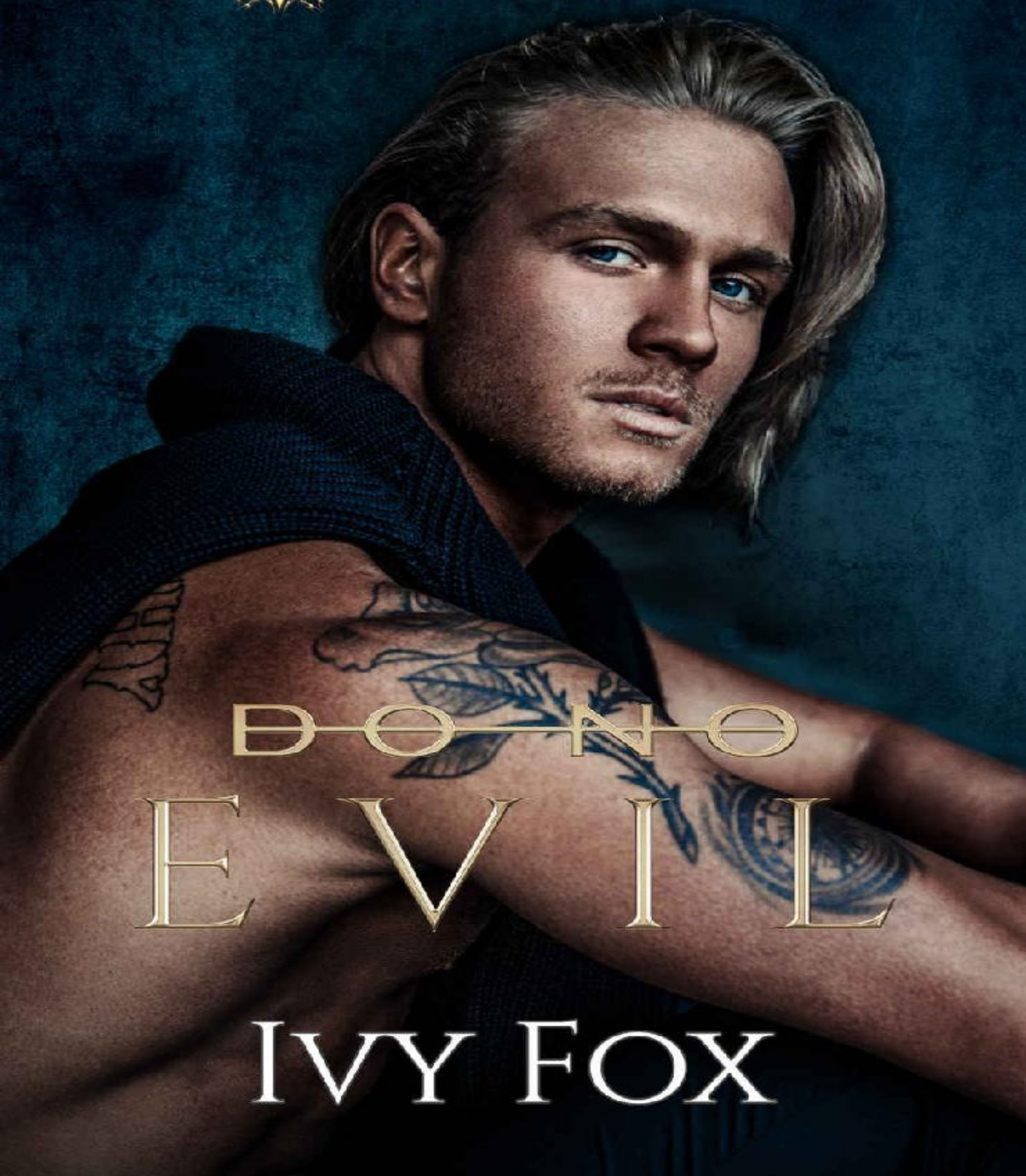


— THE —
SOCIETY



DONNO
EVIL

IVY FOX

DO NO EVIL
BOOK FOUR OF
THE SOCIETY SERIES

BY
IVY FOX



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Dedication

for everyone who was
ever told that they could
only fly so high,
This one's for you.

fuck glass ceilings.

Author Note

First of all, thank you so much for purchasing Do No Evil.

There are no words to describe how excited I am to share with you all the final installment of The Society series.

I would like to take this opportunity to reinforce that this series has an entwining subplot that will be resolved in this book, which means that you **must** read the previous books in this series to fully enjoy this epic finale.

This is it, my loves.

The moment that you all have waited for has arrived. I can't thank you enough for patiently waiting these past nine months for me to finish this book. I really wanted to give myself enough time to do Lincoln and Kennedy's love story justice, and I could not be prouder of how it all came together in the end.

I would like to ask one small favor of you, if I may.

You all know that reviews are life for an author, especially for an indie author like myself. I'm just a tiny drop in the water in this huge and beautiful sea that exists in the contemporary romance world. So, when I say that I treasure each review since they enable other readers to find my book babies, I sincerely mean it.

But I would like to ask that if you do decide to write a review to make it as spoiler-free as possible. Like I said, this is the final book in the series which means the BIG BAD will finally be unmasked, and I would really love it if every reader was surprised with the reveal. It will make everyone's reading experience so much more enjoyable, and, in the end, that's every author's main goal—to offer a blessed escape into the imaginary.

Right about here, I usually tell my readers that I don't consider my books to be full-on dark, but more in the shades-of-gray category. I can't say the same about this book, though. It is deliciously twisted and forbidden—borderline taboo even.

However, there are some scenarios in this book that may be triggering to more sensitive readers. Although I ask that you put your trust in me and have faith that everything turns out as it should, some scenes can be and will be disturbing. If you're still undecided if you should take the plunge into these pages or not, then I suggest you read reviews or join my readers' groups to ask for feedback.

If you're okay with all that I've mentioned above, please proceed and get ready to see if all your conspiracy theories panned out.

Expect plenty of twists and turns, my loves.

Grab a box of tissues and some red wine because you are in for quite a bumpy ride.

Much love,

Ivy

Do No Evil Playlist



The Society

Listen to full list on Spotify [Here](#)

- “Start a War” by Klergy ft. Valerie Broussard
- “Rule the World” by Vision Vision
- “Heathens” by Twenty One Pilots
- “Moondust” by Jaymes Young
- “Come Back for Me” by Jaymes Young
- “Ocean Eyes” by Billie Eilish
- “Love and War” by Fleurie
- “Game of Survival” by Ruelle
- “Madness” by Ruelle
- “A Little Wicked” by Valerie Broussard
- “Twisted” by Two Feet
- “Habits of My Heart” by Jaymes Young
- “Mad Hatter” by Melanie Martinez
- “Smile” by Maise Peters
- “Teeth” by 5 Seconds of Summer
- “The Beginning of the End” by Klergy ft. Valerie Broussard
- “Run Boy Run” by Woodkid
- “Monster” by Shawn Mendes ft. Justin Bieber
- “Deep End” by Ruelle
- “Behind Blue Eyes” by Limp Bizkit
- “Dark Things” by ADONA
- “Dirty Hands (Gone Mad)” by Kendra Dantes
- “Moonrise” by WILDWOOD
- “Can You Hold Me” by NF ft. Britt Nicole
- “Crazy in Love” by Eden Project
- “Ready for the Devil (No Mercy)” by Vision Vision
- “Mo Ordinary Love” by Deftones
- “Drugs” by EDEN
- “Even If it Hurts” by Sam Tinnesz
- “Tainted Love” by Holy Wars ft. NOCTURN
- “Live Like Legends” by Ruelle
- “New Dawn Fades” by Moby
- “Joke’s On You” by Charlotte Lawrence
- “Lilith” by Ellise
- “You Can Run” by Adam Jones
- “Devilish” by The Phantoms
- “Heart Of The Darkness” by Tommee Profitt ft. Sam Tinnesz

“Beautiful Crime” by Tamer
“Kingdom Fall” by Claire Wyndham
“Shadow of the Day” by Echos

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.”

— **Friedrich W. Nietzsche**

Prologue



Lincoln

I'm in love with a monster.

A beautiful vengeful soul of a girl.

Most men would run the other way when confronted with such an unforgiving force, but not me. Never me.

I've always known what lies dormant in her heart—the twisted darkness that dwelled silently inside of her.

A wiser man would have done everything in his power to keep such a danger to his soul away from him. He'd keep it at arm's length to prevent the carnage that he knew was on the horizon.

But I've never claimed to be a smart man.

Such prudence has no room in a life when it's the heart taking the lead in every decision. Because no matter how hard I tried not to love her, so deeply, so irrefutably, from day one, I knew I was destined to be hers.

My love-sick heart saw beauty amongst all the ugliness that lived and breathed in hers.

I saw nothing but glorious light inside her tormented, dark soul.

It's not the worst sight to behold.

Especially in a man's final moments.

Tied and bound to my spot, I take whatever little time is still afforded to me to admire my love. All the while knowing that the gun in her hand, pointed at my chest, is growing heavier in her grip by the second.

All sound disappears as I get lost in the sky blue of her eyes.

Ocean and sky.

One cannot live without the other.

Everything ceases to exist.

It's just me and her.

Her pain.

My love.

She places a quivering finger on the trigger, a single tear running down her cheek as she perfects her aim.

My beautiful, vengeful monster.

My hands grip the arms of the wooden chair, desperate to touch her and soothe her guilt.

Her shame.

But in the end, all I can do is keep my sights fixed affectionately on hers, silently encouraging her to do what needs to be done.

“I love you,” I mouth silently, her lids squinting in grief at the declaration.

And with a loud cry, my love, my heart, *my very soul*, pulls the trigger aimed at the heart that loves her.



Kennedy

'I love you.'

Those are the last words Lincoln chooses to whisper, already forgiving me for the sin I'm about to commit.

But there is no absolution.

Not for me.

And not for him.

Because in the end...

All evil men must die.

Chapter 1



Kennedy

Ten years old

For the third time today, my attention travels to the new kid at school. While the boys are having a blast playing hoops in the courtyard, my focus is once again diverted from my best friends to the boy in black—Easton Price.

He's sitting on the concrete ground against a wall, his back hunched as he furiously doodles something on his notebook. Richard Price's new stepson has been at Northside Elementary for two whole weeks now, and I have yet to see him talk to one person here. He hasn't made any friends, nor does he seem too bothered by it. He looks perfectly content just having his nose inside a notebook and a charcoal pencil in hand.

I wonder what he's drawing.

I look around the school's playground area and try to pick out something that might be beautiful enough for someone to immortalize on a piece of paper.

Could it be the small tufted titmouse singing its whimsical tune, perched on a nearby branch, flapping its tiny wings to keep itself airborne?

Or did he pick the girls with wide toothy grins jumping double dutch?

There is no way I can pinpoint what his muse could possibly be from so far away, but by the way Easton tilts his pencil and vigorously shades the paper in his lap, he's determined to finish his drawing before the end of recess' bell rings.

Determined to see the masterpiece for myself, I get up from the ground and dust off my knees.

"Hey. Where are you off to, Ken? Don't you want to watch me beat Walker's butt?" Colt teases, dribbling the ball.

“You wish,” Finn says, easily snatching the ball out of Colt’s hand and making a perfect shot.

“Hey?! That’s cheating. I was distracted.”

“You snooze, you lose,” Finn counters with a chuckle, holding the basketball on his hip after he’s retrieved it.

I laugh at the rivaling pair before heading in Easton’s direction, only to stop mid-step when Lincoln places his book onto his lap and tugs at the hem of my T-shirt to get my attention.

“Where *are* you going, Ken?”

“I’m going to introduce myself to Easton,” I explain matter-of-factly like a grown-up would.

“Who?” Colt asks with a furrowed brow.

“She’s talking about the new kid,” Finn explains, his gaze falling on the boy in question across the school’s playground.

I can tell by the way Finn stares at him he’s just as curious as I am.

“No, you’re not. Leave that kid alone. I mean, look at him? He gives a whole new meaning to the word ‘freak’,” Colt sneers, apparently not as impressed with Northside’s newest addition.

“Don’t be mean, Colt. If he’s a freak, then what am I, huh? A girl who only has boys as best friends?!” I retort with my fists on my hips.

“I’d call you the luckiest girl in Asheville,” Colt rebukes with a smirk the size of both Carolinas combined.

“Whatever. I’m going to talk to him, and that’s the end of it.”

“I’ll come with you,” Lincoln adds softly beside me as he stands up to follow me.

My chest expands with delight at how he always has my back, no matter what idea pops into my mind.

“Yeah, I’ll come, too,” Finn chimes in. “Who knows, maybe he’d like to play some hoops with us. I need a challenge since Colt here sucks balls at it.”

“Hardy har har.” Colt fake laughs. “Fine. Let’s meet the weirdo then.”

“Be nice.” I point a finger in his face, demanding he be on his best behavior.

“No promises. If the kid is a douche canoe, then I’ll treat him like one.”

I roll my eyes at his snarky comment, but I feel a hundred times more confident in my quest of befriending Easton Price now that the boys are coming with me. However, my excitement instantly deflates when we see that Easton’s piqued someone else’s interest, too.

“Looks like Tommyboy called dibs on the new kid. If he’s friends with that jerk, then he’s not worth our time,” Colt says, halting his step and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Hey! My brother is friends with Tom.”

“Exactly. Not worth our time,” Colt repeats coldly.

It’s useless to argue with Colt on this subject. He’s never liked Jeff very much, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon. Since we were knee-high, Colt has always been very protective of me—even when there was no need for it. I don’t fault his animosity toward my brother, but sometimes I feel Colt should be wary of me, too. Jeff and I are the same after all, and we’ve always been *different*.

“Tommyboy isn’t his friend,” Lincoln interjects calmly, bringing me back to the matter at hand. “Easton hasn’t made any friends since he arrived here, and it’s about time that changed. So move your feet, Colt. This is happening.”

My heart does this little flutter in my chest at his assertive order, his ocean blue eyes scrutinizing Easton and Tommyboy’s interaction from across the playground.

Like me, Lincoln is observant to a fault. Nothing ever escapes him. I should have known he was keeping tabs on Easton from the moment he stepped foot into our school, trying to solve the puzzle of what kind of kid he was. Whereas I’m more impatient to quench my curiosity, Lincoln likes to take his time to assess every situation—like the true leader he is.

If we were ever to crown a king for our little band of misfits, then the title would go to Lincoln Richfield Hamilton.

And one day, he’ll make me his queen.

My lovesick dreams are quickly crushed and replaced with rage when I watch Tommyboy kick Easton’s shoe before yanking his beloved notebook out of his hand. Easton gets up to his feet and snatches the book away, but not before Tommy rips a page out of it.

“We got ourselves a little pussy here, boys,” Tommyboy says to the two lackeys who have Easton’s arms pinned behind his back. He continues to snicker away as he waves a drawing of a teal-colored butterfly draped over a small batch of swamp milkweed.

It’s beautiful.

Just like I knew it would be.

Tommyboy had no right to steal it away from Easton.

No right!

“The only pussy I see is you, dipshit,” Easton growls, his gunmetal gray eyes just as picture-perfect as his drawing.

“I’m not the one drawing butterflies and flowers, freak.”

“No, but you are the one who needs his buddies to pick a fight. Who’s the real pussy here?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t need my boys to teach you a lesson, bastard. Whoops! Did I say that too loud?” Tommyboy taunts mockingly.

Easton jerks violently, trying to get out of the other two boys’ hold.

“You call me that again, and I’ll kick your teeth in!”

“Big words for a pussy.”

“Try me, asshole!” Easton snarls.

“Fine. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Tommyboy gives his henchmen a nod, and they release Easton immediately.

“It’s about time you got a Northside welcome, bastard.”

Enough.

“Ken!” I hear Lincoln nervously call out behind me as I run toward the impending fight.

Before anyone can stop me, I weave in between Easton and Tommyboy, stunning them both still.

“Leave him alone, Tom. Aren’t there some pre-K toddlers you should be bullying right now?”

“Very funny, Kennedy, but get out of the way. This doesn’t concern you. This is between the bastard and me.”

I feel Easton’s body ignite with rage behind me, ready to kick Tommyboy’s butt.

Thing is, I can’t let that happen, no matter how much Tommyboy deserves a good ass-whooping.

Easton’s new to Asheville, which means no one will believe him when he tells them it was Tommyboy who started the fight. This town isn’t known for taking the word of outsiders over their own, and Easton is definitely still on the fringe. He might be the heir apparent to the Price empire, but that means nothing to a homegrown boy like Tommyboy. His dad is the state senator, after all, and has too much influence to be ignored. As far as the Northside is concerned, until Easton pays his dues, he’s no better than your average trailer trash Southie.

I may be young in age, but I’ve lived in Asheville all my life, surrounded

by its prejudiced decay to know that much. You end up losing your childlike innocence really quickly around these parts, a fact Tommyboy is eager to demonstrate to Easton by calling him what he did. Gossip about Richard Price's new bride and stepson was on every Northside socialite's wagging tongue long before the newlyweds even decided to leave the Big Apple for the green fields of Asheville.

Easton never stood a chance on his own.

But like Lincoln said a few minutes ago, that's about to change.

"I said move, Ken," Tommyboy repeats, but I can see it in his eyes that he's losing steam now faced with me.

I know Tommyboy is sweet on me. He has been since he and Jeff became friends in kindergarten. Every Christmas, birthday, and Valentine's Day, I have come to expect a little gift on my doorstep from him. He never signs the cards, but I know they are from him. Unbeknownst to everyone, Tommyboy has a sweet side. That's why when he acts like this, it breaks my heart.

"No one likes a bully, Tom. Just walk away."

"Not happening, Ken. He shouldn't even be at school with the rest of us. His mom is a whore," he spits out, his nostrils flaring in disgust.

"I'll fucking end you!" Easton shouts behind me, and it takes everything in me to stand my ground and not let him get his hands on Tommyboy's neck.

In a split-second decision, I use the little height I have and headbutt Tommyboy before Easton gets himself in a world of trouble.

"Argh!!!" he wails, crouching to the ground, blood dripping onto his hands.

"You broke my goddamn nose, Ken!"

"Serves you right. I told you I don't like bullies. Now apologize!" I order, trying to keep my voice as stern as possible, even though on the inside I'm trembling like a leaf.

Tommyboy holds his nose up, his eyes filled with a loathing I've never seen directed at me before.

"The fuck, Ryland!" he hollers, rising to his feet.

I'm not sure what his next move is going to be—whether he's going to charge at me or not—but either way, I stand my ground, ready for him to hit me back. But just as I'm ready for Tommyboy's wrath to slap me in the face, I'm pulled back, Lincoln stepping right in front of me.

"Who's the pussy now? You think I'm going to let you hit a girl? My

girl? Try it. Try it and see what happens to you,” Lincoln mutters through gritted teeth, his thunderous blue eyes depicting a perfect apocalyptic storm.

Tommyboy stares venomously at Lincoln for what feels like an eternity, while Colt and Finn are already toe to toe with his two lackeys—both ready to follow through on our best friend’s threat on Tom and his goons.

“I’d never lay a hand on Ken, you moron,” he mumbles under his breath, using his forearm to wipe the blood still dripping from his nose. “But this isn’t over.” He points the finger at Easton and raises his voice so everyone can hear him loud and clear. “This is far from being over.”

Tommyboy turns around, taking his friends with him to God knows where.

“You didn’t have to do that. I could have taken care of him,” Easton mutters, annoyed, picking up the drawing Tommyboy dropped to the ground and shoving it into his notebook.

“Do you mind?” I ask nicely, tilting my head to the book he’s now gripping in his hands.

Hesitantly he gives it to me, clenching his jaw when I open to the first page. It’s a drawing of the school’s swing set, a girl happily pushing her friend on the swing, while the other laughs her head off, enjoying the feel of the wind on her face.

“It’s very pretty,” I tell him truthfully, handing him back his prized possession. “Maybe you could draw one of us sometime.”

“I don’t take requests,” Easton utters dismissively.

“Hey, douchebag! Be nice to Kennedy. She just saved your butt,” Colt retorts protectively, ready to pick a fight with him.

Easton lets out a long, exaggerated exhale, his shoulders slumping somewhat.

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay. I’m Kennedy, by the way,” I greet, extending my hand out for him to shake.

“East,” he replies, taking my hand like he doesn’t know what to do with it.

“Nice to meet you, East,” I singsong. “This is Colt, Finn, and Linc.”

“Hi,” he croaks, running his hand nervously behind the nape of his neck.

“Do you want to play some hoops with us?” Finn asks with a wide smile.

“I’m not the sporty type.”

“No worries. We’re just goofing around. Besides, you can’t be any worse

than Colt here.”

“Hey!” Colt exclaims, feigning outrage, successfully getting us all to laugh at his expense. But by the wink he throws me, I know he doesn’t really care if he’s the butt of Finn’s joke or not.

“Or you can just sit next to me and draw if you’d like?”

“Sure, why not?” He shrugs.

“Good.” I clap happily.

“So, is that guy always an asshole?” Easton asks as we all walk back to the basketball court.

“Who? Tommyboy?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty much, I’m afraid. But you don’t have to worry about him giving you grief anymore,” I reply, playfully knocking my shoulder with his.

“I don’t? How come?”

“Because you’re with us now, and we take care of our own. Don’t we, Linc?”

Linc’s eyes sparkle at me, the pride in his gaze making my cheeks blush profusely.

“Yeah, Ken. Always.”



The minute I get home from school, I know I’m in a world of trouble.

How do I know this?

By the triumphant snicker that my twin throws at me.

“Dad’s waiting for you in the kitchen,” Jeff says, taking a bite of his apple as he passes me by in the hall.

“What did you tell him?” I accuse on a snarl.

“I didn’t tell him anything. I didn’t have to. The school called him.”

Damn it.

Tommyboy just had to snitch on us, even though he was the one who started the fight.

“Have fun.” Jeff chuckles.

I bite the inside of my cheek and head toward the kitchen to receive my punishment. I’ve barely taken one step inside when my father starts shouting his discontentment with my behavior. After a while, all his spit-out words of disappointment become just white noise to me. He doesn’t understand my

motives, nor does he care. When I finally hear those magic words, ‘Go to your room. You’re grounded,’ I sigh in relief and do just that, not even bothering to ask if I’m allowed to have dinner first.

I know I’m not.

I never am when my father thinks I’ve embarrassed him in some way.

Later that night, as expected, Mom knocks on my door to check up on me.

“It’s late, Momma,” I mumble, turning over on the bed to face her.

“I know. I just wanted to see how you were doing,” she responds, taking a seat at the edge of the bed beside me.

“I’m angry,” I tell her truthfully. “Dad didn’t even let me explain. He never lets me explain.”

“Your father has difficulty paying attention to anyone that isn’t him, I’m afraid. You know he likes to uphold a certain image of our family and is disappointed when his children don’t measure up to his expectations.”

“But I was right to do what I did. Tommyboy deserved it after the way he treated Easton.”

“I’m sure he did. You have always had a true sense of justice. You’re a lot like me in that way,” she explains proudly, running her fingers through my hair.

“What would you have done if you were me?”

Her forehead wrinkles, a seriousness in her gaze that I’ve never seen before.

“I would have been smarter, Kennedy. Now Tommyboy will see you as a threat. The element of surprise is no longer a weapon you can use.”

“I don’t understand,” I reply, baffled by her response.

I was expecting her to tell me that I should have gone and fetched a teacher to break up the fight, or tried to reason with Tommyboy and his goons in a more diplomatic way. I wasn’t expecting her to sound like she was cast in an old episode of *The Sopranos*.

“I know you don’t, sweetheart. But one day, you will,” she adds, only adding to my confusion. “We women have to be clever when dealing with our enemies. It’s best not to be feared since fear leads to suspicion. You should be seen in a light that deems you incapable of raining vengeance on your enemies. That way, they never see you coming for them.”

“Momma, you’re talking gibberish. Tommyboy isn’t my enemy. He’s just a big bully.”

“Playground bullies grow up, too, sweetheart. Some never break the habit of causing pain. They get a taste for it early on in life, and as the years pass, so do their cruel appetites. That’s where people like you and me come in. We protect those who can’t protect themselves. Seek justice in an otherwise imperfect and unjust world.”

I yawn, wiping my eyes with my fists, trying to make sense of what Mom is trying to teach me, but I’m just too tired to keep my eyes open, much less understand what she’s trying to convey.

Realizing that sleep is eagerly pulling me under, Mom begins to recite a poem where Tommyboy never hurts Easton or anyone again while continuously brushing my hair with her fingers. Her sweet voice lulls me to sleep with fantastic tales of a magical place where I’m a vengeful knight whose sole mission is to eradicate all evil and create a beautiful utopia where everyone is loved and happy.

And safe.

I know they are just pretty words, but as I begin to slip into a dream, I see myself holding up a steel sword and slaying all the monsters that prey on the weak.

That prey on my friends.

One day, I’ll be strong enough to wield that sword.

To cut down everyone who tries to hurt the people I care for.

One day, Momma.

I promise.

Chapter 2



Lincoln

Two years later

“I can’t believe you all did this. You guys are the best!” Finn exclaims excitedly.

His baby blue eyes grow so wide—staring at the large box containing the birthday present that we all chipped in for—that they threaten to pop out of his sockets at any second.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Open it,” Kennedy encourages with a beaming smile.

Without missing a beat, Finn drops to his knees, his eager hands ripping through the colorful wrapping paper. When he finally realizes what his gift is, he falls back on his heels, looking like he’s about to cry from pure happiness.

“How did you guys even know?” he stammers, his shiny gaze bouncing off each one of us.

“It was Ken’s idea. Personally, I was all for us getting you a signed T.J. Yates football jersey, but Kennedy insisted you’d like that big hunk of junk more.” Colt yawns, lying back on one of the futons lying around Easton’s treehouse.

Finn gives him a clipped nod, but I can tell how much Kennedy’s suggestion for his birthday gift really means to him.

“I was thinking that maybe you can keep it here if you’d like? I mean, you can take it home with you, but I thought maybe you’d like to use it here at the clubhouse instead. Easton already gave his okay, didn’t you, East?” Kennedy throws her attention to our dark-haired friend, who is currently preoccupied with drawing his next masterpiece.

“Whatever the weirdo wants,” Easton retorts absentmindedly, without so

much as lifting his head from his drawing pad.

Finn's contagious smile immediately falls from his lips at our friend's callous reply.

"He didn't mean that, Finn. You're not a weirdo," Kennedy interjects quickly, giving Finn a light squeeze on his shoulder as he hugs the box containing his new telescope to his chest.

"Yes, I did," Easton adds, his focus still fixed on his drawing. "But that's okay, Finn. We're all weirdos."

Kennedy's frown is deeply ingrained on her face as she walks away from Finn and over to Easton to kick the sole of his black boots.

"Apologize," she orders him in her no-nonsense tone.

Easton rolls his eyes, leaning back against the wall, his hands now clasped behind his head.

"Why would I apologize for telling the truth?" He cocks his brow as if Ken should know better than to reprimand him for his remark. "Finn is a weirdo. I don't see why that's a bad thing. So what if Finn is wired wrong and has more conversations with himself than he does with us? I don't see what the big deal is. It's not like we're any better. Lincoln spends all his time with his nose stuck inside a book, while Colt can't go two seconds without using whatever clear surface there is to check out his own reflection. And then there's you, Ken. The only girl I know who is more comfortable amongst us freaks than she is with girls her own age. And me? Well, we all know that I'm the embodiment of fucked up. Face it, Ken. We're all weirdos. I say own that shit," Easton retorts coolly, turning his sights on the birthday boy himself. "Finn, you're a weirdo. Wear that shit like the badge of honor it is, and fuck the rest. Happy-fucking-birthday, buddy."

Kennedy takes a deep breath, knowing she won't win this fight with Easton when he gets this way, no matter how hard she tries.

"Do I really spend that much time looking at myself in the mirror?" Colt whispers beside me, low enough for Easton not to overhear.

"Yes," I deadpan.

Colt takes a beat and then relaxes back into his prone position on the futon.

"You know what? I'm not even sorry. You're all just jealous that I got the looks in the group."

"Looks but no brains," Easton mocks under his breath, going back to his drawing.

Colt flips him off and continues to scroll on his phone while I sit by and watch Kennedy console a troubled Finn.

“Don’t listen to him, big guy. East is just in one of his moods today. Just enjoy your birthday present, okay? You like it, don’t you?”

Finn nods, a trace of a meek smile cresting his lips.

“How did you know?” he questions back at her.

“Last time we were over at your place, I saw an astronomy book in your room that looked worn out from months of reading. So, I thought we could help you get a better look at the stars instead of only reading about them.”

“I love it. But you’re right. I don’t think I can take it home. I don’t want Dad—”

“You don’t want your dad to think this is getting in the way of football,” she finishes for him with a patient smile.

He nods, defeated.

“It’s okay. He never has to find out. It will be our little secret. You can leave it here until you find somewhere else that you think is better to keep it. No one has to know but us.”

His eyes sparkle, making my chest tighten at how happy she’s made my friend with her words of encouragement, as well as the thoughtful gift.

“You need some help setting that up, Finn?” I ask him, getting up from the floor and heading toward them both.

“Sure,” he replies more cheerfully, Easton’s self-deprecating rant long forgotten.

It takes us about half an hour to put all the bits and bobs together, but soon the telescope is fully functional and ready to be enjoyed.

“This is so cool,” Finn exclaims, pointing his new toy up to the sky through the largest open window in our clubhouse.

“You won’t be able to see anything from that thing right now. It’s daytime, dufus,” Colt states from across the room. “No brains, my ass,” he mumbles the last part under his breath, but still loud enough that all of us can hear him.

“Shh, you.” Kennedy points a wagging finger at my cousin. “I’m sure East’s dad won’t mind throwing a few sleepover parties for us so Finn can come over and enjoy his telescope. I mean, that’s why he built this fortress in the first place. For you to have friends over, right East?”

“Dick doesn’t care for anything but Dick. He didn’t build this treehouse. He got a contractor to do it. This is all for my mom, not me.”

“Geez, you are such a downer today,” Kennedy retorts, shaking her head despondently, her fists perched on her hips. “You’ve been acting like a jerk since you came back from Pastor Jack’s church this morning. Did something happen there?”

“Nope,” he pops the ‘p’ at the end.

“Okay. Then why are you in such a bad mood? With us. With your dad —”

“He’s not my dad,” Easton interrupts coldly. “I’m Northside’s least favorite bastard. Or did you forget?”

At this, Kennedy’s accusing gaze and demeanor softens.

Although Easton has been a permanent fixture in Asheville for a few years now, there are still a few Northside elite that won’t let him forget he’s not welcomed. Tommyboy, for example, still finds ways to get under Easton’s skin every chance he gets, using the old taunt as a way to wound him. Something about the dark prince just rubs Tommyboy the wrong way, and he makes sure Easton is aware of it twenty-four seven.

“Hey, don’t listen to what Tom says. He’s just being a jackass,” Kennedy explains.

“Yeah, he can’t help it. Douche is the only language he knows,” Colt agrees, still scrolling through his phone.

“Whatever.” Easton shrugs, getting up from his preferred spot, discarding his drawing to turn on a video game. “You want to play, or are you too busy posting the latest selfie on the Gram?” he asks Colt.

“Move over, dickwad. Get ready to get your ass handed to you.”

“In your dreams, Turner.”

I smile at how my cousin bonds so easily with Easton now. From the first moment I met him, I knew Easton would be a good addition to our band of brothers. He’s just a little bit broken. A little bit flawed. A little bit jaded —*just like the rest of us.*

“What are you smiling about?” Kennedy asks in amusement, leaving Finn entertained with his telescope to sit down beside me.

“Just thinking about how I wish I didn’t have to go home in an hour.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Her face falls at the reminder that, sooner or later, we all have to leave our little, happy cocoon to return to our respective homes.

“How’s your mom?” I ask, nudging my knee with hers, knowing she’s the cause of Kennedy’s sudden melancholy.

“I’m not sure. One day she’s all bright and happy, and the next, she’s tired and impatient.”

I just nod.

There really isn’t much more I can say to console her.

Her mom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a few months ago and has been slowly deteriorating ever since. The day Dorethea’s pain ends will be the day Kennedy’s misery begins. Then she’ll be utterly alone in that great big house of hers with only her father and twin for company.

I shudder at the thought.

“Can we talk about something else?” she mutters softly, laying her head on my shoulder.

I instantly stiffen, feeling Colt’s indiscreet glances our way. It’s not that I don’t want Kennedy to lean on me. I just don’t want the endearment to hurt my cousin’s feelings.

He’s the only family I have that I care about.

Him and Mom, that is.

Of course, Finn, Easton, and Kennedy are my family too, but it’s still different.

They couldn’t possibly understand what our family dynamics are like. You’d have to be a Richfield to truly grasp what having that last name even means. It comes with its own set of rules and stipulations. While I do my due diligence of following them to a T, lately, Colt acts like he could give a rat’s ass. I admire my cousin for his bravado, but I’m not as valiant. That doesn’t mean if I were in his shoes that I would be afraid to rebel either. I wouldn’t bat an eye if our roles were reversed.

But while Colt’s only punishment for his defiance is his mom’s cold shoulder, mine, however, is far more vicious and lethal.

“Linc?” Kennedy whispers, her clear blue eyes expectantly staring at me. “Are you okay? You went quiet on me for a minute there.”

“I’m fine,” I tell her, looking into her deep, cloudless-sky eyes and getting momentarily lost in their ethereal beauty.

We stay like that, just staring into each other’s eyes until someone clears their throat and breaks our connection.

“I’m going to bounce,” Colt blurts out of the blue, dropping his controller and picking up his things in a hurry.

“We don’t have to go home for another hour.” I scowl.

“I have shit to do.”

“Like what? What could you possibly have to do back home?” *‘In that cold mausoleum of a house,’* I think to myself, but don’t dare say the words out loud.

“I just do, alright? Now, are you fucking coming or what?”

I kiss Kennedy’s temple, doing everything in my power to ignore her cute disappointed pout because I’m leaving early, and follow my cousin’s lead. I congratulate Finn again on his birthday and tell him that I look forward to the big party his parents are throwing for him tomorrow night. Easton fist bumps us on the way out while Kennedy hugs her knees to her chest, waving us goodbye.

“See you tomorrow, Ryland.” I wink.

“Not if I see you first, Hamilton.”

In a thick, stilted silence, Colt and I take the ladder down from the treehouse and grab our discarded bikes that we left lying on the ground. We start to pedal our way out of the Price Estate, and I begin to think this is as far as my cousin’s tantrum is going to go, only to realize how wrong I am when he screeches his bike to a halt, stopping not a half a mile away from the clubhouse.

I cross my arms, watching his fury continue to rise, waiting for him to say his piece like I know he’s dying to do.

“If you have something to say, just say it, Colt,” I order, still mounted on my bike.

“Why haven’t you kissed Kennedy yet?”

His question takes me aback, not really expecting him to get to the point so fast.

“Why haven’t you?” I counter on an even tone.

“Because last time I tried, she pushed me out of that goddamn treehouse and broke my arm, that’s why!”

“Is it pity you want from me? Because you’re not getting it, Colt. It’s your own damn fault that happened. You didn’t ask Ken if she wanted you to kiss her. You did the sleazy thing and tried to steal it from her. You should know by now that won’t work with Ken.”

“Sometimes you have to force people to give you what you want, with their consent or not.”

His arrogant words bring forth a sudden wave of anger, making me drop my bike to the dirt and rush toward him. I grab his T-shirt by the collar and push him against a nearby tree.

“That is not how you treat women, Colt! Let alone Ken! Don’t let me hear those words ever come out of your mouth again. You hear me? If I do, they will be the last ones you ever say! Do you understand me?!”

He nods, flabbergasted by my outburst.

I guess I would be, too, if I were on the other side of my rage. It’s not like I show it very often. I’m very careful about keeping my anger simmering just beneath the surface, maintaining a low enough heat that I alone can control. One that I can temper and keep hidden. One that won’t show the world how I’ve dreamed of slaying my demons and rejoicing in their spilled blood at my feet.

I know that Colt didn’t mean anything by his remark. I know my cousin would never hurt Kennedy or any girl in a million years, for that matter. But just the mention of force of any kind hits too close to home for me, and he should have known better than to go there.

Once I’ve gathered my composure, I break away from my cousin, knowing that my rage isn’t directed at him but at the monsters that dwell back at my house. Colt takes a minute to move past my sudden brash eruption and then shoves me on the chest.

“I’m sorry, okay? But just fucking kiss her already! Just be fucking done with it!”

“Stop it, Colt,” I order, but he just keeps pushing and pushing.

I grab him by the nape of his neck to stop him, bringing his forehead to press against mine, his ragged breathing fanning my cheeks.

“You like her. And as long as you do, as long as you have feelings for Ken, I won’t kiss her. Just get that into your thick skull, will you?”

“Jesus! What if I always like her? What are you going to do then?”

“You won’t,” I announce with certainty, but he just huffs unbelievably.

“Always so fucking sure of everything,” he mocks, but there is no malice in his tone now that he’s calmed down.

“I am.”

He shakes his head, but thankfully I feel his muscles start to relax, demonstrating the worst of it is over.

“You better pray you’re right. Because if one day comes along that she’s into me, I won’t be as chivalrous. I will kiss her, Linc. So don’t bitch about it when I do.”

“Noted.” I chuckle.

He picks up his bike but then stops to stare at me as I’m mounting mine.

“Linc?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you so sure that I’ll stop liking Ken?” He arches an inquisitive brow.

Instead of answering, I throw him a smile and start pedaling away from him until he has no choice but to follow me.

How can I be so sure that Colt will forget this little crush he has on Kennedy?

It’s very simple, really.

Kennedy Ryland is my destiny.

And nothing and no one will ever steal that away from me.

I’m as certain of that as I am of this cursed Richfield blood that runs through my veins.



“Good. You’re home. Go and check on what’s taking your mother so long to come down. We’re supposed to be having dinner with the senator and his wife at the country club in thirty minutes. I don’t want to be late,” my father announces, puffing on his Cuban cigar without so much as a glance my way.

I should be used to it by now.

He never looks at me.

That’s a lie.

He never looks at me, aside from the times when he’s breaking my spirit.

Then he never takes his eyes off me.

I don’t ask why he didn’t ask my brother to check up on Mom before I arrived since my father never orders Teddy to do anything he deems inconsequential. These menial tasks are left for me to deal with. Without a word back to him in reply, I walk up the stairs two at a time, knowing that it’s best I fulfill his demand quickly or bear his wrath. When I reach my parent’s bedroom, I push the ajar door fully open, the creak making my mother jump out of her vanity chair.

“Lincoln, you startled me,” she stutters, placing her hand over her beating heart.

“Sorry, Mom. Dad wants to know how long you’ll still be.”

“As long as it takes.” She sighs, straightening her back in the chair to face

the mirror once more.

As she proceeds to rub some sort of foundation on her throat, I walk closer to her and inspect the latest blemish she's trying so hard to conceal from the world. My father's digits are imprinted on her neck, the ugly bluish-purple bruises on her fair skin announcing that this new contusion is at least a day old. I trace a finger on his recent mark, Mom holding onto my wrist to stop my caress.

"Does it hurt?"

"No more than the others you can't see do," she laments.

"He shouldn't hurt you," I whisper, our eyes meeting in the mirror's reflection.

"Oh, my sweet boy, he shouldn't do a great number of things, and yet he still does. There isn't much I can do to stop him."

"You could leave," I mumble softly, only to watch her sullen expression turn cold.

"No, I can't."

"Why not? You're miserable. I'm miserable. Just run away and take me with you," I beg, my eyes starting to sting at the sides.

"Shh, sweet boy." She tries to silence me, grasping my hands in her trembling ones. "You mustn't say such things out loud. Not in this house. You know the walls have ears."

With her warning in the air, my gaze locks on the two-way mirror across the room, knowing that should anyone be on the other side of it right now, they would witness my attempt to convince my mother to flee with me. And since I left my father downstairs in the foyer, the only person who can be watching us right now is my brother.

He's always watching.

"I don't care. I want you to leave," I explain louder, hoping he hears every single word. I then turn my attention back to my mother and continue on, hoping she finally sees reason in my request. "Let's just go, Mom. Let's just leave and go somewhere he can never find us."

"Keep your voice down, Lincoln. Please, baby. If he hears you say those things..." she swallows her last words, true fear in her voice.

I'm about to ask who she is more afraid of—her husband or her eldest son—when the hint of warm, spicy cloves and the familiar earthy incense of my father's favorite cigar pollutes the air around us.

"Say what things?" my father asks, his very voice sending a cold chill

down my spine while my mother's expression pales.

"Nothing, Crawford." She smiles at him meekly, letting go of my hands. "I'll be down in a minute."

"You said that twenty minutes ago, and yet here you are. Now tell me, who were the two of you conspiring against?"

I square my shoulders and look my father dead in the eye, hoping Teddy hears every word if he's indeed watching us in the hidden passageways in our home's walls.

"I told Mom she should divorce you. She should leave you once and for all and take me with her."

My father's stare bounces from me to my mother for a fraction of a second, and then he begins to laugh.

The fucker always laughs at our pain.

Mom turns in her seat and reaches for the gin glass placed on top of her vanity, drinking all its contents in one smooth pull. I've told her a million times before that no amount of alcohol would be enough to numb the pain my father inflicts on us. Yet, my mother is determined to prove me wrong. She always has a bottle or a flask near her at all times, ready to give her liquid strength to endure her husband's cruelty. I, on the other hand, have yet to find such an outlet to dim my emotions.

Still finding my small act of insurgence hysterical, my father walks over to us with a broad grin on his face, stopping only when he's standing right behind my mother's chair. With my guard already up, I watch attentively as he presses his hands on my mother's shoulders, creeping up her bruised neck and placing his fingers on the marks he left on her porcelain skin.

"Your mother will never divorce me," he croons, his thumb gently caressing her flesh while his other fingers dig in deep into the side of her throat. "She'll never leave. She'll stay in this big house of ours like the good, obedient southern belle she pretends to be. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" He lowers his head to her ear, his eyes fixed on hers in the mirror's reflection. "Tell him why that is, Sierra. Tell your son why you will never run."

I swallow dryly, my hands curled into two fists at my sides, watching my mother's skin break out in hives from his touch. It's only when he applies more pressure to her neck, her eyes widening in dread, that I launch myself at the beast. I don't even get close to hurting him, though. With one slap across my cheek, I fall to the floor, my head hitting the hardwood so hard that the ringing sound in my head makes me dizzy.

“You want to know why she won’t leave?” he barks out before kicking me in the stomach. “Because her thirst for revenge is bigger than her self-preservation.”

Another kick.

“You see, your mother wants her big sister to see her pain, to see how she suffers day in and day out under my hand, and wallow in her own misery that she had a hand in your mother’s fate.”

Kick.

“Isn’t that right, my love? You want Colleen to live each day burdened with the guilt of what she did to you.”

Kick.

“Even if that means living in hell itself. Even if it means having your son suffer the same plight.”

Kick.

“Now tell me, wife, which one of us will burn in hell first for our sins? You or me?”

Cradling my ribs, I swallow back the tears that want to come out, knowing that if I shed even one, it will only add to his satisfaction.

“You have five minutes to get ready, Sierra, or I’ll leave without you. And trust me, if that happens, you won’t want to be around when I return.”

She gives him a curt nod, flinching when he kisses her cheek. I stare at his retreating form, only to switch my attention back to my mother once I’ve made sure he’s gone.

“Lincoln, my sweet boy, are you alright?” she asks in panic, jumping out of her seat to kneel beside me and examine the damage my father caused.

“Is it true? Are we living under his cruel thumb just so you can punish Aunt Colleen in some way?” I spit back, my ribs burning like hell in my chest with every word I utter.

She doesn’t reply, still carefully assessing if any of my ribs are broken. Bile forms in my throat at how good she has become at identifying such things.

“Mom, answer me!”

My yelled plea is like a slap to her face, making her get up from the floor and sit back on her chair.

“Go to bed and rest so your wounds can heal. You can’t be seen tomorrow at the Walkers looking hurt. People will ask questions, and there’s a limit to how many times you can say you fell off your bike.”

On wobbly knees, I stand back up, cradling my bruised ribs with my arm.

“Just answer me. Please, Mom. Why can’t we leave?”

“You wouldn’t understand, Lincoln. You’re still a boy. Too young to fully comprehend certain things, and even if you weren’t, I hardly have the time to explain them to you now,” she rebukes, adding more makeup to the spots on her skin that he rubbed off at rapid speed.

“Mom—”

“Just stop it, Lincoln! This is my fate. My life. My sister made sure of it.”

“So, it’s true?” I stammer gobsmacked. “All of this is because of some twisted spite you have against Aunt Colleen?”

“No. I had my revenge on my sister before you were ever born. This is my penance for sinking to her level. I’ve made peace with that.”

I shake my head, utterly confused.

“I don’t understand.”

“There is nothing for you to understand. All I ask is you not bring this subject up again. No talk of divorce. No talk about leaving. Not yet, at least. Maybe when you graduate from high school and go off to college and Teddy has his own life, then I can think about escaping this house. Not before.”

I open my mouth, but the look of resolve in her stellar blue eyes silences all my words. She stands from her chair, looking every bit as beautiful as Aphrodite herself in her champagne cocktail dress. At thirty-four, my mother is still considered the most beautiful woman in all of the Carolinas—one of Richfield’s prized jewels.

“How do I look?”

“Beautiful, Mom. As always.”

I bow my head in disillusion, only to lift it back up when she places a comforting hand on my cheek.

“Looking this way is both a gift and a curse, you know? Beauty clouds people’s perception of us. Not many will want to know more than what is already out there in the open. People will see only what they want to see. Make sure, whatever that is, that it’s to your benefit. Not theirs. Do you understand, Lincoln?”

My brows pinch together as I’m unable to make sense of what she is trying to tell me.

“Come here,” she says, hugging me to her side until we’re both facing the two-way glass.

“Take a good look at us, my sweet boy. What do you see?”

Two lost souls who will end up dying in this house.

“Lincoln? What do you see?” she repeats, unaware of the turbulent thoughts in my head.

“I see a son who loves his mom,” I confess, trying my best to keep my tears at bay.

The smile that tugs at her lips is genuine this time.

“I see the same thing, my darling boy. But I also see something else.”

“What?”

“Perseverance.” She smiles. “Where others might look at us and be dazzled by our looks and our last name, we both know something they don’t.”

“And what’s that, Mom?”

“That you and I are far more resilient than anyone realizes. We are both clever, patient, and persistent, too. Traits that will do us well in the end. I’m sure of it.”

She bends down to kiss my cheek before walking out the door, a self-assured grin now plastered on her face. I’m about to follow her and go to my room to see for myself what damage my father did to me this time, when a loud thud stops me in my tracks. I turn around and see that one of our family portraits hanging on the wall beside the two-way mirror has fallen to its death on the floor.

I don’t have to see Teddy, to know he’s here with me and what he must be thinking.

It doesn’t matter how clever Mom thinks I am. He will always be two steps ahead of me.

If my father doesn’t kill me first, then eventually, my brother will.

Chapter 3



Kennedy

“This is bullshit.” My brother seethes, pulling bits of grass from their roots only to throw the broken strands as far away from him as he can.

Instead of agreeing with him, I continue to sit in silence, leaning against one of the large hickory trees that surround our estate while watching another car pull out of our driveway.

This time it’s Finn’s parents who are leaving our home after having their one-on-one visit with my mother. I catch a glimpse of Charlene Walker wiping away the tears that cling to her eyes, completely unaware that both Jeff and I can see her pain perfectly clear from where we’re seated.

“They’re all acting like she’s dead already,” Jeff spits out in disgust. “How is Mom supposed to fight and beat this thing if everyone around her is counting down the days until she kicks the bucket?”

“No one is doing that,” I retort with a somber sigh. “This was Mom’s idea, remember? She wants to make sure she gets a chance to say a proper goodbye before... before...”

Before she can’t anymore.

Jefferson may act as if he’s in denial about our mother’s true condition, but I know deep down he’s fully aware that she’s a lost cause to us now. It’s only a matter of time before she leaves us for good.

Still, even though it pains me to admit it, Jeff’s callous remark isn’t too far-fetched either. There are some people who seem like they just want this all to end, even if that means my mother dying sooner rather than later.

My father being one of them.

Lately, he’s been acting like Mom having cancer is one great, big hassle for him. He hardly spends much time with her anymore, blaming his busy work schedule as the reason behind his absence. But I’m not convinced his

excuse holds water. Aunt Colleen would be fine with my father taking a leave of absence at the university to take care of his wife in her final days. In fact, I'm positive the reason why my mother's best friend has been extra cold with him lately is because Dad hasn't been the rock my mother has needed him to be during this difficult time. But then again, Aunt Colleen has never been a big fan of my father's. And by the way he's been acting all aloof and distant with Mom lately, I have to say he's not my favorite person right now either.

"Do you think she's going to call us any time soon?" Jefferson asks, his voice uncharacteristically small.

"I don't know," I answer truthfully.

"But she should, right? I mean, if she makes time for all these fake parasites, she must have something special planned for us."

"I'm sure she does. I bet she's worked hard on a nursery rhyme just for us."

My optimistic words coax a minuscule spark of life in my twin's pale blue eyes. You would have to be extremely familiar with his gaze to even point it out, but I see it clear as day. When Mom dies, I will suffer terribly, of that I'm sure. But when she leaves, only God knows if that little glint in Jefferson's eye will even survive. Then again, Jeff is probably thinking the same thing about me.

"If no one shows up in the next half hour, I'm going in," he states with conviction.

"By the looks of it, you're going to have to wait a little longer," I explain when a familiar Rolls Royce pulls up.

I begin to stand up, only to cringe when I see the grass stains on my spring sunflower dress. If my father sees me like this, he'll ground me for sure. Nothing gets under his skin more than Jefferson and I embarrassing him in front of Momma's friends—especially if those friends hold the last name Richfield.

