

CHAPTER I

RJ



“E at up, bud. I’m getting married.”

Those were the first words to exit Mom’s mouth when I walked into the kitchen this morning. Naturally, I assumed I was still dreaming. That wasn’t really my mother making pancakes at the stove, casually talking about her spontaneous marriage. Clearly I was embroiled in one of those off-kilter dreams where nothing made any sense.

But nope, I was awake. Awake and apparently in the midst of Mom’s midlife crisis. I knew she was dating some new guy these past few months, but it’s not like I gave it much thought. My mother’s relationships never last.

And yet here I am, barely eight hours later, pressed into an ill-fitting tux and pushing lumps of salmon around my plate beside a similarly blindsided stranger I’m supposed to call my stepbrother.

Meanwhile, our respective and alleged adults grope each other around the dance floor, creating nightmare fuel to some graphic ‘90s R&B slow jam.

Fuck me with a sledgehammer.

“Maybe it was the fish,” Fennelly says next to me, looking a little green, “but I’m starting to feel like something crawled in my stomach and died.”

Or maybe it’s his dad getting handsy all over my mother in front of a roomful of minimum-wage waiters who aren’t getting tipped enough for this shit.

“When the apocalypse comes,” I mutter at my own slow, painful torture, “and some dude with a baseball bat is standing over me asking if I have any last words for my maker, I’ll tell him I’ve stared into the face of darkness and fear has no power over me.”

Fenn grins and knocks back another glass of champagne like he was raised on the stuff straight out of his mother's tits. They ought to get him a hose. Or an IV.

I haven't decided what I think of him yet. We met for the first time at the altar only an hour ago, standing on either side of the aisle while our parents made their vows to an otherwise empty room. I'm still trying to get a read on this blond pretty boy with the outline of a flask protruding through his pocket.

His name is Fennelly Bishop, which is a fucking stupid name, but then again I'm not one to talk. Like me, he rebels against the name, and told me to call him Fenn. I suspect he's an athlete, or at least good at sports, because he's got that tall, muscled build that doesn't look like it came from a gym. Although I guess he could have a super-expensive personal trainer on retainer, some burly dude who shows up at his huge mansion and gets paid two hundred K a year to keep this blue-eyed rich boy in peak shape. They're money people, Fenn and his dad. It wafts off them. The way he sticks his pinky out and leans back in his chair, legs splayed, as though we're all here to serve and amuse him with our quaint peasant talents.

"When I write my memoirs," he says, unraveling the bowtie around his neck, "I'll remember this as the day I learned what the opposite of porn is."

I snicker quietly. Dude's funny, I'll give him that.

Fenn barely has to raise his empty glass in order to get a refill from one of the half-dozen waiters in tuxedos skulking in the shadows of this swanky country club ballroom. It's the kind of place where the silverware is made from actual silver. Someone rushes over and offers to pour, but Fenn swipes the bottle instead. Part of me wonders if I'll have to leave here through a metal detector. The country club is in Greenwich, apparently not too far from David's mansion, which I assume is a palace, based on this club's sizable membership fee. We're worlds away from the lower-middle-class suburbs where Mom and I live on the other side of the state.

"Chick over there? She's looking at you." Fenn nods past my shoulder.

Nobody ever said I was polite, so I turn around to follow his gaze. A short brunette in a server's outfit flashes me a coy smile before raising one brow.

I turn back. “Nah, I’m good,” I tell him.

“I don’t know, dude.” Fenn cocks his head in appraisal. “She’s kinda cute. I don’t think anyone would notice if you took her into the cart house or something.”

The last thing on my mind is hooking up. It’ll take weeks for me to be able to unsee the display of parental vertical sex currently assaulting my eyes. Fenn must read the notion on my face because he chuckles and pushes a stray glass of something at me.

“Yeah.” He shakes his head. “Neither the time nor place. Sorta like having a wank when I know my dad’s in the next room. Can’t get hard. Doesn’t seem right, you know?”

The guy’s too into sharing.

“Lucky for me,” he adds with a shrug, “he’s not around much.”

