LEE WINTER

HITS

MRS



MY WIFE HIRED AN ASSASSIN

(SHE MAY HAVE OVERREACTED)

CHAPTER 1

Penguins Not on the Itinerary

Eden Lawless had been married for exactly three days and already she was failing. For their honeymoon, Michelle had requested culture. Eden had delivered Prahran. Graffiti. And…a dead penguin.

This was not a portentous start to things, especially given Eden was already beginning to fret.

A month ago, when Eden had rattled off her wish list of potential honeymoon destinations, Michelle had vetoed only one outright—an Antarctica eco-honeymoon—but otherwise had offered little opinion beyond *Can we go somewhere with culture? Champagne? Good coffee, at a bare minimum?*

Victoria, Australia, had been the compromise, with its excesses of arts, phenomenal coffee, and regional eco-getaways, none of which, Michelle had sounded pleased to note, involved subzero temperatures.

Eden had signed them up for a week in Melbourne, in a hotel overlooking its botanical gardens. This would be followed by a week at a luxury sky pod hotel at Cape Otway, which included a *Paddle with the Platypuses* kayaking excursion on Lake Elizabeth, and glow-worms at the nearby national park.

Weirdly, Michelle hadn't commented on the platypus paddling. Not once.

Letting Eden make all their sightseeing decisions might have looked like indifference, but Eden knew better. Michelle only wanted Eden's happiness. She didn't seem to care about her own. Or perhaps, after so many years doing morally grey work, she still didn't believe she deserved her own happiness.

Either way, the knowledge squeezed Eden's heart every time Michelle acquiesced to her offbeat plans. And that made her even more determined to find something they would both enjoy.

So, today, she'd promised her wife an amble through the nearby shabby-chic suburb of Prahran, given that it had promised to be quirky and interesting. Except that Michelle's expression had started to hover somewhere between polite and strained, as if she were wondering where the chic part in *shabby chic* was supposed to kick in.

And then they'd turned a corner.

A yellow baker's van sat there, emblazoned with cartoon muffins, all of which Eden highly approved, as the owner of a bright and eccentric van herself.

They drew closer.

Michelle suddenly leapt backwards with a small, undignified squeak, landing halfway on top of Eden.

Okay, what? Michelle Hastings, ex-FBI agent and total badass CEO, did not *leap*. She did not squeak. She negotiated. Calmly. With spreadsheets and cute black reading glasses that made her look utterly adorable.

Her glance inside the van for the cause of the aforementioned leapage was the moment Eden had realised that her honeymoon was quite possibly cursed.

Staring at them, glassy-eyed, through the passenger window of the van sat a…creature.

"Is that…" Michelle pointed. "In the passenger seat: a penguin?"

Eden peered inside again. It was indeed a penguin. Stuffed—not plush. As in formerly alive. Real. With actual feathers.

"Oh, hey," Eden said, identifying the species immediately. She cupped her hands to the glass for a better look. "That's a gentoo penguin. *Pygoscelis papua*." Live with an eco-warrior mother long enough, you picked things up. "He's very far from home. Wonder what he's doing here?"

"You don't think it's some random Australian thing?" Michelle squinted at it with suspicion. "Driving around with a penguin?"

"Well, Aussies are eccentric," Eden agreed. "Especially about their animals. Did you know their wildlife only has two settings: cuddle or kill?" She drew away from the van. "But no—Australians are definitely not the dead-critters-as-passengers kind of eccentric."

She soon spotted the reason the van was parked there: It was outside a crime bookstore, judging by the titles in the window.

Eden brightened. This might salvage their morning. Proof of her wife's appetite for a well-written mystery was piled up all over their DC apartment.

Michelle's gaze had already locked onto the brass doors beckoning customers closer. A sign read *Mary Bugg's Bookstore and Coffee House.* Michelle was already reaching for the door.

With a grin, Eden followed.

Inside, the shelves ran deep and long, crowded with paperbacks whose spines promised murders, heists, cold cases, and colonial brutality.

The air smelled of fresh coffee and old paper—bitter and comforting at once. Chalkboard signs promised quality espresso and flat whites, while handwritten notes at the end of each aisle recommended dusty novels set in the outback or true crime tales steeped in Melbourne's underworld. Each section bore a genre sign, delicately illustrated with peacock feathers beneath the titles in faded purples and greens.

The aromas of coffee and baked goods—almost entirely muffins, Eden noticed—filled the store.

On cue, Eden's stomach rumbled.

Michelle laughed softly. "You're always hungry."

"I have a fast metabolism," Eden shot back. "And you've been keeping me very active," she added, her gaze dropping pointedly to Michelle's mouth.

Michelle snorted. "Well. There is that."

They browsed for a while until Eden paused in front of a framed woodcut print on the wall. The sepia image showed a sinister-looking man in a duster jacket with his pistol raised and a metal bucket with a slit for the eyes on his head. Eden leaned closer to read the caption.

Vintage print of Australia's most famous outlaw Ned Kelly
wearing armour and holding the police at bay
during his last stand at Glenrowan.

By Francis Thomas Dean Carrington, July 3, 1880.

The image suited a shop devoted to Australian crime and mystery—except for the Post-it note stuck beneath it. In sharp, exacting handwriting, *most famous* had been repeated, followed by an asterisk and the word *allegedly*.

"I'm guessing they're not a fan of that particular gentleman," Michelle observed. "For a crime bookstore, they don't seem to appreciate all criminals."

Eden pointed at the bucket helmet. "Maybe it's a fashion issue."

"It is most certainly *not* a fashion issue," came a cool voice from behind them.

Eden turned.

The woman was towering—easily six feet and change—lean and angular, her gaze fixed on the Ned Kelly image with open distaste. Her Australian accent was formal, highbrow. Academia, Eden guessed. Or classical theatre?

"Oh?" Michelle prompted, looking intrigued.

The woman sniffed. "Ned Kelly is vastly overrated. Now, Mary Bugg—she was a powerhouse. Inventive, clever, skilled beyond measure. An outback legend." She gestured towards a colourful stand near the front of the shop. "I've written a book on her. She's Australia's most prominent female bushranger, if you're interested in a real hero and her tales of derring-do."

"You're an author?" Eden asked, shooting a look at the display. "That's impressive." As was anyone who could work "derring-do" into a sentence.

"Is it?" the woman replied, her tone as crisp as an Italian suit. "I'm the owner of this bookstore and once ran a university's internationally renowned Australian historical collection focused on bushrangers, particularly Aboriginal bushrangers. Writing the Mary Bugg book was an afterthought."

