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**BILLIONAIRE'S
REDEMPTION:**

The Reckoning

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— STORIES OF SILK & STEEL —



Excerpt from *Billionaire’s Redemption: The Reckoning*
(Book Two in the *Billionaire’s Redemption Series*)

Chapter 5

HONEYMOON VILLA – BRAZIL - MORNING

The late afternoon sun filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows of their villa, casting soft gold across open suitcases and neatly folded clothes. The room is quiet except for the muted sound of the ocean and the occasional rustle of fabric as Maddy packs.

The villa glows with soft, late-afternoon light as Maddy moves around the room, folding clothes with absent-minded precision. Glittering ocean waves shimmer beyond the open balcony doors, but the peaceful scenery doesn’t soften the tension forming in her chest.

Elias finishes buttoning the cuffs of his shirt before slipping his watch into its travel case. He watches her for a moment—her careful movements, her thoughtful silence.

Maddy breaks it first. “Is that gala we have to attend a week after we get back or two weeks?”

He pulls up his calendar. “It’s a week after.”

She stops packing, and whines, “Do we *have* to?”

Elias huffs a quiet laugh. “That’s what we get for being responsible adults. The schedule doesn’t care we were on our honeymoon.”

Petulant, “Fine.” Maddy goes back to packing a bit more slowly. “Anyone *notable* attending?”

“Besides us? We *are* Mr. and Mrs. Molina now, ya know.”

“Excuse me, I’m hyphenated, Mrs. Molina-Shaw.”

“That’s quite a mouthful.”

Innocently, “I could’ve sworn you were okay with my mouthful.”

Elias is shocked by her uncharacteristically bold double entendre which hits him low and fast; his body responding before his mind can catch up.

Maddy is tickled by his reaction and gives him a break. “Anyone else notable attending, besides us?”

Elias hesitates, his mind refocusing on the current conversation, then says, “Senator Pike confirmed last night.”

She pauses mid-fold. “Adrian Pike? Must be an election year.”

“The powerful always have an agenda, Maddy,” Elias replies.

Maddy studies his expression, sensing the subtle shift. “Is something wrong?”

He shakes his head, but there’s tension in his jaw. “I don’t know. Something about him... doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Elias,” she says gently, “he’s a senator. Politicians make people uneasy as a matter of course.”

“Maybe.” Elias shrugs, but his eyes remain shadowed. “Maybe it’s just instinct.” Changing the subject. “There’s something else we should talk about before we get home.”

Maddy stills, hands pausing over a folded blouse. She doesn’t turn around. “What might that be?”

Elias steps closer, resting a hand on her back. “I got a message from the D.A. yesterday.”

That makes her turn.

Her hazel eyes lift to his, wary but steady. “What was the message?”

He watches the flicker of emotion cross her face. “Since Jackson’s already confessed, they feel a trial is kind of a waste of time since it’s pretty much a slam dunk for the prosecution. So, they want to offer him a plea.”

Maddy lets out a slow breath. “And they want my blessing.”

“They do,” Elias confirms. “The plea depends on you. On whether you agree.”

Maddy flashes back to snippets of the trauma she endured at the instigation of her older brother – how she was strangled, how he tased her, how she was violated by her ex-husband, he was shot by her ex-husband, and finally how she killed her ex-husband. Silence stretches between them, heavy with the complexity of everything she feels—love, anger, fear, grief, betrayal, hope.

Elias says knowingly, “I’m happy to tell them no—”

“No, I’ll at least hear what they have to say,” Maddy interrupts quietly.

Elias blinks genuinely startled. “Really?”

She nods, exhaling as though the decision costs her something. “Under the right circumstances....”

He studies her carefully, searching her expression. “What circumstances?”

She looks at him; eyebrows raised in contemplation.

Chapter 5

The treatment center sits at the edge of the city — all glass, steel, and clean lines meant to soothe chaos. A place where sunlight tries to burn through pain, and serenity is manufactured with scented candles and carefully curated playlists.