I let out a breath of disappointment when the only two people that exit the car are Governor Crawford Hamilton and his wife, Sierra. No Lincoln in sight.

"Sit down," Jeff orders coldly, pulling me by the wrist and forcing me to sit back on the grass. "Your BFF isn't coming. None of them are."

"Why not?" I grumble, snapping my wrist out of his hold and wrapping my arms around my knees, pulling them to my chest.

"Because," my twin retorts with an arrogant tone as if I should know the

answer to that question. “Their parents want to keep the illusion that they will all live forever. That’s kind of hard to do when one of their own is lying on their deathbed.”

I hate it when he talks down to me like this. As if I’m too dumb to understand certain grown-up things, while he just understands *everything*. Although I’m the older twin by ten whole minutes, Jeff is definitely more mature than me. Not that it’s surprising to anyone. He’s always beaten me in every major milestone. He was the first to start walking, to start talking, even the first to learn how to ride a bike. Somehow, I always managed to come in second place to him. Which is fine by me. I really couldn’t care less, especially considering that any time I do come in first, he makes me regret taking the limelight away from him. He can keep it for all I care. The only thing I don’t like is when Dad boasts that Jefferson got all brains while I was merely blessed with beauty.

It’s not true.

I’m just as smart as Jefferson is when I want to be. And my twin is just as pretty as I am, if not more. Heck, put a dress on him, and no one could probably tell us apart. It irks me to no end that my own father sees me as nothing more than a pretty face while he deems my twin superior to me in every way that counts.

One day, I’ll show them both how wrong they are in underestimating me.

“He’s fucking her, you know?” Jeff tilts his chin toward Lincoln’s mom, bringing me back from my reverie.

“Who is?” I ask instead of reprimanding him for cussing.

“Dad.”

“You’re lying!” I spout indignantly.

“I’m not. I saw them with my own two eyes,” he explains, wiggling two fingers just inches away from my eyes.

“I don’t believe you,” I whisper-yell after slapping his hand away from my face. “Dad wouldn’t do that to Mom. Especially when she’s—”

“When she’s what? Dying? Don’t be so fucking naive, Sis. He never cared about our mother throughout their whole marriage. Why should he start now when he’s so close to getting the ball and chain off his ankle? The only reason why our father even married Mom was for her trust fund. That and because she was Colleen’s best friend. He just had to stick it to her.”

“What are you talking about? And how do you even know all this stuff?” I question, aghast, wondering how the hell my brother came up with this

crazy theory in the first place.

“It’s simple. I listen.” He sharpens his gaze on me with a razor edge grin. “You’d be surprised what adults talk about when they think you’re too young and stupid to understand them. I’ve known Dad isn’t worth a pot to piss in since I was eight years old. It’s time you open your eyes and see exactly what type of man he is and stop your idiotic attempts at trying to get his approval. Because when Mom dies, we’re both going to be at his mercy, and I’m telling you now, it won’t be pretty.”

“Just stop talking!” I shout at him, placing my hands over my ears to tune his ugly words out.

Unfortunately for me, Jeff is having none of it. He grabs my wrists and forcefully pulls my hands away from my ears, his face just a hair’s breadth away from my own.

“Wake up, dear sister! You are going to have to eventually, so it’s about time you get your head out of your ass and realize the world we live in and who actually pulls our strings. Stop daydreaming about fucking prince charming or whatever useless nonsense swims in that shallow head of yours and start playing the game.”

“What game?!” I blurt out, confused.

“The one everyone else is playing but us,” he explains coldly, his crystal blue eyes searing into mine.

“I don’t understand,” I reply, shaking my head profusely.

“Then don’t you think it’s about time that you did? With Mom having one foot in her grave, ready to leave us all alone, the time for being a kid is over. Open up those pretty little eyes of yours, Ken, and see for yourself what Asheville is really like. The minute that you do, you’ll never be the same again. I have to warn you, though. Once you’ve had a peek behind the curtain, you can’t go back. But I know you—the real you. You won’t want to go back either, and instead of being just another pawn in their chess match, you’ll do everything in your power to be their queen.”

I place my hands on his chest and push him away, Jeff landing on his ass a few inches away from me, busting a gut laughing.

“God, why do you have to be this way?”

“Don’t act like you’re better. I know you’re not.” He continues to chuckle at my expense.

“Do you have to be such an asshole because you hate everyone?”

“No.” His mocking features suddenly turn somber. “I don’t hate Mom,”

he answers truthfully, bringing a pang to my chest.

“And what about me? Do you hate me?”

“Some days.” He shrugs unrepentantly, making me maul my bottom lip at his honesty.

“What about you? Do you hate me?” He throws the question back at me.

“Some days,” I reply, coaxing a smile to his lips.

“But not today, huh?”

I shake my head. “No, Brother. Not today.”

“Good. I don’t hate you today, either. Although that might have changed if Lincoln were here.”

“Why?” I question, my forehead wrinkling in confusion.

“Because he makes you stupid.”

“I am not stupid, Jeff!” I growl, punching him in the shoulder.

“You are when he’s around. You don’t see anything else, even if it’s smacked dab right in front of your face. You would have known that his mom was fucking our dad long before I ever did if you weren’t so goddamn blind. Even Teddy agrees with me.”

“Wait! Teddy knows?”

“Who do you think told me to come over to the Hamilton Estate to catch our dad with his pants down?” Jeff goads, looking all too pleased with himself and his ally.

“I don’t like you spending time with Teddy, Jeff. There’s something I don’t trust about him. He’s not right in the head.”

“And we are?” He cackles, falling all the way back onto the grass.

“I’m serious, Jeff.” I fall beside him, so I can whisper in his ear. “Teddy’s not good, and he’s smarter than us. And like Mom always says, a smart man with cruel intentions is a dangerous one.”

Jeff’s eyes start to twinkle again, rolling onto his side, so we are face to face.

“Maybe you’re not as blind as I thought you were, Sister. And you’re right. Teddy is as clever as they come. But he’s no match for us, Ken. Just remember that.”

I open my mouth to object when my father’s voice calls out from behind us in a loud thunderous shout.

I look over my shoulder and see him standing at our front door, hands on his hips, snarl across his lips.

Dammit.

“Come on before the fucker has a coronary,” Jefferson mutters, pulling me by the hand until we are both on our feet.

My white dress is officially green, and my hair is a tousled, hot mess with strands of grass in it. Jeff doesn't look any better either, but unlike me, he doesn't seem to care much that our father is sure to bite our heads off with how disheveled we look. Slowly, we make our way back to our house, my gaze trained on the way my father is tapping his foot in aggravation.

“She wants to see you.” My father's tone is harsh as his scrutinizing gaze skates over me and my twin's appalling appearance. Thankfully, he doesn't say a word about the way we look, but I'm sure once everyone has gone home, we both will hear an earful.

“Already? But isn't Momma with Linc's parents right now?” I ask, confused.

“They've left.”

“That was fast. Guess they didn't have much to say, huh? I wonder why that is?” Jefferson chimes in, his voice filled with feigned curiosity, when we both know the truth.

If what Jefferson said about Sierra and our father is true, then it's no wonder she wouldn't want to extend her visit with the woman she is currently backstabbing by sleeping with her husband. The only reason I can think of for Sierra coming here at all was because it would look suspicious if Governor Hamilton didn't pay his respects to one of Asheville's most cherished daughters. And he wouldn't miss the political opportunity even if he had to drag his wife here to ensure it. My stomach twists in disgust at both of them.

“We don't have all day,” my father explains, turning his back to us and walking into the house.

Both Jeff and I follow him in, my heartbeat accelerating in my chest, not wanting this to be the last conversation I have with my mother. I swallow dryly as I walk over to the living room that has been adapted to be my mother's bedroom once she became too weak to walk up the stairs. As we reach the closed double doors, my breath pauses for a split second, and I wish I could run in the other direction and not go in.

I don't want to say goodbye.

I don't want the image of my mother lying on her deathbed to be the last thing I remember of her.

I don't want this to be the last time she tells me she loves me.

I don't want any of it.

My hesitation must be palpable because Jeff entwines his fingers with mine, his silent way of giving me strength to face my fears.

Today, he loves me.

I give his hand a little return squeeze, thanking him for being at my side when I need him most. Jeff begins to inch closer to the doors when my father presses his hand on his chest, stopping him from taking another step.

“Not you. She only wants to talk to your sister. You’ll get your turn afterward.”

I blink rapidly at my father’s words and see the hurt in my twin’s eyes that they provoked.

“It’s okay, Sis. I’ll go after.” He tries to smile at me, even though the sentiment never reaches his eyes.

I nod and open the doors just wide enough to slide in and then proceed to close them shut. I stare at the oak door, unwilling to turn around just yet. The room smells like death, announcing it won’t be much longer now.

“There’s my girl,” Mom greets sweetly behind me, her voice threatening to become a distant memory.

I count to five and then turn around, hoping the smile I have stitched on my face is enough to fool my mother and ease her concerns that I’ll be okay without her. I keep my fake grin intact even when I realize that we’re not the only ones in the room. My godmother, Colleen Richfield Turner, is right by Mom’s side, her cool demeanor not showing one single crack in it.

In retrospect, I shouldn’t be surprised to see Colt’s mom here. She and my mom have been best friends forever and a day. In fact, the running joke in Asheville is that if Colleen had been given a choice to pick the person she deemed fit to share the Richfield legacy with, it would have been my Mom and not her sister, Sierra. The two, as far as I know, have never truly gotten along, whilst Aunt Colleen and my mother have been glued at the hip since they were little girls.

Unlike the rest of the Northside, I understand Aunt Collen perfectly on that front.

We can’t choose who our blood is, but we can choose *our family*.

“You wanted to see me, Momma?” I ask at last, once I’m sure my voice is steady.

“Yes. Come here and sit next to me, sweetheart. We have so much to talk about,” she says, patting the small empty space on her bed. On lead feet, I

walk over and take my seat next to her, trying desperately not to show the sadness in my eyes when she begins to play with a strand of my hair.

“How are you, Kennedy?”

“I’m okay,” I lie, widening my smile even though it hurts my cheeks.

“That’s good. That’s really good, my darling girl,” she replies with a weak breath, and I don’t miss the quick glance she gives Colleen standing beside her.

“What did you want to talk to me about, Momma?” I ask hesitantly, wondering if this is when she’s going to go on a tangent about how she will always love me and that she will be watching over me from a place I’ll never be able to reach when I need her.

“I have a question to ask you. Tell me, Kennedy, if you had to choose between doing what’s right and doing what comes easy, what would you choose?”

My forehead creases, confused with the out-of-left-field question.

“I don’t understand.”

“Dorethea—” Colleen begins, but my mother raises her hand up just enough to stop her next words from coming out.

“I’ll phrase my question differently. Have you ever heard the expression that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing?”

I nod, my perplexed gaze bouncing from my mother’s sky-like blue eyes to Colleen’s arctic ones.

“I think so. John F. Kennedy said it in one of his speeches. He’s my namesake, right?”

“You’re completely right, my darling girl. He is. But in truth, when JFK wrote that speech, he had been inspired by a great eighteen-hundreds philosopher called John Stuart Mill, who shared in his beliefs,” my mother explains in a patient tone, even though I’m not quite understanding where she’s going with this.

“Let not any one pacify his conscience by the delusion that he can do no harm if he takes no part, and forms no opinion. Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing. He is not a good man who, without a protest, allows wrong to be committed in his name, and with the means which he helps to supply, because he will not trouble himself to use his mind on the subject,” Aunt Colleen recites word for word as if she’s committed the address to memory.

I feel the weight of both women's stares on me as if a boulder has been suddenly placed on my shoulders.

"Do you consider yourself to be good, Kennedy? Truly good?" my mother asks, brushing my hair away from my eyes with her fingers.

I open my mouth then close it shut, not sure which answer is the right one. Especially after the conversation I just had with Jefferson outside, I'm not so sure that I am good at all.

"Did you understand the question? There is no right or wrong answer, sweetheart. I just need to hear you say it."

"Either you are, or you're not, child. Just give your mother an answer," Colleen snaps impatiently.

"I am," I finally say, my spine going ramrod straight.

"And would you be prepared to prove that? For me?" my mother interrogates, a gleam in her eye that I've seen before in my own mirror's reflection.

"I'd do anything for you, Momma."

"That's good, sweetheart. That's so good," she praises, leaning in to kiss my cheek only to slant her eyes in triumph back at Colt's mom afterward.

But instead of the stoic, cold demeanor that I'm used to from my godmother, she looks out of her depth in worry.

"She's too young, Dorethea. Don't do this. Not yet," she says in warning.

"I won't be here when it is time. This way, she knows what to expect. If I can't be the one to teach her, then at least I want to be the one to induct her."

They are talking in riddles.

Just like Jeff was outside.

"Kennedy, be a dear and go to the bookstand for me. There is something there I need you to have."

Still confused, I get off the bed and start walking across the room over to the bookshelves that adorn most of the wall. But as I do so, I catch a glimpse of my brother's hair out the window. He must have gone back outside and run to the back of the house just to hear what my mother had to say to me in private.

I listen.

That's what he said.

And now I'm beginning to understand the value of the skill. There are so many secrets all around us, and to get down to the truth, sometimes we have to do underhanded things to make sure we know what is truly going on

around us.

Like he said outside, the time for being a kid is over, and somehow, my gut tells me that whatever my mother is going to show me next will ensure I'll never be a child again.

"What am I looking for?" I ask, my eyes tracing the rows of books in front of me.

"Look for Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

My trembling fingers trace the spines of each book until they land on the title in question. I take a deep breath before plucking it from its resting place.

"Open it," my mother instructs, and on bated breath, I do as she commands.

"What's this?" I ask after discovering a well-worn letter tucked in between its pages.

"Your destiny."



Two days.

That's how long I had left with my mother after that fateful afternoon.

Only two days to wrap my arms around her neck and beg her not to leave me.

Of course, asking for such a thing would have been childish and foolish on my part, so I refused to show her such weakness in the end, but to my chagrin, I did hold out hope that maybe I would still have a few more days, maybe weeks, with her before we said our final goodbyes.

Unfortunately, all I got were another measly forty-eight hours, half of which Mom was too tired to carry on any type of conversation. It's almost as if she knew her time was up and used all her strength to give me one more insightful piece of advice. As if to guarantee I would start viewing the world through her eyes instead of using the blinders I had become accustomed to wearing.

And now that they are off, I'll never be able to see things quite the same way again.

Jeff was on to something all along, but I doubt even he was aware of how vile and abhorrent the place we call home truly is. It's never been a secret that Asheville favors its elite above all others. It opens its arms to anyone whose bank account merits its approval while turning its back on everyone else it

deems unworthy. While Northside boasts at being the one-percenters favorite playground to inhabit, all I see now are vultures and leeches in one stomping ground, perfect for someone to come along and annihilate them once and for all.

Even now, as these snakes mingle throughout my home, hours after my beloved mother has been buried in the ground, they don't show a hint of shame or remorsefulness as they drink their alcohol and feast on the spread of food laid out for them. To these same privileged bastards, my mother's wake is nothing more than a perfect excuse to gather in one place and rub elbows with whoever suits their immediate needs best, be it for business purposes or social ones.

The perfect example of this is how even though my father has just lost his wife to cancer, most of the guests here have crowded and showered Colleen Richfield Turner with their shallow-felt condolences instead of seeking him out to pay their respects. Not even Jefferson or I have gotten half of the same sympathetic statements of endearment for our loss as my godmother has.

And that's all because she holds a power that they all flock to and crave for, while me, my twin, and my father have nothing to offer them. Especially now that my mother is no longer around. She was our only link to the Richfields, and now that she's gone, they are on the fence if the affluent prestigious family will take us under their wing or discard us completely. And since no one in attendance has the gift of foresight, they'd rather lie waiting on the sidelines until it's clear what favor we hold.

Since it's common knowledge that Colt's mom despises my father, and she only put up with him and accepted him into the fold for my mom's sake, I can't see fault in their reasoning. I am, however, sickened by their thought process entirely. How terribly despicable must a person's heart be to not want to console two grieving children who just lost their mother but see an opportunity to win brownie points with her best friend?

Amongst the cruel, heartless savages, there are still a handful of people that haven't lost their souls completely. They are what I've dubbed in my head to be the exception to the Northside's rule of thumb of greed.

Since my Mom passed away last week, Finn's mom and her cook, Martha, have made sure to be here from sunup to sundown, in the kitchen cooking up a storm and filling our fridge with more food than it's physically possible to consume in the coming months.

Easton's mom, Naomi, has also dropped by to help Charlene, even

though she tends to spend most of her time sitting outside with me by my favorite hickory tree. We don't talk about feelings or the tumultuous thoughts that rummage through my head. Nevertheless, she remains there for me, even if I don't say a word or shed one single tear.

Naomi hasn't said anything, but I know it troubles her that I haven't been able to cry. How can I, though? When all I feel is this immense anger burning inside me that a loving, kind soul like my mother has perished when the greedy and unscrupulous are still alive and kicking?

I hate them all.

Luckily for me, the woman who I have focused most of my hate on only popped in long enough this week to drop her sons off at our place, showing that at least she has one ounce of decency in her body not to overstay her welcome. Good thing, too, because I'm not sure I could keep up the pretense that I'm clueless to what she and my father were up to as my mother faded away before my very eyes. In fact, most of the time I sat in silence in my front yard, I spent it imagining how I'd like nothing more than to gut Sierra's pretty eyes out with a spoon and force-feed my father his mistress' blue eyes until he gagged and choked on them.

These violent thoughts should scare me, but they don't.

In fact, they do the very opposite.

They allow me to breathe and not give in to my grief.

It's only when Lincoln arrives that my judgment becomes impaired and hazy. He blinds me with his light and with his love, and for that small window of time when he has his arms around me, hugging me ever so tightly, my mind and heart are no longer afflicted with such vengeful thoughts.

Only Lincoln holds court in my heart.

And I'm beginning to wonder if that's a good thing.

Maybe my brother was right.

Lincoln does make me stupid.

So stupidly crazy in love that I've failed to see the ugliness my world holds.

And as much as I love my king, I'll never be blind again.

I can't be.

Not if I'm to fulfill my mother's last dying wish.

That's all that matters to me now.

And not even my love for Lincoln can stop me.

Chapter 4



Lincoln

“Rumor has it that you’re showing Meredith the ropes in regards to the Richfield Foundation,” my father states, slicing into his steak as if the piece of red meat has personally offended him.

Aunt Colleen, however, doesn’t register his remark as she continues to eat her salad, not even bothering to lift her eyes off her plate. My cousins all continue to talk animatedly amongst themselves, while my sole attention is on the bulging vein on my father’s forehead that is threatening to pop at any second.

“Well, Colleen? Is it true?” my father repeats, his tone starting to show signs of his impatience.

My aunt lets out an annoyed sigh and finally directs her cold stare to my father.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, Meredith has started her induction.”

“How can you sit there and say it’s no concern of mine?” my father announces, aggravated, the sound of his falling cutlery hitting the side of his plate making me nervously shift in my seat. “Shouldn’t Theodore be the one being inducted first? He is the eldest heir after all.”

“Just because he was born a few months before Meredith doesn’t give him any special privileges,” she counters before going back to her lunch.

“That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard.” My father slams his fist on the table, making everyone sitting around him go instantly silent. “My son has every right to get acquainted with the family’s business just as much as your daughter does. If not more, since he is the first *male* heir in this family.”

My aunt cleans the corners of her lips with her napkin, not one bit perturbed by my father’s outcry.

“Come to think of it, Crawford, I think you might be right for once. It’s about time your son starts learning his way around our family’s foundation, too. It’s just as much his legacy as it is Meredith’s.”

“So, it’s decided?” he questions with a hint of suspicion to his tone.

“It is.” She grins back.

My father’s lips grow into a smug smile, his shoulders instantly relaxing that he got his way.

“I must say that you’re usually not this amiable. Good to see that the years are starting to mellow you out, Colleen,” he adds, pleased, raising his glass of red wine in my aunt’s direction at the head of the table.

“All that the years have taught me is to be patient with the likes of you.”

“Sweetheart,” Uncle Owen interjects softly from the other end of the table, trying his best to salvage this family lunch.

Not that there is much to save anyway. This whole lunch is one big charade, yet like clockwork, every first Sunday of every month, we all gather for a meal at the Richfield Estate so that we can show Asheville that we Richfields are a united front and not to be trifled with.

It’s all for show, though. A failed attempt to squash the rumors that Colt’s parents and mine can’t stand each other. Everyone knows that my father hates my aunt with a passion, while she, in turn, makes no attempt to hide the disdain she has for him.

I understand why he hates my Aunt Colleen so much, though.

He resents my aunt for holding power over Asheville—power he believes is his by right as governor. The thing is, no matter who is holding public office, the citizens of Asheville will always look to the head of the Richfield family to solve whatever issue or problems they have. No elected official can come close to decades of such ingrained tradition and heritage. It’s been this way since the first settlers holding our family crest arrived in the Carolinas, and I doubt it will ever change, even a hundred years from now.

Hence why my father is so eager to get Teddy started in the family business as soon as possible. The great Governor Crawford Hamilton has grown weary of playing second fiddle to my aunt. With my older brother at the helm of the Richfield Foundation and him in his prestigious office seat, Asheville will finally give him the respect he feels he deserves. A respect that previously was only attributed to people who held the name Richfield.

“It’s settled then. Theodore can start as early as Monday. Once he’s finished with his classes, he can come over and start learning with Meredith.”

“No, he cannot,” my aunt deadpans.

“But you said—” my father sputters in confusion.

“I said I agreed with you that your son should be inducted. I didn’t say anything about it being Theodore. Lincoln will start having lessons with me instead.”

My father rises from his seat, his chair falling to the ground in a loud thump.

“You must be joking?!”

“When have I ever given you the impression that I joke regarding anything?” she retorts coolly.

“No! No! No! I won’t have it!”

“Frankly, I don’t care. I’ve made up my mind, and that’s final.”

“Do you really expect me to accept this? To roll over and let a bast—,” he starts to shout, only to be interrupted by another slam of a fist on the table.

“Enough!” Uncle Owen yells, now up on his feet. “Be very careful with your next words, Crawford. You are merely a guest in our home, and I’m not above kicking you out, family or not. I’d tread carefully with what you say next if I were you,” my uncle adds with a threatening undertone in his voice.

“You wouldn’t fucking dare!” my father growls, his nostrils flaring in fury.

“Wouldn’t I?” Uncle Owen throws him a lopsided menacing grin. “Throwing you out of my home and making you the laughing stock of Asheville would be the least of your worries. Remember, all that you have can be taken away just like that.” He snaps his fingers to drive the point home.

“You think you can threaten me?! You have no idea what I can do to all of you!”

“Big words for such a little, beady-eyed man.” My aunt yawns in boredom. “Sit down, Crawford. You’re embarrassing yourself, and I’ve had enough of your tantrums for one day. My sister may not have the ability to make you heel, but I do. Remember who really holds the strings in this family.”

“How can I forget when you throw it in my face every chance you get?!”

“I wouldn’t have to if you just knew your place and acted like the good little lapdog you’re supposed to be.”

My father seethes with rage, his whole face turning an ugly shade of red, while my eyes bug out of their sockets.

No one speaks like that to my father. No one.

Yet here are both my uncle and my aunt in true unity telling him what's what.

Not that I'm surprised with Aunt Colleen's behavior. She's never been afraid of him. Not even once. She knows exactly what words will hurt and humiliate him most. I wish she didn't say anything else, though. For every taunt she swings his way, my mother will be the one on the receiving end of his wrath. As sure as the sun rose this morning in the east, my father will take his vengeance out on my mother's bruised body before the sun has time to set in the west.

"Father, sit down," Teddy unexpectedly chimes in, stunning us all. "We should respect Aunt Colleen's decision regarding all family affairs. If she believes Lincoln to be the better choice, then we must accept her decision. My apologies, Aunt Colleen, for my father's ungentlemanly behavior. Please excuse his temper. He just wants to do right by his son. I'm sure you can understand that."

I swallow dryly, watching my brother and my father stare into each other's eyes, silently communicating with one another. My mother instantly snakes her hand on top of my lap and grabs my hand, squeezing it so tightly my knuckles crack.

We've both seen father and son in sync before, and the outcome is never pretty.

They have something up their sleeves. I just don't know what.

On bated breath, we watch my father pick his chair up off the floor and take his seat as if nothing has passed. I sit there motionless while my aunt's scrutinizing gaze takes in every inch of my brother's calm features. Her schooled expression gives nothing away regarding her inner thoughts, but when Teddy offers her one of his razor-blade grins, I catch a slight tremor on her upper lip. It happens so quickly that I convince myself it must have been my imagination playing tricks on me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I watch a slow, ominous smile creep up on my aunt's face.

"I'm glad to see at least one Hamilton here has some manners."

"My apologies, Colleen. It must have been the wine talking," my father mumbles through gritted teeth before taking a large gulp of said wine.

No one at this table believes his repentance, but no one is eager to chuck out the fake olive branch either. Any excuse is valid to keep the peace.

"Tell me, Mer, have you been enjoying your studies with the Richfield

Foundation so far?” Teddy asks, going back to his food while redirecting everyone’s attention off of him and onto my eldest cousin.

Meredith looks to her mother first, and when my aunt offers her a clipped nod, she squares her shoulders and unabashedly takes Teddy on with the same cool air about her that her mother holds.

“I have.”

“And has it been as educating and informative as you assumed?”

“It has.”

“Come now, Mer. You’ve never been shy in your opinions before. I’m very interested in what my brother is about to learn in my stead. With you at his side, I’m sure you’ll do everything in your power to help him keep up and learn everything he needs to know. Or at least we all hope he rises to the occasion, don’t we?”

My back molars grind at his condescending, arrogant smile, but I know better than to take the bait.

“Teddy’s right, Mer. I’d love to hear your first impressions in regards to your induction,” I say instead, ignoring my brother’s glower and giving Meredith a genuine smile.

Her shoulders instantly relax now that I’m the one who is interested in her feedback.

“It has been extremely eye-opening. There are so many families and small businesses that need our financial aid right now. I’m especially eager to concentrate more of the foundation’s focus on the Southside, since that part of Asheville is still in shambles from last year’s hurricane. I’ve been spending all of my free time from school there taking inventory of all the damage. And I have to admit that I was very disturbed to see that over eighty percent of the residents didn’t have the means to rebuild their homes after the catastrophic event. Most families have either opted to live in dire and inhumane conditions and make due as best they can, or abandon their homes altogether and start fresh somewhere else. It’s a travesty in this day and age that Asheville’s citizens are living in such squalor.”

“You sound very passionate about the cause, cousin. However, I hate to be the one to burst your bubble, but the Southside has always been a wreck, long before Hurricane Simon came barreling through,” Teddy interjects, killing the enthusiastic light in Meredith’s eyes.

“All the more reason for us to help,” she retorts back in her stern demeanor.

“I disagree. Why should our family’s foundation enable such reckless and lazy mindsets? The Southside likes to live in the mud and filth. You going over there, acting like you can lift them out of the gutter, will only result in you getting your hands dirty for your troubles.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth. Most of the world doesn’t enjoy such privileged upbringings,” she quips, with a bite in her tone.

“What can I say? The Lord helps those who help themselves.”

“Careful there, Teddy. The Lord is also fond of striking down the blasphemous.”

The sneer curling my brother’s lip has its own pulse. I can almost hear it beat all the way across the table from where I’m sitting.

“Good thing I’m not the church-going type then.”

“That’s because you’d probably burst into flames if you tried.” Meredith smiles overly sweet at him.

“Are you implying that I’m some sort of devil?” He grins, pleased with the comparison.

“You’re no angel, that’s for goddamn sure,” she replies through clenched teeth.

“I’m sure most of the Northside says the same about you, sweet cousin,” Teddy counters, his piercing blue eyes carving a hole into Meredith’s forehead. “I’ve never heard the term angel being used to describe you. Now, *stuck-up bitch* on the other hand—”

“Lay off, Teddy,” Colt snaps, having had enough of my brother’s shit.

“What did I say? I thought we were having a pleasant meeting of opposing minds.”

“No, you were being a dick. As usual.”

“Stop it, Colt,” Meredith interrupts before Colt says something he might regret. “I’m no damsel in distress that needs her younger brother to fight her battles for her. I do just fine on my own.”

“That you do, Mer. That you do.” Teddy beams, as if he’s eager for the challenge that Meredith will bring him.

I can see it as clear as day in his eyes. He knows that Meredith is the only one he has to bulldoze over to get his prize—the Richfield crown that he so craves.

When it’s evident that neither my aunt, uncle, nor my father is going to stop Teddy or Meredith from biting their heads off—undoubtedly wanting to

see who the victor of this feud will be—I open my mouth to say something, only to slam it shut when someone else beats me to the punch.

“I heard... I heard the country club is bringing in a new tennis instructor for summer break. Isn’t... isn’t that nice?” my mother blurts out, the timbre of her voice all sorts of shaky and awkward. “When Colleen and I were little girls, we used to love to play tennis. Isn’t that right, Colleen?”

With my mother now taking center stage, Teddy leans back into his chair with a visible frown, his rivalry with Meredith long forgotten.

“I... uh... I was thinking maybe Irene and Abby could take some classes this summer. I know how busy you are, sister, so I’d be more than happy to take them to practice.”

Instantly Irene and Abigail—who have been silent all throughout the excruciating exchange between their sister and my brother—begin to clap and jump in their seats in excitement.

My aunt’s icy stare melts somewhat, and I can see she is both grateful that Mom stepped in and changed the subject, as well as touched by the unexpected offer.

After that, the rest of the meal is contrite, but at least it’s civil with talks about what everyone’s plans are for the upcoming summer break next month.

After dessert is served, little Abby and Irene pull me by the hand to go outside to the hedge maze to play hide and seek with them, and I am all too happy to oblige. Even Colt is eager to join his little sisters and me in playing the childish game instead of staying inside his house where he could end up being collateral damage to our parents’ strife.

The minute we step outside, Irene is quick to order her siblings and me to hide while she counts down from one hundred to zero in French, no less. Before I rush out to hide in the maze, I praise my cousin for her flawless accent. Her timid smile and blooming rosy cheeks shyly appear on her face at the compliment. I try really hard to keep my smile in place before kissing her temple and running to the maze to hide like I’m supposed to.

The minute I’m out of sight, my smile falls flat to the ground.

If there were ever a contest for the best dysfunctional families, ours would undoubtedly take first prize. What just happened over lunch between Meredith and Teddy is a perfect example of that.

Everything is a competition if you’re a Richfield.

No one talks about how Irene, at only eight years old, is fluent in French or how little Abby, at six, can read almost at high school level. It doesn’t

matter what accomplishments Colt and I could possibly achieve, either. In this family, only ruthlessness is rewarded, and both Meredith and Teddy are playing the game like pros.

And just as Darwin's law predicted, only the fittest will survive.

My family expects nothing less.

Which brings me to the question—why on Earth does Aunt Colleen want me to learn the ropes at our family's foundation when I don't have that killer instinct that my brother has?

Is it just to piss off my father?

It must be.

That's the only reason I see her choosing me over Teddy.

The real question is if I'm okay with being used as a pawn in her game of humiliating my father.

I think back on all the things Meredith talked about in regards to helping the Southside over lunch and can't help the itch of excitement that washes over me. Our family might be distorted and ugly on the inside, but the Richfield legacy is not. Our foundation is known for doing plenty of good, not only in North Carolina but throughout the whole country, if not the world. And to be part of that legacy is definitely something I see myself doing when I'm older. We have so much wealth that it will take a millennium to spend it all, so to use those funds to make the world a better place is something that is near and dear to my heart.

Teddy will change all that, though, if he's given the opportunity.

He made it perfectly clear that he would be more frugal when it came to helping the less fortunate. So even if my aunt's intentions of inducting me in instead of him came from a place of hate, maybe the good I could do would outweigh all of that.

I close my eyes and let the warm sun beam down on me, its rays erasing any hesitancy I might have had in regards to my aunt's offer. Suddenly, I feel lighter with the promised future that awaits me. It's only when a looming shadow blocks out the sun that I'm reminded that nothing in my life is that easy. I open my eyes to find my brother staring down at me. At fifteen, he's twice my height and weight, and he holds those two traits over my head every chance he gets.

A shiver runs down my back when Irene's cat mews against my ankle for attention, only to have Teddy pick her up from the ground.

"I was looking for you," he says with a bored expression on his face as he

pets the cat in his arms.

“Well, you found me.”

“I have, haven’t I?” he retorts with the same jaded taint to his voice. But I know it’s all for show. I can tell just by the small excited glimmer in his eyes.

“What do you want, Teddy?”

“You’re not stupid, brother. You know exactly what I want.”

Of course, I do. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to make it easy on him.

“Just say what you came to say, Teddy.”

“So be it. Dad’s right, you know? I’m the one who should take his rightful seat at the head of the Richfield Foundation. Not some stuck-up, know-it-all bitch like Meredith and certainly not someone like you—weak and pathetic. You’re going to go back inside and tell Aunt Colleen you refuse to be inducted and that I should take your place instead.”

“I won’t,” I state evenly, standing my ground.

“You will if you know what’s good for you.”

“I told you I won’t. I’m not scared of you.”

“Yeah, you are, Lincoln. As you should be.” He smirks sinisterly, that twinkle in his eyes even more profound now.

He’s right.

I am scared.

I’ve always been scared of him and with good cause. But just the thought of Teddy poisoning the legacy my ancestors worked so hard to achieve, with his greed and his hate, has me squaring my shoulders and looking him dead in the eye.

“You can do whatever you want to me. I won’t let you bully me into backing down.”

The ominous chuckle he lets out has my skin crawling and my soul cringing.

“You think I’m going to bully you? God, how fucking stupid are you, Lincoln? Sometimes it’s hard to believe we share the same blood.” He seethes in disgust. “Do you know the difference between you and me?”

“Aside from me having a soul?” I mutter under my breath.

“That, too.” He laughs, running his fingers through the cat’s fur. “The difference between you and me, brother, is that I have nothing you can exploit. You, however, have plenty that I can hurt you with. Mom, Colt, your friends.”

“You wouldn’t hurt our mother. You love her just as much as I do.”

The words have barely made it out of my mouth when his taunting expression morphs into something horrid and cruel. My brother likes to boast that he doesn't have the capacity to feel anything, therefore making him superior and invulnerable. And to some extent, it's true. The only person that makes him feel anything at all is our mother—a fact he hates and despises about himself.

"Fine. Not her," he mumbles in defeat, hating that I'm as in tune with his weakness as he is with mine. "But someone else. Kennedy perhaps."

My heart stops at the mention of my girl's name, while my brother's emotionless arrogant smile returns with a vengeance.

"Go back and tell Aunt Colleen you don't want it, and I won't hurt your precious Kennedy."

"I'd kill you before you had the chance," I grunt, stepping toward him with my hands balled into fists beside me.

"No, you wouldn't. I, however, wouldn't think twice about snapping her pretty little neck or yours to get what I want."

And before I'm able to do or say anything, Teddy wraps his hand around Irene's cat's neck and snaps it with one quick twist. I step back in utter revulsion and fear as I watch him throw the dead animal to the ground like it was nothing.

"You really are a monster."

"I'm what I need to be. And you, brother, should remember that before you try to take what's mine."

Chapter 5



Lincoln

The following morning, I wake up wheezing, my lungs burning and straining for air. My eyelids fling wide open in terror as I continue gasping for oxygen. Teddy hovers over me with an evil grin on his lips, his hands tightening around my neck while his knee pins me down by my chest. I struggle agitatedly from under his looming bulky form, but he's just too damn heavy to give me any leeway. My legs thrash underneath him, my nails scratching at his arms, but to no avail. The glint in his demonic eyes shows just how much he's enjoying watching me fight. But it's the way his upper lip curls up in delight that says he loves seeing how powerless I am against him even more.

Just as I'm about to lose hope, Teddy jumps off my chest, only to kick me in the ribs, plummeting me off the bed. I hit my head on the corner of the side table on my way down, falling on hands and knees while panting for air to fill my aching lungs. Once I've gathered my wits about me, I push myself up off the floor and try to ignore how Teddy's sinister gaze shines with me rubbing at my tender flesh.

"Good. You're up," he finally says with that ominous grin that always succeeds in making bile rise up my throat. "You're needed downstairs."

Fuck.

If this is my morning wake-up call, then whatever awaits me downstairs can't be any better. I wish I could say waking up to my brother suffocating me caught me by surprise, but it didn't. This is just another day living under the same roof with monsters. Even with my bedroom door locked, I'm never safe. Not when Teddy can easily come inside through one of the passageways hidden all throughout the house.

There's nowhere to hide here.

He sees everything.

I grab a T-shirt and a pair of shorts from my dresser, putting them on swiftly so I can follow the Antichrist downstairs to face Satan himself. I hide my surprise when Teddy doesn't lead me into the dining room, where I would expect my father and my mother to be having breakfast at this hour, but to my father's private den. Hesitantly, I take a step inside while Teddy leans against the doorframe, arms crossed at his chest, watching me go into the lion's den.

"Take a seat, Lincoln," my father orders, blowing the last puff of his Cuban cigar in the air before stubbing it out on the ashtray.

I try not to cough as I sit on the edge of the sofa.

"How old are you now, boy?"

"I'll be thirteen next month, sir."

"Hmm." He nods pensively. "Did you know that in some cultures, thirteen is the age where a boy is considered to be a man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you consider yourself to be a man, Lincoln?"

The answer to this question should be a resounding no. Especially with the morning greeting my older brother gave me just minutes ago. A man would have been able to defend himself. I may feel and act older than my almost thirteen years, but I'm far from being a man. However, by the look in my father's cruel, uncaring eyes, giving him such an answer would be a death sentence.

"Yes, Sir. I do," I lie.

"Good." He grins that ugly, yellow, toothy smile of his that churns my stomach. "I think so, too. Do you know the greatest gift someone can give a boy who is about to reach manhood?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"It's enlightenment."

I keep my expression as blank as possible since I'm not sure what new game my father and brother are playing at this time.

"You see, when a man, in fact, becomes a man, his thirst for knowledge about his origins is more dominant than ever. A man can learn a lot about himself and where he's going in his life just by looking at where he came from. It enables him to see where the glass ceiling is. You see, Lincoln, it's important to know your limitations so you don't make the mistake of aiming for things that are well beyond your reach. Men go mad for less."

I reactively nod even though I still have no idea where he's going with

this. But just by the way my father's tone is eerily calm, and Teddy's eyes glow with unrestrained excitement, I know that whatever these two are up to will cripple me in the end.

"There comes a time in a boy's life that he must open his eyes and see the world as a grown man would," my father continues on in his rant. "And you can only do that if certain aspects of your life are revealed to you. You've been kept in the dark for far too long as it is, and it's time we remedy that fact."

The ominous, eager look that Teddy and my father share with one another has my pulse quickening in dread.

"I don't understand. What is this all about, Father?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," my father reprimands, wagging his finger in my face. "See, that right there is why the truth should have been given to you years ago. Your ignorance makes fools of us all, and frankly, I've grown tired of keeping up pretenses in my own house."

"Put him out of his misery. He's not clever enough to piece the puzzle together all on his own." Teddy chuckles from across the room.

"Well, I might be if I'm at least given all the pieces," I retort defiantly, only to get slapped for my troubles.

My father's ring slices through my lip with just one blow. The taste of liquid copper fills my mouth as my father grabs hold of my hair, pulling me up from my seat and shoving his face in mine.

"I will not turn a blind eye to your insolence any longer. You will not disrespect Theodore or me ever again. From now on, all I expect from you is your silent obedience. I've let you run amuck long enough," he snarls in abhorrence. "Acting like you belong in this family when in reality you're the constant reminder of my shame. You are the mistake I should have kicked out of your mother's stomach the minute I learned she was pregnant with you. At the time, affection clouded my judgment. I held out in doing such a thing because I believed that there was a possibility you were mine. But look at you," he almost spits in my face with disgust. "I didn't need a paternity test to see that no son of mine could ever be this weak, pathetic, feeble-minded, and dastardly. Just looking at you repulses me."

He pushes me to the floor, and once again, I find myself on my knees looking up at one of my tormentors.

"I've been patiently bearing the shame of your mother's infidelity for years now, but I knew that my sacrifice would be rewarded in the end. I knew

that one day, my legitimate heir would lead this family as it was always meant to be led—with an iron fist in a new, more proficient direction that shares my world views. But then your bitch of an aunt throws me a curveball with talks of inducting you instead of my Teddy! My flesh and blood thrown to the side in favor of my greatest embarrassment!” He beats on his chest with his fist, his face turning every shade of red in the crayon box. “How can a bastard be given the opportunity to be in charge of such a well-respected institution instead of my own son? A boy who was a result of adultery cannot have one of the highest privileges in all the south. I won’t have you making a mockery of us all. I will not have any more talks about you being inducted. All of this ends today. Is that understood?!”

So that’s what this is all about.

I should have known that my father and Teddy would come up with something to make me go against Aunt Colleen’s wishes. First, it was Teddy’s intimidation in the hedge maze. Now, this lie about me not being his son and therefore unworthy.

“I will do no such thing,” I reply assertively. “I know that you’re lying.”

This time I’m ready for the slap he lands on my cheek.

“Don’t believe me, you stupid boy?! Ask your whore of a mother. See if she tells you anything different. Or better yet,” he starts, walking over to his desk and picking up a manila envelope, “Take this. Just because I said I didn’t need a paternity test to prove you weren’t mine doesn’t mean I didn’t have one done anyway. Here! See for yourself.”

All the certainty I had that this was just another one of their ploys to get me to do their bidding begins to wither away with how confidently my father throws the envelope at my feet, urging me to pick it up. I hesitate for a fraction of a second but ultimately grab it in one hand while I push myself up with the other.

“Where’s my mother? Why isn’t she here to tell me this herself?” I ask, wondering why she isn’t here to corroborate his story.

“Stupid boy. Still needs his momma to hold his hand instead of acting like a man and facing the truth head-on. Fine. Go! Ask her then. See if the truth is easier to bear coming from her traitorous lips than mine. But the answer remains the same, boy. The sooner you realize the truth, the better for all of us.”

‘Fuck you!’ I think to myself, but I’m still too much of a coward to say it to his face.

I'm about to walk out the door and rush upstairs in search of my mother when Teddy holds me by the arm to keep me still.

"I wouldn't go up there if I were you. She's not... she's not in any condition to talk to anyone right now."

There is a little hint of sadness in my brother's gaze, but just as quickly as it surfaces, so does it disappear, and instead of anguish, all I see is hate in his eyes.

"My father is telling you the truth. You're not his son, and you're only my brother because the same woman gave birth to us. Don't mistake that for us being family. As far as I see it, you're just a nuisance we have to put up with. But as soon as you start being more trouble than you're worth... well... let's just say maybe one morning you won't get off so lightly when I decide to wake you up," he taunts, tracing his finger around my neck.

I slap his hand away and run up the stairs, uncaring if he wants me to see my mother or not. My heart is beating a mile a minute with every step that I take. When I finally arrive at my parents' bedroom door, a sudden panicked jolt stops me from entering. There is a slight breach at the door that lets me see why my mother wasn't able to make it down the stairs. Her naked body lies on the bed, belt marks imprinted on her upper thighs and buttocks. Her arm is slung down the bed, an empty vodka bottle just within her reach.

Teddy was right.

She's in no state to give me answers.

With the sound of my thumping heart ringing in my ears, I lean against the wall and rip open the envelope in my hands. And although I go through the motions of reading the paternity test, in my heart, I think I've always known there was no possible way an evil man like Crawford Hamilton could ever be my father. So, when I get to the part where it's confirmed, right there in black and white, my world crashes down around me.

"Lincoln?" my mother calls out from her room, her voice slurring from drinking and hoarse from crying all night. "Baby, is that you out there?"

"Yes," I whisper, eyes shut while banging my head against the wall.

"He's told you, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

The bout of silence that ensues devastates me more than what she says next.

"I'm sorry."

Tears stream down my cheeks as I push myself away from the wall and

run downstairs. When I reach the main foyer, I don't stop. I just keep going, running past the front door as fast as I can until I reach the Oakley Woods. Once I'm surrounded by trees on all sides, I release a pained wail, falling to my knees. I scream and cry while I beat my knuckles in the dirt, needing some form of pain to lessen the one I'm being tormented by.

I curse God, the sun, and the sky that beams down on me, seemingly unaffected when my life has just been so altered. I lose time giving in to my grief. And at some point, I start to hallucinate, too, because the next voice I hear sounds awfully familiar to that of my cousin's.

"Linc? What's wrong? What's wrong, Linc?" I hear Colt's voice stammer worriedly from behind me.

But it's all a mirage. Some sort of trick my heart plays on me to ease my suffering. To remind me that someone in my cruel existence does care for me, even if I've been poisoned by hate since the day I was born. Unfortunately, the voice is not real. It's all a sham, just another lie I tell myself to feel whole. Colt isn't here. No one is. I'm all alone. So, I continue to rock back and forth in the dirt, hugging my arms to my chest while my mind picks at the scabs of my cut-up heart.

The wind begins to shake my shoulders, trying to coax me out of my agonizing thoughts, but it will take more than Mother Nature's violent winds to get me out of this hell.

"Help him!" I hear the same voice yell. "Mom, I said help him!"

Mom.

My mother can't help me.

She can barely help herself.

All her talk about perseverance and how clever and resilient we are was just another tactic to keep me docile and blind to the truth. We will forever be their toys to play with and torture. We will never be free of them. Not when they hold all the cards. A bastard and an adulteress are no match for the great Governor of North Carolina and his rightful heir. I know that much.

How can I be expected to endure such abuse?

How can she?

Then, as if God refuses to let the devil have its way with me, I feel two loving arms wrap themselves around me, whispering that I am loved even if they hate me. I revel in this warmth and hold on to it tightly like someone would a life raft. It's only when my manic state dissolves that I realize the person that was holding on to me all along was, in fact, my beloved cousin—

Colt.

My brother, in all the ways that really count.

His loyalty and love are what snap me out of my suffering state.

With dirty bloody hands, I wipe my tears away until my eyes focus on another blurry figure looking down at both of us.

Aunt Colleen.

The reason why the truth was revealed to me in the first place today.

“Did you know?” I ask her point-blank, my voice so rough it feels like small paper cuts are slicing up and down my throat.

“Yes.”

“Who else?”

“All you need to know is that no one outside this family will ever divulge what you learned today.”

“Right.” I scoff in disdain since secrets apparently are the only birthright I have to look forward to.

“I always knew he hated me. Now I know why,” I mumble under my breath, but just as the words have spilled from my mouth, Aunt Colleen comes at me at rapid speed, knocking Colt away from me and grabbing my chin with such force, I feel her nails sink into my cheeks.

“Look at me, Lincoln. You are a Richfield. That is all that matters. Do you understand me?”

It feels like a fresh batch of tears is seconds away from spilling, but I hold her gaze steadfastly.

“Say it, child! I am a Richfield!”

“You’re hurting him!” Colt shouts, pulling his mother off me, but my aunt refuses to let me go.

“I said say it, Lincoln! I am a Richfield!” she shouts, coaxing me to stand up.

“I am a Richfield,” I state so softly that I’m not surprised when she utters her next demand.

“Louder.”

“I am a Richfield!”

“I said louder!” she yells back.

“I am a Richfield!” I shout at the top of my lungs, my body trembling in fury.

“That’s right! You are. Everything else doesn’t matter. Only that. Am I making myself clear?”

I gaze into her eyes, the same ocean blue of my mother's staring back at me, and suddenly the weight that was on my chest starts to ease away.

She's right.

I am a Richfield. I may not be my father's son, but I am my mother's. Sierra Richfield Hamilton might be frail and helpless now, but she wasn't brought up that way. Aunt Colleen is proof of their strong and fierce upbringing. My father is the one responsible for conditioning her to be this debilitated and broken woman she is today. And if I let him, he'll do the same to me.

I can't let him or Teddy break me so easily.

I won't.

I offer my aunt a resolute nod and wipe the remaining tears off my face with my forearm so she sees I understood what she was trying to tell me.

"Good. Now tell me. Where is that wretched sister of mine?"

"Inside," I explain, my gaze falling behind her to the house that no longer feels like a home.

Not that it ever did, really.

"I'll have a talk with your mother. She should have been the one to remind you of who your true family is."

"She's not doing so well." I try to defend her.

"My sister never is," she rebukes coldly.

I'm seconds away from warning her about what she's going to find when she seeks out my mother, but then reconsider and close my lips shut. If it wasn't for Aunt Colleen, my father wouldn't have taken his vengeance out on my poor mother's body the way that he did. If she had just given him what he wanted and chosen Teddy instead of me, then neither my mom nor I would be suffering right now.

As I see it, today is as good a day as any for my aunt to have a front-row seat to the damage her handiwork has caused. It's time she realizes that her need to belittle my father holds consequences, even if she's not the one paying the price for them. Maybe that will make her bite her tongue in the future. But then again, like Teddy, I don't think my Aunt Colleen has a working heart. So maybe the image of her sister's brutally abused and beaten body won't affect her in the least. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a big block of ice in her chest instead of a beating organ capable of feeling anything.

"Stay here with your cousin," she instructs Colt, snapping me back out of

my reverie. "I don't want either of you in the house for the next hour or so. I have to set a few things straight and remind the dear governor who really runs this town."

When she finally leaves and heads back to the house, I feel Colt's inquisitive eyes on me.

"What the hell just happened? Why were you crying?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. Aunt Colleen is right." I shrug.

"About what?" he asks, his pained emerald eyes showing me how much it hurts him to see me suffering.

"About who I am." I smile meekly at him.

When his brows pull tightly together at the center of his forehead, I know my vague answer confuses him. But that doesn't matter right now. What matters is that he's here, and I'm not as alone as I thought I was.