From the dance floor, my mom waves at us. Then she promptly forgets our existence again when Fenn’s father cups her ass over her white satin gown. He gives it a hearty squeeze, and I almost hurl. As far as weddings go, this one is an understated affair. There are more staff at this thing than guests. Just the four of us, all dressed up for this cozy little exercise in psychological warfare.

“This is painful,” I groan into the glass of whatever I don’t taste as I swallow. “It’s like watching a sex scene on TV next to your parents.”

“Nah, like watching your parents in a sex scene on TV next to your parents.” Clearly disgusted but oddly entranced, Fenn can’t look away. He washes the thought down with a gulp of champagne.

“I’m both ashamed and disgusted with myself.”

As an act of mercy, Fenn shoves the bottle at me. “Here, man. Never too early to develop problematic coping mechanisms.”

I tip the heavy bottle to my lips. “Cheers.”

The thing about expensive champagne, it drinks fast. I barely notice Fenn pass off the empty bottle for a second. Our parents continue rubbing against each other in slow motion to a soundtrack of retro cringe. Meanwhile, the sadistic DJ is on his phone checking Twitter, oblivious to our pain.

“This is weird, right?” Fenn is now busy making deformed origami

from an embroidered cloth napkin. “I mean if the two of them died right now. Let’s say a chandelier mercifully falls on their heads while we’re sitting here. And a shard of glass flies across the room to slit my aorta and I nearly bleed out before slipping into a coma—you would legally have to decide when they unplugged me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

The guy chugs a bottle of champagne and thinks he’s Nietzsche.

“I’m saying, that’s a lot of responsibility. Being family. What do we even know about each other?” He pauses, puzzling over my face so long I get uncomfortable and lean away. Drunks are known for sudden outbursts. “I’ve already forgotten your name,” he says to his own astonishment. “Shit, I actually forgot it.”

I can’t help but grin. “RJ,” I supply, just as another slow jam fills the ballroom. Christ. Enough. I want to murder this DJ. He must be doing this on purpose.

“Is that short for something?” Fenn asks.

“Like did my parents just pick their favorite letters of the alphabet while the doctor was dangling me upside down by my foot?”

“Did they?”

“Nah. It’s short for Remington John.” I pull out my phone, shielding the screen slightly as I find a MacBook on the Wi-Fi network. Call it an educated guess, but I surmise the machine going by “Grandmaster Gash” belongs to the tool in the headphones who’s running the music.

“Remington John?” Fenn snorts loudly. “How blue collar,” he remarks, an undercurrent of rich-boy prick bubbling to the surface.

Distracted, I open Spotify in the background and try to remember what we’re talking about. “My dad had a thing for David Carradine in the ‘80s. I don’t know. What the hell kind of *Sound of Music* name is Fennelly?”

He shrugs, unbothered. “My dad would probably say it was an old family name. But I’m pretty sure my mom got it off a baby blog.”

In the middle of an especially torrid display to Chris Isaac’s “Wicked Game,” Weird Al suddenly comes blaring through the audio system.

The DJ throws off his headphones and nearly falls over on his stool trying to figure out why he can’t get control of his playback.

“The hell just happened?” Fenn glances at me, then at my phone. “Did you do that?”

I roll my eyes. “I wish. I’m just checking texts over here.”

I drop the Wi-Fi connection and pocket my phone, allowing the DJ to take back control as Mom and David saunter over. Sweaty, smiling, and with no remorse for their actions.

“Time to cut the cake, don’t you think?” Mom’s smile is sincere and joyful, which cracks through a sliver of my bitter cynicism at this spontaneous upending of both our lives. Then she notes the two empty bottles of champagne and raises an eyebrow at me.

I give her a what-can-ya-do shrug. Sorry not sorry. I mean, shit, they should have handed out Vicodin party favors. That dance floor routine alone was like KGB waterboarding torture.

“You were right.” David, my mother’s new fully articulated checkbook, accepts the scotch on the rocks deposited into his hand by a dutiful waiter. He takes a quick sip. “We would have done better to spring for a band.”