Maddy, Elias, Isaac, and Helena sit in the visitor’s lounge. Maddy’s posture immaculate, every inch of her screaming composure. The faint hum of the air conditioner fills the silence. Across from her, Jackson shifts in his seat — thinner, paler, the tremor in his hands betraying weeks of withdrawal and self-loathing.

He looks nothing like the confident, reckless man who once thought he could outsmart the darkness closing in on him. There’s something hollow in his eyes now — like he’s seen the bottom of himself and isn’t sure how to climb back up.

When he finally speaks, his voice cracks. “Thank you for coming.”

Maddy doesn’t respond. Her hazel eyes are unreadable, her caramel-toned skin drawn tight across sharp cheekbones. The only sign of emotion is the faint pulse at her throat.

Jackson swallows hard and tries again. “They told me I had to make amends... that part of recovery means owning what I did. I wanted you to hear it from me. No excuses this time.”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, desperate. “I’m sorry, Maddy. For everything. For Damon. For Trent. For betraying you. For—”

She cuts him off with a look — calm, cold, and absolute.

“You don’t need to list it,” she says quietly. “I remember every detail.”

The air thickens between them.

He takes a shuddering breath. “Please, just let me—”

“I’m not here to make you feel better about what you did,” she says, her tone sharper now.

“I’m here because the counselor called and said you wanted to see me. So, say what you need to say, Jackson. Get it over with.”

Jackson's throat works. His eyes glisten. "I just... I wanted to make things right between us. I thought—"

"You thought," she interrupts, voice low but cutting, "that because I agreed to the plea, I would forgive you?"

He flinches.

She leans forward, eyes locked on his. "I did that for Mom and Dad. I wasn't going to bring that kind of pain to them. And frankly, I don't want to have to get on a witness stand in front of God and everybody to relive the hell that you were instrumental in putting me through. The hell you had no problem visiting on me."

Jackson's face crumples. "Maddy, I didn't—"

"Having said that," she continues, her voice steady, "I don't want anything from you at this point. I don't feel anything for you at all. I don't feel love or hate. I'm not angry or even sad anymore." She rises, the chair scraping lightly against the tile. "I am just done."

Jackson's words tumble out, panicked. "Maddy, you don't mean what you're saying. You can't—"

"I'm not saying to stay away from Mom and Dad," she cuts in again, quieter now but firm. "In fact, please don't. You need them just as much as they need you. Just know that if you come to their house while I'm there, I will leave. You stay away from me. You stay away from my son."

Her voice softens at the edges, but her eyes harden to steel. "As of this moment, you are dead to me."

He stares at her, his lips parting soundlessly, as if he's been struck.

She straightens, smooths her sweater, and picks up her bag with the calm precision of a woman sealing a door that will never open again.

"Goodbye, Jackson."

And then she walks away — not hurried, not dramatic, just certain.

Jackson sits frozen, tears sliding down his face unchecked. Outside, through the narrow window, the sun catches in the glass and blinds him for a moment — too bright, too real.

For the first time, he realizes what true loss feels like.

IN-PATIENT TREATMENT CENTER — ACTIVITIES ROOM - DAY

The Activities Room hums with low, harmless noise — puzzle pieces clacking, someone’s wheelchair squeaking across tile, a muted TV playing an old sitcom. Residents drift between tables, coloring, reading, playing cards.

But Jackson sits off to the side, alone in an armchair by the window.

His shoulders are tense, knuckles pale against his knees, eyes fixed on nothing. He looks like a man held together by whatever frayed scraps of willpower haven’t snapped yet.

Ava notices him instantly.

She’s here for volunteer hours — no office between them, no clipboard, no clinical detachment. Just her tea, her steady presence, and the instinct to sit with a man who clearly needs someone to notice him.

She approaches quietly and settles into the chair beside his, the soft herbal scent of her tea curling through the air.

She doesn’t pry.

She just waits.

After nearly a full minute, she speaks softly.

“Tell me what’s on your mind today.”

Jackson’s jaw tics. He doesn’t look at her. “I haven’t been sleeping. Last night. Or... most nights.”

“What wakes you?” she asks gently.

He lets out a dry, humorless laugh. “Everything.”

She nods like that makes perfect sense. “Start anywhere.”