"You came for me," I whisper, my chest swelling with love for him.

"Of course, I did. If you need me, I'll always be here for you."

I wrap my arm over his shoulder and pull him near until the sides of our heads are pressed up against each other.

"I love you, Colt. You're the brother I should have had," I confess in earnest, wishing that in some alternative universe I was his brother instead of having to suffer being Teddy's.

"Ahh, don't get all mushy on me," he teases, preferring to jab me in the gut than admit he cares for me just as much. "So, what do you want to do for the next hour?"

"We walk," I tell him, wiping away the wetness that still coats my cheeks. "And maybe if I'm lucky, I'll get lost in these woods and forget there is a life outside of them," I add under my breath.

I take a good long look at the vast woods around us and imagine that there was some way it could swallow me whole and make me disappear once and for all. My misery would end if that were possible.

"If you ever get lost, I'll find you," Colt is quick to say, his tone filled with the purest resolve.

"I know you would, Colt. You always do."

His gaze takes on a soft hue as he pulls me once again into a hug.

"You scared the bejesus out of me. Don't ever do that to me again. Okay?"

"Okay, Colt. I'm fine. Or at least I will be," I lie, not wanting him to worry more than he already has.

He pulls away and cleans his own tear streaks with the hem of his T-shirt.

“Are you going to tell me what new hell Teddy or your bastard of a father did to you now?”

I laugh at his poor choice of words just so I don't cry again.

“The only bastard here is me, Colt.”

“Huh?” he blurts out, confused.

“I'll tell you everything. On one condition. I don't want the rest of the gang to know about it.”

“It must be serious if you want me to keep it a secret from the guys.”

“Kennedy, too,” I add with a stern tone, making his eyes widen in alarm.

“Are you sure you want to keep secrets from Ken, of all people? That girl is a bloodhound when it comes to shit like that. She'll smell it on you. Fuck that. She'll smell it on me. On second thought, maybe it's best I don't know,” he sputters nervously.

I grab his shoulder and give it a tight squeeze.

“Colt, I need someone I can talk to that won't be quick to judge.”

“Finn and Easton would never judge you for anything. You know that,” he defends. “Neither would Ken.”

“I know they wouldn't, but it's not my reputation I'm worried about. It's my mother's.”

Colt knows that aside from him and my friends, my mom is the one person I would sacrifice anything for. His face falls as he bows his head and kicks the dirt at his feet.

“Okay, Linc. I promise I'll keep my lips sealed,” he whispers after a while.

“Thank you, brother.” The endearment has his face lighting up, making mine do the same. “Now, let's take a walk.”

“Shit, cuz. You look like you're going to tell me some life-altering stuff.”

“That's because I am.”

Chapter 6



Lincoln

“You’ve been keeping a secret from me, Hamilton,” Kennedy whispers in my ear, her breath making my skin feel hot with how close her lips are to my earlobe. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Ryland,” I reply evenly with my eyes shut, pretending to soak in the sun.

My heart accelerates when she snuggles in closer to me until half of her body is on my beach towel.

“Whatever this secret is, it must be pretty big. From what I can tell, aside from me, you haven’t told East or Finn yet. The only one who knows is Colt,” she muses, running circles on my shoulder with the pad of her finger.

I can’t help the trace of a smile that spontaneously surfaces on my face at how well she knows me. I don’t even have to breathe a word to her for Kennedy to know every dark secret and desire that resides in my heart, even if she can’t articulate what they are.

“I could always get Colt to tell me. It wouldn’t be hard to get him to cough it up,” she adds assuredly.

As I slide my lids slowly open, I tilt my head to the side to come face to face with the clear blue sky of her eyes. I trace the small imprint the summer sun left on her apple cheeks with one finger, only to have the maroon shade blossom on her fair skin. Maybe the sun isn’t responsible for putting color on her cheeks. Perhaps I’m the cause of her pretty crimson blush after all. I watch, mesmerized, as she licks her lips, her stare never wavering from mine.

“Are you going to tell me your secret?”

“No,” I reply before turning onto my stomach since her touch on my shoulder is having an undesired effect on the rest of my body.

“Hmm. Then I guess I’ll just have to get Colt to tell me.” She shrugs

unapologetically, brazenly inching her face closer to mine, so we are both huddled in our own private cocoon.

“You won’t do that.” I smile, surprising her by grabbing her hand and entwining my fingers with hers.

“I won’t?” she rasps.

“No, you won’t.”

“You sound very sure of yourself there, Hamilton,” she teases, trying to lighten the electrifying mood.

“That’s because I am.”

“And why is that?” She cocks up a defiant brow.

“Because if you go snooping for my secrets, then I’ll have to do the same and find out yours.”

The way her face blanches for a split second has my heart sinking to the pit of my stomach.

Just as Kennedy is in tune with my heart, so am I with hers. For months now, I was sure she was keeping something from me, but I told myself that I was confusing her grief from her mother’s passing with secrecy. Now I see that I was wrong.

“Keep your secret. I don’t care,” she bites back, rolling over onto her beach towel, purposely turning her back to me.

Her abrupt dismissal stings.

It never ceases to amaze me how my body can endure the vilest of abuse, but all it takes is one angry look or scornful word from Kennedy, and all of me breaks.

I lift off my towel just a little bit to double-check if anyone has eyes on us. Most of the adults are on the bank, eating and drinking and having a good time. Colt is playing with little Abby in the shallow end of the water while Meredith teaches Irene how to float on her back. Finn, East, Jefferson, and Teddy are racing each other on their jet skis all around the lake. No one is paying us any mind as Ken and I sunbathe on the floating dock.

Ever so discreetly, I eat up the small distance between us until the heat of her bare skin scorches mine. Immediately, she turns her head my way and anticipatorily waits for my next move. I grab her hand again and pull it to my lips, placing a tender kiss on her open palm.

“I don’t have to know your secrets, Ken. Just as you don’t need to know mine. We know enough. What matters, at least. Don’t we?”

She offers a soft smile, her gaze growing so hooded it’s making it hard

for me to keep mine in check.

“You can’t look at me like that, Ken.”

“Like what?” she says, almost breathless.

“Like you’re begging me to kiss you.”

“If I did beg, would you?”

I swallow dryly, reading the challenge in her eyes.

“Kennedy Ryland doesn’t beg,” I remind her.

“You’re right. I don’t. But for you, I would.”

My mouth dries further as my chest tightens at her whispered confession. It would be so easy to lean in and just kiss her like I want to. I wouldn’t be stealing her first kiss like Colt tried to do last year. Kennedy would willingly give it to me. Just as I would hand my heart to her on a silver platter if she asked me for it, so would she gift hers to me. All I have to do is open my mouth and ask for what’s rightfully mine.

But instead of giving in to the girl I had loved long before I even knew the definition of the word, I lean just a little bit closer until our foreheads are pressed up against each other, trying my damndest not to notice how even our breathing has become in sync.

“Stop baiting me, Ryland. I’m not going to kiss you with your father and brother so close by.”

“I don’t care if the whole world sees.”

“It’s not going to happen, so quit flashing those beautiful eyes at me.”

“You think they’re beautiful?” she asks timidly, those same baby-blue eyes sparkling brightly.

She holds her breath, thinking I’m about to give her what she wants, only to huff out in disappointment when I pull away to kiss her temple.

“If you don’t know the answer to that, then I guess it’s just one more secret I’ll keep to myself.”

“Argh. You can be a real tease. You know that, Hamilton?” She sulks, making me chuckle under my breath.

“Noted.” I smile, falling back onto the towel and closing my eyes, pretending to go back to enjoying the sun on my skin.

Kennedy follows my lead and does the same, but her hand never leaves mine. I let myself enjoy the small act of intimacy, telling myself that it’s enough.

For now, it has to be.

My tense muscles begin to relax as I let the happy sounds of everyone

having a good time invade my senses.

Unlike the rest of the Northside, it's no secret that my friends and I don't like spending much time at the Richfield Estate. It's always so cold and impersonal, a complete contrast to how people regard my house. My mother has gone to enormous effort to make sure that the Hamilton Estate is as far removed from my aunt's form of strict hospitality as possible. She makes our home as inviting as she can by throwing a myriad of social gatherings almost every weekend. Of course, from the outside, people think that having such a welcoming home makes the governor look like he's a man of the people. But in reality, it's just my mom's way of having a full house since it's harder for her husband to lose his temper with her if there are guests coming over.

The only time that any of us prefers coming to Colt's home instead of mine is when school ends, and summer break begins. Just before everyone goes away on whatever expensive family vacation that's been planned, my aunt invites everyone to the lake to celebrate the beginning of summer. For me, these lake days are better than whatever paradisiac destination my family is planning to go to. This year we're all going to spend two weeks in Bali, and just the thought of having to spend a fortnight sharing a room with Teddy in some distant foreign country has me breaking out in a sweat.

As if I conjured the devil to appear with just my thoughts, the sound of approaching jet skis has me getting up from my spot. It's been a good day, and I'm not going to let Teddy's presence ruin that for me.

"Where are you going?" Kennedy asks when she sees me standing up.

"I was thinking you'd lend me your canoe so I could take it out for a spin. Want to come with me?"

"Hmm. Is this your way of getting me alone so you can finally kiss me?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a one-track mind, Ryland?"

"That didn't sound like a yes."

"That's because it wasn't." I wink at her only to have her sticking her tongue out at me.

"Then you're just going to have to paddle on your own. The heat has made me too boneless and lazy to move right now anyway."

"Have it your way then." I chuckle before jumping off the dock and diving into the lake.

The cool water drips off my skin as I pull my body up to the canoe. I can see the jet skis coming closer to the raft, so before they reach it, I start paddling down the lake, hoping the excursion will do me some good at

clearing my mind.

Lately, being alone with my thoughts hasn't necessarily been a good thing, but it's preferable to having Teddy's voice inside my head. Ever since the truth came out that I'm not my father's son, he's been relentless in using that against me. Even though his malicious taunts are aimed to bruise and maim my soul, I refuse to let him break my spirit. Not that my defiance stops him from trying. Or *his* father, for that matter. Be it with their sharp tongues or their clenched fists, I'm guaranteed to end my nights in pain.

However, neither one of them has been able to hurt me as much as my mother's silence has. I've asked time and time again for her to tell me who my real father is, only for her to deny me an answer. No amount of begging, crying, or cursing has coaxed my mother into telling me who he is.

Sometimes I stay awake at night and wonder if it was some stranger who passed through Asheville or maybe some worker that tended to our estate. When Mom throws her soirees, I find myself staring at each man's face, wondering if there are any similarities between them and me. I usually excel at solving puzzles, but to my chagrin, finding out who my biological father is has stumped me.

I'm trapped in my thoughts when I realize that I've paddled so far away that I'm on the other side of the lake, close to the Price Estate. One of the familiar armed guards waves at me with his assault rifle, reminding me why it's not prudent to wander on Lake Toxaway. I start turning the canoe around to head back, my arms starting to ache as I paddle more vehemently, returning to where my friends are.

Twenty minutes later, I slow down my rowing since I've made my way back to safer waters.

I watch Colt and Kennedy talking animatedly with each other on the dock while Finn and East are still having a blast on their jet skis. My attention is on Finn doing a spin on his jet ski when an eerie splash shrouds my heart in utter fear.

"KENNEDY!" Colt cries, standing on the raft as he stares down into the murky water.

But before he has time to react, I'm already diving in.

I've never been afraid.

Not like this.

Maybe it's because I've always known where to expect danger to come from that fear has never truly consumed me. Solemn expectation has always

prevailed over fear.

This is different.

The crippling terror that streams through my veins is making it hard for me to concentrate. This is my worst nightmare come to fruition, and the feeling of helplessness has never felt bleaker than it does in this very moment.

Fuck!

'Stop thinking like that, you pussy, and just fucking save her!' I yell inwardly at myself, and when blonde strands wave at me from underwater, I almost cry in relief.

I grab Kennedy's unconscious frame and swim to shore with her on my back as fast as my body can muster. The minute I'm close to shore, Uncle Owen and Richard Price remove her from my grasp and lay her down on the bank.

"Don't you dare leave me, Ken. Don't you dare fucking do it. Not you," my head screams as I push my way over to her. My knees fall to the grass as my uncle starts doing compressions on her small chest. When he stops, I don't even think. I just put my lips on hers and breathe air into her lungs to continue with the CPR.

"Stay with me, Ken. Stay with me," I repeat on a loop when I pull away from her lips.

Uncle Owen restarts compressions while I lower myself down, low enough that I can whisper in her ear without anyone else eavesdropping.

"If this is your way of getting a kiss out of me, let me tell you that there were plenty of better ways to do it, Ryland. Now wake up if you want a real kiss! Please just wake up!"

When Kennedy starts coughing up lake water, Uncle Owen flips her to the side so all of it can come out.

"Are you okay?" I ask once the worst has passed and I have her back in my arms.

The previous glow I had left her with is no longer present. Instead, she looks deathly pale, her stunning eyes uncharacteristically glassy, looking completely out of it still.

"Kennedy, can you look at me, sweetheart? How many fingers am I holding up?" Uncle Owen questions worriedly.

"Two," she croaks, her voice so raw it's barely above a whisper.

"That's good, sweetheart. You gave us all quite a scare," he says tenderly,

before nodding to everyone that had crowded around us and easing their terrified expressions.

All but my aunt, that is, since she is currently too preoccupied with giving Colt a tongue-lashing.

“This was your doing, wasn’t it?” she yells at him, but Colt looks like he’s not even registering any word she says. “Did you think your practical joke would be funny? Kennedy could have gotten seriously hurt, you insolent child!”

And as if her words weren’t causing him enough pain, she swings her open palm and slaps him across the cheek.

Immediately, I stand up, handing Kennedy to my uncle and rushing over to the two of them.

“Answer me!” she repeats, and when she raises her hand to slap my cousin again, I grab onto her wrist, stopping her.

“Enough,” I order with such rage in my voice it surprises even me.

“Is that so?” she quips back, looking more composed than she was just a second ago.

“It is. You will never lay a finger on Colt again,” I threaten with the same edge to my tone.

“And why is that?”

“You know why,” I spit out.

I’m sure that Aunt Colleen is fully aware of the hell my mother and I go through under the watchful eye of my supposed father and brother. Or at least she has her suspicions. Like hell will I let my cousin ever feel an inkling of that abuse. Over my dead body. But instead of spelling that out for her, I go with the explanation that my aunt is more inclined to understand.

“Colt is a Richfield. And neither you nor anyone else will make him feel less than.”

“You learn quickly,” she counters, almost sounding pleased with my unexpected rebellion.

“When I need to. Can you say the same?” I counter, the provocation heavy in the air between us.

She unlatches my grip from her wrist, her icy gaze melting in approval.

“Ken, don’t,” I hear Colt plead from behind me, and before I know it, Kennedy is standing tall at my side, staring my aunt down with the same zeal that I am.

“Colt did nothing wrong, Aunt Colleen. You are always so quick to pass

judgment on him without having all the facts. Shame, Auntie. Shame on you!”

“Kennedy! What has gotten into you, girl?!” I hear her father shout from behind us, horrified that his prim and proper daughter would talk to my aunt this way.

I fist my hands at my sides, wondering where the hell he was when his daughter was fighting for her life. But instead of Kennedy asking him that burning question, she continues on her rampage, seeking justice for her best friend.

“No, Daddy. Aunt Colleen is wrong. She should apologize to Colt. He did nothing wrong.”

I feel the weight of my aunt’s scrutinizing gaze skip from me to Ken, the wheels of her mind working double time.

“Fair enough. I’ll apologize to my son if you tell me who pushed you into the water.”

I don’t miss the hesitant glance Kennedy throws over to the floating dock before she gives my aunt an answer.

“I slipped,” she lies.

“Did you now?” my aunt replies unbelievably, not buying what Ken is selling.

“Yes,” Ken doubles down, squaring her shoulders, head held high.

I can see in my aunt’s eyes that she isn’t convinced but decides to play along.

“My apologies, Colt. It seems as if you’re not the one at fault—this time,” she states with little remorse in her tone.

She eyes us one more time before turning around and walking in the direction of the main house.

Before I have time to make my own inquisition, Colt spins Kennedy around, demanding answers of his own.

“You didn’t slip. You’re lying,” he reprimands, his nostrils flaring.

“No, I’m not.” She shakes her head.

“Yes, you are, Ken,” I chime in, crossing my arms over my chest just to stop myself from shaking her until she tells us the truth.

“I’m not. I swear I’m not. So just drop it, okay?” she insists sternly, pulling her hand away from Colt’s grip.

“Whatever. Have it your way. But next time, I don’t want either one of you to interfere with my mother. She’s not worth it,” Colt utters, looking all

sorts of pissed.

“She might not be worth it, but you are. I’ll never let anyone hurt my friends. No matter who they are,” Kennedy explains, tenderness in her gaze as she stares at my cousin.

“Big words for a girl who just swallowed a gallon of lake water because she’s too afraid to learn how to swim,” he goads, starting to sound a little more like himself.

I’m not so ready to let this slide.

“Colt’s right, Ken. You can’t take everyone down who might have it in for us.”

“Oh, no? You boys just watch me,” she warns resolutely, her clenched fists finding purchase on her slender hips.

Her resolve is only interrupted by the sound of incoming jet skis near the shoreline.

“Kennedy! Come here right this second, young lady,” her father calls out, reminding her of his presence.

“Crap. I have to talk to my dad. He’s probably going to ground me for the way I talked to Aunt Colleen.”

“He should be taking you to the hospital to see if you have a concussion. That’s what he should be worried about,” I growl, enraged that her father cares more about my aunt’s feelings than his own daughter’s wellbeing.

“I’m fine, Linc. Promise.”

“Okay,” I relent.

“We’ll go with you,” Colt offers, protectively throwing his arm over her shoulder.

“Actually, I’m going to have a word with your mom. Do you think you can hold down the fort with Ken’s dad on your own?”

“You got it.”

“Good.”

I press a tender kiss on my girl’s forehead before running toward the main house in search of my aunt. Like her, I didn’t buy Kennedy’s excuse about her losing her footing and slipping into the lake either. Even though I won’t be able to prove it, I know in my heart that my brother is at fault.

Teddy must have been the one who pushed her in.

I just know it.

And I’m the one to blame for putting her life at risk.

Even after I learned the truth about my parentage, it wasn’t enough for

me to cower into a ball and give him what he wanted—to take my spot in learning the ropes of the Richfield Foundation. Since I didn't back down and started my tutelage alongside Meredith, regardless of what he and *his* father wanted, it was only a matter of time before Teddy found an ingenious way of retaliation.

And if you're going to inflict revenge on someone, you might as well do it where it hurts most.

It's a well-known fact that Kennedy can't swim, and as much as I tried to hide it from my brother, he must know that Kennedy is my true weakness.

That was my first mistake.

The second was believing Teddy would only focus his rage on me and no one else.

There won't be a third mistake.

Not if I can help it.

It doesn't take me long to find my aunt sitting in her favorite armchair in one of the plush living rooms around the house, drinking what smells like brandy.

"I don't want to be inducted anymore," I say in greeting, locking the double doors behind me.

"If you're still sore about how I blamed Colt for what happened to my goddaughter, I've apologized already. That should be enough to satisfy you," she replies, somewhat annoyed.

"No, it's not because of that, although you shouldn't treat Colt that way."

"So you keep reminding me. If this conversation isn't about my son, then why the sudden change of heart? I thought you were enjoying your tutoring. You've shown such promise. Meredith is so happy to have someone who shares her passions."

My eyes lower to the hardwood floor so she can't read my fear or my disappointment in having to drop out.

But to my dismay, my aunt is more astute than I realize.

"This is about my goddaughter, isn't it?"

When I don't reply, she places her glass on the side table and stands up from her seat.

"Who pushed Kennedy into the water, Lincoln?" she questions point-blank, getting to the heart of the problem.

"I'm not sure."

"You're lying just as she did," she states in irritation. "Tell me who

pushed her, and I will let you off the hook with your education.”

“Teddy. It was Teddy,” I confess so quickly it’s a wonder my head doesn’t spin from the force of my words leaving me.

“Him or someone acting on his behalf,” she mumbles more to herself than to me. “Very well. You are relieved of your duties for now. However, if you think this will change my mind in filling your spot with your older brother, then you are sorely mistaken. I will not take Theodore on. Not now, not ever. When you’re of age and away from his influence, then we can restart where we left off. He won’t be able to hurt you or anyone you care about anymore.”

“What about Mom? Crawford hurts her all the time, and you don’t lift a finger to help,” I bark out, angry that her concern is only for me and not for her sister.

She turns away from me as if not wanting to meet my eyes and stares at the floor-to-ceiling windows with a perfect view of the lake. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she strategically hid her expression from me to hide her shame.

“Don’t be so quick to dish out accusations when you only know half of the story. I’ve offered my sister all the help she needs to get out from under her pitiful excuse of a husband’s hold. For years, there wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t try to make amends with my sister, only to have all my efforts spit back in my face in the cruelest of ways. She would rather live with a monster than ever forgive me. That much I know.”

“I don’t understand,” I utter, puzzled.

“One day, you will. Let’s just say Sierra had never forgiven me for the role I played in her life when our mother was alive. She’s rebelled time and time again to show me what she thinks of me. I can’t save my sister any more than she can save herself. She’s a lost cause to me.”

“Well, she’s not to me,” I defend wholeheartedly.

“No, not to you.” Her voice drops an octave as she turns around to face me. “You’re a good son. Even if my sister doesn’t protect you as she should, you still find ways to defend her.”

“Colt is just as good a son as I am. If you gave him a chance, you would see that.”

“You and my son may be woven from the same cloth, but in truth, you are complete opposites. He could be so much more if he wanted, yet he refuses to rise to the challenge and insists on acting like a disobedient, spoiled child. You, on the other hand, have shown your worth. The untapped

potential I see in you is one that, when the day comes, will be very useful to us.”

“Us?”

But just as the word stumbles from her lips, so do my aunt’s features turn to stone.

“To the family, Lincoln. To the foundation,” she explains like I should have understood her meaning, to begin with. “You are a natural-born fighter. Someone who sees injustices and tries to remedy them like I do. One day, you will be able to do wonders with our family’s foundation and help people in need of a champion. Theodore could never fill your shoes. Your brother views weakness as something he needs to eradicate from the world, not protect. And that is why I refuse to play into his ambition. Or Crawford’s, for that matter. The world is polluted with their kind as it is.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She’s about to respond when a knock on the door silences her from clarifying her meaning.

Kennedy walks into the large room, all dried off and back into her summer dress.

“Sorry to interrupt, Auntie, but I have to go home. Dad is upset with how I talked to you, so I can’t stay anymore. He also ordered me to come to see you so that I could apologize before we left.”

My aunt rolls her eyes as she takes the necessary steps to reach Kennedy.

“Another parasite using his children to rise in my good graces. No need to apologize to me for defending your principles or your friends, child. It’s honorable to stand up for your beliefs and don’t let anyone make you think otherwise.”

“Does that mean I don’t have to say that I’m sorry? Because I’m not,” Kennedy states, an unrepentant and fearless gleam in her eyes.

“Then there is your answer.” My aunt laughs, surprising the hell out of me that she is even capable of putting on a grin, much less utter a laugh.

She then tilts Kennedy’s chin with her knuckles so she can look her in the eye.

“When you come back to the lake, either take some swimming lessons or use a vest. I don’t want a repeat of this incident. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, Auntie.”

“Good. Dorethea would never forgive me if I let something happen to her baby girl. You’re far too precious to lose in such a pedestrian way.”

“Of course, Auntie. I promise when I die, I’ll make it memorable for you then,” Kennedy quips back with a deep southern twang.

“Always with the quick comebacks,” my aunt reprimands, less than pleased. “Careful, child. Death and life *are* in the power of the tongue.”

“And they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof. Proverbs 18:21. I know. I know,” Kennedy is quick to reply.

“I truly hope that you do,” my aunt warns before dropping her hand. “Now tell me, where is that wretched father of yours. I need to have a word with him before you leave.”

“He’s probably still at the lake.”

My aunt gives her a clipped nod before turning her attention back to me.

“Is there anything else you needed to talk to me about, Lincoln?”

I shake my head.

“Very well then,” she says before leaving Kennedy and me alone in the room.

I can still hear my aunt’s heels click-clacking down the hallway when Kennedy bursts into a run and flings herself into my arms. I hold her tightly, her hair still wet and smelling like lake water, reminding me how close I came to losing her. When it becomes unbearable not to look at her face, I palm her cheeks in my hands and stare into her soft blue skies that always seem to see deep into my soul.

“I thought I lost you there for a minute, Ryland.” I try to tease, but my voice comes out hoarse and vulnerable, still too overwhelmed by the fear of what happened to her.

“You’ll never get rid of me, Hamilton. I’m here for the long haul.” She beams brightly at me.

“Ken... was it my brother who pushed you?” I question her, needing confirmation of my suspicion, only to feel the pang of regret when her bright smile falls to the floor.

“I told you I slipped.”

“And I know that you’re lying.”

“Can we not talk about this anymore, Linc?”

Knowing that I won’t get any answers from her today—if ever—I decide to let it go.

“What would I have done if I lost you?” I ask instead, caressing her cheeks with my thumbs.

“You’ll never have to find out because that will never happen. And even

if one day something does happen to me, I'll haunt you in the afterlife."

"You would do that, wouldn't you?" I muse softly, my heart doubling in size with her childish threat.

"You better believe it," she jokes lightheartedly.

"That's just fine by me since I don't want to be in a world where you're not in it."

We're both stunned by the heartfelt words that leave my mouth. Her eyelashes start batting a mile a minute, while the sound of my heart beating feels like it's so loud in my chest that she should be able to hear it too.

"I... um..." I begin, feeling all sorts of tongue-tied.

"Colt told me what you did. He said that you were the one who pulled me out of the water and did CPR on me. Is that true?"

I nod, suddenly unable to string a sentence together.

Kennedy takes into account my lack of verbal response and wraps her arms around my neck, going to the balls of her feet so that we're almost at eye level.

"I don't think it's fair that the first time you kissed me I was unconscious, do you?"

I shake my head, white-knuckling the fabric of her dress.

"That's what I thought."

And before I can stop her, Kennedy's lips fall onto mine. I close my eyes and let the sweet taste of her lips burn me from within. She tastes like sunshine and cherry wine, and when she sighs into my mouth, my heart explodes with unrestrained joy. I feel my soul shattering into a thousand shards of mouth-blown glass, each piece holding such intricate, elaborate color that it's blinding in its beauty. And when she breaks our kiss and smiles up at me, the tinge of profound love in her eyes, I'm left in utter awe of her.

But there is another feeling lurking behind my happiness—one that dims the beautiful shine of this perfect moment. And as much as I try to lock it away into the confinements of my mind, push it to the back where it's cloaked in darkness, so it can never see the light of day, my wayward soul gives it a name and breathes life into the emotion.

Terror.

With just one kiss, I now know who is capable of unleashing true misery upon me.

It's the girl with sky-like eyes who I vowed to love for all eternity.

Chapter 7



Kennedy

“Grab your things. We’re leaving,” my father shouts, rushing out of Dr. Trott’s office.

“Why? We’ve just gotten here,” Jeff complains, slumping back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest in protest.

“I said move!” my father repeats more forcefully, looking positively possessed.

I grab Jeff’s hand and pull him out of the chair, knowing that when our father gets this way, it’s better just to shut up and do as he says.

“Mr. Ryland, please don’t leave like this. I meant no disrespect. I’m just trying to help your children, not cause them any harm,” Dr. Trott—or Georgia like she asked us to call her—begs while looking at my brother and me with a pained expression on her face. “Please reconsider. Come back inside and just let me explain.”

“I’m not spending one more second in this place, and neither are my children. Not when it’s so obvious you’re trying to brainwash them and me with your psychoanalysis blabber. This ends today. I should have never brought them to you in the first place.”

“But you did bring them to me. Not only because you saw how much they needed to speak with someone after their mother died, but also because you sense that something isn’t completely right.”

“You’re wrong. I brought them to you because I was manipulated into doing so. If there is a psychopath in my midst, then it was the bitch who twisted my arm into bringing my children here. But no more. Jefferson, Kennedy. In the car. Now!”

“Antisocial personality disorder is more common than you think. If you just give me time to explain—”

My father turns around to face the woman who seems desperate to keep me and my brother here.

“What else could you possibly say after using words like psychopath or sociopath to define my children?”

Georgia’s panicked eyes widen at my father’s slip of the tongue.

“Mr. Ryland, I don’t think it’s appropriate you say these things in front of ___”

“In front of who?” our father cuts in, pointing the finger at us. “Them? What are you afraid of, doctor? That your evaluation is right and that one day they will grow up and come pay you a visit? Maybe even slice your throat in the dead of night while you’re sleeping? Tell me. Just what type of horrors do you expect my twins to commit in the future?”

I wince when the beautiful woman’s ebony cheeks pale at my father’s malicious words. It’s a wonder how she’s able to recollect herself so quickly, looking adamant in her resolve to persuade my father to continue our therapy sessions with her.

“People with this disorder don’t necessarily have to be violent, much less criminal. They can lead perfectly healthy, normal lives without giving in to their genetic urges.”

“They’re children. You’re making them sound like monsters!”

“I didn’t say that at all,” she snaps back, offended, wrinkling her forehead in concern when she realizes Jeff and I are hanging on their every word.

My father’s scowl only deepens when he follows her line of vision and sees that we’re still standing right behind him.

“Why are you two still here? I told you to get in the car, didn’t I?! Then go! Now!” my father shouts, and this time we do as we are told, running outside and jumping into the back seat of our father’s car.

Through the back window, we watch our father continue to fight with our therapist on her doorstep, hating that we can no longer hear what either one of them is saying from inside the car. All we can see is his expression growing angrier by the second while hers begins to look defeated.

Father isn’t known for throwing fits of rage like this out in the open where anyone can see, but luckily for him, Georgia’s home-slash-office is situated in a remote area of town where there is very little risk of us running into anyone we know. I think that’s why he brought us to Georgia in the first place. God forbid if people find out that the Dean of the elite Richfield University has his two kids undergoing therapy. Even if it were with the

intention of helping them to deal with their mother's death.

But then again, it wasn't his idea to begin with. It was my godmother's—who I'm sure will be livid when she finds out he's pulled the plug on our sessions.

"Well, I guess that's that. No more grief counseling for us," Jeff mumbles, kicking the back of the driver's seat.

"Looks that way," I agree, giving up on trying to lip-read their argument.

"Shame. I actually liked talking to Georgia."

"Me too. It felt good to talk about Mom without getting pitying looks."

"Yeah. Too bad she thinks we're psychotic." Jeff chuckles with amusement.

"That's not what Georgia said. She said we had some sort of antisocial disorder," I defend, mauling on my lower lip.

"My hearing is perfectly fine, dear sister. The words she used were psychopath and sociopath to describe us." He continues to laugh as if this is all one big joke to him. "Do you think she was talking about the both of us, or just one in particular?"

"Does it matter? She's wrong." I shrug uncaringly.

"Are you sure?" he taunts, poking at my ribs, trying to coax a laugh out of me.

"Just stop it, will you? I'm not in the mood. Besides, I'm still not talking to you."

"Jesus. You're still on that? It's been two months already. When are you going to stop being pissed at me?"

"Oh, I don't know, Jeff. Maybe when I forget that you tried to kill me," I spew back, giving him the nastiest look I can muster.

"Stop being such a drama queen. It was a joke." He has the audacity to roll his eyes at me.

"I could have drowned. What if Lincoln didn't reach me in time?"

"Well, golden boy did, so that's a moot point."

"You are such an asshole. I could have seriously gotten hurt."

"But you didn't. So just move the fuck on. You're getting tedious."

"You know what's tedious? Your stupid face!" I bark at him, shoving my middle finger in his face before turning my back on him.

"That doesn't even make any sense. We have the same face," he retorts with a laugh, pulling at the hem of my T-shirt to get me to turn around.

I smack his hands off me.

“I’d never hurt you like that. Not even on the days that I hate you would I put your life in harm’s way. But you did it just for shits-and-giggles. I’ll never forgive you for that.”

“Kennedy—” he begins after a long pregnant pause, his voice almost sounding contrite.

“Yeah?” I murmur, turning my head over my shoulder, thinking maybe he’s finally going to apologize for what he did to me.

But all my hopes of any atonement offered by my twin are squashed when our father steps inside the car.

“Forget it,” Jeff mumbles under his breath, turning his face away from me.

Neither one of us says anything as our father hightails it out of Georgia’s driveway like a bat out of hell. When we get home, he doesn’t even turn off the ignition, saying that he has to go back to the school to work.

“This head shrink nonsense has eaten too much of my precious time as it is,” he says as we get out of the car. “Don’t wait up for me. I might have to sleep at the office tonight.”

I react immediately, piercing my palms with my nails from my anger, knowing exactly what that means. Spending the night at the office is my father’s code for meeting up with one of his newest conquests. Ever since the day my eyes were opened regarding my father’s affair with Lincoln’s mom, I’ve made it my mission never to be blindsided again and to know everything that was happening under my own roof.

It only took me a few eavesdropped telephone calls and some light stalking to learn that Sierra Richfield-Hamilton wasn’t the only woman my father had on his roster—the same roster that he kept actively rotating while pretending to be the grieving widower.

To his credit, he does play his part to perfection.

If I didn’t know the truth, I’d think that’s where I learned how to wear my mask so well.

But my father never taught me anything worth value.

That was always my mother’s job.

The minute the tail lights of his car disappear, I run inside the house, pick up one of Jeff’s baseball caps, and rush back outside.

“Where the hell are you going?” Jeff asks when he sees me mounting my bike.

“Out.”

“Whatever. Just make sure you’re home before dark.”

I give him a clipped nod and pedal my way back to the place we just came from. When I arrive at Ms. Georgia’s, I hide my bike in some nearby shrubbery just in case someone passes by. The last thing I want is for my father to find out I came here after he explicitly told us that we were through with our sessions. Thankfully there are no parked cars outside, which means she must be alone. Guess there aren’t many parents in Asheville who are comfortable bringing their kids to have their heads examined. My father has made it painfully clear that the only reason he brought us here was because Aunt Colleen forced him to after the lake incident earlier this summer.

Unlike everyone else, she wasn’t fooled.

She knew that if it hadn’t been Colt playing around and pushing me in the water by mistake, then I was thrown in on purpose. And there were only two other people there that could have done it.

Lincoln’s brother or mine.

And since I had no reason to assume it was Teddy, that left only my twin.

When we got home that day, he didn’t even try to deny it when I confronted him. He just refused to give me a reason, and with Jeff, there is always a method to his madness. We’re a lot alike in that regard.

The only hope I have of finding out the truth is if by some miracle Georgia was able to pull it out of Jeff when he was at his most vulnerable, talking about our mother.

At least that’s what I’m banking on.

“Kennedy?” she asks, surprised when she opens her office door and comes face to face with me.

Instead of telling her why I’m here, my lips thin into a straight line when I see she’s not alone after all. I throw Tommyboy a frown while he cocks up that smug smile of his he likes to parade at school so much. Thankfully, when Georgia realizes that we must know each other, she’s quick to send Tommyboy on his merry way.

“Thomas, I’ll see you here next week, same time, okay? Kennedy, you can come inside now.”

I don’t like that Tommyboy knows that I’m here, but instead of saying anything to warn him to keep his mouth shut, I push past him and walk into the office. I fidget in my seat while they talk in the corridor, and I only relax when I hear the front door close.

“Kennedy, I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon,” Georgia states once

she's back, grabbing a seat in her favorite recliner. "Does your father know you're here?"

"No. Not really."

"That's what I thought. I'm sorry, Kennedy, but I can't see you without parental consent. Your father was very explicit that he no longer wishes for us to continue our sessions."

"I know. I just have a few questions to ask you if that's alright. I promise I won't come here again."

Her manicured nails tap on her notebook as if considering if she should send me away or indulge me. Thankfully her need to help wins out.

"What would you like to know?"

"Did my brother confide in you the reason why I almost drowned in Lake Toxaway this summer?"

"I was under the assumption that you slipped," she explains evenly.

"That's not what I asked," I refute sternly.

"Kennedy, I'm not at liberty to say what I discussed with your brother, just as I would never break our trust by divulging anything you said to me in my session with him."

"So, he did tell you," I add, reading in between the lines.

"I can neither confirm nor deny that. All I can say is that I wish I had more time to study your dynamics."

"And why can't you? What did you say to my father that got him so upset that we can no longer come here?"

Georgia pulls at the corner of her lip with her teeth, battling between the gray areas of what she can and cannot tell me without breaking her ethical and moral code. Witnessing how her resolve to keep me in the dark is vacillating, I get up from my seat, bridge the gap between us, and hold her hands in mine.

"Please, Georgia. I need to know what's wrong with me."

At this, she melts in concern and empathy, just as I calculated she would.

"Nothing is wrong with you, Kennedy," she explains, squeezing my hands. "I merely suggested that your father allow me to do some brain scans. That's all."

"Brain scans?" I repeat as if the word is alien to me. "Why? Do you think I'm sick?"

"No—"

"Is it because you think my brain is defective somehow?"

“God, no. You’re not defective,” she replies defensively.

“But then why do we need the scans? You said that Jeff and I were either psychopaths or sociopaths. Will a scan prove that? Is that it?”

Georgia lets out a loud, exaggerated sigh, her shoulders slumping somewhat. She gets out of her chair and leads me over to the sofa where I’ve lain down for the past few months, talking about how much I miss my mother.

“I really wish you hadn’t heard that. It will only result in you feeling more inadequate and out of place than you already do.”

“Just tell me which one I am so I know what to expect,” I blurt out anxiously.

“You’re getting all riled up and for no good reason. This was the exact opposite of what I was trying to do when I talked to your father.”

“If you don’t want to tell me which one I am, then at least have the courtesy of explaining their differences. If you don’t do it, then I’ll just have to google it. Who knows what I’ll find there? It might scar me for life,” I threaten, hoping that my words are enough to manipulate her into giving me what I want.

“It’s not that cut and dry or so easy to spot. Psychopaths can be intelligent, charming, and good at mimicking emotions. They may pretend to be interested in you, but in reality, they probably don’t care that much. They’re skilled actors whose sole mission is to manipulate people for personal gain,” she says, her brown eyes fixed on mine as if she knows she just described most of my personality.

“Sociopaths are less able to play along. They make it plain that they’re not interested in anyone but themselves. They often blame others and have excuses for their behavior. Some experts have dubbed sociopaths as being hot-headed, acting without thinking how others will be affected. Psychopaths are more cold-hearted and calculating. They carefully plot out their moves and use aggression in a methodical way to get what they want.”

“But there is a brain difference between the two. There has been research that suggests a psychopath’s brain is not like other people’s. The physical differences can even change basic body functions. For example, when most people see blood or violence in a movie, their hearts beat faster, their breathing quickens, and their palms get sweaty. A psychopath has the opposite reaction. He gets calmer. This quality helps psychopaths be fearless and engage in risky behavior. They don’t fear the consequences of their

actions,” she explains further, her gaze soft and empathetic.

“Is that me? Am I the cold-hearted psychopath or the hot-headed sociopath? Which one am I?”

“You’re neither. You’re just a girl who lost her mother as she was blossoming into womanhood—an age that a girl needs her mother most. You’re still in the grieving stages, Kennedy. It’s normal to be angry and disillusioned with the world as you are. Please don’t read into what you heard in the hallway between your father and me.”

I stare into her hazelnut-brown eyes and realize I’m not going to get any answers from her.

Not today.

Not ever.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, and I apologize for the inconvenience of showing up at your front door unannounced,” I state with so much sugar in my voice that it churns my stomach. “But Daddy’s right. Therapy is a waste of time. I thought you could give me answers, but I see you have none to offer. Good day to you, Ms. Georgia,” I add, using my prize-worthy Southern Belle smile.

I ignore the hurt look in her eyes as I rush out of her office, head held high, so she doesn’t see how defeated I feel. I’m still kicking myself for putting any hope in the good doctor when I realize that my afternoon has just turned from crappy to downright shitty.

“Dammit,” I curse under my breath when I see who’s waiting for me outside.

Tommyboy is sitting on the curb waving me over, looking like the cat that just ate the canary.

“That was quick. Usually, Georgia has me crying like a baby on her sofa for the whole hour-long session.”

Not wanting to indulge him in any way, I pretend to ignore him as I walk over to where I hid my bike.

“Whoa, whoa, hold up there, Ken. Leaving so soon? Don’t you want to talk or something?” he asks, holding on to my handlebars.

“What could I possibly have to say to you?”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Maybe why are you having your head examined?”

“I’m not having my head checked, Tom. I merely came over to give Dr. Trott a message from my father. That’s all.”

“You’re lying.” He smiles widely. “Jeff already told me you two are in

therapy.”

“Is that so?” My back molars grind at the way Tommyboy’s grin stretches from ear to ear at catching me red-handed in a lie. “I’m surprised he told you that. My brother doesn’t usually like to share such personal stuff about himself.”

“Tell me about it.” He laughs. “Jeff is one hard nut to crack. I think it helped that at the time he told me all that stuff, I had just given him his first handjob.”

“YOU WHAT?!” I blurt out, dropping my bike on the ground, completely stunned.

“Yep.” Tommyboy pops the ‘p’ at the end. “Why do you think my dad has me seeing the shrink for? He thinks Georgia can expel these *bad* urges out of me,” he explains, emphasizing the word bad.

It takes me a few seconds to process what he just told me while I watch him pick up my bike and start walking me down the driveway.

“Does that mean you’re gay? Wait a second. Is my brother gay?” I question, honestly curious.

Jeff has never given me any inkling that he liked guys instead of girls. In fact, I didn’t even think he had it in him to like anyone at all.

“Your brother isn’t gay. He’s just your run-of-the-mill teenage boy who enjoys having someone else make him cum instead of his right hand doing the heavy lifting. No pun intended,” Tommyboy explains bluntly.

“Ew. Gross.”

“Too much?” he teases.

“Yeah, Tom. Too much. I didn’t need to have the visual in my head, thank you very much.” I laugh. “What about you then?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure what I am yet. One day I think I might like girls, while other days, I’m more attracted to guys. I don’t know. I’m still working things out in my head.”

“Why aren’t you sure? Aren’t we just born knowing?”

“Not everyone is that lucky in figuring themselves out.”

“I’m sorry, Tom. That sounds rough,” I tell him in earnest, giving his hand a comforting squeeze.

I’m not really sure why I feel the need to console him, though. Maybe it’s because I understand what it feels like not to know what kind of person you really are on the inside. To struggle with the thoughts in your mind and the expectations that everyone has of you.

“Georgia did say that there was something I can do that could help me, though.”

“She did, huh?” I smile at him, pleased that at least Georgia was able to give him some hope when she wasn’t able to give me any. “What did she tell you to do?”

“Since I’ve already kissed a guy and know where I stand on that front, she said maybe I should kiss a girl and see how that goes.”

“Really? Her homework for you was to get to first base?” I ask incredulously, thinking maybe Georgia wasn’t that great a therapist after all.

“I’m not the doc. She is. I just haven’t been able to get any girl to kiss me, though. If only there were someone that I could experiment with. Someone who would be nice enough to help me out.”

And by the way he wiggles his brows, I know he has someone in mind.

“No way, Tom. You and I both know I’m not nice. Get some other girl to kiss you.” I shut him down quickly, pulling my bike out of his hands and hurrying my steps.

“Oh, come on, Kennedy. It would take you like ten Mississippis to do it.”

“Fat chance that’s ever going to happen.”

“Fine. Five Mississippis, tops,” he insists, walking double-time to keep up with me.

“In your dreams, Tom.”

“Okay. Then you leave me no choice,” he says, stopping in his tracks. “If you don’t kiss me when school starts, I’ll tell everyone that I saw you coming out of the shrink’s office over summer break.”

This little prick!

“If you do that, you’ll be ratting yourself out, too.” I point a menacing finger at him.

“Like I care.” He shrugs. “Everyone thinks I’m an asshole anyway, so they won’t be one bit surprised that my parents put me in therapy. I’m the school bully, remember? Everyone already knows I’m fucked up.”

I know he’s trying to act all tough and not pull at my heartstrings, but Goddamn it, he does. Not only that, Tommyboy is just the type of guy to actually follow through on his threat, even if it makes him look bad. And if word gets out, my father will find a way to blame me for what he deems is a tarnished reputation.

“Fine,” I concede. “One kiss, Tom. That’s it.”

Tommyboy’s smile splits his face in two as he takes my bike out of my

hands and lets it fall on some shrubs on the edge of the road.

“First things first. Let’s take this baseball cap off you. You look too much like your brother wearing it. How am I supposed to know if I like girls if you look like him, huh?” he goads, taking the cap off my head, my long blonde hair instantly falling down my shoulders and back. “Now that’s more like it.”

“Hurry up, will you? I don’t have all day,” I say, annoyed, tapping my foot on the ground.

“Close your eyes then.”

“Make it quick,” I order, closing my eyes.

“You’re really taking all the fun out of this. It kind of defeats the purpose of the experiment if I feel you’re not into this, you know?”

“Well, that’s because I’m not,” I explain in an irked tone.

“You know what? Forget it. I thought you could help me out like a friend would. Stupid me thought that’s what we were—friends. Guess I was wrong.” He pouts, turning away and walking back up the driveway.

‘I better go to heaven for this,’ I think to myself, rushing to catch up with him. I grab his arm and swing him around, and before he’s able to say anything else, I plant a kiss on his lips. The first thing that pops into mind is how Tommyboy’s lips taste like strawberry Chapstick. I wrap my arms around his neck as his fall on my hips. I feel his thumping heartbeat against my chest as his warm and oddly gentle lips mold to mine. He doesn’t shove his tongue down my throat or tries to cop a feel, for which I’m grateful. In fact, the kiss is actually quite sweet. After the shitty day I’ve been through, it actually feels nice.

But it doesn’t bring the butterflies in my belly.

Only one boy does that.

When Tommyboy pulls away from our kiss, his cheeks are red, and his eyes are twinkling.

“How was it?” he asks, sounding a little nervous when I step back.

“It was really nice, Tom.” I smile, trying to ease his nerves.

“It was, wasn’t it?” He grins, his gaze still sparkling happily.

It’s only when a horn from a nearby car honks that he stops staring at me.

“That’s my mom picking me up,” he explains before picking up my bike from the ground and handing it over to me.

I grab his hand on the handle, stopping him for a minute.

“Our secret, right, Tom?” I arch a threatening brow.

“Our secret.” He winks back at me.

I let out a relieved sigh and let go of his hand in favor of grabbing my handlebars.

“Well, did it help at all? The kiss, I mean?” I ask after mounting my bike. He smiles shyly and ruffles the hair at the back of his head.

“About that. I already knew I was bi when Remy Peterson let me French kiss her and play with her tits in fifth grade. Sorry.”

“Oh, my God! You little shit! You played me?!”

“Kind of. Yeah. I just wanted to kiss Kennedy Ryland at least once.”

“Ooh, you are just a jerkface!” I shout, with half a mind to kick him in his junk.

“Sorry, Ken,” he shouts as he runs over to his mom’s car. “You can beat me up later. It was totally worth it, though.”

I chomp at the bit, watching Tommyboy escape from my wrath as he gets into his mom’s car. Usually, I wouldn’t have fallen for such a ploy if my head weren’t burdened by what Doctor Trott had said. Tommyboy just got lucky catching me off-guard, a mistake I don’t intend to make again.

I start to pedal my way back home, fuming all the while about how someone as clueless as Thomas Maxwell Junior got the better of me. Here I was thinking Jeff and I were some sort of evil geniuses in the making, only to be bested by one boy with a pretty face and a sad song.

Argh.

Then just as the memory of his kiss comes into my mind, so does the overwhelming, crushing sense of guilt.

Lincoln.

What if Tommyboy tells Linc I kissed him?

Goddamn it!

What did I just do?

He’ll never understand.

Oh, my God, he’s going to hate me.

He is. I just know it.

My bike screeches to a stop while I have a mini panic attack curbside. I need to get in front of this. I need to explain what happened before he hears it from anyone else. I just need... I need... I need to *fix* this!

I pull out my phone, my hands shaking as I try to text him.

Where are you right now?

I bite my lip as I watch the three blue dots pop up on the screen.

Home.

Doggone it!

The last place I want to go right now is his house. Since learning about his mom and my dad, I haven't been able to set foot inside his home. Sooner or later, I know I'll have to or otherwise risk Linc getting suspicious. The last thing I want to do is have to be the one to tell him his mom is having an affair with my dad. It would break his heart since he worships the ground Sierra walks on—much like I did my own mom when she was alive. I don't have the heart to steal that away from him. Not now, or maybe not ever.

Where are you? He texts back, pulling me out of my pensive thoughts.

I'm at Georgia's.

Linc knows that I've been seeing a therapist all summer, so my answer doesn't surprise him.

That's close to East's place. Meet up at the clubhouse in 30?

I'll be there in 20.

I ride like the wind to Easton's estate, wondering what the hell I'm going to tell him. Lying comes easily enough for me. It's not as if I've told Linc every secret I have. This could easily be just another one that I add to the pile. And it's not like he doesn't keep plenty of secrets of his own from me either. So why do I have this need to tell him about one innocent kiss that Tommyboy gave me? It didn't mean anything to me. But somehow, not telling Lincoln feels like he'll think it did.

Argh.

Why am I so impulsive?

I should have just ridden my bike home and lived with the guilt.

I wave at one of the security guards at the main entrance of the Price Estate so he can open up the iron gate for me to pass through. The guards don't bat an eye at any of us coming and going through the premises since Easton's stepdad has given us free rein to use the clubhouse whenever we want.

