

A VERY BAD THING

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 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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PROLOGUE

My darling daughter,

I'm not going to hide this from you anymore.

Many, many years ago, I did a very bad thing.

And I paid for it. Oh, did I pay for it. As did everyone around me.

We're all faced with choices, moment by moment, as we embark on our lives. There's no way to know what a day will bring—Joy? Abundance? Fear? Chaos? Terror? Death? When darkness falls, when you lay down your head, you are a different person than the moment your eyes opened hours before. Your day is driven by inexorable forces seen and unseen, felt and unfelt. You choose. Eat that food. Take that drink. Do that exercise. Murder that person.

It doesn't matter that I struggled with the choice. That I was sick in body and heart for months while I decided what to do. That I stopped sleeping, forgot to eat. Cried all the time. Left my young family to fend for themselves more than once? Terrible of me.

There is no excusing what I've done.

So why am I even telling you this?

Absolution comes in many forms. If you're reading this, it's because my sins have caught up to me. Death, in all his great and disturbing glory, has found me at last.

Am I being grieved for now? I don't know. Oh, there may be strangers who think they know me who are upset. The people I've made rich will certainly be sad. You might, too.

But there are too many people I've wronged, and when they find out the whole truth of what I've done? Not the little bits and pieces I've put into my work throughout the years, the breadcrumb trail of half-truths and outright deceptions, but the real me? The person behind the public mask?

We're all hiding something. Big or little, tragic or unseemly. We keep our deep secrets; we hold our truths close to the vest. We don't share our true minds with anyone. Not really. No matter the words that come from your mouth or your fingertips on the keyboard, they are filtered. If they weren't, you would have no one. You would travel this life in a lonely world, one of your own making. An outcast. An exile.

Maybe you have tried to be your true self, here and there. How did that work for you?

No, you're smart, like me. You've hidden your truth so deep inside that no one will ever know. You will pass into the great beyond a perfect enigma, a mystical creature of great worth and seething dishonesty, unknown by even those closest to you, those who love you unconditionally and would forgive you every thought, no matter how depraved.

Almost every thought.

Were I not to share this, no one would know. And I would sail away that perfect enigma.

Now that's not exactly true, either. Someone does know. There is one person still on this earth who has full knowledge of the truth of what I've done. And because you're reading this, because I am gone now, chances are, they have decided it's time to get their revenge, to reveal the worst parts of my being to the world.

I don't blame them. I've waited so long for this. It's a relief, in many ways, to shrive myself of this burden. To admit, at last, the whole truth. Carrying a lie so big has killed my soul. Robbed me of any joy I might have had in this life.

But this is my story. And it's only right that I tell it. No matter what they say, they will twist this with their own lens and you won't get the complete picture. You must hear this from me. From my heart and mind, and no other.

So listen. Feel free to judge me. To hate me. To shake your head and put this down and say no more! I will understand if you choose to walk away. I won't blame you at all.

There are only a few motivations to do bad things. Love. Money. Power. (Madness, but that doesn't apply here. I am as sane as you; I can't claim a biological anomaly for my sins. I am culpable. I admit that freely.) It was one of those. All of them, really.

I swear to tell the truth. The whole truth. And nothing but the truth.

And when you've heard it all, I ask only one thing. Please don't hate me forever.

I love you very much,

Mother

FRIDAY

CHAPTER ONE

Riley

Denver. The last night of book tour. Columbia Jones takes the stage with a wave and a flourish, her silk cape swinging around her shoulders, settling in soft folds as she approaches the microphone, and the room goes wild. Not a lot of women on the cusp of fifty can get away with the style—black jeans, white poet’s shirt, storm-gray silk cape, chunky gold necklace—but on Columbia, it looks bespoke. Couture. Of course it isn’t; though designers clamor to dress her, she isn’t the kind of woman who takes to strangers suggesting what she should do. Her jet-black hair is cut in a severe bob that swings sharply above her sculpted collarbones, and she’s managed a red lip and winged eyeliner that puts her squarely in 1940s-movie-star status. All on her own.

She is gorgeous.

Riley Carrington has been struck by this realization several times over the past few weeks. Especially when Columbia is playing the role of a lifetime, Author Girl, like she’s some sort of superhero, with the clothes and the makeup and the confidence oozing out of her pores that makes Riley feel like she’s ten years old.

Self-talk. Riley. She chose you. You, above every other writer.

Columbia stands with one brow cocked, waiting. The theater quiets. It has to; Columbia has a low mellifluous voice that makes people lean forward to hear her better. They hang on every word.

She is their god. Their rock star. Their favorite author of all time. Some have traveled hundreds of miles to see her tonight. Every night of the tour has been the same. Massive crowds of invested fans, readers who love Columbia's work so much they tattoo themselves with her phrases and create art about her characters. There are fandoms, and then there are fandoms. Columbia Jones owns this world.

They've been on the road for a month, a traveling band of merry-makers and manic-depressives, alcoholics and teetotalers. Publicists, editors, publishers, booksellers, media escorts, family, friends, and Riley Carrington. One lone reporter. The only reporter Columbia Jones has agreed to speak to for this tour. She's press-shy, much prefers to interact with her readers directly. She hasn't done any meaningful publicity in years, generally letting her daughter and publicist, Darian, handle things for her. But *Ivory Lady* is being made into a full-length feature film with two of Hollywood's most bankable stars in the lead, and the budget for it makes *Lord of the Rings* look like a lemonade stand. The option sold before the book was finished and the film will be out in a couple of months. They got the jump. And there needs to be publicity. Columbia agreed, with one caveat. She got to pick the reporter.