He shakes his head, eyes on the carpet. “You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

Something in her voice — warm, grounded — cracks him open just enough.

“You ever feel like your whole life is falling apart because of a thousand little choices you made when you were scared?”

Ava exhales slowly, staring across the room as if she sees another time, another life entirely.

“Yes,” she says quietly. “More than you know.”

He frowns, confused.

She sets her tea on the side table and folds her hands.

“I used to be a prosecutor,” she says. “Department of Justice. Federal crimes, big cases, lots of pressure.”

Jackson looks up, startled. “You? DOJ?”

Ava gives a faint, self-deprecating smile. “I was very good at my job. And very good at hiding how much I was drinking.”

A beat of silence.

Jackson’s eyes widen — not in judgment, but in recognition.

She continues, her voice softening around old wounds.

“My little brother Mateo... he saw it. He tried to stop me from driving one night. He said he’d come with me. He said he’d keep me awake.” A breath trembles. “He got in the car because he was afraid I’d crash if he didn’t.”

Jackson’s face changes — something sharp and familiar flickering through him.

Ava stares down at her clasped hands.

“And I crashed anyway.”

His breath catches.

She says it without theatrics, without tears, but the honesty in her voice is devastating.

“He died at the scene. I walked away. And every day since, I’ve been trying to figure out how someone so smart, so trained, so responsible... could still ruin the life of the person they loved most.”

Jackson swallows hard.

It hits him because it mirrors him — too closely.

Someone who tried to help him paid the price.

Someone who believed in him ended up hurt.

Ava looks up, meeting his eyes.

“So yes, Jackson. I know exactly what it feels like to have your life fall apart because you were scared. And ashamed. And in over your head.”

His voice breaks.

“I keep thinking about everything I messed up,” he whispers. “The lies... the gambling... Maddy...” He stops before saying too much. “I just keep replaying things. Wondering how I became this guy.”

“Guilt can drown you,” Ava murmurs. “Or it can teach you. It depends on whether you’re ready to learn the lesson.”

He stares out the window again, foot tapping uncontrollably.

“I got involved with people I shouldn’t have. People who expect things. People who don’t forget when you screw up.” He hesitates. “They’re... not the kind you walk away from.”

Ava studies him, expression gentler than anything he’s used to.

“What do they want from you now?”

Jackson’s jaw locks tight.

He doesn’t answer. He can’t. Not yet.

“You really don’t give up, do you?” he mutters.

“Not on people who want to be better,” she replies.

For the first time in weeks, he lets out a real breath — shaky, unsteady, but real.

“I’m trying,” he whispers.

“I know,” she says. “I see it.”

His eyes glisten — not with weakness, but with relief.

“I want to tell you,” he murmurs. “I do. I just...I can’t...yet.”

“Then we take it one step at a time,” Ava says softly. “You talk when you’re ready. I’ll be here.”

He nods, emotional but composed.

And in a quiet Activities Room filled with strangers and background noise, something shifts between them —

Not romance.

Not confession.

Not redemption.

Just two broken people recognizing each other in the dark.

And for now, that is enough.

OB/GYN OFFICE – ULTRASOUND ROOM — DAY

The ultrasound room is dim, quiet, filled with soft beeping. Maddy grips Elias’s hand while the technician moves the wand.

“There,” the tech says gently. “See? That’s your baby.”

A tiny fluttering. A heartbeat.

Elias squeezes her hand, eyes shining.

Then the doctor enters with a chart. “All right, Mrs. Molina. As you know, pregnancies after the age of thirty-five present a certain level of risk. They use to use the term geriatric pregnancy—”

Maddy bolts upright. “Geriatric?! What am I, Methuselah?”

Elias covers his mouth to hide a laugh.

The doctor chuckles. “The term we use now is advanced maternal age so you’ll have to be monitored a bit more carefully.”

“Geriatric?” she to herself, no longer hearing the doctor. “Janet Jackson had a baby at fifty! She looks fabulous.”

The doctor continues calmly, “Mrs. Molina, it’s just a medical classification, not a comment on your youthfulness.”

Maddy narrows her eyes. “Feels like a comment.”