When I finally reach the treehouse and climb in, I let out a deep exhale, thankful that no one is around. If Easton, Finn, or Colt were here this afternoon, there would be no way I could admit to them that I had kissed Tommyboy, especially with the way he always treats Easton.

Now, I'm wondering if Tom antagonizing East isn't just a case of him having a crush he can't act on. I mean, him getting to third base with my brother without anyone knowing makes sense. Jeff has been friends with Tommyboy since they were toddlers. East is a different story, though,

entirely.

Besides, I know for a fact that East likes girls. One in particular, to be more precise. He's always drawing the same one. I've snooped around his drawings enough to know his muse is always the same—Pastor Jack's niece, Scarlett Davis. Not that he'll ever admit it to us. East likes acting like he doesn't like anybody.

Sometimes I worry that he doesn't even like himself much.

"Ryland, you up there?" Lincoln's voice calls out from the ground, making my heart pitter-patter in my rib cage.

I rush to one of the windows and wave at him.

"I'm here, Hamilton."

My heart starts doing jumping jacks in my chest from just his smile. As much as I've tried to educate my heart into simmering, it's no use. It always kickstarts to life anytime Lincoln is within arm's reach.

It's crazy, really.

Sometimes I feel like I don't have any use for my heart at all. Almost as if it would be better to discard its lead weight shackling me down to this cruel existence. But that thought never passes through my mind when the boy with deep-blue ocean eyes is looking at me. That's when my heart feels like it's light and unburdened by the life I've been dealt. As if it's free to spread its wings and fly up so high that no one will ever be able to put it back into its restraining, gilded cage again.

But I'm not free.

A fact I have to keep reminding myself of whenever Lincoln makes me believe that I am.

I pace the floor of the treehouse, counting down the seconds for him to come up through the trapdoor. I shift from one foot to the other, wiping my sweaty palms on my jean shorts, praying that he doesn't hate me for what I'm about to confess. Or worse, doesn't even care that I kissed someone that wasn't him.

The minute Lincoln's wavy blond hair comes into full view, I run toward him and catch him off-guard when I jump into his arms.

"Hey, hey, hey. Happy to see you, too, Ryland," he starts to goad but stops the minute he sees me shaking. "What's wrong, Ken? What happened?" he asks worriedly, holding my trembling form tightly to him.

But instead of answering, I close my eyes and nestle my head into his chest just so I can breathe in his comforting scent.

Lincoln always smells like home to me.

At least the home I envision in my dreams.

He lets me stay like that for a while until he feels my tense limbs start to relax and my shallow breathing normalize.

“Are you okay?”

“No.”

He kisses the side of my head before creating a breach between us, wide enough that he can look down at my face.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Ken. Let me help.”

“I did something bad,” I admit, my heart shriveling up inside with how tenderly he’s looking at me.

“Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.” He smiles sweetly.

“It is, Linc. It’s bad. I mean *really* bad.”

My dire expression must alarm him because his forehead starts to crease in concern.

“Did you hurt someone?”

I cringe, hating how his mind immediately went there. It’s not like I can blame his train of thought, though. He knows, as well as I do, that when I see red, I’ve been known to wreak havoc and resort to violence.

One particularly shameful incident immediately comes to mind.

In the third grade, there was this new girl named Lucy Duchamp that everyone seemed to absolutely adore. She was the headmistress’ second cousin who came all the way from New Orleans, so it was only natural that the faculty fawned over her. I didn’t pay her any mind, really, since I was still in my tomboy phase and preferred to climb up trees and play touch football with my friends than talk to pretty girls who wore even prettier dresses.

All I knew was that she had these big brown eyes and auburn hair that she proudly tied up into one long braid. She was just a blip on my radar until the day she started making googly eyes at Lincoln. After that, I couldn’t take my eyes off her no matter how hard I tried. I would fume in silence as I watched her share her pudding cups with him or make any excuse to talk to him. She would giggle at anything he said and touch his arm whenever she could. Once I even saw her doodling Mrs. Lucy Richfield-Hamilton on one of her notebooks in class.

It was nauseating.

I let it all slide off my back—or at least I damn well tried to. However, one day Lucy took her crush on *my Lincoln* way too far. I caught her

Valentine's Day card in his room, telling him she liked him and asking Lincoln if he liked her. That's when I lost it.

That very night, I snuck out of my house, my weapon of choice stuck carefully in my back pocket, and rode my bike all the way to her place across town. It was so freaking easy finding which room on the ground floor was hers since Lucy still needed a nightlight to fall asleep. Her walls were covered in grotesque hot pink, while Barbie dolls and stuffed animals littered her entire floor.

She was the perfect girlie princess.

While I was nothing but a dirty heathen.

With feather-light feet, I snuck inside her room and hovered over her as she slept. I took out my scissors from my pocket and cut off her most prideful possession—her beloved braid. I then scoured the room until I found a notepad and pen on her desk. Once I wrote my note, I picked up one of her teddy bears, plucked its eyes out with my scissors, and then wrapped her braid around its neck like a noose. And the pièce de resistance was my final and only warning, written in perfect cursive.

He's mine.

It all came so easily for me that night. Almost as if my bloodthirsty need for retribution and vengeance was justified somehow.

The next morning in school, rumors spread like wildfire about how someone had cut Lucy's hair while she slept peacefully in her room. Her parents and the headmistress chalked it up to it being a mean joke played by one of her girlfriends. It was preferable to blame childish antics and catty jealousy than the alternative of it being some perv who got his kicks by scaring eight-year-old little girls.

No one even considered me to be the culprit.

No one except for Lincoln, that is.

He didn't talk to me for a full month after that happened.

His disappointment in me hurt me more than any Valentine card ever could.

That's when I started taking etiquette classes with my mother. I wanted her to teach me how to be like those southern belles who wore nice dresses and sounded as sweet as homemade iced tea when they talked. I didn't want to be the type of girl who stayed up at night dreaming about cutting off braids or assassinating teddy bears just to stake her claim on the boy she liked.

I needed to prove to Lincoln that I was sorry, and I could be good, too.

But I'm not sure the lessons ever took.

"Kennedy, did you hurt anyone?" Lincoln repeats, bringing me out of my stupor.

I shake my head no.

"Maim, punch, or hit anyone?"

Again, I shake my head.

"Then I doubt it can be all that bad," he explains, less tense than he was a second ago.

"It is," I croak, suppressing the tears that want to fall.

I didn't even cry at my own mother's funeral, yet here I am on the verge of tears with the thought that somehow I'm going to disappoint him yet again.

Ever so carefully, Lincoln lifts my chin with his knuckles, brushing my hair away from my eyes, his gaze soft and patient.

"What is it, Ken? Tell me."

And before I can stop the words from plummeting out of me, I confess my sin.

"I kissed Tommyboy."

Instantly Lincoln's warm demeanor disappears. His whole body goes stiff as a board before he drops his hands off of me.

"Oh," he retorts, taking a step back from me.

"Oh? Is that all you have to say?" I yell, throwing my arms in the air.

"I'm not sure what you expect me to say here, Ken," he explains coolly. "If you expect me to fish for details on how the fucking kiss was, then you can forget about it. I don't want to know."

My eyes almost pop out of their sockets, both in surprise and in elation, as he paces back and forth, running his fingers through his hair.

"You just cursed."

"What?!" He flips his head around, anger burning in his beautiful gaze.

"You never curse."

"Of course, I do. What are you even on about right now?"

I shake my head, the smile on my face now ten feet wide.

"No. You never curse around me. The guys always do, but you don't."

"You know what? I'm going home," he says angrily. "You're not making any sense, and I can't even look at you right now."

But before he has time to turn around and leave, I pull him by the forearm and stop him in his tracks. I go to my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his

neck to keep him prisoner. He tries to pull my arms off him, but I don't move a muscle.

"Why can't you look at me?"

"Let me go, Kennedy!" he shouts, still pissed.

"Why are you so angry with me?" I insist, unable to keep my smile contained.

"I'm not angry!"

"Yes, you are!" I laugh joyfully like the sun just pushed all the dark clouds away from my view. "You're so mad at me that you even cursed."

"Fine! You want me to admit that I'm angry? Then yes, okay. I am. I'm very fucking angry! Are you happy now?!" he spits out, and I imagine that his stormy gaze is how an ocean must look when a hurricane hits it.

"Why? I want you to tell me why."

"Because," he replies vaguely, still trying to pull my arms away from his neck.

"Because why?"

"Because you kissed someone that wasn't me!" he yells, the storm brewing in his eyes making my lower belly tingle and my heart race.

"Why should that upset you? I didn't think you wanted to kiss me a second time since you only did it once and never tried to do it again."

"I have my reasons," he explains, starting to lose some of his steam.

"What are they? I'd love to hear them."

"You're fucking infuriating, you know that?" he cusses again, making me preen with how I make him lose his mind just as much as he makes me.

"I still want to know. Why haven't you kissed me again?"

"Because I wanted to spare Colt's feelings. You know how he feels about you. I didn't want to hurt him."

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes at his explanation.

"Colt only likes me because I'm the only girl at school that doesn't swoon over him. That's still not an answer. Even if you wanted to protect Colt's feelings, you kissed me anyway. So what changed?"

When he looks away, my previous joy starts to wither like a plucked rose from a field.

"Did you not like it? Is that why?"

The violent dark-blue waves in his eyes have me tightening my hold on his neck just to keep me steady.

"That's it, isn't it? You haven't tried to kiss me again because I sucked so

bad at it the first time.”

When his thumb rubs at my bottom lip and his eyes drop to my mouth, my heart literally skips a beat.

“That’s not it. I liked it fine,” he whispers, almost sounding like he’s in pain.

“You’re lying. You’re just saying that to spare my feelings.”

I was so concerned with telling him about one stupid kiss I gave Tommyboy, thinking that I’d somehow break his heart, yet here he is, breaking mine.

Immediately, I unlatch my grip on him and start rushing out of this damn clubhouse as fast as I can, so I can find a hole where I can bury my head in shame and hide. But before I get too far, Lincoln pulls me by the arm and stops me from taking another step.

“Fuck, Ken. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home! Now I’m the one who can’t stand to look at you!” I shout.

“You’re not going anywhere. Not like this.”

“Oh, yes, I am! And you can’t stop me!”

“Yeah, I can,” he threatens, and before I can make heads or tails of it, Lincoln pulls me against his chest and crashes his lips on mine.

This kiss isn’t like our first one.

It’s possessive in nature, almost as if Lincoln is determined to swallow me whole and erase any memory of anyone else’s lips ever being on mine. I let him rule the tide, his crashing waves bringing me deeper underwater until all that exists is the peaceful silence of the color blue. I yield willingly to him, craving his tempestuous heart fusing with mine. And when his tongue invades my mouth, every inch of my skin tingles to life.

It’s all too much and not nearly enough.

This isn’t just a kiss.

This is Lincoln officially claiming me as his.

When we pull away, I’m sure he sees stars in my eyes.

“From here on out, all your kisses are mine. Are you good with that?”

“Yes,” I reply breathlessly. “I’m definitely good with that.”

“Good. I’m glad we cleared that up.” He smirks before gently tapping the tip of his nose with mine.

“Me, too.”

But when he grows quiet, I can tell that something is still troubling him.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m serious about Colt, though. I refuse to hurt my cousin just because I want to kiss you every waking second, okay?”

“You do?” I sigh.

“Ken, focus.”

“Right.” I shake my head to clear the lovesick haze away. “I won’t tell Colt about us.”

“I don’t like sneaking behind his back either.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I love my cousin very much, and the way I feel for you will not turn me into a liar.”

“So what you’re saying—”

“What I’m saying is that we both care for Colt very much. Can you honestly say you won’t feel guilty if we start something behind his back?”

“Yes, I really can,” I deadpan.

“Ken,” he huffs out despondently.

“Fine. I can’t. God, he’s lucky I adore his cocky ass.”

“As do I.”

“What does that mean for us, though? That you’ll never kiss me again as long as Colt thinks he likes me?”

“I’ll kiss you plenty. In my head, at least. Don’t worry. Colt’s crush will be short-lived. You’ll see.”

“You better be right, or I’ll wring his neck until he stops liking me.”

“That will probably only incentivize him more.” Lincoln laughs. “Besides, we have our whole lives to fool around, Ken. You’re my destiny after all.”

And just as he says those words, he pulls me into a tight hug, unaware of how my joyful smile has slipped off my face with the reminder of my true destiny in life.

Chapter 8



Kennedy

Three years later

“What are you doing?” Jeff whisper-yells when he catches me hunched down and hidden in the bushes beneath our living room window.

“Shh,” I reprimand, ordering him to keep quiet while raising my head just enough to get a view of what’s happening inside, with my father’s guests being none the wiser about my presence.

“Kennedy,” Jeff insists, making me have to turn around and cover his mouth with my hand before he rats us out.

“Not a word,” I whisper, pointing to the window before letting him go.

Once he gets the hint, he gives me a curt nod and thankfully keeps silent while both of us try to sneak a peek and listen in on the conversation taking place inside.

“These Richfield bitches need to learn their place,” Lincoln’s father sneers before taking a pull of his whiskey.

“What has Sierra done now?” My father laughs, pouring more liquor into the governor’s glass.

It’s not even noon, but that doesn’t seem to faze him any in accepting a second round. It’s also quite sickening how my father can ridicule his previous mistress right in front of her husband’s face so easily. Even more disgusting than when I overheard him break his affair off with Sierra on the phone a few months back, blaming her lack of interest in the bedroom as the cause of his indifference.

My father is a pig, and I slap myself every day for ever thinking differently.

“This visit isn’t about my mother, Montgomery,” Teddy interjects coldly

before his father has time to say anything in response. “It’s my aunt Colleen that needs to learn a lesson or two. Especially in regards to the new dawn quickly approaching.”

“I thought the sun rose and set on you, Richfields.”

“My son is a Hamilton, goddamn it!” Crawford yells belligerently, slamming his closed fist on the armchair.

“You can say that until you are blue in the face, Crawford, but we all know which name trumps yours in this town.”

I can tell by my father’s smug expression that he’s taking great pleasure in watching the governor get all riled up.

“What did I tell you, Teddy? It would be pointless to come here.”

Crawford begins to get up from his seat, but Teddy stops him, holding him down by his shoulder, making sure to keep him exactly where he is.

“Tell me, Montgomery, do you still want a piece of the Richfield pie?” Teddy asks outright, a foreboding gleam in his eye.

Teddy’s deviant sparkle shines brighter when he sees he’s been successful in wiping the mocking smirk off my father’s face.

“Don’t you dare insult me in my own home, Theodore. I don’t care who you are. I wouldn’t think twice at pulling my rifle out and shooting you in the face for trespassing,” my father growls menacingly, albeit in vain, since no one in the room believes his empty threat.

“We didn’t come here to offend.” Teddy continues to smile sinisterly at him. “In fact, we came here with a proposition. One that will be highly advantageous for both our families.”

My father’s blond brows crease at the center of his forehead as he sits back down on the sofa.

“What kind of proposition?” he asks after a pregnant pause.

“Like I was saying before being so rudely interrupted, we think it’s time my aunt realizes that there is a clock ticking on her reign. The days of the Richfield Dynasty being run by a woman are done.”

“Is that so?” My father arches a sardonic brow.

“It is. She’s on borrowed time, and she knows it.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“And pray tell, what have you heard, Montgomery?”

“Rumor has it that even though you’ve already turned eighteen, Colleen still refuses to acknowledge your birthright in the Richfield Foundation.”

“I won’t deny that. She’s told me as much with the excuse that I must

finish college first before she lets me get one foot in the door. It's also true that she's put no such impositions on her own daughter and has been schooling Meredith to take her place, knowing full well that I'm the eldest of all the Richfield children. As I see it, the seat my dear cousin has been groomed for all her life should come to me and no one else."

"As much as I empathize with your disgruntlement, I don't see how I can help you with your family dilemma."

"You can't. On the other hand, Kennedy can," Crawford interjects, with beady eyes and a tobacco-stained grin.

"How so?" my father questions, intrigued.

A cold shiver runs down my spine by the way both Teddy and Crawford grin at one another.

"It's a well-known fact that Colleen has a soft spot for the girl, and after Dorethea's passing, her affection for Kennedy has only grown. We know that she is fond of walking her estate, arm in arm with your daughter, reminiscing about the girl's mother."

"It's true. Kennedy does spend a lot of time over at the Richfield Estate. I've indulged it since a girl needs a mother. Colleen, no matter her faults, is still a woman and capable of having conversations with Kennedy that my daughter might not feel comfortable having with me."

"Come now, Montgomery. There is no need for lies amongst friends. You didn't indulge anything. I reckon you eagerly encouraged Kennedy to pay Colleen these visits. The minute your wife was no longer in the picture, you knew that keeping your job as dean was on shaky ground. Kennedy is the only reason why you were spared the humiliation of getting fired. Since you had no qualms in using your daughter to line your pockets and keep your cushy job, then I'm sure our proposition won't raise any eyebrows either," Crawford explains with a smug smile.

"And what exactly is this proposition of yours?"

"It's ingenious in its simplicity, really. We'd like to propose a courtship between my son and your daughter. If Teddy here vows to make a good woman out of her, my bitch of a sister-in-law won't be able to deny my son a goddamn thing," he announces, beaming proudly that he came up with what he considers to be a foolproof plan.

"In other words, you want to coerce Colleen to do your bidding by using my child to do it?"

"Coercion is the only language these Richfield bitches understand. If you

show them any weakness, they'll eat you alive and spit out your bones. So why shouldn't we take advantage of theirs?"

"I still don't see what's in it for me," my father retorts, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Don't play coy with me, Montgomery. I know you're foaming at the mouth at the idea. If all goes to plan, the minute the girl graduates from high school, Teddy will put a ring on her finger, and you will finally have the keys to the castle that you always dreamed of."

"My daughter isn't a chess piece to be played in your twisted little game."

"She's a woman. Aside from fucking, is there any other use for them than to guarantee alliances? Don't worry. Teddy has assured me he won't lay a finger on the girl until they're wed if that's what concerns you."

My father stares daggers into Teddy's cold blue eyes.

"Forgive me, Crawford, if your word alone doesn't ease my concern. Your son isn't necessarily known to be trustworthy. I may have my faults, but I still love my children and wish to protect them."

"You'll love your daughter much more after she's given my son an heir to the Richfield fortune—I can guarantee you that."

"That heir better come only after they are married and not before. I won't let either one of you tarnish my daughter's reputation over some family feud."

"You mean like you tried to do with Sierra back in the day?" Crawford laughs wickedly, making my father's nostrils flare in contempt. "Everyone knows how you tried to knock her up just to make sure you got a good chokehold on the family fortune before they ever found out about you two sneaking around together. Too bad your seed didn't take. As you can see by my Teddy here, I didn't have the same problem."

"I guess luck was on your side," my father snipes resentfully.

"Ah, dear friend, you and I both know we make our own luck. Like you did for one. I still remember the day when Colleen found out that, while you were fucking her baby sister every which way 'til Sunday, you were also whispering love sonnets in her best friend's ear, easing your way into her heart. I busted a gut laughing when she found out how well you played her. Colleen had been so focused on Sierra and her declining reputation that she never saw the threat creeping around Dorethea. That took balls as well as brains."

"We all use the resources afforded us to make our way in this world," my

father states plainly without a hint of remorse.

“In other words, you used your dick to lure one in and your sophisticated mind to entice the other. You’re a pragmatic man who believes in a contingency plan. I’ll give you that. I’ve actually always admired that about you. But what I’m trying to convey now is that if you accept our proposal, you’ll never need another backup plan again.”

My throat dries as I watch my father take in all of Crawford’s words and dissect each one to see if they hold merit.

“My daughter is willful and stubborn at times,” he explains after a long pause of consideration. “She might not be so easy to convince.”

“Yes, she will,” Teddy explains matter-of-factly. “She’s been born and bred to be a good southern girl. The last thing she’ll ever want to do is bring shame to her family.”

“And how will her refusal to get engaged to you cause our family any shame?” my father counters suspiciously.

“Because if she doesn’t, I’ll let all of Asheville know exactly whose bed you were sleeping in when your wife was dying of cancer.”

“You wouldn’t,” my father croaks, looking awfully pale.

“I would. There is nothing I won’t do to get what’s rightfully mine.”

My chest painfully constricts with the underlying threat in his words and the determination in his eyes. There’s no doubt in my mind that Teddy would do anything to get what he wants. Even if that means running his mother’s good name through the mud just to embarrass my father, should he refuse to bend to his will.

Not that humiliation is Teddy’s endgame.

Once word gets out that dear old dad had an affair while my mother was fighting for her life, Colleen will rain hellfire down on him. The first thing to go will be his prestigious job at the university. The second, his reputation. My godmother won’t bat an eye at dubbing my father *persona non grata* throughout Northside, making sure to ruin his social standing while doing an intense campaign to preserve her sister’s. Sierra Richfield-Hamilton will be portrayed as the victim of my father’s advances, just as she had been when they were younger. With no job prospects and no wealthy friends to help him get back on his feet, it would be as if he never left the Southside.

Not that I care what happens to my father. He’s shown that he deserves no loyalty from me.

The only person I’m worried about is Lincoln.

It would break his heart to learn about his mother's infidelity. He's put her up on such a high pedestal that for that image of her to come crashing down in such a cruel and salacious fashion would shatter him.

"And like my father told you," Teddy continues on in the same eerie, calm tone. "I won't lay a hand on your daughter's pretty blonde head. But once she's mine, I'll do whatever the fuck I want with her, and there isn't one thing you can do to stop me."

Fuck!

Fuck!

Fuck!

I slide down the wall, my ass falling to the ground, not wanting to hear another word coming out of their conniving mouths. I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them in a futile effort at trying to keep myself from falling apart.

I don't see how I'm going to get out of this mess.

Either I accept my fate and break Lincoln's heart by dating his brother, or fight this and run the risk of everyone finding out about his mother's affair and hurt Lincoln that way. No matter how I look at it, he'll end up hurt.

"This can't be happening," I whisper to myself.

"Ken," Jeff whispers beside me, squeezing my hand in his. "I'm here. It's okay. I won't let anyone hurt you, I promise."

I tilt my head to the side and see the conviction in his gaze. But that's not the only sentiment shining through. Today my twin has love in his eyes for me, so even though his oath holds no real hope, I genuinely believe that he wants to protect me.

At least today.

Tomorrow, my mercurial brother might wake up hating me again and throw me to the wolves himself.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach when I hear glasses clink together in celebration. Even though I missed my father accepting their terms, by the pleasing chuckles coming from inside the room, it's obvious he's on board with Teddy and Governor Hamilton's perverse plan.

I can't let this happen.

I won't.

"Jeff, give me the keys to your car," I order, stepping away from under the window.

"Why? What are you going to do?" he asks, following me.

“Just give me the keys, Jeff!”

His gaze skirts from me to our house, where my fate has been written by men who care only about themselves and their ambitions. My body is shaking so hard that when he relents and hands me his keys, it’s a miracle I don’t drop them to the ground.

“Ken, don’t do anything stupid. This could actually be good for us. We just need to spin it to our advantage,” he yells behind me as I race to the garage.

Of course, my brother would think me dating Teddy Hamilton is a good thing. Just like my father, he’s always had an appetite for things just beyond his reach and wouldn’t think twice about selling his soul to grab it. But then again, who am I to judge?

I cashed in my soul a long time ago for much less.

“Ken, are you listening to me? Stay and let’s talk about this,” he shouts as I jump into his car.

“There is nothing to talk about, Jefferson. If Daddy asks, tell him I went into town.”

Those are the last words I tell him as I speed away in the direction of the only person I know who is powerful enough to put a stop to this diabolical plan.

Thirty minutes later, I drive onto the Richfield Estate, haphazardly parking my car in front of the cold mausoleum and dashing to the door at record speed. I don’t wait long before the butler opens the door after my incessant knocking.

“I need to see my godmother. Is she here?” I blurt out breathlessly.

“Yes, Miss Ryland. Let me show you to her.”

But instead of him ushering me inside like I assumed he would, he closes the front door behind him and leads me along the large estate until we reach my godmother’s beloved greenhouse. I wring my clammy hands as we walk inside and find Aunt Colleen on her knees, pruning roses and setting them in a wicker basket beside her. Even doing gardening work, Colleen Richfield Turner looks like the epitome of poise and grace. Something she’s been trying to drill into me for as long as I can remember.

“Miss Ryland to see you, ma’am,” he announces.

I wait impatiently for her butler to retreat, so the Richfield matriarch and I can be alone.

“I wasn’t expecting a visit from you today,” she states evenly without

turning around to face me.

“It couldn’t be prevented. I need your help, and I need it now.”

She lets out a disappointed sigh.

“That tone, child. Have I not taught you over the years to be wary of it? You reek of anxiety and desperation just by the sound of your voice. You need to get a better handle on that.”

“I’m sorry I disappoint you, Auntie, but it can’t be helped. If I sound desperate, that’s because I am.”

“You’re at a stage of your tutelage where you should be able to fix whatever is troubling you on your own. I didn’t think I needed to remind you that coming to me should always be your last resort. Otherwise, how will you ever be able to tackle the tasks ahead of you?”

It takes everything in me not to go to her and shake her by the shoulders, so she can stop being so damn robotic and show an ounce of humanity. But like my mother always said, you can’t draw blood from a stone.

“This is something that I can’t fix. Only you can,” I reply with as cold of a tone as I can muster.

Thankfully, she gets up to her feet, slapping the dirt from her hands once she’s placed her clippers down. She turns around to face me, her aloof and expressionless demeanor set in place.

“Go on then, child. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

I tell her everything I overheard earlier at my house, word for word, so as to not to leave anything out. I try to keep my features as impartial as hers, but it’s extremely difficult for me to accomplish since I’m basically confessing that my father just sold me out to the highest bidder and that her brother-in-law and nephew are conspiring against her. Once I’m done, I’m out of breath, my heart slamming away in my ribcage. I wait for her to be appalled and come up with a solution to get me out of this mess when she surprises me by going back to attending to her roses.

“Aunt Colleen, didn’t you hear a word I just said?”

“I did,” she replies with that same steady tone.

“And? Aren’t you going to say anything? Do anything?”

“No. I don’t think I am. No.”

“What do you mean, no?!” I shriek.

She turns slightly sideways in my direction with a single stem rose in her hand.

“Beautiful flowers, aren’t they? In any vibrant color, a rose is flawless in

its beauty. But even more impressive is how they can withstand the harshest of the environments while keeping their elegance and poise intact. To have such flowers in our possession, we need to tend them with an extra abundance of care and patience. One wrong move and a rose's thorns will prick the skin, making us bleed and reminding us that even seemingly frail pretty things have their armor and won't shy away from using it."

"Riddles? Is that what you have for me? Fucking riddles?!" I yell at her, losing my temper.

Her stare becomes an arctic chill freezing me in place.

"Not riddles, but a lesson. One that I thought you had learned by now."

"I don't need more lessons. I need you to end this."

"Your father was the one who put you in a vulnerable position, Kennedy. Not me. Aim that vile temper of yours where it's best suited and deserving." She snaps, "Come to think of it, this is an ideal opportunity for you to prove to me that you're your mother's daughter and rid yourself of the mess he's made. I won't lift a finger to help you. Not for the time being, anyway. However, I will give you my word that you will never walk down the aisle with that monster of a boy. That I promise you."

"I don't need your promises! I need you to fix this now! I can't wait until my supposed wedding day for you to step in."

"And why is that?"

"Because..." I stutter, a flash of ocean-blue eyes squeezing my heart into a pulp, "because *he'll* hate me."

"Ah, of course." She thins her lips and drops the rose into the basket. "I should have known this was about Lincoln. All roads always seem to lead themselves to him, don't they?" She lets out an audible sigh before turning her attention back to me. "If the match had been made between you and him, then believe me when I tell you I would have given you both my blessing. But my brother-in-law knows my fondness for the boy, even if I've tried to hide my true feelings for him. There was never a chance that Crawford would put Lincoln's best interests above his son. Not when he could kill two birds with one stone."

"What does that even mean?!" I anxiously shift from left to right, baffled by her response. "Lincoln is just as much his son as Teddy is. If I do have to marry someone, I'm sure you could persuade his father or even mine, for that matter, into amending this misogynistic arranged marriage into choosing Lincoln instead of Teddy as my would-be groom. If this is all about who will

lead the Richfield Foundation in the future, who cares which Hamilton takes this seat?"

"I care, and so does Crawford!" She snaps, stunning me into silence.

My godmother isn't known for losing her cool, making her outburst even more puzzling. "There's still so much you don't know, Kennedy," she adds, now more in control of her emotions. "So much you still have to learn. But for now, you should put away childish adorations and focus on your true goals. Love sometimes makes us falter from our true path instead of keeping us steady on it. It can hinder you more than it can save you."

"If this is your way of telling me that I can't fulfill my obligations and still have Lincoln, then you're wrong. I'll never give him up."

"You're young. When you get to be my age, you'll understand that there are many ways you can love someone and still achieve your true purpose."

"There is only one way I'll ever be able to love Lincoln, and that's with my whole heart. By you letting this scheme of his father and mine take hold, you are purposely denying my ability to do that."

"I'm not denying you anything," she retorts with a hint of irritation. "You came here seeking me out so I could fix your problem, and I'm telling you that you hold all the necessary skills and tools to deal with it yourself. This challenge is not as bleak as you are making it out to be. However, if you are unable to rectify this ill-gotten plan, then maybe you're not as ready for the trials and tribulations ahead of you as you have led me to believe. Maybe your mother was wrong about your potential after all."

"Don't use my mother's name to excuse your unwillingness to show me some goddamn mercy. But I hear you loud and clear. You want me to deal with this myself, so I will. My way."

"Good. I'm glad that's settled then. Is there anything else that you want to discuss?" she asks, placing a giant boulder on the subject.

"No."

"Then be on your way, child. Time is not in your favor."

"From what I can tell, very little is, Auntie," I retort, gifting her the same cold smile she is so fond of using, "but thank you for your words of wisdom. They've been enlightening."

The frown to her lips and the small taint of sadness in her icy gaze provoked by my sarcastic remark does very little to temper my rage as I storm off and leave. But then again, I only have myself to blame for my disappointment.

It was foolish of me to come here looking for a miracle.

Miracles don't exist.

Not in a world where evil men consistently conspire and connive into getting their way.

My mother made that very clear.

I'll be sure to be more mindful not to forget that in the future.

Chapter 9



Kennedy

On shaky legs, I climb the rope ladder up to the clubhouse, the spring wind blowing up my skirt, making me almost lose my footing. I tighten my grip and quicken my steps through the trapdoor and sigh out in relief when I see Lincoln already inside, pacing the floors waiting for me.

“I came as soon as you texted,” he states worriedly, rushing toward me so that he can help me up.

The minute my feet are on solid ground, I hug him at his waist and nestle my head on his chest, the only place in this entire world that feels like home to me.

“Kennedy?” he questions in a soft whisper, lovingly skating his hand up and down my back.

“Just give me a minute,” I reply, shutting my eyes and taking in his soothing scent.

“You’re shaking. Tell me, what’s wrong?”

“Just hold me, Linc. Just hold me.”

He does as I ask and pulls me in closer, tightening his hold around my trembling form. A sick sense of déjà vu assaults me as I remember another day that I asked him to meet me here, and how I was just as fearful of losing him then as I am now.

If I were ever given the ability to press pause on life and its cruel twists and turns of fate, I’d gladly live out the remainder of my days in this precise moment—in Lincoln’s arms. Life would be so much simpler if we were the only ones in it. There would be no sets of obligations or callous ugly people trying to tear us apart.

All that would exist would be us.

Loving each other like we were always meant to do.

“How can I make it better, Ken? Tell me, and I’ll do it,” he vows, kissing my forehead so tenderly it hurts my heart.

I stare into his oceanic abyss, wishing I could dive deep into his waters and swim and just escape to a place no one could ever touch us. But the way he stares back at me, with such love and adoration, my heart melts to the spot, unable to move or even want to.

“I love you,” I confess on a rasp, my heart beating a mile a minute as the words spill from my lips. “I love you so much, Lincoln. You own my heart. You always have, and you always will.”

His eyes soften to a perfect shade of midnight blue as he dries the tears from my cheeks that I didn’t even know were there.

“Where is this all coming from? What’s wrong, Ken? Tell me so I can fix it.”

My enamored heart falls to its death onto the floor with his lukewarm response, making me pull away from his embrace.

“Is that all you have to say to me? I’ve just poured my soul out to you! Aren’t you going to tell me how you feel about me?” I retort, hurt, turning my back away from him.

I don’t have to wait too long to feel his warm body behind mine, his fingers gently playing with the ends of my long hair, his breath tickling my ear.

“You know how I feel, Ken,” he whispers.

I snap my body around, my tears freefalling now at his reluctance to say the words I’ve wanted to hear from him for most of my young adult life.

“No, I don’t! Because you never say it!”

Before I have time to pull away from him again, he grabs me by the arm and pulls me to him so fast that our chests slam against one another. My lips part in a surprised gasp as his mouth crashes possessively over mine. Lincoln’s hands slither their way into my hair, keeping me steady as he dominates me with this one kiss.

Over the years, we’ve stolen many kisses in this treehouse, even going as far as second base. And in all the times that we snuck in these secretive make-out sessions to curb our insatiable appetite for one another, Lincoln has never kissed me quite so frantically as he is now. Today his kiss feels just as desperate as I am. It’s the solace I need to confirm that I’m not alone in my feelings. That he loves me just as much as I love him, even if he can’t express it yet.

I let him show me just how much he loves me by letting his tongue invade my mouth, like a general attacking enemy lines with the sole intent of keeping me hostage to his will. I keep my white flag hidden away, yearning for his beautiful, ruthless invasion to take me prisoner. His tongue teases mine before conquering it completely, making me moan and grab fistfuls of his T-shirt to keep me steady.

“Lincoln,” I moan when he gives me enough room to breathe, my thighs rubbing up against one another so I can keep the slickness in between them contained.

“Isn’t this what you wanted? For me to show you?” he groans, his kiss falling from my lips so his teeth and tongue can make their way down the slope of my neck. “Isn’t this what you need?”

“Yes,” I whimper when his teeth slightly bite my sensitive nipple while his hand pulls at my hair.

Every nerve ending in my body comes to life with his passionate foreplay.

But I want more.

So much more.

I arch a leg over his hip, rubbing myself unashamedly on his thigh, needing the friction that only he can deliver. My head falls back, feeling like it weighs a ton with the myriad of sensations Lincoln is coaxing out of me with just his lips.

“Lincoln.”

My voice doesn’t sound like my own when I utter his name. It’s heavy and thick, so full of raw desire that I feel like I’m going to combust at any second.

“Lincoln, please.”

“Please what?” he taunts, biting my breast, his teeth puncturing through my shirt in such a way that they are sure to leave their mark. “What do you need?”

“I need... I need...”

God! What do I need?

Although my mind isn’t capable of putting into words what I want, my blue-eyed boy knows exactly what my body craves—what my soul sings for.

He pulls me by the waist until my legs are locked around his hips and walks us over to one of the plush rugs on the floor, lying us both on the ground. He hovers over me, caressing my cheek with the back of his

knuckles, his breathing becoming just as erratic as my own.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, his voice so deliciously carnal I want it to lick every inch of my skin. “Do you, Ken?”

“Yes.” I nod impatiently.

His eyes sparkle in triumph as I surrender to whatever he has in store for me. His gaze never wavers from mine as his hand travels up my thigh and then down into the valley between my legs. My chest heaves as we stare into each other’s eyes, his deft fingers slowly making their way to my panties. I wiggle my ass up off the rug so he can pull them off and bite my bottom lip when Lincoln stores my lace panties into the front pocket of his jeans. When his hand returns to my wet slit and finds the proof of his effect on me, his eyes slant as if in pain, a raw grunt leaving his throat.

“You make it very hard for me to be good.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I cock a mischievous brow.

The wolfish smile that springs free has my clit instantly throbbing with need. I swallow the moan that wants to come out when one of his fingers gently grazes my swollen clit, teasing it with erotic images of what’s about to come.

“Do you ever think about me this way?” he asks, his eyes searing into mine as he begins to play with my pussy. “Do you ever stay up at night dreaming about the day that I can do this to you whenever I want to? Whenever *you* want me to?”

“Yes,” I confess with a sultry moan.

“I fantasize about it almost every night. When I’m alone in my room and the outside world can’t get in, I imagine that you’re there, lying on my bed just waiting for me. As if the gods have given me an offering as a reward for all the shit and suffering I have had to endure.”

My parched throat dries further with his words while the rest of my body tingles and vibrates with his soft touch. I want to close my eyes and just revel in the sensation he’s creating, but I don’t want to miss a moment of looking at my true love’s face. The outpouring of love and desire in his eyes is just as mind-blowing as his scorching caress, causing my pulse to race and my thighs to spread apart wider. He reins in a smile when I pull my skirt up so he can have a full view of what he’s doing to me.

“You really can’t help being wicked, can you, Ken?”

“No,” I reply unashamedly, bringing my knees up and opening myself to his scrutinizing gaze.

“And you also don’t play fair,” he growls when I grab his hand and brush it against my core so that his fingers are soaked in my juices.

“Nice guys finish last, Lincoln. And right now, I don’t want you to be nice.”

“What do you want then?” he murmurs, his tone drenched with need.

“I want you to kiss me.” I lick my lips, my gaze falling to my bare pussy to drive my meaning home.

I half expect him to deny my request, but Lincoln surprises me by immediately going to his knees and forcefully pulling my legs over his shoulders, my ass skidding on the floor. Before I can say a word, his head is in between my thighs, his tongue lapping at my core.

“OH, MY GOD!” I scream, my eyes falling back into my head.

As much as I thought I could handle his forbidden kiss, nothing could have ever prepared me for my body to be instantly set on fire.

“Fuck. You taste so fucking good,” he mewls, eating me out like he’s never tasted anything better in his whole life.

I bite back the smile that wants to come out with how Lincoln has officially lost his mind, cursing in between licks, his fingers digging into my skin without thought or care of the pain he’s inflicting. Long gone are the gentle, tender touches he’s spoiled me with over the years, and in their place are hot, ardent claims of passion. I quiver and moan as he continues on with his maddening assault.

I’ve never felt like this.

Like someone wants to devour me whole or risk madness setting in.

His unrestrained hunger for me has white spots coloring my line of vision, completely blinding me, making me gasp for air.

“Fuck. That’s it, Ken. Cum on my tongue,” he praises as my back arches off the floor, the pad of his tongue insistently wreaking havoc on my clit until there is nothing left but blinding color all around me.

I’m out of breath, my heart rattling in its cage as I fall back to solid ground, knowing my love is there to catch me.

My lids flutter open as the pad of his thumb plays with my lower lip, coaxing my mouth to open and suck on his digit, tasting myself on his skin. Lincoln crawls up my boneless and sated body and delivers a kiss worth committing to memory.

“Now, will you tell me what’s wrong?” he asks sweetly, wiping the sheen of sweat off my brow.

“Only after you kiss me again.”

The smile that crests his lips makes my heart sing as he bows his head one more time to kiss me. My hands tug at his T-shirt, wanting to be as close to him as I possibly can, and when his steel shaft pokes at my belly, I squirm in anticipation, wondering what it would feel like to be totally and unequivocally his in every way that counts.

With that thought planted in my head, I slide my hand in between us and grab his bulging hard-on in my hand and give it a tight squeeze.

“That’s enough,” he groans, pulling both my hands away and trapping them by my wrists above my head.

The sullen pout that surfaces on my lips can’t be avoided. I’m saddened that he ended our kiss so quickly, as well as my advances to take us to the next level. But soon, he won’t be able to deny my heart’s desire. My love showed his cards to me today and left them all out in the open for me to look at. He wants me just as much as I want him. All he needs is a little push. Not to say it won’t be a challenge since Lincoln has always been more leveled-headed compared to my impulsive nature. And for a long time, I was fine to wait for him, to give him all the time that he needed for our relationship to progress at a comfortable pace. A pace he didn’t feel he was betraying anyone by following.

But now I’m out of time.

We’re out of time.

He just doesn’t know it yet.

“Let’s run away, Linc,” I blurt out.

“What?” he asks incredulously, completely taken aback and releasing my wrists from his hold.

“I’m serious. Let’s just pack up our things and go somewhere else. Somewhere we can be free.”

“We are free, Ken. Where is this all coming from?” he rebukes, getting off of me.

I pull myself up and straighten my skirt so that I can kneel in front of his sitting form.

“We are anything but free, Linc.” I shake my head vehemently. “We’re just pawns in a game we can’t win. But we can escape all that. All we have to do is just go. Leave and never think of Asheville or the Northside ever again. Come with me. Let’s just go, Linc.”

I grab his hands in mine and kiss his knuckles before lacing my fingers

through his.

“So that’s why you called me here. You want to run away.”

“I do. With every fiber in my being, there is nothing I want more.”

“Why? Tell me why, and I’ll consider it.”

I maul the corner of my lip before shaking my head in refusal.

“Do I have to give you any more reasons than the ones you already know?”

“We’ve always had a shitty childhood, Ken, and you never wanted to run away before. What changed?”

“I can’t answer that.”

He lets out an exaggerated exhale, pulling his hands away from mine so he can run his fingers through his hair—a telltale sign he’s at his wit’s end.

“You have another secret, I see.”

“I do.” I nod, feeling my face flush. “But don’t ask me what it is because I can’t tell you.”

“So what you’re asking is for me to pack up my things and leave the only place I’ve ever called home on blind faith alone?”

“Isn’t that what love is? Blind faith that the person you love loves you back and will do everything in their power to preserve and protect it?”

His brows crease as he places a palm on each of my cheeks.

“Yes, but what about the other people that we love, Ken? What about our family?”

“What about them?” I throw my arms in the air, hurt that he’d speak of them when they are the ones at the very root of our problems. “Are you really going to sit there and tell me you’ll miss your father? A man who cares more for his political gain than sparing his youngest son any compliment on his achievements? Or will you miss the brother who you’ve admitted to me makes your life a living hell at every turn? Do you think I’d miss mine? A father who is too ambitious for his own good, and a twin who loves and resents me all in the same breath? Would you trade our happiness for theirs?”

“No, of course not. But I would miss my mom, Ken. Very much. I couldn’t just leave in the dead of night like that.”

My teeth only dig deeper into my lip at the mention of his mother.

“But I wasn’t talking about *that* family. I was talking about *our* family. Colt. Easton. Finn. Would you turn your back on them so easily?” he adds, making my eyes fall to the floor in shame that none of them had crossed my mind.

“No. They are the brothers I should have had,” I confess in earnest.

“I know they are. They’re mine, too.”

I raise my sudden watery gaze to meet his and grab his hands once more.

“We can send word to them and tell them where we are once we’ve settled somewhere safe. They would keep our secret. I know they would. And when we are all old enough, we could come back if you really needed to. Or they could come to us.”

“Ken, what you’re suggesting is crazy.”

“Is it? What’s so crazy about it? Don’t you want to be with me?”

He instantly groans, his eyes falling to my lips when I press my temple to his.

“I know you do, Linc,” I whisper, my mouth now only a hairsbreadth away from his. “You know how I know that? Because your heart is just as much mine as mine is yours. I know everything that’s in it. So don’t tell me that the idea of running away and leaving this pitiful existence never crossed your mind. I’m just the one who happened to say it first.”

“Ken—” he starts with another excuse in his eyes, but I shut it down by placing a lone finger over his mouth.

“Meet me here at midnight. I’ll have everything set for us to go by then. I know you’ll come, Linc. Just as I know you love me, even if you refuse to say it.”

I lean in and softly place a chaste kiss on his lips before getting up and walking to the trapdoor.

“Remember. Midnight, Linc,” I remind him, throwing one last look at my love over my shoulder.

It will all come to an end at midnight.

I will not be a pawn to be used by anyone anymore.

Not by my father.

Not by the Hamiltons or the Richfields.

Linc and I will have our happily ever after.

After tonight, all our worries will be in the rearview mirror, and then we can be free.

Midnight can’t come soon enough.

Chapter 10



Lincoln

When I drive back home, my mind is a minefield of unanswered questions and doubts.

Kennedy is going to leave Asheville tonight.

The question is will she do it with or without me.

She's determined enough to see this through if I don't give her a good enough reason to stay. That much I know. I just have to find a way to make her realize that we can be together here—with our family.

The thing that puzzles me, though, is what set her off in the first place.

Maybe this impulsive decision of hers is just the result of the wear and tear of forcing her to keep us a secret for so long. If that's the case, then I need to finally have a serious talk with Colt and verify that his crush on her is truly and officially a thing of the past. If it's not, then I need to make him understand that his feelings for her could never run as deep as mine. Kennedy Ryland has owned my heart for as long as I can remember. I'd go to the ends of the Earth for her.

I just pray Colt doesn't feel the same way.

My cousin may put on an aloof exterior to everyone else, but I know his heart. When he loves, he loves with his whole heart and soul, and he's loyal to the very end. There is no question in my mind that he cares for Kennedy. I just need to make sure his affections for her are in the same realm as Finn's and Easton's—brotherly love and nothing more.

Regardless of what they may be, I've put this conversation off for long enough.

When I get to a stop sign, I throw Colt a text and ask him to meet me back at my house. But the weight of uncertainty doesn't ease off my shoulders as I expected after making such a decision. There is this prickle at

the back of my neck that I can't shake. My intuition is shouting out at me that something else spooked my girl into wanting to pack up her stuff and go.

Another secret.

There is something else she's hiding from me.

She said as much.

But what could it be?

What could have propelled her to think that running away is the only choice she has to be free?

Free.

The word feels heavy on my tongue, like the burdens of a promise yet to be fulfilled.

As much as I tried to deny it to her earlier, she's right on that account.

I'm not free.

The only specks of freedom that come into my life are the moments shared with her and my brothers. Everything else feels like shackles bound to my ankles, its iron chains biting into my skin and preventing me from taking a step into the future that I want.

And just as I drive up to the house of horrors, I'm reminded of why that is.

What new hell will await me inside, I wonder?

Will it be watching helplessly as my mother is verbally and physically abused by the monster she's married to, or am I the one to suffer the brunt of his wrath today?

Or will it be Teddy—with his mind games—who will chip away at my soul?

Whatever torture awaits me inside pales in comparison to the thought of Kennedy leaving me.

However, the minute I step inside my house, I know something isn't right. My mother is sitting on the bottom of our staircase, her face hidden away in her palms.

"Mom," I call out worriedly, taking a seat beside her.

She leans into me, her tears soaking my sleeve.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry," she mumbles incoherently.

Her warm breath smells of rich bourbon today instead of her preferred vodka. She's found a new friend to find solace in for whatever ails her, but I can tell she's not fully intoxicated yet, even if she is on her way there.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

She raises her head from my shoulder, her bloodshot eyes filled with torment.

“You deserved better than me, my darling boy. So much better.”

“Don’t say that, Mom,” I reply, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“It’s true. Everything I touch, I ruin. I ruined you before you were even born. And I did it knowingly. Will you ever forgive me, Lincoln?”

“Mom, stop.” I hug her to me, feeling her pain as my own.

She still bears the scars of shame in regards to the affair that resulted in my birth. Not that she could ever forget it. Not when her pitiful excuse of a husband is always so adamant in never letting her forget how much she’s wronged him. I can admit it—at first, it was a shock learning that I was someone else’s child and not his. But I never judged my mother for finding comfort in some other man’s arms. It took me some time to wrap my head around it, but ultimately, I’ve respected her wishes for not telling me who my biological father is. Truth be told, I’m not even sure she knows. Their affair could have happened on a night that she was too drunk to know what she was even doing. And since bringing any type of suffering to my frail mother is the last thing I want to do, I’ve bit my tongue and kept a lid on my longing of wanting to know who my father is.

“How can you be so good when everything around you is so cruel and ugly?” my mother asks, bringing my thoughts back to her.

“I’m not good, Mom,” I explain solemnly.

How can I be when I’ve fantasized more than once about snuffing the light out of our tormentors’ eyes once and for all?

“Look at me, Lincoln. You are the only good thing in my life. Too good for this family. Don’t let anyone else convince you otherwise.”

“Mom, what’s this about? Why are you crying?”

But before she has time to answer, our front door swings open, my father and brother strolling in, laughing away at whatever evil thing they’ve managed to do now.

“Look at what we have here. The slut and the bastard all cuddled up and licking each other’s wounds,” my father jokes, all smiles.

Teddy, though, isn’t as amused.

His eyes fall to the woman at my side, who slides away from me the moment his gaze lands on her. With a weak smile stitched on her face, she stands up on wobbly feet and walks over to him. Teddy places a kiss on her cheek, his eyes burning holes in me.

Jealousy.

Envy.

Rage.

That's what burns inside us both.

Teddy hates it when our mother shows a morsel of love my way, wanting all of her attention only for himself. I, on the other hand, can't help the feeling of betrayal any time she shows him any type of kindness or affection. Cold, brutal logic is the only thing that eases the knot in my chest when I witness such affection. Deep down, I know there is nothing I can do to break a bond between mother and son. He's her firstborn, after all. The first child she grew in her belly and watched grow. She nurtured and loved him, unaware of the sadist he'd become. A mother's love is too strong to care for trivialities like good and evil. She knows who Teddy is but can't help but love him, even when she fears him.

Maybe that's why she loves me, too.

I'm a mistake.

A mistake she has been paying for with her body and sanity since the day I was born.

Yet, she loves me just the same.

"How was your visit?" my mother asks, trying to sound chipper, even though everyone can see that she's been bawling her eyes out.

"Productive," Teddy explains with a fiendish smile launched my way.

"Don't be modest, Theodore. It was more than productive. It's the seed that will blossom into a glorious future," his father exclaims proudly, then shoves my mother away from his beloved son.

"Your stench is nauseating, Sierra. Go upstairs and get cleaned up. I'll be there in a minute. I feel like celebrating."