Enter Riley Carrington. She knows what they say: up-and-coming journalist, hungry, talented. A good match for a juggernaut author. Will do her duty to the circus and present them with exactly what they need.

Riley's read the book, and the script. Of course, she's read all Columbia's books; she had to for the feature, but this one was something special. It's magical. Just the historical setting alone—ancient Ireland—is enough of a hook, but the characters . . . it's like she channeled them from the past, gave them life and agency, and passed along their genes to an even brighter cast. The script is one of the most faithful adaptations Riley's ever seen. She loves the actors. It's going to be the

kind of blockbuster one remembers for a generation. It's going to win all the awards and make Columbia an even more celebrated name. Not to mention a mint.

Columbia Jones is living a charmed life, that is for sure. How many artists become famous? A handful at best. That she has the personality of a saint and the fortitude of a bullfighter? Who could possibly be in the public eye constantly like this and make every person they come in contact with, from busboys to studio heads to housewives, feel like they are the most special person in the world?

Yeah. It's been a rather amazing month. They're all exhausted; it's been relentless, event after event, sometimes two in one day, then jetting to the next city to do it all over. Privately, Riley thinks Columbia might be too good to be true and keeps waiting for her to slip up and show her that she's human: to snap at someone, to be snarky, to make a cutting remark, but no. The woman has been awesome on a herculean scale.

The crowd is roaring with laughter now. Riley has tuned out the patter—Columbia gives the same speech every night, and the audiences always react enthusiastically—but based on the time, she's warming them up with the joke about the frog and the sock.

Riley is observing, as she usually does, standing in the back, with the SRO crowd. Columbia's daughter, Darian, sidles up to Riley. Darian is almost a carbon copy of her mother, without the glamorous edge. The hair is lighter, a dark blonde instead of stark black, and the features softened, the smoother skin still plump with youth, not fillers. The work Columbia's had done is excellent, discreet, and nearly invisible unless one is up close. Darian's the genuine version of her enhanced mother, comfortably housed in white sneakers and vintage wide-leg jeans.

“She's in rare form tonight.”

“No kidding,” Darian says, smiling.

A sallow-faced woman with lavender hair shoots daggers their way and shushes them. Darian gestures for Riley to follow, and they step away.

“You’d think after a month of this, she’d be exhausted like the rest of us,” Riley says. “But she’s more revved up than ever.”

“I gave her a triple shot in her latte.” Darian covers her mouth and giggles, and Riley smiles in return.

While similar to her mother physically, Darian is normally Columbia’s opposite in temperament. The only time Riley has seen Columbia get even remotely off kilter is when Darian—who, let’s not fool ourselves, has a lot of pressure on her shoulders, but still—lost her temper with the team after the Houston event. It was a packed day with two talks, and because the books were late arriving from the warehouse, the signing line stretched on for hours, and it was nearing midnight when she blew her top.

“That’s very disappointing to me, Darian, precious,” Columbia said in her posh London accent, her plump lips pursed. “I think you should go back to the hotel now.”

It was impressively dismissive.

That’s what drives Darian crazy, Riley thinks, that her mother won’t engage with her bad behavior, just scolds and retreats. It would drive *Riley* crazy; she’s always down for a good row with her own mother.

No, there’s more to this story. Riley has only scratched the surface. And it’s a surface that’s being curated for her daily.

“Does she ever come down to earth and just land hard?” Riley asks. She’s asked this before, only to be met with smirks and knowing winks, but tonight, Darian isn’t in the mood to play coy. There are dark circles under her eyes, and her shoulders slump. Her nails are chewed down to nubs.

She's not able to hide her weariness anymore. Managing Columbia Jones is a full-time job; touring her is double the work.

"It's the last night of tour. She's like Cinderella. At midnight, the carriage turns into a pumpkin." Darian looks out over the room. "Trust me, you don't want to see it. Go home, Riley. You've got your story. She will sign off on the piece, and you'll get the paycheck of the decade."

"I'm not doing this for the money," Riley replies automatically. They both know it's a lie. This fawning is a bizarre defense mechanism that's haunted Riley since she first agreed to the gig. When Columbia Jones herself calls your boss and says she wants you to do a profile and offers quadruple your normal rate, and you're in the kind of debt she is? You march smartly to the edge of the precipice while shouting "Yes, ma'am. Anything you want, ma'am!"

Riley has become so complacent at these events that it takes her a moment to realize that Columbia has stopped talking and is staring into the crowd. A man has risen to his feet, right in the middle of the room. There are five thousand seats in this theater, and each one is taken, everyone crowded in cheek by jowl, a happy, good-natured group. This man is in a loge box, front and center. One of the pricier seats. Riley can see the back of his head, registers dark curly hair and that he's tall. But nothing else.

Columbia is staring at him, hands clutching the microphone. The man leaves the box, disappearing into the bowels of the theater, and Columbia shakes her head like a deer shaking off a fly and resumes where she left off. She's into the meat of her talk now, how she developed the main character's backstory, how she mined her own upbringing on the outskirts of London—Bromley, to be precise—to bring her to life, and normally the audience is literally falling into the rows in front of them at this point, hoping against hope Columbia will reveal something, anything, about her past.

But something has changed. Her voice, normally smoky smooth, shakes a bit. Riley can hear the tremble, and so can Darian. She frowns, staring at her mother as if willing her to get her shit together already; there's a show to put on. The audience senses this change, too. They shift in their seats and look at their neighbors as if to say "What's happening?"

"Oh, no," Darian says, and Riley's attention snaps back to the stage. Columbia has stopped talking entirely now and is swaying, face pale as the moon.

"She's going to faint," Riley says, inanely, because before she can get all the words out, Columbia Jones goes down.