“Not too late to throw this shindig in the back of the jet and head to Vegas,” Fenn says, a mocking note to his voice.

It doesn’t escape me that he says *the* jet. Not “a” jet, as in any old jet. But THE jet, implying the Bishops are in possession of their own private plane. Fuck me. What world is this and how did I end up here?

When Fenn lifts his empty bottle to signal for another, his dad waves off the waiter. Fenn narrows his eyes. “What, aren’t we celebrating?”

David spares a brief look at his son. “I think maybe you’ve celebrated enough.”

“I’m going to pop over to the restroom,” Mom says. She steps closer to brush lint off the lapel of my tux, lingering over me too long with glassy eyes. I hate it when she gets sentimental. Not my vibe. Especially when I’m being subjected to her fleeting whims of self-indulgent calamity. “You boys behave yourselves while I’m gone.”

Nope. I put my fucking foot down at being referred to collectively as her *boys*.

Once she’s gone, David hovers awkwardly, first checking his watch and then glancing at his phone. He scans the room as if searching for

something requiring his urgent attention, but no such luck. He's stuck with us, these two disenchanted youths waiting for him to walk away so we can get to the bottom of another bottle of champagne.

"So..." Man, he's drowning. This is becoming embarrassing for all of us. "You two getting along? Getting to know each other?"

"*You* two getting to know each other?" Fenn shoots back.

I damn near do a double-take at the venom in his voice. For the past couple hours, Fenn's been laid-back, easy to talk to. But maybe that easygoing attitude and quick grins are only reserved for people who aren't his father.

His dad coughs and adjusts the buttons on his tux. "Yes, well. I know this was sudden—"

"Explosive diarrhea is sudden," Fenn cuts in, his pale blue eyes going glacial. "You had time to order flower arrangements. Which means you had time to come to your senses." He glances at me. "No offense."

I just shrug. Hey, man. I'm a hapless bystander to this tornado.

"Listen, Fennelly. I understand—"

"I'm here, okay?" Fenn ices his dad out with a flat expression and dismissive tone and now I feel like I'm intruding in whatever bullshit they've got between them. "Let's not pretend this whole thing isn't a clusterfuck of selfishness."

Every line and muscle on David's face becomes strained. His resemblance to his son is striking. They've got the same build, the same ice-blue eyes and sandy hair. And David's one of those dudes who barely ages. He could probably pass for Fenn's older brother. Same way people always mistake my mom, with her long dark hair and flawless skin, for my older sister.

"Fennelly." David sighs at his son. "Could you try, huh? Just a little? For a couple more hours."

Fenn pulls out his phone to scroll through his texts. "Whatever."

David's attention shifts to me. I don't know if he's looking for sympathy or solidarity, but when I don't offer either, he sets his jaw and disappears to check on the cake.

I don't know what I think of David Bishop yet. As far as first impressions

go, this isn't a stellar start. Until a few hours ago, I didn't think of him much at all. He was just the new random dude my mother was seeing who I didn't ever expect to meet. Before Mom was suddenly dropping a set of department store cufflinks in my hand, I had no reason to believe this guy would be any different from the litany of other brief but intense relationships Mom cultivated and lost in quick succession. I stopped trying to connect or even remember their names a long time ago.

"Sorry," Fenn says to me. "I guess that was awkward."

He guesses? I snort out loud. "So you two are close."

"Dude. Nothing says I forgot you're still here like sending the jet at four o'clock for a six o'clock wedding. There was a tailor with a fucking sewing machine hemming my pants at thirty thousand feet."

"Harsh." I let out a breath. "I'd ask what your father's intentions are with my mother, but I guess we've skipped right past that to *do you want the top or bottom bunk?*"

"Oh, fuck," he says, sort of dry heaving in disgust. "I just realized your mom was probably a flight attendant on that plane. I probably jerked off in the same bathroom they banged in."

"Jesus, Bishop. Keep your traumas to yourself, yeah?"

I'm gonna need a therapist after this goddamn wedding.