My jaw ticks at my father's intentions, while Teddy just shrugs it to the side. He might love my mother—or as close to that feeling as his black heart is capable of having—but he doesn't see her as a flesh and bone woman. Like Crawford, my brother believes that women are to be used and abused for his own pleasure and gain. Otherwise, he has very little interest in them.

On that somber note, Mom begins to walk away, squeezing my shoulder affectionately as she passes me by and starts heading upstairs. I get up to follow her, so I can lock myself in my room and wait for Colt to arrive, when Teddy stops me.

"Aren't you going to ask where we've been, bastard?"

I turn around, arms crossed over my chest to keep his punishing words from doing any damage.

“It’s none of my business what you do.”

“True, but something tells me you’ll want to know about this,” Teddy smirks.

My hackles rise at the nefarious gleam in his eye. I turn to my father, who is appreciating the tension between us.

“Fine. Where have you been then?” I ask with a fortifying breath.

“So happy you asked,” he retorts sinisterly. “Dad and I just had lunch over at the Rylands.”

“And this is newsworthy to me, why?”

“Tell him, Father. I think you should have the honor of telling Lincoln what we discussed today,” my brother states, far too happily for my liking.

“Very well. We struck a match between the Ryland girl and your brother this afternoon. From here on out, she’s his. They’ll start courting as soon as possible, and when the girl turns eighteen, everything will be made official by announcing their engagement.”

My heart stops as the world around me starts fading away, blackness shrouding my vision.

“Cat got your tongue, bastard?” my brother provokes, poking at the wound he just inflicted.

“You’re lying.” I shake my head, not wanting to believe it. “Kennedy would never agree to it.”

“Who cares what the girl wants. It’s done. Montgomery and I shook on it.”

“No. This can’t be happening.”

“Oh, but it is. She’s mine now, to do with how I see fit.”

I step into my brother’s face, standing toe to toe with him, my bloodthirsty need to wipe that fucking grin off of him has me balling my hands into fists at my sides.

“Over my dead body,” I reply through gritted teeth.

“That can be arranged. Just give me a reason, Lincoln. Any reason will do.”

“Enough!” My father waves off, strutting toward us. “It’s done. And that’s the end of it.”

“No! I won’t allow it!” I yell back in his face.

Crawford steps up to me and grabs my throat, putting pressure on my

windpipe.

“Allow? Allow?! Just who do you think you are, boy? You are nothing. Nothing! You should kiss my feet every day that I let people believe you are mine. You should bow every time I’m in your fucking presence.”

“Teddy can’t have Kennedy. I’ll kill him first,” I warn, meaning every goddamn word if he so much as thinks of laying a finger on her.

But just as my threat hangs in the air, I feel my hair being pulled and my steps faltering as both father and son slam my back against the wall.

“Listen here, you insignificant little shit. I can have who I want, when I want, how I want. And there isn’t anything you can do to stop me,” Teddy explains, pulling on my hair until some of the strands come off by their roots.

“Why do you care if your brother has the Ryland girl anyway? It’s no concern of yours.”

“Isn’t it obvious? He loves her.”

To this revelation, my father drops his hands off my throat, surprising Teddy into doing the same and letting go of his hold on me.

“You really are the devil’s spawn, aren’t you? In love with your own goddamn sister?! You disgust me.” He spits in my face, the saliva hitting my cheek.

What?

What?

Sister?

No!

No!

It can’t be!

“You’re lying!”

The way his nostrils flare, complete disgust on his face, has bile rising up to my throat.

“How I’ve put up with your idiocy as well as your depravity all these years is beyond me. I should have smothered you in your cradle when I had the chance. You can thank your wretched aunt that I didn’t and spared your life.”

My knees give in, falling to the floor while I grab my head in my hands to block out their lies.

This is just another one of their twisted games.

It has to be.

“God, you’re so fucking pathetic,” Teddy exclaims, going down to his

haunches so he can keep his reptile tongue at my ear, making sure his poison seeps into my bloodstream. “All you had to do was ask anyone in this town, and they would have told you who your father could be. It’s not like our mother made much of an effort at concealing her affair. You were just too weak to find out for yourself. And now look at you—broken and depraved because you’ve spent most of your stupid life infatuated with your own sister!”

Tears sting my eyes as he continues to torture me with what I now see can only be the truth.

“I am curious, though. Did you pop her cherry, or will I have the privilege of being her first? I don’t care if she comes to me a virgin or not, but I am interested in knowing if you got there before me. Hmm. Sweet Kennedy Ryland fucking both Hamilton brothers wouldn’t be too shocking for anyone to believe, but I do wonder what people would think if it ever got out that she let her own flesh and blood into her panties. So, what is it, Lincoln? Did you stretch out your sister’s tight cunt and get her good and ready for me?”

I don’t even think.

I just swing.

My punch lands good and true on his face, making the asshole fall flat on the floor. I’m on him in seconds, swinging left to right, cutting up his face with my knuckles as a painful wail expels from inside my chest. I stay on top of him, hitting him with jab after jab, when suddenly someone pulls me off him from behind, locking their arms around my torso.

“The fuck is going on here?!” Colt shouts as Teddy tries to pick himself off the floor.

“Get this useless piece of trash out of my house!” my father yells, helping Teddy to his feet.

“Hey! You fucking watch your motherfucking tongue. Or I’ll rip it out of your mouth. Just fucking try me!” Colt defends as his grip tightens around me. “Now I’m going to take Lincoln back to my house, but don’t think my mother won’t be paying you a visit to remind you how to fucking treat my cousin with the respect that he deserves. And if she isn’t successful in reminding you, well, I’ll just come back here and do some reminding of my own. You understand, asshole?” Colt yells at my crestfallen father. “That goes for you too, Teddy. I don’t know what you did for Linc to go ballistic on you, but I’m sure you deserved every punch you got.”

“Just get out! Get out!” my father screams at the top of his lungs.

“My fucking pleasure, dickwad!” Colt shouts back, pulling me away and slamming the front door behind him with a loud thud.

“Get off! Just get off, Colt!” I order.

“Fuck! Alright already!” he says after releasing me.

Unable to stay in the same vicinity as my brother or his poor excuse of a father, I run to the only place on this whole estate that allows me room to breathe.

“Shit,” my cousin mumbles as he runs after me in the direction of Oakley Woods.

When I find myself surrounded by trees, deep enough into the woods where no one will hear my cries, I pick the first tree in my sight and start punching its trunk.

“The fuck is wrong with you?! You’re going to break your hands like that!” Colt yells, trying to stop me from hurting myself.

Not that it matters.

In fact, the sound of bone breaking in my fists is a blessed symphony compared to the anguish howling inside my grief-stricken soul.

My sister.

My sister.

Why would God or the universe do this to me?

What could I have possibly done to deserve such misery?

Why me?

God, why me?

Why her?!

“Lincoln. Lincoln! Stop! Please stop!” Colt begs, and it’s only the sound of his tears falling that snaps me out of my stupor.

“Why are you crying?” I ask, still stuck in a fog of my own making.

“I could ask the same about you.” He points to my face.

I bring my bloody, raw knuckles to my cheeks, my tears adding a sting to the areas of torn-up skin.

“What the fuck happened back there?!” Colt insists, placing his hands on my trembling shoulders. “What did those fuckers do to you?”

‘Did you stretch out your sister’s tight cunt and get her good and ready for me?’

Fuck!

I pull away from Colt just in time to fall to my knees and hurl all the contents in my stomach. After what feels like forever, my heaving finally

stops.

But not my suffering.

That is just the beginning.

“Linc, cuz, fucking talk to me. I’m going out of my mind wondering what those fuckers did to you.”

My esophagus burns and my tongue feels like sandpaper, but that’s not what prevents me from explaining what torments me so. Once the words are out of my mouth, then it all becomes real.

I’ll never be able to pretend again.

“Linc. Please, brother. Let me in,” Colt continues to plead, lifting me up from the foliage and leaning me against a tree trunk for support.

I wipe off whatever vestige of puke is in my mouth with my forearm and stare into my cousin’s anxious eyes.

“I know who he is,” I finally confess, my voice coming out hoarse and garbled.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“My father, Colt. I know who my father is.”

“Okay.” His forehead wrinkles, confused. “I thought that’s what you wanted. Isn’t knowing who he is a good thing?”

“No. It definitely is not.” I rub at my chest to ease the pain ripping through my insides.

“Well, then stop fucking dancing around it and just tell me who he is then.”

“Ryland. It’s Montgomery Ryland.”

Colt’s eyes instantly widen, threatening to pop out of their sockets.

“Holy shit! Holy shit! Are you sure? Who told you it was him?”

“They did,” I reply in disgust, tilting my chin toward my house.

“I don’t believe it then. They could be fucking with you. Telling you that shit because they know it will mess with your head.”

“I thought about that, too. But then Teddy said something that made me believe him.”

“What?”

“He said if I had only asked around, someone would eventually tell me who my mom had an affair with.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything. Because I did, Colt. I asked the one person I could trust in telling it to me straight,” I lament, remembering how much I shook, knocking

on his door intent on getting some answers at thirteen.

“Who did you ask?”

“Who do you think? I asked your father, Colt,” I confess, recalling that day as if it was yesterday.

“Lincoln. What a pleasant surprise,” Uncle Owen greets, ushering me into his study.

“I hope I’m not interrupting, Uncle. I can come back at another time if it’s not convenient for you,” I say, wiping my sweaty palms on my shorts.

“Nonsense, Lincoln. I can always make time for you, son. Please, grab a seat.” He smiles, his eyes warm and bright, just like Colt’s are when he thinks no one is looking.

I take a seat on one of the armchairs facing the large open fireplace in the middle of the room while my uncle pours himself some malt brandy into a glass. He then grabs the seat in front of me, kindness laced in his expression.

“By the way you’re fidgeting, whatever you came here to talk to me about must be serious.”

“It’s about my father.”

“What has Crawford done now?” he demands, his pleasant features morphing into pure hatred.

“No, not him. I’m talking about my real father. My biological father,” I clarify.

“I was under the assumption you didn’t know who he was.”

“I don’t. My mother refuses to tell me. I’ve begged for months, but she says she’s too ashamed of the affair to ever give me a name.”

“And so she should be,” he snarls but then remembers himself and puts on a meek smile. “I’m sorry, Lincoln. I don’t want to offend you by speaking ill of your mother. I’m sure she had her reasons for doing what she did.”

“My father isn’t a good man to her, Uncle,” I defend. “I don’t blame her for anything she might have done in the past.”

This time the smile on my uncle’s lips is genuine, reaching his eyes and making the forest green in them reminiscent of the Oakley Woods just beyond my doorstep that I like to disappear into so often.

“You’re a good son and a better person than I was at your age.”

“I don’t believe that,” I swallow dryly, not used to receiving such highly esteemed compliments.

“Oh, believe me, dear boy. At your age, I was no better than your average Northside spoiled brat in need of a good ass-whooping.” He laughs

at the memory of his youth.

“What made you change?”

“You want the truth?” He cocks a playful smirk. “Love. Love was what changed me. First, I fell in love with a girl who taught me the value of friendship, and then I fell ten times harder in love with your aunt, who made me work like a fiend for her attention. I swear those two girls gave me a run for my money when I was younger, pulling at my heartstrings at every turn.”

“Hmm. I don’t see how liking two girls at the same time could have made you a better person,” I state incredulously.

“Oh, but they did. They both changed how I saw the world and my place in it,” he muses. “But you didn’t come here to listen to tales about an old man’s youth. You came here with concern about your parentage. Tell me, Lincoln, how can I help?”

“Do you know who he is, Uncle?”

The way his gaze saddens tells me he does.

“Don’t go turning stones that you’ll never be able to put back in their rightful place, son. The pain is just not worth the knowledge.”

“So, you do know who he is,” I reply anxiously as well as excitedly.

“I didn’t say that, Lincoln. I’m merely pointing out that if your mother doesn’t think it wise to divulge such sensitive information to you, then maybe you should respect her wishes.”

“But what about what I want? Don’t I deserve to know who he is?”

Again, his solemn gaze and strained smile hurt to look at.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“Fine,” I reply, harsher than I intended to. “The Northside is full of gossipers. I’m sure I can persuade one to tell me what I want to know. Even if I have to pay for the information.”

But before I’ve even gotten up from my seat, Uncle Owen grabs me by the wrist to keep me still.

“If you are so desperate that Asheville gossip will be enough to quench your curiosity, then I’m sure someone with little brains and greedy pockets will tell you this story. Might as well hear it from me instead.”

I lean back into my seat and wait for him to commence.

“You know, for a thirteen-year-old boy, you sure have gumption.”

“You’re stalling, Uncle.”

“So I am.” He smiles meekly before drinking his liquor and leaving the

glass clean. “Very well. The only man your mother has ever been linked with is Montgomery Ryland.”

“Kennedy’s father?” I croak, my heart starting to shrink.

“The very one. Both he and Sierra caused quite the scandal when they were younger, dating in secret until your grandmother put an end to it. I know she was very much in love with him at the time. Mind you, this all happened when she was extremely young and long before you were ever born, but to this day, some nastier tongues like to bring the sordid affair up when they have nothing new to talk about.”

Instead of disappointment, I feel relief.

“So, you don’t think he could be my father?” I ask, needing his confirmation that Kennedy’s dad is the last man I should be looking at.

“Like I’ve told you before, Lincoln, only your mother knows who he is. But tell me, would it change anything in your life if you knew who he was? Would it bring you any type of comfort? Would it really make such a positive impact in your life, or would it only cause you and your mother more suffering?”

I think long and hard about the question.

“I have no idea. I’d just like to have a choice.”

“A choice?” He arches a confused brow.

“Yes. An alternative to the father that I have now. Maybe he could be someone I could lean on instead of hate.”

“I see.” He frowns, his eyes lowering to the floor.

“But you’re right. If knowing who my father is, causes my mother any type of suffering, then it’s not worth the cost. Thank you, Uncle, for seeing me today. I’m sorry if I’ve upset you.” I let out an exhale before getting up from my seat and walking toward the door.

“Lincoln,” my uncle calls out.

“Yes.” I turn around to face him.

“If you ever need an alternative like you said, I’d be honored if you came to me. You can always lean on me for anything, son. I hope you know that.”

The loving sparkle in his eyes tells me he’s being sincere, and for a minute, I’m plagued with envy that my cousins have him as their father. I push that ugly sentiment away and smile at my dotting, caring uncle. As I say my farewells, I mentally send out a prayer that when I do find out who my father is, he’s as good and noble a man as Owen Turner.

“Shit! You’re serious right now? My father told you all that?” Colt states

after I tell him the gist of the conversation I had with his dad when I was younger.

“He did. I never gave it much thought after that day, or maybe I just didn’t want to. But after Crawford just spelled it out for me, confessing that it was Ryland all along, I can’t deny how much sense it all makes. It’s hard to forget your first love.”

“You can’t tell her, Linc. Kennedy will lose her goddamn mind if you do. This will break her.”

I take in his warning and think long and hard about keeping such a secret from her.

But in the end, I submit to my cousin’s sound advice.

If Ken ever found out that we are siblings, not only would it break her, but it would kill her.

I love you.

Those were the words that came out of her mouth just a few short hours ago. And even if she hadn’t said them, my heart knows the depths of her love. Because I feel it, too. Kennedy is, and always will be, my everything. If she finds out that she’s my sister, who knows what she will do.

She’s never been one for half measures.

“What are you going to do, Linc?”

“What I have to.”



When midnight arrives, I’m filled with opposing emotions.

Grief.

Love.

Despair.

Rage.

All of them live and breathe inside me, and I do my best to push them aside as I draw closer to our childhood treehouse. As I climb the ladder, I see a dim glow of yellow light inside and hear sounds of pacing, anxious steps. I push the trapdoor open, Kennedy’s eyes lighting up with utter happiness when she sees me. She runs toward me, slamming into my chest and holding on to my waist.

“I knew you’d come.” She smiles widely up at me, my heart slicing open at the love I see in her clear skies.

My arms go around my back to unlatch her grip from me and gently push her away. I swallow dryly, taking the necessary steps to keep a wide berth between us.

“You didn’t leave me much of a choice,” I reply, keeping my back turned to her at all times.

“Linc? What’s wrong?”

Each step I hear her take in my direction, I take another.

“Lincoln,” she repeats in confusion.

“Enough, Ken! I just came here to talk some sense into you. You can’t run away from your problems, Ken. We’re not children anymore.” My tone is stern and oddly cold, but I keep to it, knowing this will be the only way to convince her to stay as well as put a crushing end to her love for me.

“Lincoln, look at me,” she orders, but I keep rooted to my spot. “I said look at me, goddamn it!” she yells, pulling me by the arm.

With all the bravery I can muster, I turn around, my expression stoic.

“We’re leaving. You and me, Linc. Tonight,” she insists with pure resolve.

“No, we’re not.”

“Yes, we are!”

I grab her shoulders and start to shake her.

“Stop it, Ken! Stop acting like a selfish little girl who only thinks of herself.”

“What the hell has gotten into you?!” she shouts, staring me down.

“You! You’re the one who’s gotten into me with all this ludicrous talk of running away.”

“Why? We can be happy. I can make you happy,” she pleads, fisting my shirt in her hands.

When I look into her eyes, I still don’t see a sister. I see the owner of my heart. The girl I have loved all the days of my life. I see my future suddenly stolen from me.

And worst of all, I see the hate she undoubtedly will garner for me when I never tell her the true reason why we can’t be together.

But it’s best that I’m the only one who truly suffers from the burden of the truth. I have to erase all these feelings of love from my heart and my soul, and replace them with the tenderness one would have for a sibling. How long will it take for me to see her with different eyes, I wonder? How long will it take for my heart to acknowledge her as something other than the other piece

of my heart? To forget how sweet she tasted on my tongue? To erase the memories of her cumming with my name on her lips? How long do I have before I lose my sanity for good?

“Lincoln, I don’t know where your head is at right now, but we have to leave. Now,” she adds, scrutinizing my eyes to find the source of what ails me.

“No one is leaving Asheville tonight.”

“We are.”

“No, Ken. We’re not.”

Her teeth chew on her bottom lip, frustrated that I’m being so difficult.

“My father and yours have made a deal. They want me to start dating your brother, Teddy,” she finally confesses, thinking that will be enough to change my mind.

“I know,” I state evenly.

“You do?! Then why are we still standing around here?”

“You don’t need to run away. You’ll find a way to get out of whatever deal our fathers concocted. You’re too smart to be pinned down by my brother.”

“But why risk it? Let’s just leave, Linc. Leave before our parents find a way to ruin us.”

They already have.

I lean my temple to kiss hers, taking in her sunshine scent one last time before I deliver the cut that will make us both bleed out.

“I don’t love you. Not like you want me to, Ken.”

Her arms tighten around me as her body begins to shake.

“You’re lying,” she chokes out on a soft wail. “I know you love me. I know you do.”

“I don’t. I’m sorry, Ken, but I don’t.”

I try to pull away, but the pained cry that rips out of her freezes me in place.

I need to feel this.

This pain.

It’s all that will remain of her after tonight.

“What about all those things we did this afternoon? Didn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Don’t mistake lust for love. Just because I wouldn’t mind fucking you doesn’t mean that I’m in love with you.”

“LIAR!” She slaps me across the face, and I take each blow as if it were her last kiss. “You’re lying!” she continues to shout, now slamming her fists into my chest. “You love me! You do! I know you do!”

With each slam to my chest, I yearn for the next one to arrive. But as her adrenaline wavers and misery begins to settle in, her punches cease to exist. I want to lick her tears away and vow my undying love for her, but in doing so, I’d lose all my morality—my very soul.

“Why are you doing this?” She cries, leaning her forehead to my chest to keep her balance.

“I’m sorry for what I said before. You didn’t deserve that. You’re my best friend, Ken. I do love you. I will always love you. But not like you want me to. Don’t ask me for what I can never give you.”

She cranes her head back and opens her mouth to say something, but she’s cut off when beaming flashlights shine up at the treehouse.

“Everything okay up there?” We hear one of Price’s guards call out from the ground.

“I have to go,” I tell her, using this interruption to my advantage.

“Linc.” She weeps as I start walking to the door. “Please don’t do this. Please.”

“It’s already done, Ken. I’m sorry.”

Chapter 11



Kennedy

Ten Months Later

“You must be excited for Christmas break, Theodore.” My father offers up as meaningless dinner conversation in between chews.

“I am,” Teddy replies, sitting beside me, not paying my father much mind.

Since my father sold me off to the governor, I’ve had to bear Teddy’s presence on a regular basis. Thankfully, Teddy’s idea of dating is coming over to my house for Sunday dinner. He doesn’t call me on the phone. He doesn’t send me flowers or little texts wishing me a good day. If I actually had feelings for him, I’d be disillusioned by the type of boyfriend he is. But since I hate him with every fiber of my being, his coldness suits me just fine.

“It’s more than expected,” my father rambles on. “Most of Richfield’s freshmen count down the days to their first winter break like their lives depend on it. Not everyone is ready for the pressures of college life.”

“Mm,” Teddy mumbles disinterestedly.

When my father sees that Teddy refuses to engage in conversation with him, he focuses his attention on Governor Hamilton and his wife instead.

“How are the preparations coming along for your New Year’s party, Governor? It’s the talk of the town.”

“Everything is set and ready to go.” Crawford grins contentedly. “It will be the party of the century. I guarantee it.”

“I believe you. However, it will be hard to match Colleen’s yearly bashes. Most of the Northside was terribly disappointed when she called her party off. Such a shame that little Abigail caught the measles so close to the end of the year. Any word on the little one?”

“From what I heard, the girl will soon be on the mend. It’s my sister-in-law’s own damn fault she got sick. She lets Abigail run free like some sort of heathen. It’s distasteful and demeaning to the Richfield name to let a girl her age run amok the way she does,” Crawford states, his expression screwed in such a way to suggest he just smelled something foul.

“I don’t know about you, Father, but I don’t know many ten-year-olds who don’t like to run and play with their friends,” Lincoln interjects, protectively defending his baby cousin.

With the sound of his voice, I try not to lift my gaze from the table to the boy sitting across from me. Looking at Lincoln always hurts, especially when Teddy is so close by. He acts like he’s indifferent to seeing us together, but sometimes I catch a glimpse of pain in his eyes that mimics the one that burns within me.

My skin crawls when I feel Teddy’s arm fall behind my back, resting on the top rail of my chair.

“But that’s not how Abigail caught the measles, now is it?” he commences, staring at his brother. “Meredith took Abby and Irene to the homeless shelter on the Southside, and that’s where she got it. As I see it, both Aunt Colleen and Meredith just reaped what they sowed with their imprudent behavior.”

“Imprudent? I don’t see the imprudence in trying to help those less fortunate.” Lincoln is quick to respond.

“No?” Teddy cocks an eyebrow. “Be thankful all Abigail got was the measles. Some Southside scum could have hurt her or, worse, kidnapped her for a large ransom.”

“Not every person on the Southside has dollar signs on the brain. That kind of thinking is usually reserved for the residents on our side of town,” Lincoln answers without missing a beat.

The tension between the two brothers is so palpable, you almost feel like you could reach out and grab it with your hand.

“I... um... I heard Naomi Price is also gathering funds to buy Christmas presents for the Southside orphanage and that Pastor Jack has a few other charities he’s asked her to help out with,” Sierra chimes in, putting a halt to her sons’ staring match.

“Another bleeding heart,” Crawford quips in disdain. “I say charity starts at home. But then again, I’m not surprised that Price’s whore is involved in such things. Rumor has it she spent a few nights sleeping on the streets

herself, if you know what I mean.”

My nails pierce my palms at the degrading way he’s talking about Easton’s mom.

“What if she did?” Lincoln rebukes with a frosty tone. “It’s no concern of ours. And in the future, I ask you not to speak badly about my friend’s mother again. I’m sure Richard Price, *her husband*, wouldn’t take too kindly to learn how the governor of our state goes around talking about his wife behind his back, either. Didn’t you once say that elections aren’t won by how many voters like you, but by how deep their pockets are? Gaining Price as an enemy doesn’t seem *prudent* to me.”

The way his father’s face goes beetroot red with his favorite son’s words used against him has me inwardly applauding.

“You’re very vocal tonight about your opinions, Lincoln. Someone might construe it as a lack of discipline. Maybe I should be more vigilant in educating you with proper cordial guest behavior.”

I play around with the food on my plate just so I don’t risk the chance of flinging myself across the table and carving the good Governor of North Carolina’s eyes out with my fork.

“Is something wrong with your dinner, Kennedy?” Dad asks, the underlying tone in his voice ordering me to put on a smile and change the topic of conversation.

“No, Daddy. I’m just not that hungry.” I throw him a fake smile.

“Southern women worth their salt have meat on their bones,” Governor Hamilton admonishes, swallowing a forkful of mashed potatoes.

I’m about to open my mouth to tell the governor where he can stick his misogynistic remark, when Teddy’s hand goes to my thigh and squeezes it so painfully, tears spring to the corners of my eyes.

“My father’s right. Eat,” he orders.

“She said she isn’t hungry,” Lincoln counters from across the table.

“I say she is,” Teddy retorts.

Lincoln white-knuckles the fork and knife in his hands, the tense environment reaching DEFCON levels.

“Teddy’s right. This food is too delicious not to enjoy,” I add, taking a bite of my potatoes.

Lincoln’s face falls at my compliance to his brother’s orders while Teddy lets go of my leg. Although I hate that he thinks I submitted to his brother so easily, the last thing I want is for things to get out of hand tonight.

Lincoln and I haven't exactly spent much time with one another since I started dating his brother earlier this spring. He won't return my calls or texts, and he doesn't talk to me in school anymore either. When the rest of the guys are with us, then sometimes he'll say a word or two to me, but rarely is that the case. I miss him so much I feel like death has its grip on my heart. The only reprieve I have from my misery is these dinners.

Lincoln always comes to Sunday dinner with his family.

Always.

This is the only time I get to sit just a few inches away from him to breathe in the same air he does. I will not let Teddy, his father, or even mine take that away from me.

The best part is after dinner anyway.

Once the dessert has been eaten, my father always invites Teddy and his dad to his study, while Lincoln and his mom come to the living room with Jeff and me so we can play cards. With no television in the house—since my father insists it rots the brain—chess, cards, or board games are usually the only thing we have to entertain our guests.

Not that we get many of those anymore.

When Mom was alive, she threw the best dinner parties, inviting fascinating people who traveled the world and talked about politics, philosophy, and history. Aunt Colleen would always be in attendance and would bring Meredith along with her to listen in.

Now all I have to content myself with are these dinners where I count the seconds until we retire to the living room, and I can stare at Lincoln until my heart's content.

"How about we have some malt brandy and cigars in my study?" my father finally says an hour later, using the words I've been anxiously waiting to hear all night. "Kennedy, will you accompany Sierra to the living room? Maybe play some bridge or something."

"Actually, I'd like to take a little walk with Kennedy outside. Lincoln and Jefferson can entertain my mother tonight."

My heart drops at the same time my father's eyes light up, thinking that Teddy and I are finally getting along. I don't have the nerve to look at Lincoln as Teddy pulls my chair away and takes my hand in his.

When we step outside, I pull it back from him.

Teddy just laughs.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were repulsed by my touch."

“That’s because I am.”

“Now, is that any way to talk to your fiancé?”

“You’re not my fiancé. You’re barely even a boyfriend.”

“Now, now,” he coos, grabbing my wrist and pulling me against his chest. “You know as well as I do that I own you. It’s set in stone, Kennedy. You can fight this all you want, but I’m telling you it will be in vain.”

I push myself out of his grip and walk in the direction of the backyard, so no one can hear our conversation.

“My father might have agreed with yours in this charade, and I’ll play along for his sake, but I’m telling you now, I’ll never marry you. I’d rather kill myself before I ever let you touch me.”

With that threat still hanging in the air between us, he grabs me by the throat and slams my back into the wall. My eyes widen in alarm that he would aggressively put his hands on me with our parents just inside the house.

“Don’t threaten me, Ryland. I always get what I want. And it just so happens I want you. So, spare me your idle threats of suicide since we both know you lack the courage.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.” I seethe.

“Oh, no?”

He then pulls my hair with such force I feel the sting of it on my scalp. He pulls me to a nearby window where his mom is playing chess with my brother while Lincoln looks absolutely devastated sitting next to her.

“You might not care about your own life, but what about his? What would you do to save him?”

I snap my eyes at Teddy, fear replacing the loathing I have for him.

“You won’t hurt him.”

“No? I wouldn’t be too sure about that. If my brother is the roadblock keeping me away from what I want, then I think a little shove is in order.”

“You wouldn’t.” My voice cracks in the end.

I hate that I sound so weak.

So vulnerable.

But the thought of him doing something to Lincoln sends true fear down my spine, chilling my bones deep into their marrow.

“You start behaving like a girlfriend should, and I promise I won’t lay a finger on his blond head.”

“I won’t sleep with you if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

“Ah, yes, you will. But I’m more than happy to wait and break you on our wedding night.”

I’ll kill you before I ever let that happen.

“If it’s not sex that you’re after, then what exactly do you want?” I ask instead of blurting out my true thoughts.

“A kiss will do for now.”

Bile immediately rises to my throat.

“Is that a no?” he questions smugly, reading my repulsed expression to a T.

“You won’t hurt Lincoln?”

“I promise.”

“And why should I believe the promises made by a known liar?”

“True. You shouldn’t, but that’s all you get. Bend to my will or buy yourself a cute little black dress for his wake. Your choice.”

I swallow down the vomit that threatens to come up and nod. The sinister smile that plays on his lips makes me even more nauseous. Without waiting for me to get ready, Teddy grabs my neck and pulls me to him, his nails sinking into my flesh. I keep my eyes open, my last ounce of bravery to show him that I’m not here while he takes what he wants. His kiss is brutal. His tongue jams down my throat, coaxing my gag reflex. I grip onto his shirt to keep from getting sick all over him. It’s only when he breaks the kiss that I can finally breathe.

His eyes look like those of a madman as he smirks at me.

“That’s more like it. If you know what’s good for you, be prepared to treat me well. Otherwise, I’ll have to take out my frustrations on the man you actually love. We wouldn’t want that now, would we, Ryland?”

He presses another brutish kiss on my lips, but thankfully he doesn’t deepen it this time. He pulls away and walks back inside as if nothing ever transpired between us, leaving me trembling with both anger and trepidation.

It’s only after I’ve collected myself and begun to follow him inside that I see Lincoln standing by the window, obviously witnessing his brother kissing me.

Pain and misery slice me raw as he turns his back to me.

From here on out, all your kisses are mine.

The memory of his words when we were younger has me running into my house and darting up the stairs to lock myself inside my bedroom, refusing to come down to say goodbye to anyone. Once our guests have left, my father

comes upstairs demanding that I redeem myself in the morning by apologizing for my rude behavior. Even after I told him how Teddy forced himself on me, he didn't want to hear it. Saying that I'm to marry him anyway, so he was only taking what was his by right.

At night, I cry into my pillow, hating every weak tear that leaves me.

I am not this person.

I am NOT this person.

I repeat the mantra on a loop and only stop when someone opens my bedroom door. Like a thief in the night, my brother is getting better at picking locks.

"Ken." I hear his low voice in the dark.

"Go away, Jeff."

"Not until you tell me what's wrong."

"Just leave me alone."

"No," he replies, sitting on the edge of my bed and playing with my hair like our mom liked to do.

His comforting touch tells me that today my twin loves me.

That today he cares for me.

"It was Teddy, wasn't it? Tell me what he did to make you cry?"

"He kissed me."

"Just a kiss?"

"Isn't that enough? If I didn't want to be kissed at all by him, should I feel grateful he didn't take more from me?"

"Still, a kiss isn't so bad."

"It is when it's forced on you. What about when he wants more from me, Jeff? When a kiss isn't enough to satisfy him? Should I just bend over and let him steal what I don't want to give?"

"We all must make sacrifices for what we want," he counters softly, thinking that justifies anything.

"But that's just it! I don't want any of this! Don't you get it? I don't care for the Richfield fortune. I never have."

"But you should. It should have been ours a long time ago."

"You sound like our father. Are we supposed to give our lives for his greed?"

"You don't get it. But one day you will, Ken. One day you'll see what that family has really done to us. But I'll help with Teddy for the time being. He won't touch you again."

“How? How will you be able to stop him?” I clear my wet cheeks with my palms.

“Don’t worry about the how. I’ll buy you some time until you come to your senses. Right now, it’s the chase of having you that intrigues him. Teddy will bore himself with you soon enough after he’s succeeded in getting what he wants, and then you’ll be free. All you have to do is hold on a little while longer.”

My brother has been completely brainwashed by our father. There’s no getting through to him, and frankly, I’m too tired to fight him on this. I turn my back to him and face the wall. He continues to brush my hair, and I close my eyes, letting his gentle gesture soothe my aching soul.

“Do you think I’m weak?” I ask him point-blank.

“No.”

“Then why did I let him do that to me? Why didn’t I fight back?”

“He caught you by surprise. Next time you’ll be ready for him.”

“And what if I’m not? What if I freeze and let him do whatever he wants with me?”

“I’ll never let that happen. I told you. I’ll deal with Teddy.”

“Then I guess there is only one question that bears asking. Do you love me today, brother?”

“Yes. Today I do. I love you very much.”

“Okay. Then I’ll believe you.”



The next day I’m reminded by my father to go to the Hamilton Estate to apologize for retreating to my room without giving proper goodbyes. When I get there, I’m happy to learn that neither Teddy nor his father is at home, having gone golfing at the Richfield Country Club.

Sierra smiles at me when I explain that I had a migraine and had to lie down. By the glassy look in her eyes, I can see she really isn’t listening to a word I say, only nodding every so often to pretend that she is.

After I’ve done what I was ordered to do, I leave her alone in the den. Though I should probably go home before Teddy and the governor return, I walk upstairs searching for Lincoln.

When I reach his bedroom door, he’s nowhere in sight, but the sound of a running shower tells me he must be in his ensuite. From where I’m standing,

I can see he left the door ajar. Slowly I walk toward it and widen the breach. From the small rift, I can see Lincoln in the shower through the pane of glass.

Sweet baby Jesus, he's magnificent.

Long gone is that lean boy I once knew, and in his place is a beautiful man with broad shoulders, defined abs, and thick runner's thighs. I'm in a daze watching the water beat down on his skin, his blond hair wet and gently falling to his eyes. I'm so swept up in the gorgeous scenery—and greedy to take in his every feature—that I don't even realize what he's about to do until the very second he does it. My throat clogs when Linc grabs his cock in his hand, his other splayed on the wall to keep him steady. I don't know what gets into me, but I open the door wider and watch him stroke his cock.

Who are you thinking of, Linc?

Is it me?

Please let it be me.

I stand there motionless, my heart jackhammering away in my chest as he beats his cock into submission, his lids closed shut as he gives himself the release he so desperately seeks. All of me wants to jump in there with him and touch his velvet skin with my tongue. It takes inhuman restraint not to.

And when he cums, one word leaves his lips, paralyzing me on the spot.

Kennedy.

The sound of my name on his lips has my heart leaping for joy and my soul mourning what we could have been if only he had been brave enough to run away with me when I begged him to. Instead, he fed me lies of feeling nothing for me and kept his distance from there on out. My eyes are still on his body when suddenly I see three deep, ugly burn marks on the inside of his thigh.

Uncaring if he'll get angry with me or not for barging into his safe space, I shove into the bathroom and open the glass pane.

"What the hell are those?!" I scream out at him, pointing to the burn marks.

"Jesus, Kennedy!!! What the hell are you doing here?!" he belts out, turning off the water and stepping out of the shower. He quickly grabs a towel, but I pull it away before he has time to cover up.

"Ken—"

"Don't Ken me! What are those, Lincoln?! Did Teddy do that to you? Did he burn you on purpose?"

I'm trembling so hard that when Lincoln carefully pulls the towel from

my grip to cover his waist, I let him.

“This isn’t Teddy’s handiwork. This is.”

And that’s when he turns his back to me, and I see dark purple contusions on it. Carefully I trace each ugly bruise, hating how all the colors are so different.

Some blue and purple...

Others are yellow and light brown...

Lincoln shivers under my touch even though his skin is still warm from his shower. He then pulls away from my fingers and turns around to face me, grabbing my chin.

“You shouldn’t be here, sweetheart,” he says lovingly.

“I needed to see you,” I stammer, still too overwhelmed by his bruises.

“Why?”

“To explain what you saw last night.”

His eyes fall to my lips.

“You kissed your boyfriend. There isn’t much of an explanation needed.”

“You know I didn’t do it because I wanted to. I hate him! I hate him!”

“Don’t let him hear you say that, Ken. If he does something to you, then I don’t know what I’ll do.”

My lips quiver at the anguish in his voice.

“Who burned you, Lincoln?” I repeat my question, not letting him off the hook.

“Sometimes screaming at the wind in the woods isn’t enough to take the edge off. Sometimes, I need to feel some other form of pain to make sense of things. To have some sort of control in my life. That if I can survive the hurt my body is inflicted with, then I can survive the suffering in my heart.”

My eyes fall to his chest, understanding his meaning perfectly. But I can’t allow him to hurt himself. It’s bad enough that Teddy has free rein on his body. There is no way I will allow him push Lincoln into succumbing to his dark, self-destructive thoughts. I pull away from his gentle grip on my chin and begin to open his cabinet drawers.

“What are you doing?” he asks, puzzled behind me.

“I’m looking for whatever you used to hurt yourself.”

“Ken. Stop—”

“No.”

I don’t find his weapon of choice in there that would leave burn marks, but I do find razor blades. Without any hesitation whatsoever, I hike my dress

up my thigh and press the cold blade to my skin.

Lincoln's eyes immediately go wide in panic.

"Ken! Don't!"

"If you hurt, we all feel the pinch, remember?"

"Ken, don't do this!"

But no amount of begging or pleading weakens my resolve. My brain is on autopilot now, knowing this will be the only way to stop him. I press the edge to my skin and stifle the wince when it cuts into my flesh.

"Kennedy! Stop!"

"I'll only stop when you do!" I shout at him, lifting the blade an inch higher to cut myself again.

He wraps his hand around my wrist, his ocean eyes filled with the same turmoil I feel inside.

"You've made your point."

"Have I? Will you stop hurting yourself? Promise me! On your mother's name, promise me!"

"I promise." He nods, taking the razor out of my hand and placing it in the waste bin. He then bends down and grabs a first aid kit from the cupboard below, always making sure to keep his eyes on me.

"I'll need to clean that up so it doesn't get infected."

"Okay," I stutter, the adrenaline of my impulsive action starting to wear off.

He goes to his knees and pulls my dress up a little higher.

"You're going to have to hold on to the hem, okay?"

I do as he says and hold my dress up, my lace panties in plain view. Lincoln grumbles something under his breath but then begins to clean the two cuts ever so gently so as not to hurt me. His hands on my skin have it breaking out in goosebumps. I lick my lips, begging my heart not to leap out of its cage as I watch him on his knees taking care of me. When he blows on the cut, I let out a whimper.

His breath is so close to my clit that it's maddening. His thumb slowly caresses my inner thigh, his eyes looking up at me.

"Is that better?" he croaks.

I shake my head.

"Does it still hurt?"

God, yes.

But not the cuts. The internal ache that I'm suffering from has nothing to

do with the cuts I branded myself with.

“Ken?”

“Hmm,” I hum.

“What do you need, sweetheart?” His voice is hoarse, mirroring the same need living inside me.

You. Just you.

You have always been what I needed.

But I can't say those words out loud because it wouldn't be fair to him. As far as the world is concerned, I'm dating his brother. But having Lincoln here on his knees in front of me, the outside world seems to be so far away right now.

It's only him and me.

Like it should be.

“It's all better now,” I lie, running my fingers through his hair, a soft moan leaving his lips.

He places a kiss on my inner thigh, and to my frustration, he gets back on his feet.

“Good.” He smiles, going back to his usual self.

I miss the boy who looked at me like I was his world.

Where are you, Lincoln?

And how can I get you back?

“I miss you,” I confess in a low whisper.

“I know,” he replies, saddened, lowering his eyes away from me and onto the tile floor.

“Don't you miss me?” I ask, uncaring how desperate I sound.

“You should go home, Ken.”

I nod in defeat and go home as he asked, knowing that nothing I could say would make what we are going through any less painful.

The next time I see Lincoln is the very next Sunday when I see Teddy, too.

Only this time, I'm ready for him.

I'll put up a fight. One that he'll never recover from.

He's hurting Lincoln even though he said he wouldn't after he forced himself on me.

Somehow, I'll find a way to hurt him back. Like my godmother said all those months ago when I asked her for help, I have the tools and the know-how to end Teddy's tyranny. All I need is to find out his weakness and

exploit it to ensure he never hurts Lincoln or me ever again. He might not have any since he's the devil incarnate, but I'll find one.

I have to.

When dinner ends, I'm ready for him to tell my father he's going to take me for a walk on the grounds. But to my surprise, Teddy doesn't say anything to that effect. Instead, he tells everyone he's going for a ride over to Charlotte, and he's taking Jefferson with him.

Both Linc and I stare at each other, confused, but the relief in our expressions at having one night to ourselves is also mutual. As we follow Sierra into the living room, Linc whispers in my ear, "Didn't that story about them going to Charlotte all of a sudden seem odd to you?"

I nod, biting the corner of my lip.

"Yeah, me too. I wonder what my brother is up to now," Lincoln mumbles to himself.

I'm more concerned about what my brother is doing.

Chapter 12



Kennedy

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” I ask my brother when he flies past me in the hallway as if someone just set fire to his ass.

“Out. Teddy is picking me up,” he announces at the same time an obnoxious horn honks outside in our driveway.

“Teddy, huh? You two sure have become close.”

“Hmm,” he mumbles, putting on his warmest coat since Asheville’s winter this year has been uncharacteristically chilly.

“Well, aren’t you at least going to tell me where you two are going?”

“Ask your fiancé if you’re that interested.”

“He’s not my fiancé.” I grind my teeth.

“Semantics. Once you graduate high school, he’ll make everything official. Our father will make sure of it.”

“So happy to see that everyone has planned out my life so well without asking me what I want out of it.” I scowl, earning an impatient groan from my brother.

“I don’t have time for your temper tantrums, Kennedy. I’m already late. If you want to ask me something, just do it already so I can get out of here.”

“I thought I just did. Where are you and Teddy going?” I insist, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Out. Or would you rather go in my stead?”

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” I roll my eyes at him.

“That’s what I thought. So can I go now, or do you want to keep giving me the third degree?”

I give him my best side-eyed glower before heading to the sofa and pretending to go back to the Penelope Douglas book I’ve been reading.

“Take a scarf. It’s as cold as a polar bear’s butt outside,” I holler at him.

“Ah, you must love me today if you’re worried about me catching a cold.”

“I guess I do. Don’t push it, though. I could easily change my mind.”

“I love you, too, Ken.” Jeff chuckles, amused, before closing the door behind him.

A few seconds later, I hear the sound of Teddy’s car skidding down our driveway, announcing they’ve left to go God knows where.

I’d like nothing more than to return to my book and see if Tiernan finally makes her move and has sex with her hottie of a step-uncle, Jake, but my own hot mess of a life needs to take priority right now.

I jump off of the sofa and run upstairs into my brother’s immaculate—almost borderline obsessive compulsive—clean bedroom and open his closet. Once I’ve put on one of his hoodies and baseball caps to hide my hair, I rush back downstairs and pick up his car keys.

Since our father is out with whatever new flavor of the month he’s into these days, he won’t even know that I left the house. But just in case his date turns sour and he comes home early, I leave a note for him saying that I went to see my godmother after dinner, knowing that he won’t ask me any questions as long as I’m winning brownie points with her.

With my alibi set in place, I rush out the door and jump into Jeff’s car. Once I’m in the driver’s seat, I open the tracking app Meredith suggested I use for these very occasions. It was nothing short of a miracle that I was able to download and hide the app in my brother’s phone since he’s almost always glued to the damn thing.

But everyone needs to sleep sometime.

So, last night when he was deep in slumber in his room, I crawled on my hands and knees—I’ll admit it, not my finest moment—and used his finger to gain access to his phone and *voilà*, big brother—or in this case, big sister—is now able to track his every move. I even scrolled through his phone to see what he and Teddy talked about all the time, but when I checked their exchanged DMs, to my disappointment, there was very little there to clue me in. The idea I have to stalk my brother to know what they get up to irks me to no end. But then again, if the shoe were on the other foot, I know that Jefferson wouldn’t have any qualms following me if I were so tight-lipped with him about my comings and goings.

“Hmm,” I mumble, biting the corner of my lip when I realize that they are heading to the Southside. “Now, what are you two going to that part of town

for, I wonder?”

If I want the answer to that, then there is only one way to find out, and that's to go to the Southside, too. Without a second to lose, I start the car and head in the direction of where my antichrist of a boyfriend has decided to take my brother.

An hour later, I arrive at the last place I'd ever think to see Teddy in, much less my germophobic brother. It looks like one of those run-down biker joints where you need to get vaccinated before even thinking of venturing inside. By the clientele entering and exiting the bar, they don't look like they care too much, though. Just another watering hole to spend their minimum wage checks in and forget for a few hours the cards that life has dealt them. The huge red neon sign of a woman's silhouette, with her huge breasts hanging out while riding a chopper, is a perfect calling card for this bar.

Which bears to question—why two guys from respectable families from the Northside would willingly come here on a Friday night?

What are you two up to?

I hunch down low on the driver's seat and keep my eyes fixed on the front door. Sooner or later, they'll have to come out eventually. Unfortunately, when an hour passes by and there is still no sign of either one of them, I start to second-guess myself. I look at the app again to make sure it's not on the fritz and it didn't just send me on a wild goose chase.

But just as I'm scrolling through the app, a familiar sinister laugh grabs my attention.

Teddy is walking out of the bar with a woman who looks like she's twice his age, while Jeff trails right behind them with his hands shoved into his coat pockets. There are plenty of loitering clientele standing outside, shooting the shit with beer bottles in their hands and enjoying the music that can be heard coming from inside the bar. No one even looks at them twice as they cut the corner to the side of the decaying building.

I hold my breath and keep my gaze fixed on the unlikely trio as they walk deeper into the shadows. But even though it's a dark February night, the neon sign offers enough light that I can see everything they are doing. My hackles immediately rise when Teddy pushes the woman against the wall. She doesn't seem offended by the way he manhandles her. In fact, it looks like she almost expects it, laughing away at his brute force treatment of her.

After they've talked to one another for a few more minutes, the woman crams her hand into her plunging neckline and takes something out. It's too

small for me to see what it is from so far away, but after she's handed it over to Teddy, I see him unwrapping what looks a lot like a foil wrapper.

Once he's satisfied with its contents, he whistles over to Jefferson. My brother turns around and pockets the tiny item before going back to his post. He continues to vigilantly guard them while Teddy returns to the woman to whisper something in her ear. I have no idea what words he said to her, but when she drops to her knees and starts unzipping his jeans, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out what they must have been. Unabashedly, she takes Teddy's cock out of his boxers and starts deepthroating him right there in the open where all eyes could see.

Gross.

Maybe a normal girlfriend would be hurt by such disloyalty, but since our relationship is far from normal, I'm not surprised that Teddy has a few sidepieces lying around waiting for him, even if he does have to pay them to sleep with him. I am disappointed, though, that he brought my brother to stand guard while he got his dick wet.

Could this be what Jeff meant when he said that he would take care of Teddy?

That he would make sure that the scumbag would never touch me again?

This is probably the reason why Jeff refuses to tell me what they both get up to when they go on their long rides together. Making sure his soon-to-be brother-in-law has his balls good and empty before coming to see me on Sunday, just so he doesn't feel the need to touch me, isn't exactly music to my ears. If I had known this was what I'd find, then I wouldn't have bothered tailing them.

The minute he's done and they get back into his car, I'm going home. But just as I'm thinking this, my eyes unwillingly go back to the trio, only to find Teddy slapping the woman across the face before wrapping his hand around her throat.

The next thing I see will forever be branded into my memory.

Teddy pulls the woman by her hair and flips her around until she is caged between him and the wall. He pulls her miniskirt up and brutally starts fucking her from behind. Tears start streaming down her cheeks as he whispers something into her ear, his forearm on the nape of her neck so she can't move. My eyes are two large saucers, unbelieving of the horrid scene taking place right in front of me, while a slew of bikers are just a few feet away, cheering and laughing at some joke one of them made.

Why the fuck doesn't she yell for help?!

Why doesn't she fight him? Claw and kick her way out of his hold?

Why didn't I when he forced himself on me?

Why the hell isn't Jeff doing anything to stop him?!

Why doesn't anyone STOP HIM?!

All these thoughts slam into me at once while Teddy continues to abuse and brutalize her. Unable to let this go on for another second, I get out of the car to put an end to it, even if that means I willingly put myself in danger. But just as I'm rushing toward them, a small pixie of a girl with raven hair as dark as night comes out of the bar calling out for someone named Janet, heading right toward where Teddy is raping this woman.

Scared that this girl is going to get caught in the crosshairs and get hurt too, I rush toward them, only to hide again when the girl shouts at the top of her lungs, grabbing the attention of the other bikers.

"Where the fuck is, Janet, preppy?!" The girl, who looks to be about my age, calls out when my brother blocks her path. "I saw her come out here with you and your bestie. She's got tables to bus. She shouldn't be out here on her own with you lot."

"She's busy," my brother states evenly.

"Yeah, well, the party's over. Janet! Janet!" she shouts, trying to push past my brother.

But he's having none of it, blocking her at every turn.

"You'll get your friend back in a minute. Or do you want to take her place instead?"

I can't see my brother's face as he says these menacing words to the black-haired beauty, but I can see hers as clear as day. This girl doesn't look like she scares easily, yet there is fear in her eyes.

"You know what, preppy? Fuck you!" She turns around, heading back to the bar and yelling out the name Lamar.

