

Not a single soul tried to stop them, and moments later, they burst through the door together. But Jason didn't stop moving until they reached the van and he'd jerked open the doors to shove her inside. He climbed in behind her and slammed the doors shut before picking up a headset and barking into the mic.

"I've got her. Where the hell is everybody?"

Ro's husband, Octavius, was the first to respond. "Headed for the exit."

"Not yet!" Jason snapped the order out, and Evie could just imagine the looks on Luca and O's faces. "Do you see Ro and Teagan anywhere?"

"What?" Luca's voice came through the headset loud and clear. "The girls aren't in the van?"

Jason growled into the headset, "Nobody's in the fucking van! We need to find them, now!"

When Jason looked over at her, his normally cool gray eyes were filled with anger. Anger she would have shrunken away from, before tonight. But she still had a little bit of that courage she'd borrowed from her sisters, so she tilted her chin up and met his fiery gaze with an ice cold one of her own.

"Where the hell are they, Evie?"

"Inside. They were my decoys."

Yanking the thick black glasses off of his face, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Your decoys?" he growled. When he opened his eyes again, the anger was still there, burning red hot.

Again, she met fire with ice. "Yes. In case Branson couldn't be detained. They were going to distract him."

He gave her one more hard look before shoving the glasses on again and turning back to the monitoring station. With quick, efficient movements, he turned on the monitors and they were suddenly seeing inside the ballroom. Not just from Luca and Octavius's lapel cameras, but from the hotel's own security cameras. Evelyn took a tiny step closer, so she could see the screens. Instead of pushing her away as she'd half expected, Jason shifted so she could stand beside him. Even knowing he was pissed at her, his presence soothed the parts of her still shaking from Branson's attack.

"O, one of them is to your right. Shit, Sleazeball is moving in on her. Why the fuck is he not in cuffs?"

A soft whimper escaped as she watched her own personal

nightmare advance on her sister. She wasn't sure which one until he grabbed the woman's arm and was met with an impressive right hook to the eye. Evelyn couldn't stop the grin at the look of shock on Branson's face. He'd been expecting meek and mild Evelyn and he'd gotten ass-kicker Teagan instead.

But her quick expression of amusement reminded her she'd taken the full force of Branson's fury to her face just minutes earlier. Pressing a hand to her cheek, she hissed at the flash of pain.

"There are ice packs in the mini fridge." Jason didn't so much at glance at her when he spoke, and she tried to ignore the little stab of hurt.

"I'm fine." Her voice wasn't as strong as she wanted it to be, but at least she wasn't just cowering and doing as she was told. Those days were behind her.

"It wasn't a suggestion, Evelyn. Go get an ice pack for your face. Now," he added a heartbeat later when she still hadn't moved. "Luca, O has Teagan. Do you have eyes on Ro?"

"Yeah." Despite the simmering fury in his voice, Luca was calm and professional. "Straight ahead. Where's Sleazeball?"

"He's been detained." Flipping switches, Jason focused the monitors on her sisters and the men escorting them from the building. "For now. Get Rowena out of there before O kills us all."

Blocking out the chatter, Evelyn moved to the small black fridge in the corner of the van and retrieved an ice pack. Pressing it to her aching cheek, she let out a small sigh of relief. When she turned back to the console, Jason was watching her. He gave her a small nod of approval before focusing his attention back on the screens. Funny how just that small acknowledgment made her heart jump a little. Holding the pack to her cheek, she studied him.

He was the smallest of the three men but still taller than she was, even in the stilettos she adored. Built like a swimmer, he had



a long, lean body that belied his true strength. More than once, she'd found herself tossed over his shoulder so he could haul her from one place to the next. The first time he'd done so, she'd almost been too drunk to remember it the next day. But after Ro had jogged her memory, she clearly remembered grabbing a handful of hard, muscular ass. The man might have been a nerd—thick black glasses and all—but he had the body of a god.

The back door of the van flew open, interrupting her appreciation of the man at the monitors, and a disheveled version of herself climbed inside the van, her eyes blazing.

"Teagan." She hadn't realized how scared she'd been for her sisters until her voice shook.