Elias finally lets out a full laugh—earning a slap to his arm.

But then the doctor continues, tone shifting.

“I need you to hear me on this. With your previous medical history and current stress levels... this *will be* a high-risk pregnancy. You’ll need to reduce stress as much as possible.”

Maddy opens her mouth to argue.

Elias gently places a hand on her thigh. “No winding yourself up about outdated medical terms,” he murmurs. “Doctor’s orders. And for the baby.”

She exhales slowly. “Fine. I’ll try.”

MOLINA TOWER – EXECUTIVE LEVEL - DAY

The elevator doors glide open onto the executive floor of Molina Tower, and Elias steps out looking... different.

Lighter.

A little dazed.

Almost glowing.

He’s just dropped off his *pregnant* wife after their first ultrasound, and he still can’t fully process the fact that there is a tiny heartbeat inside Maddy. His Maddy.

He walks into his office and allows himself one breath—one moment to take it in—

I’m going to be a father.

But the moment barely settles before two shadows fill his doorway.

Luke.

Miguel.

Elias blinks. “Miguel? What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at the club today?”

Miguel gestures between himself and Luke. “We were summoned. By Ana. Said it was urgent.”

Elias frowns. “Summoned—what? Ana didn’t call me.”

Luke lifts a brow. “Check your phone.”

Elias pulls it out - Five missed messages. Two missed calls.

All from Ana.

“Shit,” he mutters. “I was at the doctor’s office with Maddy. Phone was on silent.”

Before he can tap to call her back, the large wall-mounted flatscreen behind his desk lights up, flickering to life.

Ana appears, wearing her headset, surrounded by the glow of her cyber-ops lab.

“Finally,” she says. “About damn time, Elias.”

Elias moves closer. The shift in his posture is instantaneous—the new-dad haze replaced by razor-sharp focus.

“What’s going on?”

Ana doesn’t waste a second.

“Got something.”

Luke steps forward immediately. “Tell us.”

Ana’s fingers race across the keys.

“Vanguard Urban Solutions is not just a random shell company.”

She taps a new sequence.

“It’s a *C-Spire* shell.”

Miguel’s jaw tightens.

Elias’s entire body goes still.

“One of their legacy fronts from the Lisbon cluster,” Ana continues, eyes on the data streaming across multiple monitors. “It went dormant over a decade ago. No movement, no red flags.”

Her voice drops. “Until now.”

Another keystroke. Another window opens.

“And when I cross-referenced the metadata with old intel—specifically the Brockington investigation from last year—”

A file fills the screen.

Miguel’s face. Miguel’s name. Miguel’s classified military record. Operational notes. Deployment logs. Covert missions Elias *knew* his brother had buried deep.

Miguel goes rigid.

Luke curses under his breath. “Not a coincidence.”

Ana’s voice is quiet and grim. “It means someone wasn’t just monitoring your movements back then—they were cataloging them. Hard.”

Miguel exhales slowly, nostrils flaring. “So they have my name. My history.”

Ana nods. “They have more than that.” She clicks again.

Surveillance logs pop up—Lisbon dates glowing in red.

“Someone tracked you. Someone recorded you. And now Vanguard is suddenly resurfacing in Maddy’s professional sphere.”

She meets their eyes through the camera. “And that is sufficiently alarming.”

Elias stares at the dossier—the *C-Spire* insignia encrypted in the data.

His expression darkens. He grips the back of a chair so tightly his knuckles blanch.

“So, this isn’t just pushing into Maddy’s work,” he says quietly.

Luke glances at Miguel. “This is reaching into *your* family.”

Miguel shakes his head, eyes still on the screen. “Maddy is my family, too. This was already a family matter.”

Ana swallows and switches files. “This next part is what made me call all of you immediately.”

A timestamp appears.

“Most of this activity—accessing the legacy *C-Spire* files, reviving Vanguard, pulling Miguel’s information—”

She points to the date which is 10 months ago.

“Started when phase III of the Shaw-Molina project was announced.”

Those words land like a sniper shot.

Elias freezes.

His mind switches instantly to threat assessment. Contingency planning. Protection grids.