"Teddy, we have to go! Now." My brother seethes, while my monstrous boyfriend just laughs.

"Too bad. I was actually having fun," he says, zipping himself back up. "I'll be back next week to pick up the rest, Janet. Only then, you get paid."

"Sure thing, sugar. Whatever you need," she stutters, wiping away the blood from her busted lip.

On shaky knees, Janet walks back to the bar, slamming into the bouncer—who I assume is named Lamar—and the fearless loudmouth girl who had

been looking for her just seconds ago.

“Jesus Christ, Stone! Why did you bring Lamar out from his post for? You always cause such a ruckus, girl. I have half a mind to complain to Big Jim himself so he can fire you, once and for all. I don’t care who your daddy is or how young you are. A girl like you should know how to mind her own goddamn business instead of poking her nose in mine!”

Stone looks livid while her friend Lamar takes inventory of Janet’s disheveled and bruised state.

“You alright there, Janet? You look a little banged up,” Lamar says, his eyes falling to the two shadows a few feet away from him.

“I’m just fine, darling. You know how it is. Some guys like it a bit rougher than others. Only way they can cum. Got an old man waiting at home for me like that, too.”

“Hmm. You shouldn’t be pulling tricks at work, Janet. Big Jim wants the patrons to spend their cash inside the bar, not outside it. Shouldn’t be dealing out here, either.”

“Yeah, well, Big Jim doesn’t have half the temper that my Tucker does if I don’t bring him his dues. Now just leave me be so I can finish my shift, will ya?”

Lamar offers Janet a curt nod before going back inside while Stone stares at the two silhouettes standing by, waiting for her to go back in.

“Come back inside, Stone. And leave those guys alone,” Lamar orders. “Janet is a grown-ass woman. I’m sure she knows what she’s doing.”

“Doubtful,” the girl retorts, but in the end, she follows the large giant back inside.

When the coast is clear, Teddy and Jeff start heading in my direction toward Teddy’s car. I hunch down below a four-wheeler until they pass right by me.

“Let’s go back to my place. We got what we came for,” Teddy explains, sounding bored.

I watch them get into the car and catch a glimpse of my brother’s face, completely expressionless.

Why, brother?

How could you let that happen?

Once they leave, I stand back up and return to Jeff’s car, fuming and disgusted at what I just witnessed.

Someone needs to put a stop to Teddy.

He's even more evil than I gave him credit for.

He's hurting Lincoln.

And he hurt that poor woman.

I refuse to be another victim in his games.

I would much rather be the villain.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

My mother's last words haunt me as I come up with a plan fit for dethroning Asheville royalty. I play out every scenario in my head as I wait until the bar begins to shut down. It's risky staying out so late, especially in this part of town, but it can't compare to the true evil that exists currently safe and warm back at the Hamilton mansion.

The minute I see Janet wave her goodbyes and walk toward the other side of the parking lot, I get out of the car and head toward her.

"Hi," I say from behind her as she's opening her car door, making her jump out of her skin in surprise.

"Jesus, kid. You scared the bejesus out of me." She places her hand over her rapid heartbeat. "What are you doing back here again anyway, kid? Did you forget something? Wait... you're not—"

"No, I'm not," I interrupt. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Her brows pull together in suspicion.

"I'm not fond of talking to strangers."

"I think you'll make an exception for me."

"Hmm. What's this about, huh? You got a boyfriend you want to spice things up with in the bedroom or something? 'Cause I don't come cheap if another girl is involved. Muff diving is gonna cost you extra."

"That's not why I want to talk to you," I say before gently brushing my fingers on the bruise that is starting to swell up on her brow. "Although, you have met my boyfriend. He gave you this parting gift earlier tonight. But that wasn't the only thing he did to you, was it?"

Her eyes widen in alarm, looking left to right to see if there is anyone close by that she can call for help if she needs it.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

"I want no trouble." She lifts her open palms in the air in surrender.

"And I'm not here to give you any," I explain patiently, implementing a soothing tone in order not to frighten her further.

"I ain't going to no cops, either, if that's what you're thinking. They'd

lock my ass up and throw away the key before they would do anything to those Northside boys. What's done is done, and I ain't gonna cry a tear about it, neither. Just the hazards of the job. Ain't my first rodeo, either."

The way she is so conditioned to accept what happened to her only fuels my resolve.

"That's not why I need to talk to you."

"It ain't?" she asks suspiciously.

"No, not at all. All I need is some information. And possibly a little help."

"What kinda information are you looking for?"

"I want you to tell me everything you know about the man that assaulted you tonight as well as his friend. I want you to tell me when they started coming to you and why. I'm especially interested in knowing what you sold them. Basically, I want to know it all."

She taps at her keychain with her red acrylic nails, considering my proposal.

"And just what's in it for me? If I tell you all you want to know, what do I get out of it?"

Without any hesitation whatsoever, I reach for my diamond earrings and place them in her hand.

"These things stolen?" she asks, looking long and hard at the fine-cut stones.

"They were my mother's. She gave them to me before she died."

"I'm sorry to hear about your momma's passing, pet. You shouldn't have come here wearing them in the first place, though. Can't be too safe around these parts."

"Noted. They've been valued at over twenty thousand dollars. Is that enough?"

The smile that traces her lips tells me it is.

"You driving?" she questions, pocketing my mom's diamonds into the small valley of her breasts.

"I've got my car right back there."

"Well, follow me then. I know someplace where we can talk and not be interrupted."

"Thank you," I reply genuinely.

"Sure thing, pet. I do have one more question, though. For my own curiosity's sake. What exactly are you going to do with the information I'm going to give you?"

“I’m going to make sure that what happened to you doesn’t happen to anyone else ever again. And you’re going to help me do it.”

Chapter 13



Lincoln

The sound of Strauss’s “Vienna Waltz” booms all around the large ballroom, the orchestra’s violins flawless in their delivery of the traditional song used for such occasions. I slump back into my chair, watching Asheville’s most cherished daughters joyfully waltz around the dancefloor with their black-tuxedo-wearing partners. The debutantes all beam proudly as they fulfill the ancient Northside tradition of coming out in high society.

Of course, not everyone is having a good time.

“You fucking suck at being a wingman, cuz,” Colt grumbles, side-eyeing me. “Even Walker is better at getting ass than you are,” he adds while pointing at our friend, who is currently trying his best not to step on his dance partner’s toes. “The least you could do is put on a goddamn smile. You’re scaring all the fish away with that scowl on your face.”

I don’t bother telling him that we’re at a fucking debutante ball, the last place he should be thinking about hooking up with anyone. But that’s Colt for you, never wasting an opportunity to get some girl under him. Or on top of him. I really don’t care to think about the logistics of my cousin’s bedroom rituals.

“Here, maybe this will loosen you up,” he says, reaching for his inside pocket and handing me a flask.

“Keep it. I don’t want it.”

“Argh. You don’t want to get laid. You don’t want any booze. Is there anything you *do* want, Linc?”

Without my permission, my gaze immediately lands on Kennedy waltzing up a storm in Easton’s arms, laughing away and having a grand old time.

“Except that.” Colt sighs, saddened when he follows my line of vision.

“You have to let that shit go. It’s fucking with your head.”

“If it was only my head, then maybe there would be some hope for me.”

When Colt’s emerald eyes soften, the pitying expression on his face has me grabbing the flask out of his hand and taking a huge pull of the foul liquid.

“That’s more like it, cuz.” He slaps my back, pleased. “Now all we need is to find you a girl to take your mind off *you-know-who*.”

If only things were that simple.

“I’m not interested.”

“You say that now, but after you’ve blown your load in some pretty debutante’s mouth, you’ll be singing a different tune.”

“Jesus, Colt. Does everything have to revolve around sex for you?”

“This from a guy who is still holding on to his cherry like it’s some prized possession or something. Look around you, Linc. Any of these girls would fall on their hands and knees to get inside your pants.”

“Spoken like a true romantic.”

“Fuck romance. It’s sex, Linc. Not a fucking marriage proposal.”

“How about we change the subject?” I order him, not wanting to broach the topic of my virginity with my cousin.

He rolls his eyes at me, much like Ken is fond of doing whenever any one of us says something stupid. And unbeknownst to him, that small action makes me feel like my heart has been cut by a thousand papercuts. I love him to death, but some things should stay private.

To this day, I’ve never told him how Ken and I used to hook up in our clubhouse. At first, I kept it a secret because I didn’t want to hurt his feelings in any way, shape, or form. And then I kept the memory hidden away just so I could keep a piece of her all to myself. It became a form of purgatory for me. A place I could revisit solely in my mind, where no one would learn the type of deviant I was for wanting to relive those stolen moments with the girl I loved.

With the girl I shouldn’t still be in love with.

“Crap. Here comes trouble,” he mumbles in annoyance, pulling me away from my wayward thoughts.

I don’t have to ask him what he means when I see his sister Meredith and one of her friends walking in the direction of our table.

“I’m surprised you’re here, Mer. Usually, you’re too busy up Mom’s ass to attend such frivolous social activities.”

“And I’m surprised you’re not giving some poor silly girl a nasty STD right about now. Guess we’re both full of surprises tonight.”

“Hardy har har. What do you want?” He scoffs.

“I came over to say hello to my cousin. Is that alright with you?”

“He’s all yours, your majesty,” Colt snipes, getting up from his seat and making a show of bowing to his sister. “Come and find me when *Princess Stuck-up* is through with you, cuz.”

“Cute,” she quips.

“Yeah, I know I am.” He winks at her before marching over to some girls across the room who haven’t been able to take their eyes off him all night.

“I really have no idea how you can be friends with my idiotic brother, Lincoln,” Meredith proclaims after he’s left, fixing her white gloves up to her elbow.

“Colt has his charms. You’d know that if you gave your brother half a chance.”

“My time is too precious to suffer fools. You know that.”

“Right. Why show love and affection to your family when you have a world to fix?” I cock my brow sarcastically at her.

“I know you’re mocking me, but it’s the truth. I’m too busy with the Richfield Foundation and college to make time for my brother’s insolence.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe he’s like that because you and your mom are always icing him out? He’d meet you halfway if only you showed him an inkling of wanting to have a relationship with him.”

“And that’s why I adore you, Lincoln. Always the peacemaker.”

“Now who is mocking who?”

The tender smile that tugs on Meredith’s lips warms my heart. These Richfield women are not known for showing their feelings, but whenever Aunt Colleen or Meredith let their cold masks falter, it’s like staring at a comet falling from the sky. You know that they are rare and extraordinary, and not everyone is privileged enough to see it firsthand. So, if you’re lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one, you’d be a fool not to cherish it.

It’s only when the girl beside Meredith clears her throat that we remember her friend’s presence.

“Oh, how rude of me. Lincoln, this is Anna Trott. She’s going to be working as a temp in the Foundation over the summer. Anna, this is my dear cousin, Lincoln. And before you ask, all the rumors are true. Not only is he unattached, but he’s also Asheville’s favorite son. You might have seen him

on the news recently when he single-handedly raised enough money to build the new primary school on the Southside after Asheville's school board wasn't able to allocate funds for the project. He did all that and still maintains his four-point-five GPA."

"That's very impressive," Anna remarks with a kind smile.

"Hence why I wanted to introduce you to him," Meredith adds proudly.

"Before you brag about my accomplishments too much there, Mer, let me just clarify that it was easy to raise the money when people know I'm a Richfield. All I did was knock on some doors and make a few phone calls. Our Foundation and family legacy is what did the heavy lifting."

"Humble, too, I see," Anna coos, batting her long eyelashes at me.

"Told you." Meredith winks. "I've been watching you all night, dear cousin, and saw that you haven't danced once. Does your date not know how?"

"My date is your brother, Mer." I laugh. "I doubt he wants to dance with me."

"Of course, he came to the debutante ball stag. He knows damn well that everyone has to bring a date."

"And he did. Me. Are you saying I'm a lousy date?" I tease, smiling for the first time tonight.

"Oh, God, he's rubbing off on you, too. Seriously, Linc. You have got to start hanging around better people than my brother."

"That's where you're wrong. I have yet to meet a better person than Colt. It saddens me that you don't see how great a human being he is. He'd give his life for me, and I'd willingly give mine for him," I explain sternly, my protective nature taking over.

"M'kay, well, this conversation just got heavy," Anna announces, trying to lighten the mood. "I think what Meredith was really trying to do was ask you if you wanted to dance with me. I'd love nothing more than to be your first."

Her ebony cheeks instantly blush at the double entendre her statement could be construed into.

"I'd be delighted, Anna, but do you mind if I dance with my cousin first? I don't want her to stay mad at me for too long even if we do share different opinions."

"Of course." Anna smiles genuinely while I take Meredith's hand.

We both walk to the middle of the dancefloor, Meredith's head held high,

always making sure not to make eye contact with anyone. Once we start to dance and we blend with the other dancers, she relaxes somewhat.

“You could have asked to dance with Anna first, cousin. There was no need to pick me instead. I could never be mad at you.”

“Are you saying that I’m also a lousy dancer as well as a crappy date?”

“Stop.” She grins, slapping my forearm.

“Careful now. I’ve seen you smile twice in one night. You’re about to set a new world record.”

“Funny,” she retorts, pulling back another grin that I see playing on her lips. “Well? Don’t leave me in suspense. What do you think of her?”

“Of who?”

“Anna, Lincoln. That’s who.”

“I know. I was just messing with you.” I laugh. “She seems nice.”

“Nice, smart, and beautiful. She’s the full package. You probably never met her before because she goes to Southside High, but I’m sure you know who her mother is—Dr. Georgia Trott. She’s one of the best children’s psychologists in the district.”

“The name does sound familiar,” I retort, recalling how Kennedy went to therapy for a few months after her mother died. Although I thought it was a grief counselor, not a psychologist.

“I really hope you and Anna hit it off tonight,” Meredith continues to ramble on.

“I’m sure you do. I’m just not in the dating mood right now.”

“Oh, I know. You’re still pining over your brother’s girlfriend. Have been since they started dating. Everyone can’t shut up about it.”

“Is that what people are saying?” I ask hurriedly, alarmed that this is the gossip going around town.

“Are you surprised? Both of you used to be thick as thieves, and now you hardly spend any time together, pouting like five-year-olds in separate corners of the room when you do.”

“That’s not true. We had a great time over New Year’s at my place a few months back.”

“You mean when your brother snorted enough cocaine to kill a small horse, too high to notice you two chumming it up? Yeah, I know. So does everyone else. People can’t shut up about it.”

“Shit. This is bad,” I grunt, thinking that the rumor mill is bound to reach my brother’s ears sooner or later.

I don't care if he retaliates against me. It's Ken I'm worried about. Now that he's gotten his filthy claws into her, who knows how he'll react. Nothing really worth talking about happened between us over New Year's, but I doubt my brother will take my word for it.

The only thing that occurred was me breaking the promise I made myself to stay away from her. Blame it on the flowing champagne, or having my friends celebrate the upcoming year at my house, or the fact that, a few weeks prior, she had stumbled into my bathroom and discovered my coping mechanism for dealing with the shitstorm that is my life, but something changed inside me that night. I could no longer keep Kennedy at arm's length. If I couldn't love her, I could at least be a friend to her.

That night everything just felt a little more hopeful—that somehow there was still a future for me where she could be in it.

But I can't ignore Meredith's perspective of that night, either.

I knew that Teddy was high as a kite, but so were a lot of the guests there that night. Unlike Aunt Colleen's New Year's parties, not everyone that attended our gathering had her stamp of approval. There had been some out-of-town guests, people my father said were donating to his upcoming campaign, that gave the party a heavy feel to it. Although, it did strike me as peculiar why someone who didn't even live in our state would want to guarantee my father stay in office as governor. And they didn't sound like they were from the south, either. In fact, I almost caught a hint of Russian from one guest in particular that my father and Senator Maxwell couldn't stay away from.

I'm sure this wealthy stranger and his entourage were the ones who brought the illicit drugs to the party, and somehow Teddy had gotten his hands on some. I didn't see him for most of the party, and neither did Ken, a fact we both took advantage of, using the time to reconnect. The only time he did come out was to take a photograph with us when the fireworks had started. His absence throughout the night almost made it feel like maybe the year was starting off on a better leg than its predecessor.

Now I see how wrong I was if all I did was manage to get the gossiping tongues of Asheville to slander Kennedy's good name.

I'm still trapped in my chaotic thoughts when the song ends, and Meredith starts calling her friend to join me on the dancefloor.

"Do you mind if I cut in, Mer?" Kennedy surprisingly interrupts, standing beside us now.

“Actually, I do,” my cousin replies curtly. “Lincoln promised my friend Anna that he’d dance with her next. You’ll just have to wait your turn.”

“Is that so?” Kennedy counters, throwing a glance over at the girl in question walking toward us. “No. I don’t think I will. Tell your friend that Lincoln is taken.”

“But he’s not, now is he, Kennedy?”

“He might as well be because your friend will not be dancing with him tonight or any other night.”

“Mighty protective of your soon-to-be brother-in-law, aren’t you?” Meredith provokes with a chilly tone that I’m used to hearing come out of her mother’s mouth.

“Test me, and you’ll see just how protective I am,” Kennedy rebukes, widening her menacing smile.

“Tsk, tsk, Ken. You know what my mother says about that temper of yours.”

“No, I don’t. Remind me.”

“That it will be your ruin,” my cousin explains with a clipped grin of her own.

“Stop it, you two,” I interject, having had enough of this tennis match of stubbornness. “Mer, I’ll dance with Kennedy first, and then I can dance with Anna afterward. No need to cause a scene because of a little dance. I’m not that good a dance partner anyway.”

Both girls throw fake smiles at one another before I pull Kennedy deeper onto the dancefloor and away from my cousin.

“Meredith can be a real bitch when she wants to be,” she says once we are out of earshot.

“Not a nice thing to say about your friend.”

“Meredith is not my friend. She has too much of a one-track mind to have any friends.”

“That can’t be true. Colt tells me that anytime you go to the Richfield Estate, both of you are always linked at the hip, whispering in the halls with one another.”

“Did he?” She rolls her eyes, coaxing a smile out of me.

“He did. You know how jealous Colt gets when he doesn’t get all the attention his way.”

“Colt is exaggerating. Yes, sometimes I do like to talk to Meredith about certain things you boys wouldn’t understand. I don’t know if you’ve noticed,

but I'm not exactly affluent in the girlfriend department."

"And why do you think that is?"

"Because I scare them away? Because I'm intimidating even when I try not to be? Take your pick."

"Or maybe it's because you call the one girlfriend you do have a bitch and try to one-up her when she's trying to set her cousin up with a date?"

"Is that what she is? A date?" Her soft sky-like eyes dim.

My heart rattles in its cage at how her face fell from the mere mention of a possible date. And as I take in this obvious reaction, I start picking up on her other features. I swallow dryly, not wanting to think about how beautiful she looks tonight, even with a sad tinge to her eyes. With her blonde hair up in a low bun and little dionysias adorned all around it, she looks like one of those fairy tales princesses one would see in a children's picture book. My eyes follow down the slope of her neck, bare of any jewelry, strategically done to draw attention to her white heart-shaped bodice, whose border contains sparkling crystalized imitations of the same flowers in her hair, making her ensemble even more memorable.

By far, she's the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on.

And she's my sister.

Just thinking that chips away at my soul.

"Well, is she, Lincoln?" she repeats, bringing my eyes back to her face.

"No. Just someone Meredith thought I should meet. You've probably met her already. She's Georgia Trott's daughter."

"I haven't heard that name in ages," she muses, throwing another glance at the girl.

"She's really pretty."

"Hmm."

"I can see why Meredith wants you to dance with her."

"Hmm."

"You don't sound so thrilled about it, though?"

"Do you want me to be?"

"No," she deadpans without missing a beat.

"Where's your date? Teddy? He should be the one dancing with you," I state, more as a reminder to myself than to her.

"Jeff took him home a few hours ago. Something about not feeling well. But in all honesty, I don't think either of our brothers like these sorts of social gatherings very much. I'm sure it was just an excuse."

“And are you okay with that? Your boyfriend leaving you at your debutante ball?”

“It’s the first real gift he’s ever given me. Not having him here is the best thing that could have happened.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that. Not when people can hear you. I thought I told you that already.”

“Soon it won’t matter anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Kennedy opens her mouth to respond but then thins her lips instead.

“What?” I ask, curious as to what she meant by that.

“Nothing. Just dance with me.”

We stay silent like this for a blessed moment as we just dance, mirroring each other’s steps and pretending it’s only us on the dancefloor. It’s on the tip of my tongue to warn her about what people have been saying about us, but to my heart’s chagrin, I don’t want to break the spell we’re in. Thoughts of deviant perversion that have plagued me for the better part of a year now seemingly disappear as I stare into her light skies and get lost in them. I watch her chest slowly heave up and down as my grip on her waist and hand tightens. Decorum tells me that I must keep a wider berth in between us, but as I pull her inches closer to me, the little gasp she lets out, and the way her lips part looking up at me, has my cock hardening.

Fuck.

Her cheeks bloom a pretty shade of red, the white stars in her eyes sparkling as I take the lead. I see a whole different life playing in her gaze, and to my despair, I let those images take flight in my mind and in my heart. I see a life where I could hold her whenever I wanted. Where I could kiss her and love her the way a man who wasn’t her kin could.

Stop this!

Stop this now!

Fuck.

As soon as the song ends, I unlatch my grip from her so fast she almost stumbles.

“Lincoln?” she whimpers, her melodic voice heavy with desire, making my engorged cock swell further.

“Lincoln!” Meredith calls out from across the room, waving to me with an expectant Anna at her side.

My gaze rotates quickly between all three girls as I step back.

One step.

Then two.

Three.

“I have to go. I can’t be here. I’m sorry,” I whisper before turning around and rushing out of the ballroom, leaving them stunned and confused in the middle of the dancefloor.

On my way out the door, I pass by Easton smoking a cigarette.

“You ditching already?” he calls out to me as I give the valet my stub.

“I can’t be here,” I explain, running my fingers through my hair.

“Are you kidding me? Why bail now when you could be winning your girl back? I saw you two dancing inside. Looked like you two were finally getting along. Are you really going to just let your brother take her from you without a fight? I mean, it’s Kennedy, man. She’s your girl. Not his.”

“She’s not MINE!” I yell, losing all my hard-won composure and shocking the hell out of East.

“Lincoln,” he starts, concern in his eyes, throwing his cigarette away just as my car appears.

“I have to go. I’m sorry, East. I just have to leave.”

I jump in my car, not willing to stay another moment so close to the girl I’ll never be able to have. I drive home like a madman, surprised I get there in one piece. But instead of going inside, I get out of the car and go to my sanctuary. As I walk into the deeply wooded area, I loosen the bowtie, which feels like a noose around my neck, and I scream at the top of my lungs in the dead of night. The February wind camouflages my pain with howls of its own. My hands ball into fists, needing to punch into a tree’s bark so I can ease the misery I’m being crippled by. The only thing that stops me is the image of my true love slicing her inner thigh with one of my razor blades. I lean my temple onto the cold tree trunk and concentrate on my breathing, blocking out everything else and focusing all my attention on this small action.

It’s been over a year since I found out the truth, and no matter how much distance I’ve put in between us, my heart still yearns for the one girl I can never have.

I call Teddy a monster for his brutality and soullessness, but am I any better? Coveting my own flesh and blood? Wanting to own every little gasp of hers? Needing to devour her with my kiss and lose myself in between her thighs? What other thing can I be if not a depraved monstrosity? I curse the

blood that runs in my veins with the same fervor I curse hers.

This all needs to stop.

I need to find a way to make all this stop—before I lose my sanity as well as my soul.

When the snow begins to trickle down from the sky, it cools my senses. I can live with this pain. I can survive it. There will come a day when I can be in the same room with her, and she won't affect me like she does now. Life has been too cruel to me already not to give me this. I just have to believe that better days will come. The nights, though, can have me.

The nights, though, can have me and do what they must.

Once I have full control of myself, I walk back home. I'm not surprised to see most of the lights off since it's well past midnight. I try not to make a sound coming in and head upstairs. I'm walking down the long corridor that leads to my room when I hear a loud crash coming from inside Teddy's room, followed by an eerie garbled sound.

I have half a mind to ignore it when I remember Kennedy saying that Teddy left the ball early because he wasn't feeling well. I shouldn't care if he's sick or not, but I've lost enough of my soul for one night not to at least check up on him.

"Teddy?" I call out his name after I've knocked on his door.

When he doesn't respond, I crack the door open and look inside.

"Teddy?" I repeat again, walking further into his dim-lit room.

But as my eyes become accustomed to the darkness, I see my brother's body lying flat on the bed, choking on his own vomit, his usually pale skin turning horribly blue and purple. This is where my protective instincts would usually kick in. Witnessing someone fighting for their life would summon my own reaction to act and help.

However, in this case, that's not what I do.

I just stand there staring at him as he inches toward death.

No one would know.

I could step out of this room now and walk away, get into my bed and sleep like a baby until dawn, knowing that I would no longer suffer his oppression and sadistic games. I could let him die here and now, and no one would be the wiser that I didn't stop it.

I could do that.

All I have to do is take a step back and walk away.

Walk away, Lincoln.

But if I do that, then I'm no better than he is.

He's taken too much from me already. I will not let him take my morality, too.

I shake my head to clear my vengeful thoughts and rush to his side. My knee dips onto the mattress as I hurriedly turn him to his side so he doesn't suffocate on his own vomit. I see shards of glass from a broken lamp on the floor as well as a syringe with the poison that must have provoked such a seizure.

"I'm going to get help, Teddy! I'm going to get help!" I shout before rushing out of his room.

As I run down the hall, I pat my pockets and curse out loud when I realize that in my haste to leave the ball, I must have left my phone on top of the table Colt and I had been sitting at.

Shit!

When I reach my parent's bedroom, I knock on the door with such force it's a wonder I don't break its hinges.

"What is going on out there?!" I hear my father shout angrily on the other side of the door.

"Help! It's Teddy. Call nine-one-one! Hurry!"

"What?" he responds when he opens the door.

"It's Teddy! We need an ambulance."

"What are you on about now, boy?"

"Baby, what's wrong?" my mother questions in tandem with her husband, wiping the sleep from their eyes.

Fuck!

I barge into their room and pick up my mother's phone to call for help myself. As I'm spurring out to the emergency operator the nightmarish way I found my brother in his bed just a few seconds ago, my parents start to understand the severity of the situation and race out of the room toward Teddy's.

"THEODORE!!!" I hear my father cry out, announcing he's reached his room. "NO!!!"

"Just hurry!" I beg the operator for an ambulance as I head back to Teddy's room. The phone slips from my hand when I see Teddy's lifeless body in his father's arms, his eyes completely devoid of their usual sinister gleam.

My mother is hysterically crying, kneeling on the floor, her hands

covering her face, unwilling to have her firstborn son's dead body burnt into her memory. It's only the sound of sirens that breaks my father's anguish long enough for his gaze to fall on me.

"YOU! You did this! You killed him!"

I shake my head frantically as he lets go of his son to march toward me. I'm still in shock when he reaches me, wrapping his hands around my throat and launching obscenities my way.

"YOU DID THIS! YOU KILLED MY BOY!"

But just as I'm about to deny his claim, his face goes ghostly pale, his facial features deforming and becoming unrecognizable. He lets go of my neck, stepping away from me while gasping for air, and then drops to the floor, looking just as dead as his son.

My mother and I stare at each other, her cries now silent.

And without uttering one word, we know exactly what the other one is feeling.

Relief.

It's over.

We're finally free.

Chapter 14



Lincoln

“Any news on your dad?” Finn asks with sincere concern, gaining the attention of everyone else in his living room.

“He’ll be out of the hospital in a couple of days. The doctors say he’s made a full recovery, even if the stroke did leave some serious nerve damage that he won’t ever truly recover from. They call it hemiparesis, and in my father’s case, this means the stroke weakened his muscles on the left side of his body. He’ll probably have to walk around with a cane for the rest of his life.”

“That sucks,” Finn replies solemnly. “But at least he didn’t die, right? So, I guess that’s the silver lining in all of this.”

Not for my mother or me.

We both genuinely believed that we were done with him. To our bitter disappointment, the ambulance we had called for Teddy was able to offer my father assistance, as he held on until they reached the hospital. After that, modern medicine did the rest in keeping him alive.

“What about your mom? How is she holding up with... well... you know.”

Yeah.

We all do.

“She’s hanging in there.”

What can I say?

I can’t exactly tell my friends that my mother hasn’t left her bedroom since Teddy’s funeral last week. Or that she binge-drinks herself to sleep most nights and spends her days in bed crying her eyes out. When I voiced my concerns to her doctors about her mental state, I was told that grief hits us all in different ways, and I should give her space and time to let her process

such a loss. The thing they don't understand or even fathom is the true nature of my mother's suffering. Not only is she grieving the death of a child, but also the death of her freedom. The loss of that one second of hope, when we both thought Crawford had fallen to his death, shattered something inside her that I'm not sure she'll ever be able to put back together.

"Hey, Walker. Enough with the downer conversation already. We want to lighten my cousin's mood, not make him want to slice his wrists open," Colt reprimands while scrolling through his phone.

Finn throws me an 'I'm sorry' glance which I just shake off. I really don't care what we talk about. I'm just happy I have my brothers here with me. The brothers that I actually care about. For the past few weeks, they haven't left my side, either coming over to my place or picking me up so I can spend some time out of the house. The latter is the only thing that truly lifts my spirits. Not being cooped up inside the house with all the bad memories that it holds does my heart good. I almost feel like I'm normal.

It's only when I return that I have no choice but to face my demons.

While everyone believes that I'm mourning a dear brother, nothing could be further from the truth. Although I am definitely in mourning, I've not shed one tear for him.

My father was right in accusing me of killing Teddy.

And though his death was ruled an accidental overdose, his blood is still on my hands. I can't help but remember that split second when I wanted to let him die. How at that moment, I let my hate overpower me long enough that taking a life felt righteous to me. The realization of knowing I'm capable of doing such a thing has caused me more grief than Teddy actually dying. The guilt I feel, thinking maybe I could have done something else to help him, torments me.

What if instead of going to my parents, I would have stayed beside him and searched for his phone to call nine-one-one?

What if I had shouted from the top of my lungs for help instead of leaving him alone?

Would he still be alive if I had just chosen differently?

Or did I purposely leave him alone so there was a chance he could suffocate on his own?

So many questions, but the answer remains the same. I'll never know. The only thing I do know is that I wanted him dead that night, and no matter how many times I organize my thoughts to paint a different picture of myself,

I am that person—a man willing to kill his brother for the sake of his own happiness.

But at least I have them.

Colt.

Easton.

Finn.

They remind me that all is not lost.

That I can still be good, that there is some redeemable quality in me that can offer me the redemption I seek.

I am not a monster.

No matter what Teddy's death may say to the contrary.

"Have you guys chosen a movie yet?" Kennedy singsongs as she enters the living room, reminding me of another reason why I shouldn't lament Teddy's untimely passing.

She throws me one of those sunshine smiles of hers as she plops right down beside me, holding a large bowl of popcorn in her lap.

"Not yet. Easton is taking his sweet ass time picking one."

"Hold your horses, Turner. I got one. I got one," Easton says, looking mighty proud of his choice of cinema.

"Of course, it had to be another Tarantino movie. Surprise, surprise," Colt chastises with a smirk.

"Fuck you, asshole. I know you love 'em," Easton teases, getting up from his seat next to Finn on the other couch so that he can slap Colt across the head.

"Hey! Watch the hair!" Colt scoffs, putting his phone down so he can quickly tame his disheveled hair with his fingers.

"Vain fuck," Easton taunts before getting up from his seat again to steal Colt's phone.

"The fuck? Give it back, East. I'm like two DMs away from setting up my first threesome."

"Ew! Gross, Colt. Ain't no one interested in knowing your business!" Kennedy laughs, throwing popcorn at him.

"Ain't?" He cocks a brow. "Since when have you ever said words like *ain't*? Have you been spending time on the Southside or something?"

"Or something," she jokes, throwing more popcorn at him.

"Ken! My mom will freak if she sees you mess up her carpet," Finn shouts, getting up from the sofa so he can clean up the mess she made.

“Oh, hush now, big guy. Your momma loves me too much to be angry about a little popcorn on her carpet. She loves me so much that I got her and Martha to cook us some peach cobbler for later.”

“She did?” Finn’s eyes light up at the mention of his favorite dessert.

“Look at Walker going all googly-eyed at the mention of pie,” Colt starts to tease. “You know what’s better than pie, Finn? Pussy. Ever ate that, buddy?”

Finn’s cheeks flush so profusely it completely outs him.

“Holy fuck! You have! Hold up! You’ve been keeping that piece of juicy information from us, but we had to listen to you ramble on for hours about your football drills?” Colt busts a gut laughing. “Well, who was she? Come on now, Walker? Stop holding out on us and spill.”

“Remy Peterson,” Finn admits shyly.

We all burst out in laughter while Finn runs his hand up the back of his neck to hide his embarrassment.

“Geez, that girl gets around,” Kennedy mumbles under her breath. “Has anyone in this room not hooked up with Remy?”

“Saint Lincoln hasn’t yet. But no surprise there since my dear cousin, here, has vowed to live a chaste life fit for the monastery. That probably explains why Remy hasn’t been able to sink her claws into him. All I’m saying, cuz, whenever you come to your senses and want to pop that cherry of yours, I got Remy’s digits right here waiting for you. The girl is a pro, so even if you suck at it, it’s still going to be good.”

“Shut it, Colt. Lincoln’s not interested.” Kennedy is quick to defend me.

“Maybe he should be,” Colt retorts, wiggling his brows, but I don’t miss the underlying meaning in his tone that was intended for my ears only.

“Are we going to talk about easy pussy all day, or are we going to watch a goddamn movie?” Easton interrupts. “Actually, on second thought, I’m calling our first intermission so I can go outside and grab a smoke since Charlene won’t let me do it inside the house.”

“That’s because those things will kill you,” Finn reprimands with a frown.

“Wait a second. East, did you hook up with Remy, too?” Ken’s eyes widen in shock when she realizes he didn’t deny it earlier.

“Yep, definitely my cue to go for a smoke,” he blurts out on a laugh, getting up and walking toward the front door.

“Easton, please tell me you didn’t?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“EW!” She pretends to gag.

“I can’t wait until all of you meet some nice, *respectable* girls to date. The dating pool around Asheville can’t be that bad that you all dip your pencil in the same one. I’m sure there are plenty of girls that actually deserve you assholes.”

“What a wonderful endorsement of your friends,” I goad, adding my two cents to the hilarious mayhem.

“What makes you think we even want nice and respectable girls to date anyway? We have you as a best friend, don’t we? Kind of makes it clear that none of us likes nice or *respectable*.” Easton winks before heading out the door.

“Hey! I’m respectable! Just ask anybody,” she snaps back at him, just as he waves her off and shuts the door. “Jerk.”

“No, babe. You got them confused. That’s Kennedy Ryland—Dean Ryland’s perfect little Southern Belle that is respectable. Not you, babe. Not our Ken. Our Ken is worse than we are,” Finn explains with a playful grin.

“You guys are assholes, you know that?” She pouts, hugging the bowl of popcorn to her chest.

“Yeah, but you love us,” I interject with a wide smile on my face, pulling at the ends of her hair.

“Yeah, I do,” she acknowledges with a twinkle in her eye. “I love every last one of you. Good thing too, or I’d whip your behinds right about now.”

“That can be arranged. Walker, pull down your pants so Ken can spank you,” Colt mocks with a cocky smirk. “You look like the type who would be into kinky shit.”

“You fucker!” Finn laughs, launching himself at Colt and bringing him down onto the carpet.

They both start wrestling and laughing hysterically as Ken and I throw popcorn at them while goading them on.

“I leave you guys alone for five minutes, and already Colt’s gotten to second base with Finn. Geez! You lot do have sex on the brain today,” Easton taunts, breaking the fighting duo apart. “Tarantino first, then you two idiots can make out afterward all you want. Although, I got to say, Finn, I’m kinda hurt. I didn’t think you’d choose a pretty face over me.”

“Never. Everyone knows the Dark Prince of Asheville trumps Richfield royalty,” Finn jokes when he gets up to his feet, putting his arm around

Easton's shoulders and planting a wet kiss on his cheek.

"And don't you forget it." Easton winks. "Okay, now enough horsing around. Let's watch some blood and gore!"

Once the curtains are drawn, and everyone has picked their preferred spot, East presses play on the movie to commence our matinee. When Kill Bill's 'The Bride' appears on the screen, Kennedy squeals beside me.

"Ooh! I love this movie!"

"You do, huh?" I laugh.

"Of course. What's not to like? Uma Thurman kicking ass and taking names with a katana is EVERYTHING! Besides, I've always been a sucker for a good revenge story. Kill 'em all, girl!" she shouts at the screen, making the rest of us laugh just as loudly.

"We all knew you had a killer instinct in you, Ryland. You never fooled us for a second," Easton goads playfully.

"Oh, shut it." She laughs, throwing more popcorn his way.

"Hey, hand me that popcorn so I can eat some that aren't on the floor," Colt asks, still sitting on the floor, his back leaning against the couch.

Kennedy hands him the bowl, but I don't miss the cautious warning he sends my way. I also try not to notice how she pulls her legs up onto the sofa and bends them to snuggle in closer to my side. I let my arm fall over the couch, which she takes as an invitation to snuggle up higher, her lips just inches away from my ear.

"Welcome back. We've missed you. *I've missed you,*" she whispers before placing a chaste peck on my cheek.

"Me too," I confess, unable to pull my eyes away from her.

I more than missed this.

She throws me one of her sweet sunshine smiles and leans back, snuggling into my side, her head nestled on my shoulder. This is what has been missing from my life. This is the normalcy I've been deprived of for the past year. As long as I have my friends, *my true family*, then there's still hope that all is not lost.

As long as I have them, then my soul is safe.

Chapter 15



Kennedy

One Year Later

“You can’t do this! Not again! Teddy’s body isn’t even cold yet, and you’re already selling me off like a piece of meat?!” I yell at my father after hearing what he’s been up to behind my back.

“You’re exaggerating, Kennedy. Theodore has been dead for over a year now. How long did you intend to mourn him anyway?”

Mourn?

As if I’d ever mourn that monster.

“But that’s beside the point. Regardless of how long it’s been since the fool went ahead and killed himself, both Senator Maxwell and I understand that these matters need to be handled with great care so as not to lose favor with this town.”

“Is that so?” I scoff, not hiding my disdain that he’s more concerned about pissing off total strangers than he is about his own daughter.

“It is. Hence why we’ve decided to hold back on announcing your courtship with Thomas for the time being and will only make it official when you start college in the fall. We want your relationship to look as organic as possible. Therefore, I insist you start spending some time with the boy in public social settings. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to be seen together during the summer holidays so that when freshman year comes along, no one will be too surprised to see that your friendship turned romantic in nature.”

The analytical way he’s talking about my love life feels like he’s checking boxes off a grocery list.

“And please stop pacing about so frantically like that. You’ll end up wearing out my rug.”

Like you're wearing out my patience, Father?!

"I think the decisions you're making about *my life*, without my consent or knowledge, are more important than a Persian rug, Daddy."

"Honestly, Kennedy, I don't see why you're so upset. I understood your lack of enthusiasm about Theodore since he was a few years older than you, and he's not exactly the most affable of young men, but you've known Thomas for most of your life. He's a perfectly good match for you."

"Daddy, please," I start to beg sweetly since my outrage isn't getting through his thick skull. "I don't want this. If one day I do decide to marry, then I want it to be for love."

"Love?" He snorts as if the mere mention of the word is ludicrous to his ears. "Love is a word the poor and feeble-minded throw around to give their pitiful excuse of a life meaning. I taught you better than to give credence to such infantile notions. Power and prestige are the only things that hold true value in this world. We tried and failed to achieve the first. Now it's time we focus our efforts on the latter."

No matter how much I try to contest this, I see he's made up his mind. For the second time in so many years, my father has set the course of my life toward a destiny that I do not want. I was able to correct its sails once, but this time I'm not so sure I'll be able to repeat such a feat.

For all his faults, Tommyboy doesn't deserve the same fate Teddy got in the end.

There has got to be another way around this.

I'm just not seeing it yet.

"Why Thomas, though?" I ask after a long pause. "Why him and not Lincoln, for example? I'm sure if you approached the governor again with the same proposition, he'd consider it. Or maybe this time you could talk to Aunt Colleen herself and propose a match between her nephew and me. We've been best friends since we were babies. No one will bat an eye at us dating. People will naturally assume that his brother's death brought us even closer together."

"I considered it. I won't lie, but the Richfield name brings too many strings attached to it. Besides, Crawford made it very clear that Lincoln is out of his favor. No," he shakes his head, and continues, "I've had enough of that family myself. For years I had to endure Colleen's ridicule and icy stare whenever she came over to visit your mother. Thomas will do perfectly. And if all goes according to plan, this match will exceed anything the Richfield

name could have brought us. Maxwell has big plans for the future. Not only for himself but for his son, too. And should he succeed, you'll be standing right by his boy's side, gaining the same widespread respect and admiration of everyone around you. The Ryland name will cease to be a joke. I guarantee it."

The gleam of greed in his gaze shines through, announcing that nothing I say will change his mind.

Most little girls look up to their fathers with stars in their eyes, believing them to be the epitome of good. Someone that will always protect them and keep them safe. I learned long ago that my father was never that kind of man. He would gladly hand me over to anyone he deemed could further his agenda of power and wealth.

It should sadden me, really, how most men in my life see me as nothing more than a chess piece to be moved at their discretion. The only thing that stops me from giving up hope that there are any good men left in the world is my friends—Finn, Easton, and Colt would take a bullet for me if they thought it would prevent me from getting hurt.

And Lincoln?

He would kill for me.

Just as I have killed for him.

"Are we quite done here? I need to head back to the university in about an hour. I'll be there for the rest of the day, interviewing candidates to fill the Ethics class vacancy that Professor Blaire is going to create when he retires at the end of the semester. I can't afford to dilly-dally here, waiting for you to come to your senses when I have such important work to do. The deal is done, Kennedy, and I expect you to act accordingly and respect my wishes. Do I make myself clear?"

He doesn't even wait for a response, his gaze falling back to his computer screen, his way of telling me that we're done here. Furious, I march out of the room, only to come to a halt when I see my brother leaning against the wall right next to our father's study.

Waiting.

Listening.

"Did you know about this?" I ask before he opens his mouth to say a word.

He nods impassively.

"How long? How long have you known and kept it from me?"

“A month,” he says unashamedly.

“A month?” I spit out, my nostrils flaring. “Thanks. Great to see you have my back.”

“I’ve had your back plenty. But not this time. This time you’ll have to handle this situation yourself. I still have the scars from the last time I tried to be your knight in shining armor. The role never suited me anyway.”

If by ‘your knight in shining armor’ you mean when you let Teddy rape that poor woman, thinking it better to be her than your sister, then yeah, Jefferson, you definitely suck at being one.

The words are right there at the tip of my tongue, eager to come out and reveal what I saw, but like I’ve done for the past year or so, I swallow the words down deep and keep that night’s events a secret or risk giving myself away.

However, there is only so much pretending that I can stomach.

Ever since that horrid night, my relationship with my brother is even more strained than before. As hard as I try to find it in my heart to forgive him, I’m unable to do so. In my eyes, there was no excuse for Jefferson’s complete disregard of Janet’s mental and physical wellbeing. His behavior was just as criminal as Teddy’s, and both of them deserved to pay for their actions. Knowing my own flesh and blood willingly let someone suffer like that, to be brutalized in such an inhumane manner, has eaten at my soul and deteriorated our already frail sibling bond.

Sometimes you can’t put the genie back into the bottle, no matter how much you want to.

He senses it, too.

My unexplained distance.

I wouldn’t be surprised if he kept our father’s arrangement with Senator Maxwell a secret as his way of punishing me for my cold demeanor toward him. No. I definitely wouldn’t put it past him. Jefferson always did like to punish others for his own shortcomings, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

“Does Tommyboy know?”

“He does. I told him.” He smirks smugly, only adding salt to the wound.

“Great. That’s just great,” I retort, pissed, throwing my arms in the air.

“I thought you’d be pleased.”

“And whatever gave you that impression?”

“Simple. Tommyboy is no Teddy. You’ll be able to wrap him around

your finger and do with him what you want. He's harmless."

"He's a jerk!"

"Didn't say he wasn't, but he's still a teddy bear compared to your last fiancé—no pun intended." He has the gall to laugh.

"I guess you would know, wouldn't you?" I arch a suggestive brow, needing to cut him open just as he's done me.

"I have no idea what you mean by that remark, but if you're insinuating that I've been friends with Tom since pre-K and know the ins and outs of his mind, then yes, I know him very well. So, well, in fact, that I know he'll never be much of a threat to you. Tommyboy is all bark and no bite. He'll be easy enough for you to manipulate into doing anything you want. Even have him fall in love with you," he explains, with a Cheshire Cat grin stretched out on his face that has me deepening my scowl. "Ah. By the look on your face, I see we're having one of those days again, aren't we? Do you not love me today, dear sister?"

"No. Not today, brother," I growl at him, showing all my pearly white teeth in the fakest smile I can muster.

"That's okay. I'm not feeling too affectionate toward you either right now. Not when you're acting like a spoiled brat, refusing to see the gift that was just hand-delivered to you."

"Gift?! How does not having a say in my own life benefit me in any way?!"

"Because it does!" he shouts in my face, no longer as cool and collected as he was acting a minute ago. "All you have to do is spread your legs apart and poof! You're married into one of the most influential families in Asheville. You don't even have to put much effort into making a name for yourself. Tell me, how does that not benefit you when I have to work ten times harder to achieve half the prestige and power that you're going to get?" He seethes, genuinely believing the bullshit that is coming out of his mouth. "But no matter," he adds more calmly. "I'll find a way to get what I want myself. I always do."

And with that ominous statement still dangling in the air, he turns around and walks away.



"Another engagement, you say? Either your father has been very busy, or

you, dear child, are in very high demand,” Colleen replies after I’ve explained what my father has done this time.

“I don’t see the humor in any of this,” I retort, flipping the ledger’s page with no consideration for its age.

“Give that here,” she demands with a stern tone, her arm outstretched to me while snapping her fingers so I can hand her the antique in my hands. “I can understand your frustration, but there is no need to take it out on my great-grandmother’s diaries. She would be rolling in her grave if she saw such a lack of consideration for her prized possessions. Her brainchild came into fruition when writing on these very pages; therefore, these books need to outlive you. Remember that.” She places the leather-bound diary back in its vitrine bookcase and locks it away so I can’t do them any more harm.

“Can we please focus on my dilemma right now and not your precious family heirlooms? You have to stop this. I will not be used again.”

“As I recall, you were able to get out of his previous arrangement without my help.” She arches a knowing brow.

“That was different. Tommyboy is innocent.” I chew on my lower lip.

“True, but his father, on the other hand, is far from being virtuous,” she explains, walking away from me so she can stare out of one of the many windows in her library, deep in thought.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, venturing closer.

“I’m thinking that Owen’s little birds might be telling him the truth. That the good senator’s ambitions are greater than I expected them to be.”

“What does that mean? For me, Aunt Colleen?” I ask, confused. “What does that mean for me?”

She turns to the side to face me and palms my cheeks into her hands.

“It means that you are going to be the daughter your father expects you to be.”

I step away from her grasp, shaking my head, not wanting to believe what she wants me to do.

“No. I won’t marry Thomas. I won’t marry anyone that I don’t love. I’m not like you,” I continue to protest, only to have her glacial stare sear into mine.

“Don’t talk to me about love, child. I have loved more deeply than you will ever experience in your lifetime, and through it all, I was still able to do what needed to be done.”

“I can’t go through with this again. I can’t,” I reply in defeat, realizing

that I'm not only a pawn in my father's game, but I'm one in hers, too.

A game I willingly signed up for.

I feel her scrutinizing stare on me, knowing she's finding me lacking.

"Sacrifice. Some people swear that they are capable of it, but when push comes to shove, they can't handle all that comes with the word."

"I've sacrificed enough."

"No, Kennedy. You have not. But you will. That I guarantee you."

"I'm not my mother!" I shout, surprising even myself with the outburst.

"Another truth." She points a menacing finger at me. "Your mother knew the true meaning of the word. What it meant to keep your enemies close. To keep a watchful eye on them. She sacrificed her happiness for the greater good. Such a shame she was unable to instill the same principles in you. Family, duty, and honor, Kennedy. Those were the words she asked you to keep sacred at all times. And here you are, spitting on her memory!"

Burdened by shame, I bite into my tongue as she takes a long exhale.

"This is about my nephew again, isn't it?" she asks, her tone no longer holding such malice.

"You know it is."

"Has he made any attempts in making you his?"

I shake my head, her pale blue eyes softening further.

"Have you ever considered that maybe this infatuation of yours is one-sided?"

"It's not. Lincoln loves me."

"Does he?" she counters disbelievingly. "It's been over a year since his brother died, and he's yet to show you that you're his. Maybe your heart refuses to see what's right in front of your face. That his love will never match yours."

"I don't believe that."

"But maybe you should."

She eats up the distance between us and picks up my chin with her hand.

"I sympathize with your suffering, child. Believe me when I tell you that I have cried many nights over the years for the sacrifices I've had to make. But you will do this, Kennedy. You must."

"Okay," I whisper solemnly. "I'll do what I have to, but I'm not marrying Tom. You can't make me."

"No, I cannot. And since your mother made a similar sacrifice of her own back in the day, I won't ask you to do the same. Thomas Junior is known to

have a healthy appetite when it comes to his sexual partners. I doubt he will be faithful to you during your courtship. When you've gathered as much information as you can, then, and only then, can you call the engagement off. No one will fault you for it if you tell the world your future husband is unfaithful."