She sighed as if the very idea wearied her. "I've written two more books on these remarkable women now. Others are planned, of course. But someone had to set the record straight on our overlooked female bushrangers. Or outlaws, as you Americans would say."

Eden grinned. "Oh! Like Billy the Kid."

The woman twitched. "I…suppose," she said through clenched teeth.

Not like Billy the Kid, then. Eden fought a laugh.

"So, can I ask something else?" Eden said.

The bookstore owner frowned. "If you must."

Eden was genuinely struggling to keep a straight face at her demeanour. "Is the gentoo penguin in the muffin van outside yours?"

The woman's expression brightened by a fraction. "Ah. You've discovered Trip. No, he belongs to Olivia." She nodded towards the back of the shop. "Resident muffin maker. Holder of appalling book opinions. At present, she's embroiled in a war of words with her chaotic little book club."

Eden rose onto her toes to peer over the shelves. Five people sat in armchairs, gesticulating wildly, faces animated. "They seem…passionate."

"Every member of the book club has very firm opinions," the woman agreed. "Most especially me."

"So why aren't you over there offering them?" Michelle asked lightly.

"Oh, I was," the woman said. "Which is why I'm now over here. Not everyone appreciates my view that bestseller status has no bearing on literary merit. Olivia may have…insisted—for the sake of group cohesion—that I tend to customers instead of sharing all my expert insights." She flicked her fingers towards Eden and Michelle.

Eden laughed. "Let me guess: It's hard being entirely correct and surrounded by idiots, huh?"

"Indeed." The bookstore owner cocked an eyebrow, as if this kind of skirmish were merely Tuesday for her. Given it *was* Tuesday, perhaps it was. "They're not all idiots. Olivia, for instance. Her views are outlandish at times, but always well argued."

It was hard not to notice how her voice softened whenever she mentioned Olivia. Interesting.

Michelle, clearly bored now and not bothering to hide it, murmured something polite and wandered off towards the Mysteries section.

"I'm Eden," she said after her wife had gone.

"Dr Blackwood," the store owner replied. "And from where in the US do you and your…friend…originate?" She tested the word *friend*, as if uncertain.

"I like to think I'm a citizen of the world now," Eden said easily, "but I was born in a tiny town in Maryland called Wingapo. My wife's from DC—born and bred." She gestured towards Michelle.

"I see." Dr Blackwood's gaze softened at *wife*.

Eden's gaydar pinged. Hard. Unless she was way off base, Dr Blackwood and penguin-owning Olivia might be a couple. "We're on our honeymoon," Eden added, lowering her voice. "Maybe you can help me. I'm trying to find

things Michelle would enjoy doing or seeing. Anything cultural happening around here?"

"Cultural?"

"Art. Exhibitions. Classical music."

"Always," Dr Blackwood said with utmost certainty. "It's *Melbourne*." She paused, then nodded. "This way."

She led Eden to a noticeboard near the front door and pointed to a flier pinned near the top. "That went up last week. It would qualify. The orchestra is quite highly regarded."

Eden studied the blue piece of paper.

An Evening of Saint-Saëns

Featuring Cellist Natalya Tsvetnenko

As part of the Victorian Philharmonic Orchestra's fiftieth anniversary celebrations, acclaimed former VPO cellist Natalya Tsvetnenko performs for one night only, direct from the world-famous Vienna Philharmonic.

Featured works include Saint-Saëns's Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor and* The Carnival of the Animals*, with a solo of "The Swan" (arranged for cello), performed by Ms Tsvetnenko.

The cellist pictured at the centre was striking, tall, with long dark hair spilling over a black gown, her cello held to one side like a courtly partner. The rest of the orchestra had clearly been added later as a background.

It wasn't the cellist in general that caught Eden's attention; it was the woman's expression—direct, unflinching, as though she were staring straight through you. Daring you to blink. As if nothing on earth could daunt her.

Eden was impressed. She'd met thousands of people through her work as a professional protester and social justice campaigner, but she'd never met anyone who looked like this.

The rest of the flier detailed additional works and musicians, other featured performers on other nights, but Eden had already settled on the important points: classical music, which Michelle loved, and animals, which Eden loved.

"It's meant to be," Eden declared, tapping the flier. "Can I have it?"

Dr Blackwood gave the most minute of shrugs. "If you like. The concert's on tonight, so I doubt anyone else will want it."

Eden unpinned it and slid it into her pocket. "I'll take a copy of your book too. The first one—about Mary Bugg. Sounds fun."

"A wise choice." Dr Blackwood retrieved a copy from the display. "The *Herald Sun* called it 'a historical revelation'." She paused. "I assume they meant that positively." Her lips formed the thinnest of lines. "I hadn't considered the alternative until now."

"That's still better than a bad review."

"I don't expect I'll get one of those. Well, not again," Dr Blackwood said briskly, signing the book with a tight, defensive flourish. "My books are *meticulously* researched, yet that one so-called journalist bought into several populist *but entirely wrong* conspiracy theories about Mary Bugg. The reviewer refused to countenance that his excited drivel wasn't grounded in truth and wondered why my book hadn't included these 'facts'."

Her eyes blazed as she rang up Eden's purchase and accepted her credit card. "Because they were untrue! *His* internet search does not trounce *my* nearly three decades of academic research on the subject." She flapped the credit card about for emphasis. "I've banned the bloviating fool from my store for life."

Eden laughed.

"I'm serious." Dr Blackwood slid the book into a brown paper bag and passed it over along with Eden's credit card. "Now, go and see Kelly at the café counter. With this book purchase, you've earned a free bushranger muffin of your choice. I recommend the Mary Bugg Thunderbolt. Do not bother with the Ned Kelly."

"Why? Does it taste bad?"

"Of course not. I created it myself, with regionally accurate ingredients."

"Then…?"

"It's *Ned. Kelly*." She scowled. "I don't like to encourage him. Even in muffin form."

Eden snorted. "Ah. Okay."

A smaller woman with gentle curves and soft eyes stepped up beside Dr Blackwood and slipped an arm around her waist. "Margaret doesn't like to encourage Ned Kelly in any form," she said with an amused smile. "Hi. I'm Olivia."

Eden beamed. "I'm Eden. So—you're the book club critic? And gentoo penguin owner, I hear?"

Olivia shot Dr Blackwood a fond look. "Are you talking me up to customers?"