Teagan combed her fingers through her hair and shot Evelyn a quick grin before focusing on Jason. "Where are Ro and Luca?"

"Still inside." The disapproval in Jason's voice cracked like a whip, but Teagan didn't so much as flinch.

"Eyes and ears?" she asked, slipping off the red-bottomed stilettos Evelyn had lent her for the event. Wincing, Evelyn bit her tongue when Teagan carelessly kicked the heels under a bench.

Octavius climbed into the van with them, and Evelyn inched to the side. Too many people, there were too many people in the van. "We've got them," O snapped, pointing to the bench. "Sit down. Now."

Hands on her hips, Teagan went toe to toe with Octavius. "No. That's my sister and my man in there. I won't sit by like a goddamn spectator."

Octavius didn't back down. "It's my woman and a man I consider a brother. You'll do what you're told, or I swear I'll wear your ass out before Luca gets his hands on you. And don't think I won't be telling him about your language tonight."

The raised voices and anger filling the small space finally sapped the little bit of courage Evelyn had left. Lowering herself to the floor, she wedged herself into the space between the fridge

and the bench. She pulled her knees up to her chest, trying to make herself as small as possible, and closed her eyes.

"Stop it, both of you." Jason's voice sounded far away, like he was in a bubble or something. Maybe she was the one in the bubble. Yes, she was in a bubble, far away from angry voices and pounding fists.

The van went silent, but she didn't open her eyes. Sometimes, the worst parts came after the quiet. She stayed curled up in her space, eyes closed, pretending she was somewhere safe.

"Evie. Sweetheart, look at me." Jason's soft voice joined her in the bubble. "You're safe, Evie. Just look at me."

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Jason's concerned face filled her vision. The corners of his lips lifted in a small smile. "There you are. Deep breaths. In through the nose." He inhaled, and she copied him, holding the breath for a count of three. "Out through the mouth. Good girl. One more." He waited for her to obey. "Better?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I think so."

"Good. Nobody here is going to hurt you. You know that, right?"

"Yes." And she did. Regardless of how many times she'd seen her sisters squirming in their seats at dinner, she knew these men would protect all of them until their last dying breath. She was safe here.

*Safe.* The vice around her chest loosened and the next breath didn't feel like her lungs were on fire.

The back door opened again, revealing a grinning Rowena and a scowling Luca. Rowena's smile faltered when her husband stalked to the back of the van and jumped down. Wrapping his hand around Ro's arm, he turned to Luca. "We good?"

Luca nodded. "Teagan and I will take the car and follow you to the cabin." He zeroed in on Jason. "You stay with Evie. Keep her calm." When he shifted his attention to her, she shrank back at the fury in his eyes. "We can discuss the stunt you pulled later."

At her soft whimper, his expression softened. "You're safe now, sweetheart."

"I know," Evie whispered. "Thank you, for everything."

His head jerked down in a curt nod. "Roll out!"

Octavius pulled on his wife's arm. "You're with me, Rowena."

"But I need to check on my sisters!"

"You, little girl, need to do as you're told before I forget we're on a timeline and decide to paddle your ass in front of God and everyone. Move it."

"Octavius!" The rest of Ro's protests were lost as her husband dragged her to the front of the vehicle.

Luca called from the back of the van. "Teagan, get a move on. We need to get gone, yesterday."

Ignoring the command, Teagan knelt beside Jason, her hazel eyes warm and soft as she studied her sister. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." Evelyn managed a shaky smile. "Go, before Luca follows through on O's threat."

"Good point. See you at the cabin." Placing a hand on Evelyn's knee, she gave it a comforting squeeze. "I'm proud of you. Just have to be strong for a little while longer. Right?"

"Just for today," Evelyn said, parroting the advice her sister had given her for making it through hard times. According to Teagan, it was how she'd made it through eighteen years of foster care.

"And today is almost over." Patting Evelyn's knee one more time, Teagan rose and jumped down from the van. The sound of Luca's scolding was followed by the loud, unmistakable sound of his hand meeting her bottom and Teagan's outraged shout of protest.

Jason stood to close the doors, and moments later, the van rocked as Octavius drove away.