She pulls me into an embrace, and I shatter in her arms.

"These are the moments I wish Dorethea was still alive. She'd know exactly what to say to soothe your pain. She always did when I came crying to her."

The idea that my godmother has ever shed a tear about anything should surprise me, but in sadness, it doesn't. I know she's telling me the truth about her own plights in trying to do what's right.

I've seen it with my own eyes.

And so has Colt, unfortunately.

"I miss her." I sob, holding on to my godmother, wishing it was my mom instead.

"I do, too," she confesses, raising my head up to hers. "I'm sorry for what I said before. I know wherever she is, she's proud of you. And I know you'll do everything in your power to keep it that way. Won't you, Kennedy?"

I nod.

"Good. Now wipe your tears. They've never done any of us good."

Truer words have never been spoken.

No amount of tears will get me out of this mess.

Only I can do that.

And I know exactly where to start.



"Kennedy! Well, isn't this a lovely surprise! Please, come in," Senator Maxwell greets, ushering me in the door of his lavish foyer.

"Thank you, Senator. I apologize for coming by unannounced, but I was hoping I could talk with Tom, if that's okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be? He'll be delighted to know you're here," he exclaims joyfully. "Tommy! Tommy, boy! Come down here! You have a guest!" he shouts, reminding me of how Tommyboy got his nickname in the first place.

I try not to roll my eyes at the senator's eagerness for his son to come

down from his room and talk to me. When Tom finally comes out of his hole and sees me waiting for him in the foyer, the cocky smile that crests his face can probably be seen from outer space.

“Look who dropped by to see you, son.” His father wiggles his eyebrows suggestively at him.

“Kennedy Ryland. As I live and breathe,” Tommyboy playfully utters when he reaches us both. “What pray tell could I have possibly done to deserve the honor of such a visit?”

If his father weren't standing right beside me, I would have punched him for his smug attitude.

“I was wondering if you'd like to go grab some coffee with me? My father has advised me of his plans for our combined future, and I thought it would be a good idea for us to discuss how to go about it. In private that is,” I add the last part demurely, making sure the senator misreads my meaning.

“I told you Kennedy would be a good fit for you, Tommy. Why don't you two go for a walk outside in the gardens? It's a lovely day for it.” He grins widely, pushing us out the door before we even have time to say yes to his idea.

I wait for Tom's father to close the door before letting my chipper mask fall.

“We need to talk,” I tell him sternly, pulling him by the arm.

“Aw shucks. And here I thought that you asking me out for coffee was code for wanting to make out.” He laughs.

This time I do punch him.

“Argh.” He hugs his stomach. “I forgot what a mean left hook you have.”

“Well, keep it in mind because I won't be afraid to use it on you if you misbehave.”

“Aw, come on, now, babe.” He laughs. “Why are you so pissed at me? I didn't set this whole charade up.”

It's true.

He didn't.

Unlike Teddy, Tommyboy had no part in our fathers' scheme. He is as much of a victim in this sham as I am.

“I'm sorry. I guess I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around all of this.”

“I get that. Believe me, I get that perfectly. When your dad showed up at our doorstep a month ago with this proposition of setting up an arranged

marriage between us, I was shocked, too. I mean, hello? It's not the Middle Ages where fathers pawn off their daughters to secure alliances or some shit like that. I was half expecting him to even throw in a dowry or something just to sweeten the pot." He continues to chuckle.

"How can you find this all so funny?" I question, appalled at his laid-back reaction.

"The better question to ask here is why don't you?"

My brows furrow in confusion.

He keeps chuckling away as he puts his arm over my shoulder, pulling me in closer as we walk deeper into his family's garden.

"Both you and I know that we are never getting hitched, so why not have fun with it?" he whispers in my ear. "Let the old men play their little games, get their jollies however they see fit because, in the end, they are in for a rude awakening. We are the masters of our own destiny, babe. I say fuck 'em and let's fuck with them."

Hope suddenly sprouts up in my heart as Tommyboy keeps us huddled in a sideways embrace, in case anyone should want to interrupt us.

"Well, I'll be damned. You sound an awful lot like a man with a plan," I venture excitedly, keeping my voice low.

"Did you honestly think I wouldn't have one?" he rebukes, amused, adding a cocky wink for good measure.

"Honestly, I don't know what I think. You could have been willing to go along with this fucked-up plan. How was I to know any differently?"

"I do love it when you cuss and break that good southern belle facade. You're always carrying it around like it weighs a ton. It's fucking exhausting to watch. Glad to see I'm getting the real Ken and not that fabricated version," he teases, pretending to hit me in the chin with his fist. "And as much as I wouldn't mind us fooling around, I'm way too young to be thinking about getting tied down. No offense."

"None taken." I laugh happily, suddenly feeling lighter than ever.

"Here's the thing. I have a predicament of my own. My father has got it in his head that once he finishes his second six-year term in the Senate, he'll throw his name in the ring for president. But for him to do that, he has to make sure that he has all his ducks in a row. Guess where he's starting to clean house first?"

"Let me guess? You," I reply, disheartened.

"Bingo. No matter how many shrinks he sends me to or how many

conversion-therapy camps he forces on me, to his bitter disappointment, he can't get the queer out of his only son. Me being bisexual isn't exactly the golden endorsement that will get him nominated to be the leader of his party if word ever got out."

My heart saddens further at the hint of anguish in his voice.

"And that's where you come in," he adds, staring down at me. "All of Asheville loves you. Not only because everyone still remembers your mom's kindness and good heart, God bless her soul, but you have all the necessary qualities to change my public image. Elegance, grace, and most of all—you lack a penis. You are exactly the kind of girl my father wants everyone to see me arm in arm with. Whatever rumors arise of my sexual confusion—as my father likes to phrase it—they'll hold no merit because, in the end, you're the one I ended up proposing to."

"But you just said that you didn't want to marry me," I chime in, needing to know to what lengths Tommyboy is willing to go.

"And I don't, but here's the rub, though. My trust fund only kicks in when I'm twenty-three. By my calculations, I'll get it a few months before we both finish college. I can stall my parents and your father by setting a wedding date until after we graduate. When my father no longer pulls my purse strings, I'll empty the trust and move to California."

"California?" I repeat in surprise. "Why so far?"

"Hmm, babe. Do you watch TV at all? Most everyone there is bi and hot as fuck. I'll be living like a king every day and have my bed warm every night."

I can't help the giggle that rips through my throat.

"You really are the gift that keeps on giving. Here I was thinking that I had to come over to lay down the law, but I see you've got it all figured out."

"I'm not just a pretty face, you know?" he jokes.

"You're right. You're not. And you're not as much of a prick as you let people believe, either."

"Oh, I'm definitely a dick. Makes it easier for people not to want to know my business if I act like a total asshole. Not that it should surprise you. You've got four friends that aren't exactly boy scouts either. Well... all except one. How is Lincoln going to take it when he finds out that we're supposedly the hot new *it* couple around town? He didn't look like he took it too well when you were chumming it up with his brother."

"You're very perceptive."

“I know a thing or two about trying to hide a person’s true feelings. Lincoln couldn’t fool me, and neither do you.”

I pull his arm off me, not really sure how I feel about this intuitive side of him.

“I know you have a thing for him. There’s no need to deny it either. I just opened myself up so you know who you are getting in bed with, so to speak. Now it’s your turn to do the same.” He cocks up a questioning brow.

“It’s true. I do have feelings for Lincoln, and those won’t change. Is that going to be a problem?”

“You tell me? If we’re going to do this, then you have to play the part, too. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Is this your way of giving me a way out?”

“If you want it. Although, I hate to be the one to point out to you that if you don’t want to hitch your wagon to mine, then your father is just going to find someone else to take my place. At least with me, you know what you’re getting and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. It’s your choice, Ken.”

“That’s just it, Tom. I don’t have a choice.”

“We always have a choice, babe. You just don’t like the one you’ll end up making. Think about it and get back to me. The ball is firmly in your court.”

I go to my tiptoes and place a chaste kiss on his cheek.

“I have to go.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” He sighs. “Say hi to Lincoln for me.”

I offer him a small smile before turning around and heading back to my car. Before I can commit to anything, I need to talk to Lincoln. Give him one more chance to admit his feelings for me. His reaction will either strengthen my resolve or finally break his. When I arrive at the Hamilton Estate, I take a deep, long breath before I gain the courage to knock on his door.

This is it.

Now or never, Lincoln.

My nerves are in overdrive as I walk up his stairs and ring the bell. My heart squeezes inside my chest when Lincoln opens his front door, pure happiness and joy dancing in his eyes for seeing me there.

“Tommyboy asked me to go on a date with him,” I blurt out, wanting to pull the band-aid off as quickly as possible.

The sparkle in his eyes immediately dims as he struggles to keep his

smile intact.

“Is that so?”

“It is. So, tell me, Lincoln. Am I going on this date, or am I turning him down?” I ask expectantly, putting it all on the line for him.

For an infernal moment, we just stand there staring at each other, counting our heartbeats.

“I think you should go, Ken.”

“Go home or go out with him?” I ask him to clarify.

“Both,” he explains sullenly before closing the door on me.

The next morning, I wake up to find my IG blowing up with innumerable pictures of Lincoln at some party with none other than Remy Peterson on his lap, putting an end to any hope I could have had for us.

We always have a choice.

And Lincoln just made his.

Chapter 16



Lincoln

Four years later—That fateful night

“So, what are we in the mood for? You guys want to check out the party over on Greek row tonight?” Colt asks, scrolling through his phone. “Looks like easy pickings to me,” he jokes, flashing a pic full of half-dressed drunken college girls at us.

“Hard pass. I get enough of jersey chasers at school. Add alcohol to the mix, and those sorority chicks are relentless,” Finn mumbles despondently from the driver’s seat.

“I don’t get you, Walker. Aside from the money, most guys play football for the girls. I swear you’re the only jock I know who hates the attention,” Colt retorts incredulously with a laugh.

“Leave him alone, Turner. Not everyone is as smooth with the ladies as you are, Mr. Casanova.” East chimes in.

“You want me to give you a few pointers, big guy?”

“Again, hard pass on that. I’m good.”

“Your dick might think otherwise,” Colt counters.

“Funny, asshole. Just tell me where I’m driving to, will you?”

“Why don’t we go back to my place. Have a quiet night in for a change? Watch a movie or something?” I put in my two cents worth.

“Lame, cuz. It’s Saturday night. We gotta get our party on.”

“I’m with Lincoln on this one. I’m all partied out. But I could go for a poker game or something.” Finn agrees, sounding more excited about spending a night in than having some star-struck girl chasing him around at a party.

“You know what? A night in doesn’t sound so bad to me either. I’m with

Finn and Linc on this one.”

“Of course, you are, Price. Fine. We’ll go back to Linc’s place and play some goddamn cards. On one condition, though,” Colt announces, sounding dead serious.

“This ought to be good. What do you want, Colt?”

“Next weekend, I’ll be the one who decides what we’re doing. If I leave shit up to you lot, people will think I’ve made a vow of chastity in no time. And look at me. What a fucking waste that would be.”

“You never cease to amaze me with how seriously fucking vain and shallow you are.”

“Thank you very much. I do aim to please—”

“I wasn’t done, asshole,” East interrupts. “Didn’t it ever occur to you that the reason why we don’t want to go to some lame-ass fraternity party is because we are fucking tired out from finals, dipshit? Ever think of that?”

“Oh, cry me a river, why don’t you, Price. We all know you could pass your classes with your eyes shut if you wanted to.”

“Not Harper’s class. That woman is a tyrant.”

“Yeah, but fuck is she hot.” My cousin bites his knuckles to drive the point home. “I’m totally okay with flunking her class every year if it means I get another one with her.” Colt smirks. “Too bad she hates my ass because I’d love nothing more than to sink my teeth in hers.”

“Hold up. I can’t believe my ears. I thought there wasn’t a woman alive who was immune to the Turner charm? That must be driving you insane.”

Colt kicks Easton’s seat in front of him to stop him from laughing.

“Who says she’s immune? I just haven’t made a play for her, that’s all. I could get her if I wanted to.”

“Sure, you could, Colt. Sure, you could.” Finn pretends to believe him, making Easton laugh harder.

I lean my head back on the headrest and close my eyes, letting them bicker and goof off on their own. While they are having fun teasing each other, I can have a moment of peace—alone with my thoughts—without feeling guilty that I’m worrying them in any way. They’ve done plenty of that since the news of Kennedy’s engagement to Tommyboy broke out last February.

I have to give Tommyboy credit, though. He went all out on his proposal, making it very hard for any red-blooded woman to decline. He reserved every seat in Alphonso’s over Valentine’s Day—pissing off most Northside men

when they had nowhere to take their dates on the day—and filled the restaurant with more red roses than all of Asheville’s florists had in stock. Rumor has it he paid a small fortune to have more bouquets brought in from Charlotte since he was afraid there weren’t going to be enough roses to impress her. Add to the mix a twenty-four-carat, emerald-cut diamond engagement ring with a split shank setting—worth a cool million—and it’s been the talk of the town ever since.

He did it wrong, though.

Ken’s favorite flowers are sunflowers, not roses.

The white was a poor choice of color for the diamond, too.

Only a blue—as light as the summer sky—diamond would have been good enough for my girl.

But she’s not my girl.

She’s his.

A fact that I’ve been struggling to swallow down for the past four years. I should take comfort in knowing she belongs to someone who can actually love her out in the open without running the risk of everyone thinking he’s a perverted abomination.

But I don’t.

It still fucking hurts.

Knowing she chose him.

A man who will never be loyal to her. A man who is incapable of not straying from her bed or treating her like the queen she is.

Why him, Ken?

Why give yourself to someone so unworthy of your love?

I know she’s not blind, deaf, or dumb. Kennedy might be many things, but she isn’t that. There is no doubt in my mind that she must know what Tommyboy gets up to when she isn’t around. There is no way in hell she doesn’t know about the various hookups he’s had behind her back.

Yet, she still chose him.

Is it to hurt me, Ken?

Is it?

To make me live out the rest of my days knowing you gave your heart to someone who should have never gotten so close to it in the first place?

Do you want me to suffer like I have made you?

If that was your intention, then there was no need.

I suffer for you every day.

And with my last dying breath, I will still suffer.

Because I'll never have you.

Because I'll never be able to rid myself of this love I have in my heart for you.

Sometimes when I let my masochistic thoughts get the better of me, I replay that day she arrived on my doorstep and told me about Tommyboy asking her out.

There was a challenge in her eyes.

It was her version of a 'shit or get off the pot' ultimatum.

I had hurt her deeply when I refused to run away with her when Teddy had set his sights on her. Yet, there she was again, giving me a second chance to man up and declare my undying love for her. Ken drew a line in the sand that day and begged me to jump over to her side, unaware that to do that, I would become an even bigger monster than my brother ever was.

When I refused her love for the second time and sent her away, I saw the light in her eyes die that day. And I've never seen its shine again since.

But unlike with Teddy, I vowed that I would stay in her life any way I could.

She was my best friend, after all, and keeping her close—even if only platonically—was better than the alternative of not having her at all.

“Yo! Linc! Earth to Linc. Wake up, cuz. We're already here.”

My eyes fling open at my cousin's statement, staring at my house through Finn's Porsche window, relieved that I'm no longer burdened with a sense of trepidation when I look at it. Ken's unexpected relationship with Tommyboy wasn't the only thing that changed in my life. I used to dread coming home when Teddy was alive, but now I can breathe easy knowing that the monsters that used to rule this home no longer exist.

After his son died and Crawford suffered a stroke, his vileness and brutality simmered to the point of being nonexistent. His feeble body was no longer capable of physically abusing my mother and me, and with Teddy's absence, his willpower to use his tongue to cut us down at every turn also diminished. It almost feels like it took my brother dying to kill his drive to torture us. For years I waited for him to gain enough energy back to pick up where he left off, but to my relief, that day never came.

The only thing that troubles me still is my mother's mental wellbeing.

She's never fully recovered from Teddy's death.

Before, she used to drink to cope with her husband's abuse. Now she

drinks to forget the son she lost. Many a night, I've found her balled into a corner on the floor, crying her eyes out, begging the Almighty for forgiveness.

“What kind of mother is happy that her son is dead? How could I have loved the innocent boy I carried in my belly and feared the man he was bound to become simultaneously?”

Every time she asked me these types of questions, I never had any comforting answers to give her. All I could do was wrap my arms around her and let her cry her fill. It's only in the last few months that I've seen a subtle change in her. There haven't been any empty vodka bottles lying around. No glasses with half-drunk bourbon in them or the smell of liquor on her warm breath when she kisses my cheek in the morning.

And just like with my father, I'm always on high alert, wondering when her stint with sobriety will crumble and old habits resurface.

“Linc, you have any food in the house? I'm starving,” Finn utters, breaking through my pensive thoughts as he carefully closes his car door.

“Not sure. We can always order out if there isn't,” I reply, heading to the front door.

“On it. I'll order some pizza for us,” he says, patting his jeans for his phone.

“Chicks, you're fine to go without, but lack of food is a hard limit for you? I swear your priorities are fucking warped, Walker,” my cousin accuses with a taunting grin.

Finn is thinking of a comeback when an eerie scream stops him from opening his mouth.

“The fuck was that?!” Easton blurts out beside me in alarm.

My hackles rise at the familiar sound as I open the door and rush toward my mother's cries for help, my brothers running frantically right behind me. And what I find when I reach the library confirms my previous suspicions that I should never let my guard down.

“YOU BITCH!” my father yells, beating my mother with his cane. “How could you do this to me again?! I'll kill you before you bring this type of shame on me a second time! I'll end you!!!”

“The fuck is going on here?!” Colt shouts out as both Finn and Easton grab my father and pull him away from my mother.

“Get your hands off me!” he yells, struggling to get Finn and East off him.

“Fuck that, old man. You have completely lost it,” East yells, shoving him to the other side of the room as far away from my weeping, battered mother as he can.

“I’m calling the cops,” Finn adds, throwing worried glances over at me as I kneel down by my mother to check her injuries.

“Mom, are you okay?” I ask, petrified when I see blood on her nightgown.

“I’m not sure. I need to go to a hospital.” She cries, cradling her stomach. I nod, slowly helping her up to her feet.

“The fuck is wrong with you, Uncle Crawford?! Have you officially lost your goddamn mind?!” Colt spits out at my father.

“I have never seen things more clearly,” he utters, deep-rooted malice in his tone. “Your bitch of an aunt has made me a cuckold for the last time. She will not have this baby! I will not endure it! Not again!”

“What are you talking about?! You know what? I don’t want to know. You’re done! Kiss your cushy government job goodbye. I’ll make sure everyone knows what a sick, twisted fucking bastard you are! Your days in this town are over, fucker. Wait until my mother finds out you laid a finger on her sister.”

At this, my father scoffs.

“You think Colleen doesn’t know? You think she gives a shit about her slut of a sister?”

Colt’s steam runs out, confusion and disgust laced in his emerald eyes.

“Don’t say another word, Father! Colt is right. Your days are over,” I reprimand, letting my mother’s weakened body lean against me for support.

“You! Don’t you dare call me Father again. I have no sons. My boy died, and you killed him!”

“Fuck! He’s delusional,” East mumbles under his breath, never taking his eyes off my father as he limps to the desk at the corner of the library.

“I know you did it! I know you killed him! You killed my Teddy,” he continues to shout, opening a drawer and ransacking it like a madman possessed.

“I can’t listen to this fucker’s senile ramblings for another minute. Let’s get Aunt Sierra out of here and to a hospital. We’ll deal with this asshole later.”

But just as Colt says those words, my blood runs cold at the sight standing right behind him.

“You! You were the one who should have died that night. Not my Teddy! Not my boy! Not my boy!” my father shouts, pointing a gun at me.

“NO!” my mother screams, and before I can do anything about it, she flings herself in front of me just as my father pulls the trigger.

The next seconds go by in slow motion.

I watch in horror as the bullet flies across the room and finds purchase in my mother’s belly, her body instantly falling to the floor. Mayhem and chaos erupt as I fall to my knees and cradle my mother’s head in my lap.

“Mom!” I weep, her eyelashes batting a mile a minute as her mind comes to terms with what’s happening.

My ears pick up on my brothers trying to take the gun out of my father’s hand as he spews his murderous intentions of striking me down. The only thing that breaks my attention from my mother’s gasping breaths is when another shot rings out loudly behind me.

“I said stay the fuck down, you asshole!” Colt shouts, the smoking gun now clutched in his grip.

My father screams bloody murder, staring at the bullet wound Colt inflicted in his leg just to keep him still, preventing him from doing us any more harm. Easton and Finn share a panicked look while pinning my father’s arms behind his back.

“Lincoln.” My mother wheezes.

“Mom, don’t talk. Someone call an ambulance!” I shout, tears streaking down my cheeks.

“Lincoln.” She continues to pant with one hand protectively on her bleeding stomach while the other tries to lift up to nestle my cheek. “I love you, Lincoln. So much. I’m going to miss you so much.”

“Mom, stop. Save your strength,” I beg as my eyes linger on the immense amount of blood seeping through her nightgown, turning it from white to a horrifying blood red.

“You deserved so much better. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Mom.... Please... don’t go,” I hiccup between sobs. “Please... stay.”

“I’m sorry. I’m... so... sorry. For... forgive me.”

“Mom! Don’t! Don’t go!”

“I... lo... love... you. You... made... it all... worth it.”

“Mom! Mom! MOM!!!” I scream while trying to shake her back awake.

But it’s no use.

The devil won and stole her from me.

The loud thunderous wail that rips through my chest silences the room. I hug her corpse to my chest as I grieve for the woman that gave me life, love, and affection. The one person in this entire world who knew what it meant to truly share in my suffering.

“Good! One less whore to worry about,” my father has the gall to shout, laughing at my misery.

And just like that, my grief morphs into something else, awakening in me a hatred that blinds and robs me of my sanity. A hatred that will only be content after his blood is spilled.

The body that rises up is no longer mine.

The feet that walk over to the man who had made it his mission to consume my soul since the very day I was born do not belong to me.

The hands that unclench my cousin’s grip from the gun hold no familiarity to me.

I no longer exist.

Only hate prevails in my stead.

My fingers grip his cowardly head, craning it back as I shove the gun under his chin.

His face pales to a ghostly shade of white, his beady eyes widening in terror, staring at the empty shell of a person he’s created with just one bullet.

“You are my soul’s hate,” I whisper in his ear, pulling myself back just enough to memorize his crippling fear and hard-wire it in my mind.

“Send Teddy my regards.”

And with those fateful words, I pull the trigger.

Chapter 17



Kennedy

“Hey, Ken. I don’t think you should be here right now,” Easton warns while, in the background, I can hear Lincoln shouting obscenities and throwing things around.

“Move, East. Don’t have me make you.” I grind my teeth, clipping him in the shoulder and pushing the door open so I can get inside.

“Your funeral. Shit. Poor choice of words,” he mumbles behind me.

“Where is he?!” I demand, putting the grocery bags on the floor so I can run like a frantic lunatic in search of my blue-eyed boy.

“In the library.” Easton grimaces.

“What?! Why the hell did you let him go in there?!” I shout in outrage while inwardly blaming myself for leaving Linc alone with Easton to buy groceries.

But it had to be done.

The only thing Lincoln has in the house is an alarming abundance of booze—and if the past month has taught me anything, it’s that alcohol mixed with grief makes for unsavory bedfellows. I would have asked one of the staff to stock the refrigerator if Lincoln hadn’t gone on a self-destructive rampage and fired everyone that used to work in the house after the funeral. And if I had sent East on a supply run, he’d probably only bring back a pack of cigarettes.

When I get to the library, my heart actually weeps for what it finds. Lincoln has gone on yet another bender, vodka seeping through his pores as he trashes the place.

“Damn it, Easton! I told you to take care of him.”

“Believe me, I tried!” he shouts back with a miserable expression plastered on his face.

When Lincoln hears us talking at the threshold of the library, he turns around and points a menacing finger at me.

“NO!” He shakes his head. “Take her out of here, Easton! I can’t have her here, too. I can’t! I just fucking can’t!”

“Well, too fucking bad, Hamilton, because I’m not leaving.”

“The fuck you’re not, Ryland?!” he growls, launching himself in my direction only to trip over his feet and stumble to the floor.

Shit.

I rush toward him and drop to my knees beside him. I cradle his head in my lap, rubbing soothing strokes along his back, and let him cry it out as he slams his fists in frustration onto the carpet. I wish I could say his erratic behavior comes on a shock, but I’ve seen worse since I took it upon myself to take care of him after his parents died.

Every day is the same.

Lincoln wakes up at the crack of dawn and walks to the Oakley Woods so he can shout at the heavens and curse out God for taking his mother away from him. Then he returns to the mansion to have his liquid breakfast, making sure that when lunchtime comes around, he’s already drunk his weight in vodka. That’s when he picks a room around the house and trashes everything that isn’t bolted down, yelling and shouting incoherently until his voice is so raw it hurts him to physically utter another word. After all of that is done and over with, he breaks down and cries until he’s too tired to keep his eyes open, surrendering to his agony only for the vicious cycle to repeat itself again in the morning.

It’s been a month of this madness, and it’s not getting any better.

Only worse.

Today I told myself I’d put an end to it, hence why I left on a grocery run to get proper food in him. I just never expected that today, of all days, he’d choose this very room to destroy. But then again, I should have figured Lincoln would be more volatile today; it’s been exactly one month since someone broke into his home and killed his parents in the middle of the night.

I brush his hair, like my mother used to do for me, and softly remind him that he has people in his life who love him and care about him. That he isn’t alone and never will be. That his family will always be by his side. These are the vows and promises I make on a daily basis, unsure if they ever reach his ears, much less his heart.

After an hour or two of this, his shaking body starts to calm down,

showing signs that he no longer has the will to speak. I ask Easton to help me take him back to his room and watch my fearless, rebellious friend hesitate, almost as if stepping inside this room where his best friend's parents died brought a curse upon the place.

"Easton," I repeat. "A little help here?"

"Fuck. Okay," he stammers before quickening his steps to help me lift Lincoln off the floor.

His body is dead weight on our shoulders as he flounders up the stairs, almost making us lose our footing.

"Shit!" Easton grumbles, shifting most of Lincoln's weight to his side. "These are the moments I get really pissed at Finn and Colt for bailing on us. Another set of hands would have been a big help."

"It's not their fault. Linc sent them away, remember?"

"Lincoln probably can't remember his own goddamn name right now. They should have known he wasn't in a state of mind to make good decisions."

"Leave it alone, East. He's got us, doesn't he? We can handle this on our own."

"Yeah." He sighs out, deflated. "Still would have been nice to have a day off from babysitting the lush. Shit. I sound like fucking Colt. Sorry, I didn't mean that."

I frown at the hint of shame in his voice for wanting a few hours to decompress. I understand where he's coming from. It's not easy watching someone you care about fall down the rabbit hole of despair. Lincoln, *our Lincoln*, is slowly disappearing before our eyes, and I'm not sure who will take his place when all of this is over and done with. Watching someone that we love losing a bit of themselves every day, deteriorating right in front of us, and give in to his somber depression, is not for the faint of heart. All we can hope for is that one day he'll wake up and remember the person he used to be and return to us—the friends who love him unconditionally and always will.

We lay his dormant body on the bed when we finally get him to his room.

"What time is it?" I ask, sitting by his side, never wanting to stay too far away from him.

"A quarter past five."

"Okay. I doubt he'll leave his bed again tonight. Why don't you go home and rest up? You look like you need a break. Besides, your mom must be

worried that you're spending almost every waking moment over here."

"I can say the same about you. You haven't left his side either. Don't you have a fiancé who might get pissed that you're spending all this time away from him?"

"Tom understands that Lincoln takes priority right now."

"Never thought Tommyboy was the understanding type. If my girl was ditching me to spend all her free time with another guy, I wouldn't be too happy about it."

"Even if he was her best friend?"

"Especially if he was her best friend. Those types of bonds run deep. A man could get mighty intimidated by such a connection." Easton arches a knowing brow. "Jealous, even."

"Then I guess Tom isn't the jealous type." I shrug off.

"If that's true, then I'd call off your engagement if I were you. He doesn't love you."

"Why would you say that?" I ask in utter bafflement that he would say something like that.

"Because a man in love can't help but be jealous of anything that pulls his woman's attention off him. If Tommyboy truly knew what love was, he'd be here with you right now, keeping a vigilant eye on you at all times. He wouldn't let you take on this burden all on your own, either."

"Hmm. Someone once told me that there were many ways to love."

"Whoever told you that crock of shit was lying to you. There's only one way to love. Either you're in it with your whole goddamn heart, or you're faking it."

"Careful there, East. You sound an awful lot like someone who's speaking from personal experience," I tease, the image of his favorite muse immediately coming to mind.

"See, that's where you're wrong. I'm not talking about me."

"Then who are you talking about?"

"Him." He points at the boy who is sound asleep at my side, his hand entwined in mine.

"I... um... I should take a quick shower before you leave," I quickly say, getting up off the bed without waking Lincoln up.

He stirs, displeased in his slumber, when I pull my hand away from him, making my heart hurt even more.

"I won't be long. Ten minutes tops," I rush to say, pulling open one of his

drawers to grab a T-shirt and sweats to change into afterward, instead of going downstairs to get my overnight bag.

When I close the ensuite door behind me, I lean against it, placing my hands on my chest, praying that East didn't see how his words wormed their way into my heart. His definition of love mirrored my own feelings for Lincoln to a perfect T. He's not even mine, and yet, I go mad with jealousy with everything and everyone that captures his undivided attention.

"Stop it," I curse softly, slapping my face repeatedly with both hands to get my shit together, reminding myself that my lovesick heart can wait its turn.

I jump in the shower to cool my rampant heartbeat, and in ten minutes flat, I'm back in Lincoln's room telling East he can go home for the night. Reluctantly he leaves, promising me that he'll be back by dawn, knowing that's when Lincoln usually wakes up. I put on a smile and wave him off at the door.

Once I've made sure to lock it behind Easton, I pick up the discarded grocery bags on the floor and take them into the kitchen to unpack. Once that's done, I go back upstairs to check on Lincoln. I let out a relieved sigh when I find him peacefully sleeping, his nightmares thankfully not paying him a visit tonight.

I gently sweep his hair from his eyes and lean in to kiss his temple.

"This has to stop, Linc. I can't let you continue on like this. It's breaking my heart," I whisper lovingly, rubbing my nose in his hair.

Even though he still smells like expensive name-brand vodka, my true love's scent is still deliciously there, right at the fray, taunting me. Proof that my Lincoln still lives. Somewhere deep in his dark and hellish existence, he fights to be free of the chains of misery and guilt.

Because there is no doubt in my mind that's the demon he's in battle with.

I know grief.

I know what it is to feel empty after a beloved mother is taken away from you.

What Lincoln is being tormented by isn't just that—it's also survivor's guilt.

And if I don't do something about it soon, he'll willingly throw himself off the ledge and follow his mother's untimely fate just to stop his suffering.

I can't let him drink himself to death.

I can't let him continue wallowing in this pain.

It hurts too much to watch someone as good as him wither away right before my eyes.

I love him too much to let him give up.

With new resolve seeping into my bones, I press one more kiss to his temple and go back downstairs into the kitchen. I grab a trash bag and go on my hunt, throwing away every bottle of alcohol I can find throughout the house. Once I've dumped the foul-smelling liquid from each of the bottles down the sink, my energy is completely drained from the excursion.

Originally, my plan was to make some mac and cheese for dinner in the hopes I could get Lincoln to eat some of it, but after running around the house for the past two hours, checking in on Lincoln every now and then, I'm in no mood to cook or eat. Feeling exhausted from today's events, I walk back upstairs and decide to lie down beside my love for a while and just rest my weary bones.

I must have dozed off in the meantime because the next thing I remember is feeling a looming presence watching over me. Ever so slowly so as not to spook him, I open my eyes and stare at the boy I have loved all my life, lying on his side beside me.

"Why are you here?" he asks with such disdain it takes all of me not to grimace under his loathing gaze.

"Because you need me," I reply in a soft whisper, tilting my head his way.

"No. That's not why you are here." He shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You're here to ruin me. To shred the remaining ribbons of decency inside me. It's true, isn't it? That's why you're here. You're my own living, breathing purgatory. Admit it!"

The sweet smell of bourbon on his breath that's tickling my cheeks tells me that while I slept, Lincoln must have woken up and found a bottle stashed away somewhere that I had missed earlier.

"Answer me, Ken," he demands, but his malicious tone isn't as dominant as it was a second ago. "Please. Tell me I'm right. That's why you're here, isn't it? To ruin me completely and damn my soul for all eternity?"

My chest tightens at his pain, more than it does from his words.

"All I want to do is help you get through this, Lincoln. Your soul is safe. It's safe with me."

"No. It's not." His voice starts to crack. "I'm not safe with you. I'll never

be safe with you.”

My throat clogs at the misery swimming in his eyes. I swallow the lump down while my trembling hand caresses his cheek. Lincoln’s eyes instantly go half-mast as he lets himself lean into my touch.

“You’re safe with me. I’ll never hurt you. I promise you, Linc. No one will ever hurt you.”

“Another lie. I do nothing but hurt,” he mutters, slamming his fist against his chest. “I hurt every fucking day. I can’t stop. Please, Ken. Make it stop.”

The need in his voice summons my own, and before I can rethink my actions, I lean in and kiss him. His surprise lasts for only a split second, and suddenly, as if awoken from a deep sleep, he springs into action. Lincoln hovers his body over top of mine, pinning my arms over my head and dominating me completely. His kiss is so ardently passionate that every nerve ending in my body bursts to life.

“Ken,” he growls, nibbling on my bottom lip, his teeth exquisitely digging into my flesh. “Stop me, Ken. Please. Stop me.”

God no!

Not now. Not ever.

I arch up my pelvis to meet his, my answer to his plea.

“God, please have mercy on my soul. I can’t quit you,” he sends out as a prayer, his grip on my wrists loosening in favor of trailing down my body.

I whimper in delight at the feel of his steel cock rubbing against my core while my fingers weave through his long blond locks.

“I need you so much. So, fucking much,” he continues to profess, as he licks his way down my neck and chest until his lips find my nipple and begin to suck at it through the T-shirt.

“Argh!” I pant, locking my legs around his waist as he dry humps me into oblivion.

“Off!” he grunts in frustration with all the clothes keeping us apart.

I fumble to keep up with him as he pulls my shirt off, shoving my sweats down my legs simultaneously. He hisses at the feel of my hands on his chest as I pull his T-shirt over his head.

“I can’t have you. I *can’t* have you,” he repeats on a loop, pulling his sweats and boxers down low enough to free the bulge hidden underneath them.

“You can have me. You *do* have me, Linc. You always have,” I reply, tears starting to streak from the corners of my eyes, falling to his pillow.

Like a neglected child that craves attention, I've imagined moments like this where I was once again the center of his universe. I wrap my arms around him, keeping him in place, afraid that whatever has taken over him will wear off, and he'll go back to depriving me of his love. I'm so needy for him I might lose my mind if he pulls away now and stops this.

"Lincoln, please. Don't stop."

In his maddened state of lust and alcohol, I'm not even sure he hears the words coming out of my mouth. I cry out his name as his fingers dig into my hips, the crown of his cock teasing my opening.

"Ken," he pleads for the last time, his blue oceans a depiction of a perfect storm.

"I love you. Please. Please. I love you," I beg, needing to be connected to him in every way a man and woman who love each other can be.

"Then ruin me. I have no will to fight for my soul any longer. Not if it means not loving you."

And with those words hanging in the air, his lips crash into mine as his cock spears into my virgin pussy, stretching it out and blinding me with pain. My nails sink into his back as I try to focus on his loving kiss and not his punishing cock.

I meet his eyes as they drop down to where his cock thrusts deep inside me, blood coating his shaft. His gaze immediately snaps up to mine, a million questions embedded in them.

"No!" He shakes his head, pulling out and making me wince in relief. "Not like this. Not like this."

I'm afraid he's going to leave me there on the bed, unsatisfied and bereft of his love when he surprises me by going to his knees and locking his head in between my thighs.

I bite into my lip as he laps at my slit, cleaning my blood and juices with the pad of his tongue. I try to keep my beating heart in check as Lincoln devours my pussy, playing with my clit with his expert tongue. My orgasm starts to build up, igniting further when he moans out my name in between swipes.

"Fuck, I could eat you for days," he admits, the hunger and truth in his voice lighting the match of my already burning desire.

I buck my pussy up to meet his sinful tongue, crying out my release on a loud wail.

"That's my girl. My beautiful girl," he praises once I've fallen back on

the bed.

He crawls his way over my body and tilts my chin up, licking and nipping at it until he finds the seam of my lips, making me whimper when his tongue slides into my mouth and finds its counterpart. Our tongues tangle together, sucking and biting and clashing teeth, needing to taste every inch. He breaks our kiss, letting me suck in much-needed air while his tongue drags down my collarbone, deep into the valley in between my heaving breasts. He slants his gaze upward as his teeth graze my sensitive skin before taking one peaked nipple into his mouth. He sucks and teases until I'm a quivering mess of want and desire, only to repeat the onslaught to my other nipple.

"Lincoln, please," I cry, feeling my empty core drenching the sheets beneath us.

Lincoln swallows my whimpers, kissing me ever so gently, his legs spreading mine further apart.

My breathing is heavy and erratic, scorching heat blooming down my spine and through my lower belly and pussy. This time, when his crown breaches my center, my body opens up to him like a flower deprived of sunlight.

"Ruin me again, sweetheart. I live for it now," he utters softly as his cock digs its way into me, just as its owner has dug his way into my heart.

The second time around, my one true love is slow with his lovemaking, always tender and gentle as he breaks and shatters every piece of me, only to rebuild me from scratch into something extraordinary. My body sways into his thrusts, my chest heaving for air, needing more of his sweet torture. Every coherent thought leaves me, dying a beautiful small death, as my mind and body become clouded with waves of ecstasy and desire.

"Lincoln!" I call out his name since it embodies all my wants and dreams.

His gaze never wavers from mine as he claims my body, heart, and soul with his love.

Deep down, I know I'm taking advantage of his vulnerable state since it's obvious Lincoln is not in his right mind. If he were, his level-headed and protective nature would have taken care of putting on a condom before stealing what remains of my innocence. Unlike me, he would have taken precautions to keep me safe at all times.

I'm not as self-contained or as prudent.

I want all of him. I crave everything he has to give me. I want it all.

His kiss.

His body.

His heart.

And yes, his very soul.

He was right when he said that his soul isn't safe with me because, given half the chance, I'd steal it away and keep it all to myself. That's what he does to me. I'd do the most underhanded, unscrupulous things just to keep him. There are no lengths that I wouldn't go to, no lie I wouldn't tell, just to have his love.

So when I feel his cock begin to swell inside me, my core clenches around him, keeping him hostage just as my heart has been his faithful prisoner since I was a child.

"Ken," he mewls, slanting his eyes in pain, so close to coming undone.

"Linc," I whisper back, licking his lips before tugging at his bottom one with my teeth, my fingers laced into his hair.

"Fuck!" he curses, making me preen with happiness when he starts fucking me into the mattress like a beast gone wild.

The rigorous motion rubs against my sensitive clit, making each of his thrusts that much more powerful. Light begins to surround us as I reach out to grab the orgasm that is within my grasp. I hold on to it with both hands and explode beneath him, singing out his name as if it's the most beautiful song the world has ever heard.

"Fuck!" he cries out again, letting go of whatever was holding him back and cumming inside me.

After he's given me all of himself, Lincoln drops onto my chest while my arms wrap themselves around him, needing to keep him as close to me as humanly possible. He lifts his heavy head a fraction to look up into my eyes. The love that I saw a minute ago is no longer there, and in its place, shame reigns.

I lean in and kiss his lips, praying it's enough to bring back my love, to no avail.

"And with a kiss, I am damned."

He then nestles his head in between my breasts and begins to sob quietly, provoking my own tears to fall, mourning the beautiful moment that is sure not to ever see or hear the light of day.

Chapter 18



Lincoln

I stole my sister's virginity.

Like a thief in the night, I robbed Kennedy of her most precious possession.

And, worst of all, even engaged to another, she let me.

Her scent is still on my cold sheets, entrenched in my skin.

It's been a month since it happened, and we have yet to broach the subject, preferring to play the shameful game of denial and ambivalence.

If we don't talk about it, it didn't happen, right?

Unfortunately, that's not how real life works. You can't forget making love to the person who rules your heart, no matter how hard you try. You can't scrub the images of her gasping out your name or the sheen of sweat in the valley of her breasts that you licked away. You can't erase the image of her lips parting just as she's about to cum, or how her sweet, tight pussy clenched around your cock, milking it dry. Your tongue will always crave the taste of her. Yearn to be the one to see her shatter beneath you.

No.

No matter how you fill your days, those images will be forever branded in your mind, torturing you with how it feels to truly have a taste of heaven on the tip of your tongue. To say that the past few weeks have been more than uncomfortable is the understatement of the year.

The only good thing that came out of sleeping with Kennedy was the shock of my actions propelled me to wake up from my stupor. It was the wake-up call I needed to pull me out of the destructive state I was heading toward. If I let myself continue on as I had been doing, then I doubt I'd have the willpower to resist her again should a similar situation present itself to me.

And though I may have handed my soul off to the devil himself, I won't put hers in jeopardy. I need to be strong enough to bury this love that has sunk its claws into me if I'm to have any hope of salvation. My sanity is the only thing I still have, and I won't give it up lightly.

As the tattoo needle continues to pierce through my skin, the knot that has been in my chest for the past few months starts to loosen. Ever since Kennedy put a stop to my self-destructive tendencies when I was sixteen, I've found new and creative ways to use as outlets for my grief. No one bats an eye at me for defiling my skin in this way, completely unaware that the few hours I spend in the tattoo artist's chair are as close as I will ever get to purposely hurting myself. They also don't question the time I spend pumping iron or running outside until my lungs burn and gasp for oxygen, thinking I'm on some kind of health kick instead of pushing my body to the extreme. As far as the world is concerned, these are perfectly acceptable ways of surviving. Some may even think it's the healthier way to deal with my shit.

All I know is, these have been the lifelines I have held on to since the night I lost my soul.

"I think this is going to be my best masterpiece yet. Not everyone in this town has a high threshold for pain like you do, Lincoln. They couldn't stay still in my chair for so long." Carl, my preferred tattoo artist, jokes as he wipes the ink and blood away from my forearm.

"Sometimes I even surprise myself," I offer him a thin grin.

His brown eyes sadden, giving the other shoulder he isn't working on a comforting squeeze.

"Really sad about what happened to your folks. I sure hope the sheriff finds whoever did it and brings those bastards to justice. Those animals deserve to be put behind bars."

For my sake, and that of my friends, I sure hope you're wrong.

"How is it looking so far?" I ask, tilting my head toward the tattoo, hoping to switch the conversation to a safer topic.

"It's looking mighty pretty. I'm usually not a fan of flowers and girly shit like that, but it's gonna be a beautiful tribute to your momma. I guarantee it."

"Thank you. She always did love red roses."

"And sunflowers too, I'm guessing." He points out the sunflowers I asked him to hide within the rose's petals.

"Hmm." I nod, leaning back in his chair and closing my eyes as the silent cue for him to pick up where he left off.

I only open my eyes a few hours later when he gives me the all-clear. Just as he's bandaging me up, I hear the chiming of the bell from Carl's shop door opening.

"Jesus, Linc. I've been looking over the whole goddamn Northside for you," Easton reprimands, walking toward me.

"I haven't offed myself if that's what you were worried about," I rebuke coldly, looking at the tattoo in the mirror.

"That shit isn't funny, Lincoln."

Fuck.

"I'm sorry." I let out an exaggerated breath. "I've just been having one of those days. Hence, the tattoo."

His gaze trails to the half sleeve that is now permanently inked on my arm.

"It suits you, brother." He smiles.

"Thanks."

"So, you about done here or what?"

"Just need to pay up. Why?"

"Because there is a certain blonde with the temper of Hades himself threatening to cut my junk into tiny pieces if I don't bring your ass back home in one piece. I'm not joking. She's on a rampage because you won't answer her calls or tell her where you've been holed up all day."

"Of course, she is." I frown, swiping my card and paying the shop's clerk.

"Why didn't you pick up the phone?" he asks curiously after I've waved goodbye to Carl and thanked him for another job well done.

"I just needed a few hours by myself without Kennedy's voice in my head."

"Yeah? And how did that work out for you?" He cocks up a knowing smile, making my frown deepen. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Come on, Linc. It's time I brought you home to the ball and chain."

If only that were true.

When we arrive back at my place, Ken is fuming at the door.

"Yeah, I'm not going to stay around for that," Easton points at a furious Kennedy.

"I don't blame you."

"Hit me up if you need anything. I'm going to take it easy this weekend and try to wrap my head around going back to school on Monday. Still can't believe we made it to our senior year."

In other words, he still can't believe we haven't been caught yet.
Frankly, neither do I.

The sheriff's department has done an appalling job at trying to find out the culprits behind my parents' murder. If I wasn't banking on their incompetence, I'd be furious. As far as I know, they have stipulated that it must have been a burglary gone awry. They've only questioned me once of my whereabouts that night, believing wholeheartedly that I had been partying with my friends at the Price residence.

But then again, can I really blame them for not looking at me as a suspect?

Since Teddy passed away, my aunt was quick to recruit me to start working at the Richfield Foundation every summer. I took to the job like it was my destiny, making sure to give it my all and come up with ideas that would make the place I call home thrive and prosper. I focused all my attention and efforts on both sides of the fence—Northside and Southside alike—making sure no one's plea for help and assistance went unanswered.

And because of it, Asheville regards me like the fucking second coming, the prodigal son that will right all wrongs.

How could they ever conceive the possibility that I alone am the cause of every death that occurred under my roof?

That I negligently let Teddy suffocate and die in his own vomit.

That my mother gasped out her last breath in my arms, a victim of a bullet that was meant for me.

And that I can still see my father's blood trickle down my face after I blew his head off.

No.

This town will never believe I'm guilty of such villainous actions.

The only way I'll get caught is if I turn myself in and admit every sin I've committed.

All but one.

That one I'll take to my grave.

My sights fall on the real danger to my soul as I take a fortifying breath.

"Where have you been?" she asks the minute I step foot inside my own house. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Why didn't you answer my calls? I've been going out of my mind with worry."

"I'm in one piece, Ken. You can calm down."

I see the tongue-lashing she wants to give me playing on her lips, but she

keeps it locked away, fearing that I might relapse if she confronts me in any way.

If I didn't go running for the bottle when I woke up with the memory of your pussy swallowing my cock whole, I'm not going to do it now just because you're pissed at me, sweetheart.

"I... um... I left you a casserole in the fridge, and you still have some leftover lasagna. That should hold you for the weekend."

"Thank you. But like I told you before, I can take care of myself now. I'm perfectly capable of making my own meals."

"Yeah, I know." She mauls her lower lip, her gaze falling to the floor. "You have been better lately. Sounding more like yourself, even. I guess you really don't need me anymore, do you, Linc?"

The way she says those words feels like a hot spear being driven into my heart, twisting and turning to make sure to cause the most damage.

"Hey," I call out, picking her chin up off the floor with my knuckles. "That's not true, Ken. I'll always need you. You're my best friend. My family."

"Right," she retorts, saddened, pulling away from my touch.

"Ken—" I start to say when she starts to walk toward the door.

"It's okay, Linc. I get it. I heard you loud and clear. We're family. I'm like the kid sister you never had, right?"

God, I wish she hadn't put it like that.

"I have to go," she explains, her shoulders slumping slightly. "There was some mail outside and a few Amazon packages. I left them all on the kitchen counter for you."

"Ken—" I supplicate at her distant tone.

"What, Linc? What?!" She suddenly snaps, the anger and hurt in her gaze deflating me further. "Yeah. That's what I thought. It's all good, Linc," she adds, placing the spare house key I gave her on the mantle. "I honestly do have to go. I'm meeting Tom for dinner with his folks. Besides, Finn and Colt are returning this weekend from their summer vacation, so I'm sure they'll be eager to come here and see you. I guess... I guess I'll just see you Monday back at school."

Before she turns around to leave, I grab her wrist to stop her, hating that I caused her any type of pain.

"Thank you. I don't think I ever said those words to you the entire summer you've been taking care of me. I couldn't have pulled through

without you. I mean it, Ken. Thank you.”

“What are friends for, right?” She offers me a meek smile, her gaze still empty of the light I crave to see in it.

I release my hold on her wrists, letting her leave before my heart gives in and begs her to stay. I wait, rooted to my spot, listening for her car to start and drive off to meet up with the man she’s supposed to marry.

Not wanting to let those thoughts take hold, I go in the direction of the kitchen to see what has arrived for me. There are some packages I recognize from books I ordered online, a few bills to pay, as well as some condolence letters from my father’s constituents and colleagues. I’m about to put the cardboard boxes away when I see something stuck to the bottom of one. I turn the box around to find a black envelope caught at its edge. I pull it off and see a peculiar red pentagram seal at the center of the envelope, igniting my curiosity further. Hurriedly, I break the seal and take out the black stationery inside, wondering what its contents could possibly be.

Little did I know this letter would be the catalyst that would set the course of our lives on an ominous path for the following months.

This is karmic justice.

My sins come back to haunt me for what I’ve done.

And how I revel in their vengeance.



WE KNOW WHAT YOU DID.
YOU TIPPED THE SCALES IN YOUR FAVOR.

NOW YOU'LL HAVE TO UNDO THE DAMAGE
AND TIP THEM BACK IN OURS.

EACH ONE OF YOU WILL BE GIVEN A TASK.
COMPLETE THEM SUCCESSFULLY AND WE WILL
OVERLOOK YOUR OFFENSE.