"That doesn't sound like me," Dr Blackwood replied, although her gaze lingered, warmer now. "Besides, tourists don't count. You never see them again."

"Well," Eden inserted helpfully, "she did say you have well-argued opinions."

"Well-argued?" Olivia nudged Dr Blackwood, sounding gleeful.

Dr Blackwood rolled her eyes, then straightened, pivoting to Eden. "Thank you for shopping at Mary Bugg's Bookstore and Coffee House," she said formally. After a beat, she smiled, the expression coming out tight and awkward but earnest, like it was something she'd been reminded to do. Often.

Well, the woman had tried. Eden smiled back.

Olivia simply laughed.



Ten minutes later, Eden headed outside with Michelle trailing behind, sipping the coffee Eden had bought her that she'd declared, with relish, to be excellent.

The muffin was excellent too. Between bites, Eden explained the concert. "You need a cultural fix. You love classical music. And it's about animals, which I love. Win-win."

She handed over the flier.

Michelle stopped mid-swallow. Slowly, she lowered the cup, smoothed the paper against her stomach, then lifted it again. Her gaze locked onto the cellist's face.

"Sweetheart?" Eden frowned. "We don't have to go if—"

"Yes," Michelle said, voice low. "I would very much like to go."

"You would?"

"Yes."

Weird as hell, but okay. Eden pulled out her phone. "I'll get tickets."

A moment later, she added, "Premium tickets in the dress circle come with an afterparty invite."

"Is that so?" Michelle murmured, gaze still fixed on the woman's photo.

"Wait—do you know her?"

"*Know* is a strong word. I met her once. Some years ago at Heathrow in the first-class lounge. She made quite an impression."

"I'll say, if you still remember her." Eden confirmed the reservation. "Tonight at seven."

"Thank you." Michelle finally met her gaze. "I think I'd enjoy seeing Ms Tsvetnenko in action."

The way she said *action* sent something skittering down Eden's spine.

"Are you sure you only met her once?"

"Quite sure. Once was…an experience."

Eden glanced back at the flier. "She's intimidating. Chilling, even."

"Well," Michelle said thoughtfully, "you're right. She may be Australia's most chilling woman."

"I didn't realise you knew any Australians."

"Just the one." Michelle tapped the photo.

Just the one.

Eden turned the words over, something pricking at the back of her mind. Whatever she was missing, she wondered if she'd find out tonight.

CHAPTER 2

Suburban Goddess

"You look gorgeous," Alison said, straightening the collar of Natalya's silken black blouse.

And, oh Lord, she really did. Sinfully so. The ebony-coloured pantsuit set off her lover's pale skin and the sleek fall of her long black hair to devastating effect. Alison still found it strange, seeing Natalya get ready in a suburban, middle-class guest bedroom, as though she'd wandered into the wrong life entirely.

Alison's sister, Susan, had insisted they stay at her place for Susan's daughter, Hailey, who worshipped Natalya, heart and soul, and wanted her close for her upcoming birthday.

Natalya, for all her lofty detachment, was a sucker for the teenager's pleas, while pretending she was entirely unaffected. If she truly were unaffected, they'd be staying at some five-star hotel in the heart of Melbourne, which had been Natalya's original plan.

The guest bedroom sat at the back of the house, overlooking a square of lawn where a rusting Hills Hoist clothesline cast a crooked steel shadow.

A double bed hugged one wall, its white wooden frame scuffed at the corners, dressed in a floral doona faded unevenly by the passing years. The pillowcases weren't matched—Susan didn't have enough visitors to justify splurging on new ones.

The bedside table held a box of tissues, a chipped ceramic lamp with a beige lampshade that gave off a dull, comforting glow, and a paperback abandoned by a previous guest. Alison was fairly certain Natalya hadn't been the one to bring along *Salt, Steel, and Sin: Ravished by the Pirate King.*

She was honestly surprised Natalya hadn't used the book yet as tinder for the room's old fireplace.

Beside the book sat a potted African violet that had once belonged to Natalya. Left behind when she'd gone to Vienna, it had passed to Alison's, then Hailey's care. Against all odds and expectations, the little plant remained stubbornly alive.

The fact that Natalya's beloved violet was more than just existing but actually thriving had earned Hailey Natalya's highest regard. After all, the former assassin respected things that stayed alive.

The carpet was a practical brown, the walls an off-white that yellowed in the afternoon light. Thin curtains patterned with pale leaves dressed the windows.

Nothing in the room was new. Everything screamed domestic—suburban, boring, and basic.

Which was why it always shook Alison slightly to see Natalya framed within it.

Her lover was sleekness personified. Danger and edge set against a backdrop of the mundane. And, oh, how Natalya knew it. Hell, she played with it.

Sometimes she'd lean against the windowsill, gaze outside, and say, "From a life of Viennese refinement, artistic rigour, and world-class prestige to… Frankston, Melbourne. You know, I never thought I'd see a Hills Hoist again."

Other times, she'd hold up a ceramic clown found on the top shelf of the chipboard wardrobe, or gesture at the macramé wall hanging. "To think we could be at the Grand Millennium and miss out on these rare collectables."

"You're such a snob," Alison would say every time.

"Don't pretend you miss this world," Natalya had replied last time. "I know where you came from. That crushing existence with your mother. Your soul was threadbare. I refuse to pretend this is any sort of life—no matter how much your sister believes provincial mediocrity is a worthy aspiration."

Pointing out Susan's life of mundanity was pure Natalya. It was baked into her DNA to push against it, to recoil from and fight a low bar. Alison rarely argued, because she knew Natalya was right: She was glad—truly glad—to be out of this suffocating world, even though it suited her sister so well.

Of course Natalya found it worse than stifling. To her, working-class suburbia—with all its expectations and intentional smallness—was offensive. She'd always loathed the ordinary: in music, in places, and

especially in people. And Susan, Alison knew, was one of the dullest women Natalya had ever met. Alison's sister's sole brush with intrigue had been marrying a homicide detective whose downfall and subsequent disappearance had made the national news.

Without Barry Moore's spectacular self-destruction, Susan's life would have simply plodded along quietly—a bitter and unremarkable one.

So, no, Alison didn't blame her lover for indelicately mocking Susan's guestroom. Natalya was chafing to escape it, counting down the hours and minutes. And honestly, if Hailey hadn't begged for Natalya's presence as her birthday gift, Alison herself would already have booked a five-star suite.

That was telling. Maybe they were both snobs now.