Fenn takes a swig from his flask. "So what's your deal?"

"My deal?"

"Sure. What are you into? What do you do when not getting hijacked into shotgun weddings?"

"Don't even joke." If my mother tells me she's pregnant, I'm hopping a train to the west coast.

The waiters come by to change the place settings. They pop a new bottle of some sweet-smelling dessert wine, which Fenn helps himself to tasting.

"You're going to be a senior, too, right?" he pushes. "Where do you go to school?"

It's a bit more complicated than that. "I don't, technically."

"Aw shit. You're not one of those homeschool kids, are you?"

He leans away from me as if just remembering we'd both had our

lips on the same champagne bottles tonight. “You’ve had all your shots, right?”

“I was at a public school in Windsor last semester. But it was suggested I take an early summer break.”

“You got expelled.” His expression is mildly impressed. “Did you deserve it?”

“It’s a matter of perspective.” That principal had it out for me from the first day I stepped through the doors. She took one look at my record and had her mind made up. Not that I did much to convince her otherwise.

“What’d you do?”

“My friend Derek boosted a teacher’s car from the school parking lot during a fire drill.”

Fenn cracks a smile. “Nice.”

“Bunch of us went joyriding through the neighborhood until the school resource officer set up a roadblock in front of the Taco Bell.”

“Like at gunpoint?”

“They threw out stop sticks that Derek mostly avoided, but we still blew out a tire.”

“Suburbia is wild.”

It’s also complete bullshit.

I don’t even know a kid named Derek.

But I don’t trust anyone who wants to know me, and I’m not about to hand over that kind of ammunition to some rando. A marriage certificate doesn’t make us allies.

When Mom gets back, she and David gather us around a two-tier white wedding cake and proceed to make us watch them feed each other. Then they get choked up over more teary declarations of grotesque joy, and all I’m thinking about is how to pull one of these waiters out back because someone’s gotta have a joint on them. Though I’d settle for a spoonful of arsenic at this point.

“I never imagined I’d be standing here,” Mom starts, raising a glass.

Not for lack of trying, I almost blurt out.

I manage to hold my tongue, but come on. It’s the truth. Mom’s had more boyfriends than oil changes. She spent my entire childhood dating

men who weren't interested in putting a ring on it. Despite her best efforts, she was either relegated to mistress territory, or just jerked around until they found someone who was more "wife material." Mom's job as a flight attendant pays well, but a lot of dudes just aren't interested in marrying a chick with baggage. The baggage in this case being yours truly. After all the bullshit she'd been fed by guys over the years, I guess it makes sense she up and married the first one who'd offered. And I suspect the "knowing him less than three months" part was offset by the "he's filthy rich" part.

Not that I'm calling my mom a gold digger—I can't begrudge the woman a little financial stability. But she does have a type. And I doubt we'd be standing here so soon if David didn't have the equivalent GDP of a small island nation.

Still, I don't hate that she looks happier than I've seen her in a long time. Maybe it's the mood lighting, or the white cocktail dress, but she's especially beautiful tonight. For a working single mom who's been putting up with my delinquent ass for eighteen years, she cleans up nice. So maybe I can't begrudge her a little spontaneous self-indulgence.

"I still can't believe this is all really happening." She dabs a napkin under her eye, clearing her throat. "I'm thrilled to have a new son, Fennelly. And I can't wait to get to know you better."

She then goes on about family and love, telling me how David and I are going to become just the best of friends and he's such a great father figure—though Fenn might have other thoughts.

I mean, let's pump the brakes a little. This is the first time I've ever been in the same room with the guy. He seems normal enough. Nice, I guess. Loaded, of course. But I haven't done the appropriate legwork yet to determine where the bodies are buried, and I'm not about to start calling him Dad.

"I never imagined I'd remarry," David says when it's his turn to speak, clutching my mother closely while sparing a glance at Fenn. "Then you smiled at me, gave me a little wink, and it was like having a first crush all over again. Every time I look at you. Every time I hear your voice. I'm falling in love for the first time."