“You’re sure this is *C-Spire*?” Elias asks, voice low and lethal.

Ana nods once. “They’re back. And they’re better organized than before. More strategic. More connected. And they’ve already maneuvered closer than we realized.”

Elias’s jaw tightens hard enough that the muscle ticks.

Elias stares at the *C-Spire* emblem glowing on the monitor, then turns to Miguel and Luke—two men he trusts with his life, two men now caught in the same tightening snare.

He draws a breath. A heavy, weighted one.

“This means that you and Maddy have been on their radar for a while now,” Luke says almost to himself, considering the implications.

“Last year wasn’t random. It wasn’t just Trent or even Jackson. That was the opening salvo to infiltrating one or both of our organizations,” Elias says with calm resignation.

Ana reaches for her phone, “We can patch Maddy through to brief her-“

“No!” Elias’s response sharper than he intended.

“Elias, Maddy has a right to know what’s going on,” Ana says with sufficient steel.

Elias runs a hand through his hair and a bit of a frenetic energy begins to exude which is very uncharacteristic of him.

“Elias?”

He takes a deep breath.

“What I’m about to say stays in this room, no exceptions.” He looks into the eyes of each person present for their assurance.

Elias continues, voice low: “Maddy is pregnant.”

Both men freeze.

Luke’s eyes widen in stunned relief, “No shit!”

Miguel offers a lopsided grin and hugs his brother. Ana’s grin lights up the screen.

“No congratulations. Not yet. One, she doesn’t want anyone to know for a few more weeks—at least until she hits her second trimester. Two, and more importantly, she’s high-risk. The doctor specifically said she has to reduce her stress levels. Telling her any of this would achieve the opposite of that goal. She needs peace right now.”

The men sober instantly.

“So as far as she knows,” Elias adds, “you don’t know anything. Not one word, not one look, nothing slips.”

Miguel and Ana nod solemnly.

Luke as well.

Then Elias’s voice hardens.

“I am telling you because if *C-Spire* targets her, or the baby, we need to be ahead of them. Always.” He looks between them again.

“I cannot lose any of you,” he says softly. “Not my brother... not my wife... not this child.”

It isn't a plea.

It's a vow.

A blood oath.

“My pregnant wife and my brother are on *C-Spire's* radar,” he repeats, barely above a whisper. “This isn't *just* applying pressure.”

His eyes sharpen like drawn blades.

“They're positioning.”

Miguel steps forward, voice thick with guilt.

“I'll keep my distance—from you, from her—if that keeps her safe—”

“Like hell you will,” Elias snaps quietly. Final. Ferocious. “That's exactly what they want. Isolation. Fragmentation. That's how *C-Spire* hunts.”

Luke nods fiercely. “He's right. They break organizations by pulling people apart. We stay tight. No gaps.”

Ana closes out the file with a decisive click. “Then we need to move carefully,” she says. “Quietly. And *together*.”

Miguel meets Elias's stare—Molina blood, Molina fire, Molina loyalty.

“So, what's our next move?” Miguel murmurs.

Luke suddenly straightens, a tactical gleam in his eyes. “We flip this on them. We act like we don't know what we know. No change in patterns, no shifts in routine. We give them nothing. Make them think their strategy is working.”

Miguel nods slowly. “That might buy us time.”

“And time,” Luke adds, “lets us track who's pulling strings behind Vanguard. Lets *us* choose the battlefield.”

Elias exhales, tension shifting into purpose. “So, we're agreed,” he says. “No distance. No panic. No change in behavior around Maddy.”

Miguel nods.

Luke nods.

Ana nods through the screen.

A united front.

A silent strike force forming.

Elias lifts his gaze—calm, deadly, unshakable.

Ana cautions, “Elias, if Maddy finds out that we’re keeping this from her—”

“Then see that she doesn’t. No matter how far this goes,” he says, voice steady as steel, “they will not touch my family.”

The screens hum around them, casting shifting light across their faces.

And for the first time in years, all four of them feel the shift—

Not fear.

Not dread.

Resolve.

War.

The Molinas are not running.

They are preparing to fight back.