"You think I look gorgeous?" Natalya brought Alison's thoughts back to the present. "Not supremely talented? I know which I'd prefer."

"Fine," Alison said. "You also look devastatingly dangerous. Enough to make a certain show pony violinist with ambitions far beyond her abilities cry into her cheap replica Guarneri."

Now she was just buttering Natalya up—playing straight to her vanity. It was one of her lover's few weaknesses, this rivalry with a woman she considered vastly inferior.

Amanda Marks. Violinist.

Beautiful, narcissistic Amanda had soaked up all the attention and limelight when she and Natalya had played together with the Victorian Philharmonic. Yes, she had skill—but not that much. And yet she graced international music magazine covers, once crowned "Australia's String Sensation".

It wasn't jealousy, exactly. Natalya would probably scoff at a cover story about herself. What galled her was seeing mediocrity lauded as brilliance, simply because it came wrapped in blonde, elfin beauty.

Therein lay the nub: Natalya was the excellence Marks pretended to be.

Her former orchestra had overlooked that, likely because of Natalya's "difficult" personality, particularly when contrasted with Marks's sparkly, media-friendly one. Natalya had always resented being underrated, especially in comparison to those she regarded as her inferiors.

Alison suspected that half the reason Natalya had agreed to perform at tonight's one-off VPO concert was to rub Amanda's nose in it. Although, privately, Alison doubted Marks thought about Natalya at all.

She'd never say that aloud. For all Natalya's accomplishments and ruthlessness, she carried one quiet Achilles heel: the fear of being overlooked. Worse—of being overlooked for someone beneath her talents.

After tonight, Alison hoped that fear would finally be laid to rest.

Natalya's eyes lit with amusement. "I'm impressed you noticed Marks plays a replica Guarneri."

"The real thing costs millions," Alison pointed out. "And she's on a VPO salary."

"I meant that you recognised the brand."

"I didn't. She told me—four years ago. When she was trying to recruit me as her social media manager. Remember? The lunches, the random calls? I thought I was being flirted with or toyed with. I couldn't work it out."

Natalya's jaw tightened. "I remember."

There it was. The real jealousy this time.

Even back then, Natalya had felt proprietary about Alison—long before she'd understood why. Long before she'd admitted she felt anything at all.

The reminder of the veiled, possessive way she'd looked at her in those days—and had never stopped—made Alison want to pin her against the wall and fuck her senseless in that exquisite pantsuit. Natalya loved it when Alison initiated intimacy—when she threatened to take the power.

But they were already running late. Natalya's two outfit changes had seen to that. Alison, wisely, didn't mention aloud that her accomplished lover might be nervous.

Seeing her former orchestra once more would have stirred old memories. Or, knowing Natalya, old injustices.

"You look acceptable too," Natalya said suddenly, as if remembering it was wise to compliment one's partner when they were dressed up. Her finger traced down Alison's burgundy silk blouse tucked into high-waisted black trousers—a Viennese acquisition that never failed to catch her lover's eye.

Natalya leaned in, lips brushing Alison's neck, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "When we get home, I'll remind you of my skills. In all things."

Alison inhaled sharply. "Is that so?"

"It is." Then she stepped back. "But tonight, any interaction we have must be strictly professional."

"What?" Alison blinked. "What do you mean?"

"We won't enter together. We won't interact as anything other than cellist and groupie." A faint smile curved her mouth at the last word.

It rankled. "Why?" For weeks, Alison had been looking forward to having Natalya on her arm, claiming her beautiful lover in front of the entire VPO and its upper-class patrons.

"You know where we are. Melbourne is too dangerous. If anyone knew who I really was—and what you mean to me—you'd be at risk too. Fleet Crew is rebuilding. They've already tried once."

"The assassin in Vienna," Alison said, folding her arms. "The one who hurt you during that massage last month. The one you never talk about. I got the impression she was a lone wolf, not part of a gang."

"Yes. And no." Natalya swiped dark-crimson lipstick across her mouth, her movements sharp and decisive. "She wanted payback. Sal merely nudged her in my direction. A little passive-aggressive love tap from him, but not a direct attack. Fleet Crew's not stupid."

"Do you really think someone will come for you tonight, though?"

"Probably not," Natalya admitted. "But I won't take the risk. Not with you."

Alison drew in a cool breath. "So now I'm your groupie."

"Are you not?" Natalya's asked wickedly. "You've worshipped me like one before. Would you prefer…admirer?" Her eyes gleamed.

Alison swallowed. "I'm tempted to make us late."

"We already are." Natalya straightened. "Unacceptable. Let's go."

"Actually," Alison said, "Hailey wants to drive us."

Natalya frowned. "Is that…safe?"

"She's on her P-plates now. She says she wants the experience of driving in the city at peak hour. But let's be honest; she really just wants to show off to you."

"I see." Natalya hesitated. "I had been about to suggest we take my Ninja."

"What?" Alison stared in shock. "I thought you sold your bike years ago?"

"Never." She scowled at the suggestion. "It's been in a secure storage facility here all this time. I took it to get serviced on Friday when you went to lunch with Susan. I plan to have a nice long ride on it soon."

"There is no way I'm getting on that motorcycle with you, even if we weren't dressed to the nines." Alison shook her head adamantly. "And not just because you ride it like a bat out of hell."

"How would you know?" Natalya pointed out.

"I just do." As if she'd drive at any other speed. "Besides, you don't have a licence and you never had registration."

Natalya smiled and hooked her index finger under Alison's chin, tilting it up so she could meet her eye. In a tone perilously close to affection, she said, "Once a traffic cop, always a traffic cop, hmm?"

"You were the one telling me we have to keep our heads down and stay under the radar while we're here. And you want to go speeding all over the city on an unregistered motorbike!"

"I meant under the radar with the underworld. This is just a quick ride up to the concert hall." Her gaze turned intense and dark. "Alison? Haven't you ever wondered what riding with me would be like?" Her voice hit that low and dangerous tenor when she was being deliberately provocative.

"I'm not going to enable you, so don't ask again," Alison said, although, honestly, yes, she had wondered. It might be thrilling. Probably would be. A small shudder rippled through her. But, no, she needed to be sensible.

Natalya pursed her lips. "I'm hardly about to force you to ride with me. All right. We'll go with Hailey. I'll ride on my own another time."

Alison let that one slide and decided she wouldn't think about Natalya's flagrant law-breaking too hard. "Good," she said, then gentled. "You're such a softie. Regarding Hailey, I mean."