From his chair, Fenn rolls his eyes and draws, "If only Mom knew she

was standing in the way of your true love, she could've skipped the eleven agonizing months of chemo, am I right?"

"Fennelly," David growls sharply.

I'm about ready to duck when Mom grabs David's lapels, keeping him close to her side. "It's okay, honey," I hear her murmur to him. She turns to address Fenn. "I can't imagine how difficult that is to live with," she tells him with a sad smile. "I know your dad cherishes your mother's memory, and I would never disrespect that. I hope we can work on being friends."

Fenn doesn't make eye contact. He's on an island. I have no idea what keeps him glued to this spot when it's obvious he'd rather jump through a window to get out of here.

"It'll be an adjustment," David starts again. "We're all figuring it out together. It's my hope, however, you both understand how much Michelle and I love you." He signals to a waiter who emerges from the corner of the room with a silver tray. Two small green leather boxes sit atop it. "Since today is for all of us, I thought a small gift to commemorate the occasion was appropriate."

David hands a box with a crown embossed in gold to each of us. I eye it warily, fighting the urge to say "nah, I'm good," until I notice Mom imploring me with her gaze. Stifling a sigh, I open the box. Next to me, a bored Fenn does the same. Inside the boxes are matching Rolex watches.

David's excitement makes up for the total lack of enthusiasm on Fenn's and my part. "That's a meteorite face and white gold case with a metal blade overmolded in a flexible black elastomer," he tells us, as if I understand a word of it. He's literally speaking gibberish. "They're designed for endurance racecar drivers, but I thought it might be a bit more practical and sporting for young men."

"Yeah, no, very practical, Dad." Fenn snaps the box shut but stops just short of chucking it over his shoulder. "How long do you think it'll last at RJ's public school before he's held up at gunpoint in the lunchroom?"

I snort a laugh that gets me a flash of the evil eye from Mom. "What? He's not wrong." Then I remember I'm supposed to be on my best behavior. "I mean, thank you. I'll, uh, be careful."

Mom and David exchange a quick, desperate look. At this point they're

muscling through this thing as Fenn and I become more unruly due to our waning patience. Neither of us wants to be here and I think we're both questioning why we've tolerated it this long.

"On the subject," David says then, nodding at my mother. "I have one more surprise, if it's alright."

Mom smiles at him, that smitten glow returning to her face. "Oh, honey. What have you been up to?"

"Well, I've made some arrangements, and I've managed to secure a spot for RJ at Sandover Prep next semester."

Is he joking?

Prep school?

Yeah, I don't see that working out. Being surrounded by a bunch of posh little bastards in bowties drinking lattes made of their nanny's breast milk? No thanks. I suddenly wonder if it's too late to hop that train out of town. Flag down a Greyhound, even. I could find my place among the skatepark beach people in Venice, maybe polish up on my pickpocketing while surfing the café public Wi-Fi for easy marks. Anything beats being shipped off to douchebag school.

"David, really? That's wonderful." She's way too excited about this when she meets my gaze with a desperate insistence. "Isn't it wonderful, RJ? This is going to be such a great opportunity for you."

In other words, could you try not to get kicked out of this one?

"Oh yeah, it's a real opportunity," Fenn echoes mockingly, looking amused by the announcement. "Sandover Prep is known for its stellar academics and model students and—oh wait, stupid me. I must be thinking about some other prep school." He glances at my mother, whose expression has gone uneasy. "Sorry to inform you, Dad's new wife, but Sandover's where all the delinquents are sent." Laughing carelessly, he pokes himself in the chest. "Case in point, me."

Mom's gaze swivels to David, who is quick to intervene. "Fennelly is being hyperbolic. Sandover is one of the top schools on the east coast. Its alumni include two former presidents and dozens of Rhodes scholars. I promise you, RJ will be receiving the best possible education there and will pretty much be guaranteed admission into any college of his choice."

As David continues to reassure her, Fenn leans toward me with a bitter smirk and a soft taunt. “Congratulations, brother. Welcome to fuck-up school.”