"No need to be insulting," Natalya murmured, then stepped closer, gathering Alison in her arms. "Now, since we're not going to be a couple tonight, I think I'll just get a quick fix to tide me over."

Her lips pressed hard into Alison's, surprising her with their speed. She hadn't even seen Natalya move. Her tongue demanded admission, and Alison gladly opened her mouth and met her. It was always fucking hot the way Natalya kissed. She didn't use to kiss at all. Now she was making up for all the time they'd lost. Alison's lower belly stirred, making her shift her thighs as arousal tickled her.

"All right," Natalya said, ending the kiss and standing back just as suddenly as she'd begun. She pivoted to look in the mirror, checking her lipstick. "Now I'm ready."

Alison nodded dumbly, more turned on than she cared to admit. Voice thick, she murmured, "I'll hold you to your promise to have your way with me tonight."

Natalya's eyes brightened, looking interested and pleased. "I vow this," she said, her voice a rumble. "I'll make it unforgettable. To make up for not being able to claim you in public after the concert."

"No," Alison croaked out, "you'll do more than that. I want you to think about fucking me while you're playing your solo tonight. I want you to think about it while you stroke your cello. Pretend it's me."

Natalya's nostrils flared. "I can't do that. I'll lose focus." But her eyes said she was thinking about it. Tempted.

"Aunt Emily!" came an impatient voice through the door, followed by a knock. "Are you guys ready? Can I drive you? Pleeeeaaase?"

Alison swallowed as she took in Natalya's expression—a look that said her lover was considering exactly what she'd do with her later. Then it was gone.

"We are ready," Natalya informed Hailey evenly through the door. "Yes, you may drive us."

A muffled squee sounded, followed by, "Meet you out front!"

"Thank you," Alison whispered. "You probably made her night. I know she tries to act all grown up, but you're still the hero who saved her life when she was thirteen at the Melbourne Cup. She'll always want to impress you."

Natalya's expression contained approval. "Well, she has an eye for quality," she deadpanned.

Immodest as ever.

"Natalya." Alison shook her head in amusement. "Never change."

"Why would I do that?" She ran a fingertip down Alison's cheek to her chin. "You know, I'll never get used to her calling you by your other name."

"Emily or Alison, I don't care which people use." Alison shrugged. "I do like the way you say my middle name though."

"Alison." Natalya said it with emphasis and leaned in closer. "My little mouse." She dropped a kiss next to her ear. "Mine."

Alison's heart started thudding hard all over again as she understood what Natalya was really saying.

"I love you too," she told Natalya, feeling her smile soften. "Let's show your old orchestra what they've been missing out on."

"A sound plan," Natalya murmured, her lips curling in approval.

CHAPTER 3

Strange Allies

Alison hovered at the edge of the afterparty, the polite din of voices rising and falling around her like a tide. The Victorian Philharmonic Orchestra concert had been exquisite, and Natalya had shone, just as Alison had known she would. But the applause had barely faded before a familiar tightness settled in her chest.

In rooms like this, something peculiar to being back here, she felt subtly reduced—as though the air itself conspired to make her smaller, quieter, and less certain of the woman she had become.

The city had a way of reaching back into her, unearthing versions of herself she believed she had outgrown. The years she'd lived here returned with aching clarity: days revolving around her mother's medical needs; the constant vigilance resulting from her mother's self-absorption; the gnawing sense that her own life was embarrassing. She had felt invisible then, and yet relentlessly observed, while her ambitions were dismissed as a silly dream of no consequence.

Vienna, by contrast, had given her space. There, she was loved by a brilliant woman who wanted her to succeed, surrounded by people who saw her clearly. She still played her violin, but these days she indulged her hobbies, such as cooking and exploring Europe's vast delights with Natalya. And she'd discovered a passion for helping others, too.

Yet standing here now, amid polite smiles and empty chitchat, her hard-won confidence wavered. The past pressed close, whispering old doubts, and for a moment, Alison had to remind herself she was no longer that woman. The life she had built a world away was solid, real, and hers.

In some ways, being back here felt like glimpsing the path not taken, the life she might have lived if she'd stayed. Perhaps it would have been

fine. Comfortable, even. She'd already been clawing her way out of her old rut when Natalya had come back for her, asking her to share her life abroad.

Still, the unease lingered as she studied the room: regular patrons, several members of the music media, and the orchestra members whose lives she knew almost as well as her own.

They didn't know her at all. Except, perhaps, for the first-chair violinist, Amanda Marks, who had latched onto Alison four years ago as someone useful. Or more accurately, someone to use.

The rest of her anxiety came from the reminder that this had once been her path too. Her first ambition.

She'd been twenty, studying violin at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music on the scholarship of her dreams. She'd even had the girl of her dreams: Melissa Gallo, who played flute beautifully and sang badly, and adored Alison right back.

Then family obligations had shattered everything. A mother who'd had a breakdown and needed tending. A sister too busy with her own family to help. And just like that, Alison's dreams had crumbled into dust.

Being here, surrounded by people who had done what Alison hadn't, brought back the bitterness she'd tasted the day she quit her scholarship to return home. She could still see the look on Melissa's face when she'd told her.

They'd been sitting in a Conservatorium practice room, late-afternoon light slanting across the music stands. Alison had said the words clumsily. She'd said she was leaving. She couldn't stay. She had *not* said their relationship was over.

Melissa had looked at her then with pity in her eyes. Understanding came, as if she had already accepted Alison's lesser fate. As if Alison was fragile and already lost to a different life, far from music.

There wasn't even a sliver of anger. Her expression was compassionate but without any hope. The look had told Alison that Melissa believed this was simply what happened to people like her. And that belief had hurt more than any accusation ever could.

Alison had felt herself shrink under that gaze. She'd wanted Melissa to be defiant, to demand Alison stay or insist they'd find a way, that they become a long-distance couple. Instead, Melissa had nodded and said the words out loud: It was over.

Her pity made Alison feel erased, like a footnote to a life that would continue beautifully without her. It confirmed Alison's worst fear: that she wasn't worth fighting for.

When Melissa had finally looked away, Alison had understood: It was already over. Melissa had skipped straight past denial and bargaining to acceptance. Alison was being politely mourned. That felt even lonelier.

That feeling had never quite left her—the sense that, deep down, she was a pity case. Even now. Even after everything she'd done since. Even after breaking down the walls of one of the most magnificent and closed-off women who'd ever lived, winning her heart. Being loved.

But sometimes at night, while Natalya slept deeply beside her, Alison remembered who she had been then: a woman destined to be a concert violinist. Until she'd lost her one chance.

No, not lost. Given it up. For a mother who hadn't cared for a moment what Alison had sacrificed.

Little wonder she struggled being back here at the Victorian Philharmonic Orchestra, surrounded by dark emotional eddies, navigating a space that clawed away at her sense of who she was.

Alison found herself at the orchestra's public bar, deciding whether to order a glass of wine, when a voice that was loud and jarringly familiar spoke.

"Emily?"

She turned. Melissa. *Her* Melissa stood before her. Somehow summoned from the very memory Alison had been simultaneously excavating and burying.

"Mel?" Alison gasped. "Melissa?"

Melissa flung her arms around her in a fierce hug. "Oh my God, it's really you! I almost didn't recognise you! That chic outfit? And your hair's so different!"

It was, she supposed. The careless brunette ponytail was long gone, replaced by a sleek auburn cut that matched her stylish European wardrobe.

Absurdly, Alison longed to hear Melissa say *she* was different too. Hair was nothing, easily changed. What she most needed erased was the memory of how Melissa had last looked at her.

Instead, Melissa's gaze skimmed her lightly. "You've lost weight," she said softly.

It wasn't a compliment.

Sure, Alison had trimmed down a little. She walked everywhere in Vienna. Everything was so close and there was too much to explore within easy reach to ever bother driving.

Melissa hugged her again, briefer this time, which was somehow worse. It was *comforting*. As if Alison needed comforting.

Over Melissa's shoulder, Alison spotted Natalya watching in the distance, and her breath caught, just a little, as it always did.

Then Natalya was moving towards them with a predator's grace, a low, fluid glide, hips loose, shoulders relaxed, every step placed with intention.

Susan had once remarked to Alison that Natalya looked "forceful" when she walked, as if she were "angry without being angry. Someone to avoid". Then she'd seemed confused by her own words. Of course, Alison's sister had no idea who Natalya really was, nor how close she'd come to stumbling over the truth. *Why yes, my partner is Australia's most lethal assassin, Susan, so there will be some leakage in how she carries herself.*

Natalya's stride slowed as she took in Melissa's embrace.

Alison pulled away quickly, even though Natalya surely couldn't be jealous. They weren't a couple tonight. Just a featured cellist and her adoring groupie. Her jaw tightened at the reminder of Natalya's amused words.

"Why are you here?" Alison asked, focusing back on Melissa. "Do you still live in Sydney?"

"Of course. Woollahra these days. And we're here for my husband's work," she said, eyes bright, with a smile even more dazzling. "There's a music conference—the Australasian Symposium on String Performance and Contemporary Practice." She laughed. "I know, it sounds wanky. I should attend a few lectures myself, but honestly I just want to raid the minibar at the Grand Millennium while he's getting educated."

Husband.

It caught Alison off guard.

"The kids are at home with my parents," she finished.

Kids.

"When Anton heard Natalya Tsvetnenko was performing, he insisted we come tonight. He's a cellist too—a huge fan."

Of course he was. Alison had yet to meet a cellist who didn't admire Natalya's skills.

"I have two now."

Two what?

"Want to see?" Melissa was already pulling out her phone. "Ella's four. Mikey's six."

Oh. Kids.

As Melissa gushed about her new life, Alison covertly studied her. She was still willowy with sharp cheekbones, and expressive red eyebrows. Her claret-red mop of hair had not changed. She wore a little black dress that showed off toned arms—evidence of a gym habit she hadn't had back when they'd dated.

"They're already showing musical promise," Melissa burbled on, pride flooding her features. "With two musical parents, really, it's not surprising."

"Wonderful," Alison murmured, swallowing.

The strangeness of it all pressed in—meeting someone who had once been her mirror, who was now utterly foreign. A husband. Children. A house in upmarket Woollahra. Melissa's mother would be ecstatic on all three counts.

"Are you still playing?" Alison asked.

"Oh, yes! I'm with the Sydney Metropolitan Orchestra now. That's how I met Anton."

Alison nodded. So Melissa had achieved what she'd always wanted. What Alison had once wanted too. Her stomach twisted.

"What about you?" Melissa asked with enthusiasm. "Do you still play?" Her hands squeezed Alison's. "Did your mum get better? Where are you living now? And your dog—Charlotte, right? Is she still as adorable as ever?"

The knot tightened again.

"I don't play anymore," Alison admitted. "Not professionally."

Melissa's face fell.

"I'm too busy," she added. "I teach ESL now."

"You're an English teacher?" The astonishment slipped through despite Melissa's clear efforts.

"To immigrants and refugees," Alison expanded. "It's very interesting. I'm going to try and get more work next semester."

"I'm sure it is…interesting," Melissa said, sounding unconvinced. "Good luck with getting more work?"

Why had she made it sound like a question?

"The job market is so very hard right now, isn't it?" Melissa's voice was filled with sympathy.

Oh! She thought Alison still lived in Melbourne. She opened her mouth to correct her, but then Melissa had to go and ask the worst thing.

"And your mother?" Melissa asked, those soft eyes going wide and sad. "Is she still…facing her health struggles?"

Alison's jaw went hard and tight. "My mother passed last year. My dog too, last month." Her throat closed. "Charlotte was very old for a red heeler."

"Oh, honey," Melissa said, gripping her hands tighter. "I'm so sorry."

Alison blinked hard. She still missed the beautiful, loyal old dog. "I'm staying with my sister at the moment."

Melissa's expression softened with disbelief. "Of course. I'm sorry. I know you two didn't get along back in the day. Still, at least it's temporary. Until, you know…" Her look was painfully diplomatic.

Until you get back on your feet, it said.

Before she could reply, a familiar prickle crept up Alison's spine.

Natalya was close.

She turned. Sure enough, Natalya was lingering nearby at the bar, an untouched glass of vodka, most likely, in hand. Her look was bland enough to betray nothing, except that she was close enough to have heard everything.

"No, it's not like that," Alison said hastily. "Susan's just putting me up for a few weeks."

"Oh, I understand." Melissa's reply was painfully gentle. Like patting a sad child on the head. "Life's been…unkind." And then, sounding desperately hopeful, she threw in, "But tell me you have someone? Someone wonderful?"

"Oh, yes," Alison replied automatically and made the awful mistake of turning to Natalya.

Natalya's expression cut her short. Her eyes narrowed, the warning clear.

Melissa followed Alison's gaze. "Oh…are you and she—?" The astonishment felt borderline insulting.

Natalya turned into their space, shoulders tight, and stepped forward. Too close.

Possessive in spite of herself, it seemed.

"Natalya," Alison said. "This is Melissa Gallo. My…friend. From the Conservatorium. Well, former girlfriend."

"Ms Gallo," Natalya said to Melissa, her words as cool and sharp as a blade pulled from ice. She then pivoted to Alison. "And you are?"

The dismissal burned like acid. She almost gasped at the cutting question. "I'm Emily Ryan," she said, using her old name with a bleak flatness. The one Natalya had never bothered with.

"Ms Ryan," Natalya greeted her without even a flicker of inflection. "Did you enjoy the concert?" Her low voice hovered just shy of mockery.

Just this once, Alison wished Natalya could see what she needed most from her now. This wasn't a game. It hurt. It was a reminder of when she'd been no one. Nothing.

To Natalya, this was all simply a ruse they were playing until their safety could be assured. When it came to protecting Alison, no compromises would be countenanced. If they were being watched, Natalya would give no one reason to suspect Alison mattered to her. To her, Alison's bruised feelings would be illogical.

That didn't change how it felt. The sting of rejection was almost physical.

"Hey, love." A man's voice cut into the moment, sparing Alison from having to answer Natalya. He kissed Melissa's cheek, took her hand absently, and turned to Alison. "Hi there. Anton Kersley." His smile was warm and open. "And who's this?"

"Emily Ryan," Alison said as she took him in. He wasn't tall and barely filled out his slim-fit navy suit. Thick, wavy hair receded from his forehead, and there was an intensity to his face she'd seen many times before—common in musicians. Someone driven to succeed, living for his passion.

His gaze drifted past Alison, then slid upwards. "Oh my God." His face broke into astonished delight. He reached for Natalya's hand. "You're… you're Natalya Tsvetnenko!"

He didn't wait for permission, clasping her hand and pumping it enthusiastically, missing entirely the twitch and downward pull of Natalya's mouth.

She bared her lips. "I am," Natalya said, extracting her hand with a snap. Her expression was pure distaste.

"I am such a fan," he gushed. "I play cello like you! For the Metropolitan Orchestra. In Sydney."

"Not like me," Natalya said, producing a tissue from her pocket and discreetly wiping her hand.

"Oh!" He seemed briefly stricken at her disapproval. "No—no, of course. I didn't mean that. I mean, you're legendary." He grinned, suddenly looking boyishly attractive. "I just mean I fell in love with the cello after seeing you in concert in Spain a decade ago. I played before that, obviously, but after… God, I saw what a cello could become."

He kept on talking when Natalya didn't respond, piling word upon word until it became a torrent of reverent adoration.

Melissa, meanwhile, had turned her attention to Alison, offering small, tight glances—as though contemplating Alison's pitiful pretence that she personally knew such a formidable cellist.

Great. Now she felt even smaller than she had when she'd entered this reception. Diminished. It no longer mattered that she'd moved on, built a new career, achieved professional acclaim, come into herself. Much of the reason for her growth was standing beside her now—cool, poised, being lauded for her greatness, and completely ignoring Alison. As if she were nothing to her. Not the woman she'd once said mattered to her. Mattered the same way her music mattered.

The humiliation became crippling.

Alison excused herself as Anton, seemingly oblivious, launched into more grand tales of Natalya's legendary status. She felt her lover's gaze on her back—Melissa's too—and took a dozen quick strides, hoping to melt into the crowd.

She collided with someone. It was a woman in blinding white, her blonde hair styled to perfection around a pale face and sharp blue eyes.

Crap. Amanda Marks. Of course. As if her night could get any worse.

"Careful," Amanda said, her tone still mellifluous even in irritation. She held her drink away from her gown, then sighed in relief. "That was close."

"I apologise, Amanda," Alison said, acutely aware of Natalya's gaze still tunnelling holes into her back. "I wasn't looking."

"Obviously. Still, no harm done." Amanda sounded as though the concession was an act of generosity. She studied Alison more closely, gaze raking over her face. "Do we know each other? You seem vaguely familiar."

Vaguely familiar? The woman had wooed her professionally for an entire month!

"You wanted me to take over your social media accounts," Alison reminded her.

"I did?" Amanda said slowly, then brightened. "Oh! Yes. The violinist. Weren't you a security guard or something as well?" She looked Alison up and down and frowned. "No, that can't be right."

"No," Alison agreed. Apparently, she was eminently forgettable tonight.

"Well, I'm sure it just didn't work out. I went in a different direction." She gestured towards a young man hovering nearby, anxiously tapping away at his phone. "Jonathan's a marvel. Truly. My Instagram has never been more dazzling. You understand?"

"Wait, I was the one who turned you down," Alison pointed out.

Amanda pursed her perfectly shaped lips. "Highly doubtful."

"That's what happened. You never said you were auditioning me, and when you finally explained, I said no."

Amanda snorted softly. "No one turns me down. I'd remember that." Her laugh tinkled, but her eyes had become hard chips. "What was your name again?"

Her beautiful brow furrowed and, before Alison could answer, said: "Sorry, I don't remember much about you. But I do have so many fans. Don't take it personally."

The audacity! Alison stared.

"Well," Amanda added brightly, "Jonathan needs me for some photos. Bye now!" She swept away.

Alison gaped after her, appalled, hollow, and utterly humiliated.

"Just not your night, is it?" an amused American voice said from behind her.

She turned. "Excuse me?"

An attractive woman with shoulder-length reddish-auburn hair was smiling at her from the bar. "No, I think they should be excusing *you*. That violinist woman? What's her deal? She was a pill." She shook her head. "And don't get me started on the star cellist pretending she doesn't know you. I'm sorry. Goddess, that was cold."

Alison blinked and came closer. "Um…who are you?"

"Eden Lawless. Social justice campaigner. Lover of animals, people, Mother Earth. Observer of life." She smiled wider. "My wife's somewhere

around here talking to a conductor she adores. I was just sitting here and couldn't help noticing you having the absolute worst time."

Frowning, Alison searched for mockery but found only kindness.

Eden waved to the bartender. "Let me buy you a drink. Looks like you need one. Also, I have to know what's going on with all the bitchy women in your life. What'll you have?"

Alison huffed out a breath. "I don't think alcohol could fix my night—tempting though it is."

"Fair enough. So, what would you like instead? Something non-alcoholic?"

"What I'd most like is a do-over."

"Can't blame you." Eden ordered a beer for herself and then faced Alison. "Your cellist was very convincing pretending not to know you. Personally, I'd make my woman sleep on the couch for a week if she did that to me in public." She paused as if considering that. "Unless it was life or death. Then I might forgive her."

Alison narrowed her eyes. "What makes you so sure she's my woman?"

"She's got a possessive streak a mile wide. She watched you forever before coming over. Hated that other woman touching you. Then she stood practically in your shadow while pretending she didn't know you." Eden clucked. "Not as subtle as she thinks. It was funny. At first. Until I saw your face. Then—yeah. I felt bad. What's your name?"

"Alison."

"Nice to meet you."

"Please don't judge Natalya," Alison said, just barely audible above the background noise. "We agreed to pretend we're not friends tonight. She's just more thorough at it than I expected."

"You two are friends?" Eden asked, sounding surprised. "Just friends-friends? That's not the vibe she puts out."

The bartender returned, sliding a beer over to Eden. She took it and glanced at Alison. "Still sure you don't want one?"

Alison smiled. "I…don't think you'd like Natalya's reaction if a strange woman bought me a drink."

"Jealous type?"

"Nope," Alison said honestly. It was hard to explain. "Natalya doesn't get jealous. Not in the regular way. She just ensures consequences if anyone hurts someone she cares about."

Eden's eyebrows climbed. "And me buying you a drink counts as me hurting you?"

"It's step one to the *possibility* of hurt existing." Alison knew how this sounded, but Natalya had her own unique way of seeing the world. "If you had bad intentions, for example. She notices everything. So, if someone crosses a line, or plans to, she'll deal with them in a way they won't soon forget."

"She takes out the trash. Right. So, is she in law enforcement, then?"

"She's a *cellist*," Alison said, incredulity filling her. "Come on, this whole concert is about her."

"Right. Just checking." Eden took a sip of her beer. "I people-watch a lot. Comes with organising protests. Your cellist? She gives off a whole other vibe. Like she has another job entirely. Someone used to being in charge. Used to having her way."

"You sound so convinced you're right."

"I think I am." After a beat, Eden continued, "Let's take the violinist. Amanda, was it? She was definitely lying. That forgetful act? Payback?"

Relief loosened Alison's chest. "She doesn't handle rejection well. Any kind."

"I noticed." Eden lowered her voice, then shifted right back into dangerous waters. "I have to know: Why are you two pretending to be strangers? You and your cellist? It's not role-play. I could see how much that hurt you when she did it."

"What if I said it *was* life or death?" Alison asked with a tiny grin, pretending it was a joke.

At Eden's look of confusion, Alison added, "You said you'd make your wife sleep on the couch for pretending not to know you. Unless it was life or death."

Eden's eyes widened. "Is it?"

"Natalya thinks it is."

"You disagree."

Alison shrugged. "It's her nature to be protective. That's all I'll say."

Eden nodded immediately. "Okay. I won't ask." She mimed zipping her lips. Then, after a beat, she said, "This might sound out there, given we're from the other side of the world, but my wife is convinced she's met Natalya before. It's why we're here tonight. She wanted to see her play."

Confusion washed through Alison. "Your…American wife thinks she's met Natalya?"

"Yes."

"Unlikely. Natalya hasn't played in the US. Her entire circuit is Europe and Asia."

"Well, Michelle thinks she met her at Heathrow Airport. London."

Alison considered that. "I suppose that's possible. When?"

"A little over two years ago." Eden traced a finger down her glass, watching the condensation trail behind it. "I thought it was a bit odd—remembering a random stranger after such a brief encounter. But now, seeing the way Natalya prowls, how she studies people like everyone's a threat, and how she makes a science out of just standing next to someone…" She fell silent for a moment. "It makes sense. She's very memorable."

"Yes. Well. She has that effect on people."

"Including you. Especially you." Eden's gaze was gentle, perceptive. Not quite knowing, but she'd snuck a question in there.

Alison exhaled, neither confirming nor denying.

Eden laughed, apparently taking silence as agreement. "My wife has that effect on me too. Goddess help me, it's hard to look away sometimes. She's got this charisma. A presence. I've never encountered it in anyone else—and I've met a lot of people. Natalya probably comes closest." She straightened, then lifted her glass. "I admire our fortitude."

"Oh?"

"For winning over the most fearsome women in the room."

Alison snorted softly. If she'd had a glass, she would have clinked it. "Tell no one," she said, her tone a warning. "I might think she's overreacting about tonight, but she isn't wrong in general. There are people who wish her harm."

"Music critics are the worst," Eden said with a flippant wave, but her gaze held understanding.

Alison's tension eased.

Eden briefly touched her hand, her fingers chilled from the glass. "Moving on—we're here on our honeymoon. You have local knowledge, right? Help me impress my wife?"

"Sure." Alison smiled, now fully relaxing. "I was born in Melbourne. Grew up here. Fire away."

"Perfect. I'm looking for things to do that Michelle would love. Cultured things. And the more champagne, the better." Eden laughed and then pulled out her phone. "Could I grab your Insta handle or something? I could DM you for ideas."

Alison reached for her own phone. "I'll share it—if you don't mind a hundred photos of my dog, Charlotte, being goofy and adorable." She swallowed a small knot of sorrow.

"I see your dog," Eden said, tone solemn, "and raise you ten thousand photos of protests from around the world." She turned her screen around. "I am not even kidding."

She wasn't. There were images from every corner of the globe: raised fists, bright placards, crowds in motion—and Eden in the thick of it, arms lifted, face alight. "See that woman there? That's Mom. River Lawless. She set me on the path to justice."

River Lawless. The name sounded vaguely familiar. "Please tell me she's not the woman who had herself chained to the front of a supertanker in port?"

"That was her."

"Reckless," Alison whispered. "Dangerous."

Eden shrugged. "She was more focused on the media attention it'd bring to her cause. I get it. Some things are worth fighting for. I've always believed that too." Her thumb flipped a few photos over to one of Eden up an enormous tree, holding a sign: *Don't cut me down!*

"I can see you're someone I wouldn't want to cross," Alison teased.

"Who, me? Nah. I'm a pussycat compared to my mom," Eden said with cheerful acceptance. "But my badass woman is the one you really don't want to rile up."

"I know the feeling," Alison muttered.

Not quietly enough, though, because Eden gave her a knowing nod.

And with that, they exchanged details.

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