FAIL TO DO AS WE SAY, AND THE
TRANSGRESSIONS YOU'VE MADE AGAINST US
WILL PALE IN COMPARISON TO THE ONES WE
HAVE IN STORE FOR YOU.

TAKE CAUTION AS THIS IS YOUR ONLY
WARNING.

THE SOCIETY



Chapter 19



Kennedy

There is something to be said about growing up with four boys as your best friends—they certainly keep me on my toes.

Not many people understand why a girl like me would rather spend her time with four guys who act like alpha-holes most of the time than spend it with the polite debutantes of Asheville. Or rather, they can't wrap their heads around how I can be the epitome of sophistication and grace and still insist on keeping such questionable company. The only thing that excuses my taste in friends is that all four boys come from Northside's most esteemed families, and money and power always speak louder than propriety in this neck of the woods.

Still, I refused to be pigeonholed into a role that people expect of me. However, I will play the part that has been given to me to perfection if needed. And lately, I really have needed to. Although I hate falling into stereotypes, I found that the best way to guard the people I love is to sometimes act like the naive blonde friend, too clueless to see what's right in front of her eyes.

Thankfully, Tommyboy has been instrumental in making the people in my life believe that I'm too preoccupied with school and my engagement to pay them any mind. Safe to say that it leaves a bad taste in my mouth that my friends... no scratch that... *my family* has been keeping secrets from me for the past few months.

But who am I to judge?

I can't throw stones when my own roof is made out of glass, now can I?

Just as the thought sweeps through my mind, my phone pings with an incoming message, making my lips frown instantly when I read it.

Sort it out yourself.

My back molars grind reading my godmother's words, but I expected this kind of response. It's not like I've had any luck before when soliciting her assistance in the past. I guess if I were in her shoes, I'd have more important things to worry about than listening to me whining about how my gut tells me something is amiss with my boys.

But I'm not in her shoes.

I'm in mine.

And my eight-inch heel Manolo Blahniks scream that I don't fuck around.

I'm done with all the secrecy.

Well... on the boys' part, at least.

Right when the school year started, I felt that things weren't quite right. Something in the air felt tense and unnatural, an electrical current waiting for a spark to set everything aflame. At first, I shrugged it off, telling myself that it was my own sense of paranoia playing tricks on me. But then, when Finn got kicked off the football team for doping, no less, I knew that didn't check out. I might have suspected that Finn's heart wasn't in playing football anymore, but he would never resort to drugs to enhance his performance. Nor would he use it as an excuse to leave the team.

Whatever they are hiding from me has them running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Always checking dark corners and looking over their shoulder like someone is going to pop behind them with a machete in their hands. I've never known for any of them to be fearful of anything, and yet, that's exactly what I see in their eyes every time they think I'm not looking.

Something or someone has them terrified.

And I'm going to find out what's going on.

With that purpose straightening my spine, I walk the small distance to The Grind, where I usually meet Lincoln in between classes for some coffee. Ever since the night we slept together, he's been doing everything in his power to adjust our dynamics and pull it back to a safer territory. I pretend that I'm good with however he wants to deal with us having sex, but in reality, it hurts like hell that he won't even talk to me about it.

It's as if it never happened.

But it did.

And although the moment was bittersweet, I don't regret it.

Unfortunately, Lincoln does.

If my foolish heart hasn't taken enough of a beating over the years when

it comes to loving Lincoln, then seeing the shame and guilt so evident in his eyes is sure to mangle it further.

“Hi.”

“Hi, sweetheart. I already ordered your macchiato for you.” He winks, making my heart lift off like a hot air balloon.

Today, he’s my Lincoln.

There isn’t a shred of shame in him, offering me some small sliver of hope.

“Have you been here long?”

“Just long enough to drink my coffee.”

“You should have called me. I’d have come sooner.”

“But that would mean you’d have to ditch class,” he teases, tapping the tip of my nose with his knuckle.

“Hmm. Let me think. Spending an hour listening to my ethics professor prove to me that I have no ethics to speak of, or spend an extra hour with my best friend? Hmm. You’re right. It is Sophie’s choice, isn’t it?”

He laughs that deep beautiful laugh of his.

“Ethics, huh? That’s Professor Harper’s class, right? If Colt is to be believed, then she’s quite the sexpot. Maybe you *would* prefer to spend an hour listening to her lecture than hearing me go on about my boring life.”

“First of all, Colt wishes he could get some of that. And secondly, you could never be boring. I would rather hear you recite the yellow pages than go to class.”

“Yellow pages? Do those things still exist?” he taunts, his foot playing around with mine under the table.

“I have no idea.” I laugh. “Maybe we should go on a scavenger hunt and track one down.”

“Hmm. Like, find old things such as music cassette players, floppy disks, or VHS blockbuster tapes.”

“YES!! I laugh, throwing my arms on the table, my hands innocently falling on top of his.”

“That could be fun.” His eyes twinkle, giving my hands a soft squeeze.

But just as I open my mouth to keep fueling this flirtatiousness between us, Easton walks into The Grind looking like someone just pissed in his cereal, making Lincoln pull his hands out from under mine.

“Still wearing that deep-rooted scowl, I see.” I shake my head while rolling my eyes at Easton.

“Stop busting my balls, Ken. Or at least have the decency to let a man drink his coffee before having to listen to you complain about him. It’s too goddamn early for it anyway,” he rebukes before sitting down beside me.

“It’s eleven, East! Practically lunchtime! And besides, what are you even doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be in history class at this hour?” I ask worriedly. “I swear Finn said something about you two having a quiz today.”

“Keeping tabs on me, babe? Aren’t you sweet.” he goads, pretending to raise his hands to pinch both my cheeks, but I slap them away before he has a chance.

“You know Price will have a field day if you flunk another class,” I reprimand, reminding him that his stepfather has a low tolerance for laziness.

“I couldn’t give two shits about Dick’s opinion on the matter,” he grumbles, slumping further into his seat.

“You’re right. He is giving Colt a run for his money in the brooding department,” Lincoln interjects with a taunting grin on his face.

“Judas,” East retorts, in better spirits.

“Ah, don’t be like that, East. You know if you’re having girl problems, you can always come to me.” I wiggle my brows at him, hoping he can give me some crumbs to work with.

“You won’t hear a peep out of me, babe. So quit your fishing expedition.”

“Hmph! You’re no fun!”

“Was he ever?” Lincoln plays along, making my foolish heart pitter-patter at how at ease he is today.

“You two want anything, or is talking shit about me enough to fill your appetites?” East says, waving at a waitress to grab her attention so he can place his order.

“Order me a refill,” Lincoln requests while getting up from his seat. “I’ll be right back.”

Discreetly, I watch him head toward the men’s room, but I can only ogle for so long when a pair of silver eyes and a familiar look put an immediate stop to it.

“What?” I snap.

“Nothing. Just, for a girl who’s going to walk down the aisle after graduation, your eyes sure check out my boy a lot,” Easton castigates with that smile of his that sees right through my nonchalant act.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, you don’t.” He smirks just as the waitress approaches.

When he's not paying any attention to me, I can't help the smile that surfaces on my face.

There is no question that I love my boys all the same.

If you asked me to choose, I'd rather cut off an arm than do it. But where I feel an abundance of protectiveness for Finn's sensitive nature and share a sisterly bond with Colt, I've always admired how Easton has this uncanny ability to read me like a book as only a true best friend could. Just like me, he has dark secrets from his past that prevent him from showing his true colors to most people. To be his friend is an honor I don't take for granted, and I only wish that one day he can find peace and expel the demons that are always clawing at his tormented soul.

Still, having someone that can see right through you has its drawbacks.

For instance, the knowing smirk that insists on plaguing his lips while I drink my macchiato tells me he's foaming at the mouth to talk about my repressed feelings for the best friend who is currently holed up in the bathroom. The only thing that stops him from doing so is when the girls in the next booth behind us start to squeal like butchered pigs.

"Oh, my God! I know, right?! He is so hot. Too bad I'm not crazy enough to want to date him. I mean, who is? Only someone who has a death wish or something. Am I right?"

"I don't know. I'd do Lincoln Hamilton in a heartbeat. He's gorgeous. Not to mention filthy rich."

At the mention of Lincoln's name, I can't help but listen to their drivel.

"Nope. Not me. I don't care if he is hot and richer than God. He's bad news."

"Oh, come on, Tiffany. You're exaggerating."

"Am I, Lisa? Everyone he comes in contact with dies. Like, 'dead as a doornail' kind of dead."

"It's not even like that."

"Yes, it is. You heard the rumors. No one that lives in the Hamilton Estate lives long enough to talk about it. I heard the mansion is haunted, filled with the ghosts of every person who has died there. Lincoln is either going to be next in joining the dead club or end up recreating a scene out of *The Shining*. Who knows? Maybe he already has."

"You and your conspiracy theories. He's lost his whole family. You can't actually think he had something to do with it?"

"Fine. Maybe that's going too far. He may not be responsible for all those

mysterious deaths, but he's still creepy as fuck. I mean, who would even want to still live in that house? What if the ghosts that haunt the place possess him or something? Could you imagine being his girlfriend and sleeping over there? You'd think you're about to get a goodnight's sleep, and then bam! He shoves a knife in your back."

"Oh, my God! You have got to stop watching all those horror movies, Tiffany. They're making you paranoid. And who cares anyway? I know for a fact that if Lincoln Hamilton even so much as looked at you twice, you would be all over him. Don't even lie, bitch."

"You're right. I'd do him like that. Maybe even sweet-talk him into getting my name written into his will. That way, when he kicks the bucket next, I get all that Richfield money."

"And good dick while you wait."

The fucking hyenas burst into hysterics before lowering their voices when they realize that they have caught the attention of everyone present.

I am rage personified.

"Don't do it, Ken." I hear Easton warn me, his tone panicked that I'm about to unleash hell on these girls that would dare defile my love's name in such a malicious manner.

He grabs one of my arms, thinking that's enough to keep me still.

All of me shakes in anger.

I shake with so much hate that I'm honestly surprised that I don't choke on my own poisonous blood. But he's right. I can't do anything right now. Not because people might see me lose my shit and run to my father to tell him how his well-behaved daughter just went ballistic at his college's favorite hangout, but because I don't have a handle on my temper.

And that is a very dangerous thing.

I count to ten repeatedly in my head, concentrating on Easton's hold on me to temper my fury. When he feels I am no longer a threat, he lets me go, and I take comfort in his belief that I won't go all Bloody Mary on these girls.

At least for now, I won't.

I'm equally relieved that by the time Lincoln returns, I am well in control of my sanity again. Unfortunately, Easton's concerned expression narcs me out.

"What did I miss?" Lincoln asks, his worried gaze bouncing between Easton and me.

"Nothing. Just Ken giving me a hard time as usual. Isn't that right, babe?"

Easton is quick to answer, nudging me on the shoulder, his silent way of telling me to woman-the-fuck-up.

But just as he says this, an idea comes to mind.

“Actually, we were talking about Halloween,” I interject, leaning closer to the table so Lincoln’s attention is solely on me.

“We were?” Easton asks with a confused look on his face.

“Yep,” I reply over my shoulder, widening my eyes so he can get with the program.

“What about it?” Lincoln retorts, picking up his Americano and taking a small sip.

“I think we should throw a party,” I explain, overly cheerful at the suggestion.

“A party?” Easton repeats, still not sure where I’m going with this.

“Yes, Easton. A party,” I coo, my tone warm like droplets of honey.

“Okay. I’m in. Where should we throw it?” My blue-eyed love utters joyfully, never one to turn down any idea of mine.

God!

I could kiss him right now.

“Your house, of course.” I beam, batting my eyelashes at him so that my gaze doesn’t fall to his full lips.

“My house?”

“His house?”

Both Linc and East repeat incredulously, waning on my patience.

Jesus, give me strength.

“Yes! God, you both are so slow sometimes.” I snap before I have time to rectify my tone. “It’s time to heal a few wounds, and what better way than to throw a Halloween party.”

“I can think of plenty of better ways,” Easton grumbles under his breath, only to bite down on his lip in pain when I stomp on his foot to shut him up.

Doesn’t he see that this party is a ruse to get everyone to go to Lincoln’s home and end the stigma that it’s some kind of haunted house? To put a stop to people thinking that somehow, he’s cursed, too? Easton is usually so sharp at understanding my intentions, but lately, he’s been all over the place.

Just like the rest of them.

“So, what do you think?” I ask, overly chipper, trying to hide my apprehension. “It will have to be *invite-only*, of course, to make the event real selective. That way, everyone will want to be invited. If it’s an open house, it

doesn't have quite the same appeal."

"Whatever you say. You call the shots, darling." My beautiful boy agrees with that damn smile on his face that is sure to leave me weak in the knees.

"See? And that's how you treat a lady. Take notes, East."

"Yeah, since it's obviously worked wonders for Linc in the past," he retorts sarcastically, instantly followed by a "motherfucker" when I stab his foot again with the heel of my stiletto.

Satisfied that Easton will keep his trap shut for the remainder of our time at The Grind, I go over my plans with Linc to ensure this party will be the talk of the town and the place every student in Richfield will want to go to come Halloween night. The conversation flows so easily that I can't help but be disappointed when he reminds us it's time to go back to class. We pay our tab and head out, but I still have unfinished business to do inside.

"Oh, silly me. I forgot something inside."

"You want us to wait for you?" Linc asks.

"No, that's okay. You guys can go on ahead. I'll catch up with you in a jiff."

"Okay. I'll go and grab the car then," he replies.

"I'll meet you back on campus, okay?" Easton shouts after him, to which Lincoln nods before heading over to where he parked his car.

I leave Easton outside The Grind's doors and keep my expression as neutral as possible, knowing that he's keeping a watchful eye on me. Better him than Lincoln. Just thinking about what these bitches said about him has my blood boiling again.

I walk over to their booth and throw them my best beauty-pageant smile.

"Hi, there."

"Huh, hi," one of them greets me suspiciously, eyeing me up and down. By the high pitch voice and condescending way about her, I can tell this one must be Tiffany.

"I couldn't help but overhear you two talking about my friend, Lincoln, earlier."

"It's not polite to eavesdrop on other people's conversations, you know?" interjects the girl named Lisa. "I thought you being the dean's daughter and all, you'd have been taught some manners and not eavesdrop on other people's private conversations."

"Oh, fun." I clap excitedly. "You know who I am. Well, this will make things so much easier." I plaster on a sinister grin rivaling that of the Joker's.

“Here’s the thing. Lincoln is very special to me. *Very special*. So, when I hear two pea-brained girls talk shit about him, I get angry. And believe me, you don’t want to see me angry.”

“Oh, my God. Are you on a power trip right now? Bitch, just move along,” Tiffany cackles.

I lean in closer to the table, making sure my words can’t be overheard by anyone other than their intended audience.

“You’re the one who likes to watch horror movies, right? Do you know what I like best about those movies? It’s when the villain finally shows his face. It’s always this ugly monstrosity of a thing, isn’t it? This mutilated mess of a person, perhaps caused by some freak accident. I always wonder how he got that way since there are so many options. Take hydrochloric acid, for example. Do you know what acid does to the skin? No? Well, let me educate you. It burns human flesh in seconds, eating away at the blood cells, the smell so repugnant it will be the only thing you smell for days. Left for too long, the chemical can cause fourth-degree burns that extend into your deep tissue layers, rotting and burning away at your tendons and even your bones. Your body becomes so disfigured that just the mere look of you has people screaming and running the other way. You’d think that things like that only happen in films, right? But you’d be wrong. Accidents happen every day, especially to people who don’t know who they are fucking with.” I smile widely. “If I ever hear Lincoln’s name come out of either of your mouths again, I’ll find out where you live and rearrange your pretty faces. And you can shout out on every mountain top that I was the one who did it, but no one will believe you. Because like you said, I’m the dean’s daughter, engaged to the senator’s son. Now, why would little old me do something as horrid as that to complete nobodies? Don’t fuck with my friends, and I won’t have to fuck with you. Am I making myself clear? Nod if you understand.”

Lisa nods, sobbing, while Tiffany looks like she’s about to hurl.

“Good. I’m glad that’s settled.” My spine goes ramrod straight as I wave them off like we are the best of friends. “So lovely we had this chat, ladies. Hope you have a nice day,” I singsong in my best southern twang.

I shimmy out of the café and meet a chuckling Easton at the door.

“Feel better now?” Easton smirks, aware of the threat I just made.

“So much better,” I reply, feeling ten pounds lighter.

“Come on, Ryland. Let’s get you to class, sweetheart,” Lincoln calls out, opening the passenger door for me in the middle of the street.

“Bye, East!” I giggle happily, jumping into the car.

“Bye, Psycho!” Easton chuckles, completely oblivious to how psychotic I really am.



When I drive up the driveway, I’m happy to see that no one is here.

Just as I planned.

I rush out of the car, pulling the copy I made of Lincoln’s house key out of my pocket and walking right in through the front door. If there were an ounce of good in me, guilt should consume me right about now. I mean, I am breaking and entering, after all. Sure, it’s for a good cause, but if I get caught, it’s still considered a felony. What excuse could I give for being here when I should be in class?

But there is no need for me to come up with excuses since Lincoln is back in school, right along with Finn and his girlfriend, Stone, who have been shacking up here recently.

I still get pissed recalling how Hank Walker kicked Finn out of his home when the whole doping fiasco occurred. It’s not like anyone in Asheville knows what happened. Both his father and mine went to great lengths to keep the whole affair all hush-hush. More so my father, since he didn’t want Richfield University to be known as that school where their star quarterback was using enhancement drugs to beat the other team’s butt on the football field.

Still, I have no idea why Charlene didn’t put her foot down and demand her son come home.

But right now, I have bigger fish to fry, like finding out what the hell is going on with my boys.

With that in mind, I run upstairs into Lincoln’s room, knowing if there is anything that will give me a clue as to what is happening with them, it will be there.

I just need to find out where first.

“If I were Lincoln, where would I hide something of value?” I muse to myself, looking around the room.

Think, Ken. Where could it be?

Lincoln would hide it in plain sight.

That’s what he would do.

No one will look for something that is right there in front of you.

Immediately, I go over to his desk and look through all his textbooks as well as the books he has from the Richfield Foundation. When my search is fruitless, I look around the room again, trying to see if anything out of the ordinary pops in my line of vision.

“It can’t be,” I murmur when a familiar book title grabs my attention.

I swallow dryly then walk to the bookcase across the room. An eerie, ominous feeling chills my bones as I run my finger down the spine of Alexandre Dumas’s greatest piece of fiction.

“What are the odds?” I ask myself before pulling the book from its resting place. When a black envelope falls to my feet, my knee-jerk reaction is to step away as if the damn thing is going to bite me.

On wobbly knees, I bend down and grab the cursed thing and sit on the edge of Lincoln’s bed, the black envelope feeling heavy in my hands.

“What have you guys done?” I ask myself, a fear like I’ve never felt before making me hesitate to open the envelope.

My hands shake as I stare at the broken red seal of a pentagram. I’m about to look inside the envelope when Lincoln’s bedroom door suddenly swings open, Stone at its threshold.

“Well, look what we have here,” Stone smiles at me. “Hi, Barbie.”

I keep my lips sealed as she closes the door behind her.

“I think it’s about time you and I have a little chat, don’t you?”

Chapter 20



Lincoln

“Mr. Richfield,” Ruby coos when she sees me walk in. “What a delightful surprise. I was unsure if you were going to return to us. I must say my night has gotten a whole lot more interesting now that you’ve graced us with your presence.”

I smile at her brazen displays of seduction.

“I’m sure you get paid to say that to all the men that come through the Guild’s doors,” I tease.

“You’re right, sugar, I am. But rarely do I mean those words. Youngblood like you is always a breath of fresh air to girls like me.”

“Ruby, you may be many things, but a girl is not one of them. You are very much a full-grown woman.”

“You flatter me, Mr. Richfield.” She bats her eyelashes at me.

“Please. Call me Lincoln.”

“If you insist.” She beams, snaking her arm with mine. “So, tell me. What are you in the mood for this evening? A little gambling? Maybe a show? Or are you looking for some company tonight? If so, I’d love to be considered.”

I rein in a laugh at her ‘in your face’ flirting.

“A show will be fine for now, Ruby.”

The exaggerated pout she puts on is all for show. Still, I have to give her credit for such a flawless performance. I can see why the Northside men of Asheville would seek out her company. With flowing red hair and pouty full lips, Ruby truly is a sight to behold. It’s unfortunate that my heart craves another.

“Well, if it’s a show you’ve come for, you’re in luck. Angel should be starting her first act at any moment. However, I must make you aware that one of your friends has also taken a liking to our young star singer.” She thins

her lips.

“And by friend, I’m sure you mean Easton?” I arch an inquisitive brow. “You don’t seem very happy about that.”

“It’s not my place to judge, but I’m not sure the boy is good enough for our Angel. She has a good thing going here, and I’d hate it if her relationship with the Dark Prince of Asheville jeopardized that.”

“Dark Prince? I see that Asheville gossip has even seeped its way into this fine establishment.”

She throws her head back and lets out a loud laugh.

“The Brass Guild loves nothing more than to hear idle gossip. It helps us girls pass the time.”

“Is that all it does?”

She throws me one of her seductive smiles but doesn’t answer as she leads me to a secluded booth.

“What can I get you to drink while you wait, sugar?”

“Sparkling water will do fine.”

“Very well. I’ll let one of my girls know to bring that to you. If there is anything that you need, please feel free to come find me. I’ll always make time for such a pretty face,” she croons, lifting up my chin with her long blood-red nails and planting a kiss on my lips, making sure to leave her red trademark lipstick on them.

I let out a soft chuckle and lean back into the leather upholstery as she sashays away in search of another client to entice and keep happy.

Although I told Ruby that I was here to see Scarlett sing, my true intention is to check out their clientele. My gut tells me that if The Society does exist, then this will have to be their playground. After what they did to Finn, I worry that they will up their ante with Easton. Unfortunately, I don’t think my dark-haired friend is too concerned about what they’ll do, being more invested in the girl they have put in his path. There is something between them, and though it’s still in its early stages, there is no denying Easton has feelings for Scarlett. And if that is the case, his focus will not be on The Society, which might prove dangerous for us all.

I, on the other hand, wake up and go to sleep with the nefarious group on my mind.

I think of little else.

Well, that’s not entirely true.

Sky-like eyes and parted pink lips calling out my name also haunt my

every waking moment.

I push that memory to the outskirts of my mind and give my thanks to the scantily clad waitress that delivers my drink, wishing I'd asked for something stronger. It's Friday night, and the place is packed to the brim with some of the most influential players in Asheville. When some of the elite men see me sitting at my booth, they nod in greeting but don't come over to talk to me. That suits me just fine. However, I have to admit that the recent side glances, followed by whispered hushes behind my back, are starting to irk me somewhat.

I try not to let it affect me, knowing this is just a natural response to the past month's events. For all intents and purposes, I'm the last Hamilton standing.

Hamilton.

I'd change the name if I thought it wouldn't set off red flags.

Again, Kennedy rules my thoughts as I remember how hard she has been working on throwing the best Halloween party the Northside has ever seen at my place tomorrow. I know it's her way of trying to get people to stop treating me with kid-gloves and remember who I was before all these macabre events took place.

Would she still look at me with love in her eyes if she knew how filthy my hands were with my brother and father's blood on them? Would that be enough to push her away for good? Or would the truth be the only thing that would erase any and all love she may have for me?

I try to relax my rigid shoulders and put on an enthused smile when the DJ announces Scarlett's performance is about to begin. In a glowing silver dress that reaches the floor, she stands center stage wearing a purple wig, looking like she was born for the stage. When she commences her own interpretation of the classic tune 'Tainted Love' in a sultry voice, a part of me wonders if it's directed at anyone in particular.

"I see you've found our little oasis," a smooth voice utters.

I crane my neck back and meet familiar forest green eyes smiling back at me.

"Uncle Owen." I grin happily, getting up from my seat to offer him an embrace which he returns with the same affection.

"How is my favorite nephew?" He smiles widely, taking a seat beside me.

"I'm doing alright. As well as can be expected, I guess."

"Hmm. Your aunt tells me you haven't been up to see her at the Richfield

Foundation in quite some time. She's starting to worry that you've put your philanthropic ambitions to the side in favor of something else. I hate to think that spending your nights at the Guild is the cause."

"Hardly." I chuckle. "This is only my second time here. I've just not been in the right frame of mind to be of much use to the Foundation. Besides, if my aunt was really worried about me, she would visit or pick up a phone to check up on me."

"That would require her admitting she's concerned about something aside from the Foundation. You know Colleen as well as I do. Showing emotion of any kind would mean that she has a heart, and your aunt quite enjoys the fact that people believe she doesn't own one."

I take that into consideration, but a part of me can't forgive her for her coldness.

"She was her sister. A call telling me that she missed my mother just as much as I do would have sufficed."

"I know, son." His eyes soften, putting his arm over my shoulder. "Even if she'll never admit it to you, Colleen is suffering from Sierra's death. They might have had a troubled relationship, but she loved her very much."

"I wish I could believe you, Uncle. I truly do."

"Hmm," he hums, his eyes trailing to the beauty on stage, his silent way of moving past the subject at hand.

I follow his gaze and can't help the warm feeling in my chest at hearing Scarlett sing so beautifully. It's a little disconcerting, to say the least.

"She's quite remarkable, isn't she?" he says, taking a sip of his drink.

"Yes. Very talented, too."

"Hmm. It's come to my attention that your friend Easton has set his eyes on her, though. He's been coming here most nights that she performs. Seems like cupid has struck him deep in his black heart."

"Yes. I think you might be right," I reply despondently since my uncle just confirmed my own suspicions of how far gone Easton is for Scarlett.

I truly hope he keeps his wits about him.

Falling in love right when a secret society is blackmailing us doesn't seem prudent to me.

We were lucky that Stone was so understanding after Finn told her the truth of that fateful night. I'm not sure if Scarlett will be as sympathetic.

"You and Easton have been friends for a long time," my uncle adds. "It would be a shame if a girl, even one as remarkable as Scarlett, should ruin

such a friendship.”

My uncle’s gaze looks worried, baffling me why he would take such an interest in my or Easton’s love lives.

“I have no intention of courting Scarlett if that is what you are hinting at, Uncle.”

I watch his demeanor instantly relax at my words, his wide smile back on his face.

“Glad to hear it. Scarlett should be the last girl you ever look at, anyway.”

“That’s harsh, Uncle, even for you. Now I see where Colt gets it from. I wouldn’t have thought you to be so shallow. Are you saying that a girl like Scarlett wouldn’t be good for me?”

“A girl like her, yes. Scarlett herself, no. I’d stay clear of her if I were you.” This time his tone is stern and authoritative, two traits my uncle rarely is.

I’m about to question him further when my gaze falls on the two men who walk through the door—Senator Maxwell accompanied, of course, by Tommyboy. Instantly I white-knuckle my glass, watching two of the Brass Guild’s girls draped over Tommyboy’s arms, their breasts basically rubbing up against him.

“But I see that Easton has no cause for alarm. It’s clear as day you still harbor a crush on someone else’s fiancé. Am I right?”

I drink the rest of my sparkling water, wishing for the second time tonight I ordered something stronger.

“He’s no good for Kennedy. That’s all. A man who would cheat on a girl like her doesn’t deserve her.”

“Tell me, son, are you generally this protective of all your friends or just Kennedy in particular?”

“I’d think and say the same if it were any of the guys that found themselves in a similar situation,” I retort evenly.

“I believe you. I just think maybe your over-protectiveness of Kennedy stems from more than just friendship.”

“I assure you, it does not.”

“If you say so.” He chuckles, amused. “Although if I may add my own thoughts on the matter, I always thought you and her were far better suited for each other than she and Thomas. It always baffled me why you never pursued her for yourself.”

“Some things are just not meant to be. Me and Kennedy being one of

them.”

“I’m sad to hear that.” This time his tone sounds sincerely sad for me.

Not wanting to continue this line of conversation, I ask my uncle the question that has truly been on my mind and the reason why I came to The Brass Guild tonight, to begin with.

“Uncle, have you ever heard of an organization called *The Society*?”

His face pales for a fraction of a second before he chuckles loudly, patting his chest for air.

“If this is your way of not wanting your uncle to ask you more questions about your love life, then you could have come up with less imaginative ways to go about it, son.” He laughs uncontrollably. “I’ll keep my mouth shut from now on.” He pretends to zip his lips and throw the key behind his shoulder.

“No. That’s not why I asked. I’m genuinely curious if you’ve heard the name being spoken here before?”

“Here? At the Guild?”

I nod.

“No. I can’t say that I have, no. Although if you’re asking me if the name is familiar to me, then my answer is yes.”

Hope immediately blossoms in my chest.

“Where? Where did you hear the name, Uncle?”

“Probably the same place you heard it—at Richfield. Why, when I was a freshman there, you couldn’t throw a rock at someone who hadn’t heard of The Society. Everyone was on pins and needles waiting to be called and sworn into the secret society. But by the time I graduated, I understood that it was just a myth, told by imaginative minds with too much time on their hands.” He continues to laugh. “Please tell me you’re not wasting your senior year searching for ghosts that don’t exist?”

Oh, but they do.

And they haunt my every waking moment, Uncle.

“If that’s the case, then I must agree with your aunt and think it’s best that you return to work at the Foundation and put your time to better use.”

“Yes, you might be right.” I offer him a curt nod.

“Good. So shall I tell Colleen to expect you next week?”

“Actually, if it’s alright with you, I would rather focus on my schoolwork this year and give the Foundation the attention it needs once I’ve graduated.”

“It’s all the same to me, son. Just as long as I know your focus isn’t split between some nonexistent boogeyman and your schoolwork.”

“I can guarantee you, it’s not.”

The Society has my undivided attention.

“Good.” He pats me on the back, looking pleased with my reply.

I muster up a smile to ease him further when I see Kennedy’s brother—*my brother*—walk through the doors and head to the senator’s table. Tommyboy gets up from his seat, whispering something in the woman’s ears and following Jefferson out of the packed room.

At least Tommyboy doesn’t have the courage to cheat on his fiancé where her brother can catch him. Neither sees me there as they both walk out. Hopefully, Jefferson is taking him home and away from the temptations that The Brass Guild has to offer.

If Ken was mine, that’s where I’d be, anyway.

Chapter 21



Kennedy

Halloween night

When I see a familiar shadow leave Teddy's room upstairs, my hackles instantly rise.

I didn't want to believe it, but after reading the letter I stumbled upon in Lincoln's room, I knew there was only one possible person who could be behind it.

Yet, there was a part of me that wished I was wrong.

My gaze never leaves him as he walks down the staircase, thinking that the partying half-drunken crowd isn't paying him any mind as he heads toward the back of the house. On featherlight feet, so as not to make him aware of my presence, I follow him down the dark corridor, making sure the shadows always keep me hidden from him. My heart leaps to my throat when he stops in his tracks, making me step back and hide against a nearby wall. I count to five, thinking it's enough time for him to see that no one is trailing behind him, and continue on my hunt. When I step back into the corridor, there is no sign of him, making me quicken my pace, searching for where he went. When I finally reach the servant's quarters and see there is no trace of him, I kick the wall, frustrated that I let him slip away.

"Shit!" I mutter, pissed off.

This was my one shot at catching him red-handed, forcing him to tell me what the fuck he thinks he's playing at. This little game of his is bound to get someone hurt. Or worse. I just need to figure out what his intentions are and the reason behind this cruel scheme of his. But most of all, I need to know if he's acting alone or if someone is pulling his strings.

Why are you doing this, brother?

Just tell me why?

Feeling defeated that I wasn't able to catch him in the act, I start to head back to the party, only for someone to grab me from behind, locking an arm around my waist and claspng their hand over my mouth so as to prevent me from screaming for help.

"Boo," Colt whispers playfully in my ear.

This asshole!

I elbow him as hard as I can in his stomach, making him drop his hold on me in an instant. Regrettably, I must not have hurt him too badly since he has the gall to laugh in my face for scaring the living shit out of me the way he did.

"Damn you, Colt! You almost gave me a heart attack," I whisper-yell in his face, giving him my best deep-rooted scowl.

"It looked like you were about to have a coronary long before I came along. Just what are you doing back here all by your lonesome?" he questions, arching a curious brow.

"What are you talking about?" I play it off like he's crazy. "I was just checking if all the rooms had enough beverages. Linc did appoint me as this party's hostess, right? I'm just doing my part, that's all. Geez, paranoid much?" I accuse, while crossing my arms over my chest, so he doesn't see how my heart literally wants to jump out of it.

"Sure you were." Colt continues to laugh, stepping toward me until I'm pinned between him and the wall behind me. "Where's your fiancé?" he asks with that smug expression still on his face.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him yet." I shrug, pretending to be bored with his line of questioning.

"You don't look like you're too bothered that he hasn't shown up to your party," he continues, trying to provoke me, his stare fixed on me, trying to read my thoughts.

"It's not *my* party. It's Lincoln's." I roll my eyes at him for good measure.

"We both know it's *your* party, Ken. Everyone does. That's why people came."

I chew on my bottom lip, not liking how he might be onto something. The Hamilton house is packed, and for all intents and purposes, the party is a huge success. Unlike Colt, I'm not conceited enough to think these kids are here just because I invited them. But I'm also unsure if people came over tonight to show their support for Lincoln or just to satiate their own morbid

fascination with this house.

‘The house of death,’ as I heard one girl say to her friend earlier tonight when they came in.

It took everything in me not to kick everybody out of this house when I heard the harsh nickname, but I kept my temper in check, determined for the night to go off without a hitch, hoping that, by the end of it, people would remember that Lincoln is more than the macabre memories this house holds.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Colt interrupts my train of thought. “You don’t look like you care if your fiancé comes to this party one way or the other. Why is that, Ken?” he insists, pressing his forearm above my head so that I’m trapped under his looming form.

“Of course, I care. Stop being so obtuse,” I retort with another roll of my eyes, placing my hands on his chest, trying to shove him away.

Unfortunately for me, Colt is made out of marble, so even with all my efforts to get some distance from him, he doesn’t move at all. I know what he’s trying to do. Coercing me into fessing up that I know my engagement is one huge mistake in the making.

But just as Colt is a stubborn ass unwilling to admit defeat, so am I.

“Why are you even with that guy?” he asks finally, confirming my suspicions of why he refuses to let me leave.

“Not this again. Seriously, Colt, this conversation is getting stale,” I retort with a yawn.

“Well, tough shit, because I’m going to keep asking you until you give me a real answer.”

“I have given you one. It’s not my fault you refuse to accept it.” I smile sweetly at him, knowing it will only piss him off more. Serves him right since I’m not impressed with his tactic of intimidation either.

“If you’re going to feed me that bullshit of how in love you are with Tommyboy, I’m going to hurl. We both know you don’t love him.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself. I’m marrying him, aren’t I?!”

“I stand by what I said. Just because you’re willing to put his damn diamond ring on your finger doesn’t mean you love the prick.”

I turn my head away from him, showing that I’m done with this conversation, but Colt is having none of it. He grabs my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye. Only instead of the furious gaze that I was expecting to find, all I see is brotherly affection and concern.

“End it, Ken. Tommyboy is not the one who you should end up with.”

“Oh, yeah? Then who is?” I bite back, only to frown when the image of Lincoln comes to mind.

“You have other choices.”

“Sure, I do,” I scoff despondently, lowering my eyes from his impenetrable gaze.

“Look at me, Ken. You do have other choices. If you’re so gung-ho on getting hitched, I’ll marry you if you want?”

WHAT?!

I feel my eyes go wide like two large saucers, my chin instantly dropping to the floor at his insane suggestion.

“Well, say something!” he shouts out nervously when I’m too stunned to reply to his absurd statement fast enough.

“What do you want me to say? It’s obvious you’ve lost your goddamn mind.” I snap, slapping his chest.

“Why not me? I’m better than Tommyboy.”

“If you say so,” I mutter under my breath since I know that Tommyboy and Colt are more alike than he would like to admit. Both have a high opinion of themselves, as well as only having sex on the brain. If Tommyboy weren’t so intent on pissing people off just to keep everyone at arm’s length to protect his secret, then I’m sure he and Colt would have been the best of friends.

“Don’t even deny it. I am definitely a better catch, and you know it. Besides, if you’re willing to marry that douche, whom you don’t love, by the way, then why not marry me?”

“Geez. Now that you put it that way... I’d be a fool not to marry you, huh?”

“I’ll talk to your father tomorrow and set it all up,” he announces insistently, completely ignoring my sarcastic remark.

“Colt Turner, you will do no such thing! Jesus. Are you high?” I yell at him, convinced my best friend truly has lost his mind.

“Like I’d ever poison my body.”

“Okay, then you must be drunk because you are not making any sense right now.”

“I’m sober as a judge, Ken,” he deadpans.

“Then you hit your head somewhere because you have completely lost it!”

“Ken,” he starts to object, losing some of his steam.

“No.”

“Come on, just think about it.”

“I said no!” I shout, jabbing my finger into his chest, so he can quit it already.

“Why the fuck not?” he shouts back, looking actually confused as to why I’m turning him down.

I love him to death for what he’s trying to do.

I do.

Even if unrealistic, the way he’s trying to give me a way out of the loveless marriage he sees on the horizon warms my heart. However, if he knew that I never intended to actually marry Tommyboy, then I know he wouldn’t be making me such an offer. Colt doesn’t love me like that. He never has, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself otherwise when we were kids. He’s just grasping at straws right now, using every weapon in his arsenal to help me get out of this engagement. I’m sure that Colt, like most of my friends, probably believes that I was somehow bullied into accepting Tommyboy’s proposal by my father. And even though, in a way, I was, that’s not the real reason why I keep up the pretense that Tommyboy and I are a sure thing.

Besides, he’s not the Richfield I would joyfully accept a marriage proposal from.

And he knows it.

“Colt... just stop, okay?” I reiterate one last time.

“I could be good for you,” he whispers, his voice dropping an octave. But just as he’s about to softly caress my cheek, I remind him of who he is and who I am by slapping his hand away.

“No, you couldn’t.”

“I could, Ken. If you just gave me a chance, I could. I loved you once when I was a kid. I’m sure I could do it again if I put my mind to it.”

Oh, Colt.

My heart bleeds for my dear friend as I place my hand over his mouth before he says something he can’t take back.

“Don’t you dare say another word, Colt Turner! You’ve said too much as it is. And besides, you never loved me. We both know what you had was an infatuation over the girl who didn’t come at your beck and call every time you snapped your fingers. You didn’t care about me that way then, and you don’t now. So just stop it.”

His gaze saddens, and I let out a sigh of relief that my words have finally gotten through to him.

“Would you leave Tommyboy if *he* asked?”

My heart plummets to my feet at his question.

“He won’t ask.”

“But would you?” he asks softly, knowing his question has caused me pain.

“Yes. I would,” I confess with all the broken pieces of my heart.

“He’ll never ask, Ken. You know that, don’t you?” he adds with the same sympathetic tone to his voice. However, hearing how certain he is that Lincoln will never be mine, no matter how much I want him to be, only serves to hurt me further.

“Why? Why won’t he, Colt?”

‘*All I want to know is why,*’ my soul begs.

When his lips seal shut, unwilling to give me an answer, tears start to sting at the corner of my eyes. I’m about to open my mouth, get on my knees, and beg my best friend to tell me why his beloved cousin refuses to love me when two figures at the end of the corridor stop me from embarrassing myself further.

“Everything okay?” Easton calls out, coming closer to us.

At the sound of Easton’s voice, Colt immediately steps back from me, giving me some room to breathe.

“Of course,” I reply, my cheerful tone a complete contrast to my mangled soul.

“You sure about that?” Easton repeats, seeing right through my fabricated, chipper demeanor.

“Don’t be silly. Everything is fine,” I state, my high-pitched tone saying otherwise.

Shit.

When I see Pastor Jack’s niece agitatedly watching us from the end of the hall, I thank my lucky stars for sending me such an angel to use as an excuse to leave.

“You know what? I haven’t had a minute to talk to your new friend. It’s about time I welcome her properly into the fold, don’t you think?” I wink at Easton before trying to pass by him, only to stop when he grabs me by the elbow.

“You sure you’re good, Ken?” he asks with concern, inspecting my face

to see if I'm really okay.

"I'm fine, Easton." I nod with a sincere smile. "Just parched all of a sudden. I'm just going to steal your date away and see if she also wants something to drink while you boys talk."

"Fine, but be nice. Don't scare her off, will ya?"

"No promises. If I don't think she's a good fit for you, then a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. You know how it is," I tease, even though I already know Scarlett is perfect for him.

"She's a good girl," he states confidently.

"Ah, honey. We all are on the surface." I goad while patting him on the shoulder, knowing that Scarlett isn't as angelic as her costume would lead you to believe.

Owen's little birds never are.

"How about we let the boys talk while we get to know each other a little bit?" I fling my arm around Scarlett's before she's able to let out a peep and pull her away from the corridor.

By the look in Easton's eyes, I'm sure he's giving Colt a serious tongue-lashing. I would rather save his date from having to watch Easton lose his cool. Guilt settles inside my chest that I left Colt to fend for himself, though. Easton knows me well enough to see that whatever Colt had been saying to me before East put a stop to it had struck a nerve. It also didn't help that we were basically on top of one another. Someone who didn't know any better might have thought he was making a move on me.

Yep, now that I think of it, the optics of it all might have led Easton to believe in the improbable.

Colt is definitely going to hear an earful, alright.

"So, are you having a nice time?" I ask Scarlett, putting on the role of party hostess and pushing those harrowing thoughts out of my head.

"Yes," she mumbles, her gaze flicking every so often over her shoulder.

"So happy to hear it. I'm even happier that Easton finally brought a date to one of these things. Have you known him for long?"

"For a while."

"Is that so? Where did you meet?" I arch an inquisitive brow.

"You ask a lot of questions." She thins her lips, pulling her arm away from mine.

I laugh at her guarded attempt to deflect my question.

"I do, don't I? Well, I hope you stick around long enough for me to bore

you with all of them.”

“Hmm.”

“Come. Let me introduce you around.”

“Actually—” she starts to protest, but I’m guiding her toward Stone and Finn in the foyer.

“Guys, meet Scarlett. She’s Easton’s girl.”

I watch her face pale at the introduction, but I inwardly clap in glee when she doesn’t rectify it.

Stone and Finn warmly greet her with wide smiles and open hearts, just like I knew they would. We start talking about school and which classes she may have with us, and as time passes, she starts to relax and join in on the conversation. I start babbling away, not really paying much attention to what I’m saying when my supposed boyfriend finally shows his face.

“And just who is this?” he asks, his sights fixed on Scarlett.

“This is Scarlett. Easton’s friend,” I explain, unable to hide my annoyance at him being late, especially since he was supposed to help me keep tabs on Jeff tonight.

“You don’t say?” he coos. “Pleasure to meet you, Scarlett. Although I do feel we have already.”

“She’s in Harper’s Ethics class. Maybe it’s from there,” I add, even more annoyed when I see that he’s drooling over my friend’s date and not making any effort to conceal it.

God, this boy has no shame.

“No, that’s not it. I hardly go to that stuck-up bitch’s class. Not after she gave me a D last semester.”

“Maybe from church. My Uncle Jack leads the First Baptist Church over at Walnut Grove. Maybe we’ve crossed paths there.” She offers up as a suggestion, not aware that Tommyboy is not the type of guy who would step foot inside a church unless it was to make out with someone in the confessional.

“Definitely not from church.” He chuckles, wrapping his arms around my neck to keep me from blowing a gasket at him.

“Somewhere else. I just can’t put my finger on it. Take off your mask, sweetheart. Maybe if I see your full face, it’ll come back to me.”

Jesus, Tom.

I’m right here, idiot.

“Keep the mask on. And her name isn’t sweetheart. It’s Scarlett.” Stone is

quick to defend, already feeling protective of her.

“Where’s Jeff? Weren’t you two coming together?” I ask him outright to remind him of his true objective for tonight.

“I’m not your brother’s keeper, babe. Last I saw him, he was slumming it with Southside trash. Lincoln should be more selective of who he invites into his home.”

It takes everything in me not to bite his head off with that remark.

“I couldn’t agree with you more. Some people should really learn some fucking manners before they are let out of their cage,” Finn growls, while Stone entwines her hand in his and starts pulling him away from my fiancé before he smacks him upside the head.

“Let’s go outside, Pretty Boy. I need some fresh air away from the foul, pretentious smell stinking up the joint. Do you want to join us, Scarlett?”

Scarlett enthusiastically nods and follows my friends outside. When I’m sure they are no longer within earshot, I slap Tommyboy’s hands off me and pull him into a secluded nook where we can talk in private.

“Can you please try not to get yourself killed tonight? One more dickish remark like the one you just made to my friends and one of them is bound to kick your teeth in.”

“Babe, chill. If they haven’t punched me in all the years I’ve known them, then I doubt they will tonight.” He chuckles, not seeing the danger of his actions.

“Huh, hello? If I remember correctly, you and Easton used to fight all the time when we were teenagers.”

“Fuck did we ever. Guy has a mean left hook. Still, those wrestling matches were as close to first base as I was ever going to get with East. You can’t fault me for that.” He laughs, making my own lips tug up to a smile.

“You really are a twisted individual, you know that?” I shake my head laughing.

“I know. It’s part of my charm.” He beams.

“You know, if you let them in and they see the real you, maybe my friends wouldn’t hate you so much.”

“And if I did that, then this whole sham we’ve cooked up for the past four years would go down the drain, now, wouldn’t it? Don’t fix something that isn’t broken, babe. Your friends hating my guts is the reason why they still believe there is a sliver of a chance this engagement is legit. If they spent too much time around us, then they would see that it’s just one big lie.”

“You’re right.” I let out an exaggerated sigh. “I know you’re right. Besides, I can’t think about that right now anyway. We have bigger problems. I thought I told you not to leave Jeff’s side?”

“Babe, I tried, okay? But he’s a slippery fucker. One second, he was chatting up some girl, and the next, he was gone. I’ve been looking for him ever since,” he explains, disheartened for letting me down. “Also, it would help if I knew just exactly how he’s messing with your friends.”

“That’s my concern. Not yours.”

“Whatever,” he pouts, feeling left out.

“Tom, just help me out here, okay? Please?” I place my hand on his cheek.

His eyes light up at the caress, offering one of his true, sincere smiles.

“Okay. I’ll look downstairs while you look upstairs. He can’t have gone far.”

“Thank you,” I reply gratefully, going to my tiptoes to place a chaste kiss on his cheek.

Even though it’s dark inside the house, the dim lighting isn’t enough to conceal his blush.

“Enough of that. Go!” He laughs, slapping my ass to push me along.

I throw him another grateful smile and head upstairs in search of my pain-in-the-ass twin. However, as I take the very last step, my throat clogs when I see Lincoln coming out of Teddy’s old room.

“Why were you in Teddy’s room, Linc?” I ask point-blank, not hiding my apprehension.

“Just go away, Ken.” He snaps bitterly.

He’s about to pass me by and walk downstairs, completely dismissing me, when I grab him by the hand and keep him glued to the spot.

“Linc, what’s wrong?”

“Everything,” he retorts coldly. “Just give me space.”

I let go of his arm, wounded more by his tone than by his words.

Lincoln hurriedly walks away, trying to gain some distance from me, but to his chagrin, I’m right on his heel. Something’s happened for him to be this way. But what? Earlier in the evening, he was fine, playing around with his Thor hammer while I pretended I had a samurai sword in my hands to complete my Kill Bill costume. I know the answer must be in Teddy’s room, but I can’t go up there now or risk exposure. I’ll just have to rely on Stone to tell me afterward.

He pushes through the crowd in the living room and heads straight to one of the liquor tables I set up. Everybody from school is dancing their hearts out while I stand by the wall, keeping a vigilant eye on him. A quick scan through the room, and I see Finn and Stone are dancing it up while East and Scarlett are in a dark corner talking. Colt, however, is nowhere to be found. I stand rooted to my spot as I watch Linc drink shot after shot with some of Finn's old teammates.

Shit. Not this again. Goddamn it, Linc!

This isn't like him.

This isn't like my Lincoln.

I keep repeating it to myself, only for the night to just get worse.

After he's drunk his fill, Linc goes onto the dancefloor and starts dancing with every girl he can get his hands on. My jealousy of the way he looks at them and laughs at whatever they say while pressed up against their bodies is all-consuming. I'm about to put a stop to it when Tommyboy halts my next step, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind.

"Where do you think you're going, beautiful?"

"What does it look like?"

He shakes his head before placing his chin on my shoulder.

"Wrong. You're going to stand here with me, looking pretty and not moving an inch, unless it's to dance with me. How would it look if my fiancé had a hissy fit because her best friend was trying to get some action?"

"I don't care!" I seethe, sinking my nails into his hands.

"Yeah, you do. Think, Ken. Get a fucking grip and think rationally. Do you really want to start rumors that you can't take back?"

"Like there isn't gossip already about us." I scoff.

"Gossip, yes, but no tangible proof. Stay here with me, and just let things play out as they should."

He twirls me around, bringing my arms to fall over his shoulders before wrapping his around my waist again.

"Now we are going to dance the night away and pretend to be in love like everyone expects," he whispers before tugging a lock of my hair behind my ear.

"I don't think I can," I admit, chewing on my lower lip like my life depends on it.

"Yes, you can. I was going to ask if you found your brother to take your mind off things, but it will only amp up your already vile temper. So, you're

going to look at me, stare into my drop-dead gorgeous eyes, and imagine better days where all this shit is over and done with, okay?"

I nod, feeling my whole body shake in his arms.

"That's it, babe. Just like that," he praises as we sway from left to right.

I try not to look at Lincoln, or who he is dancing with now, and just listen to the beat of the song playing while taking comfort that I have a friend in Tom.

"God, what I wouldn't give to be in the middle of that sandwich," he jokes, his eyes fixed on Easton's devil costume and the perfect angel beside him. "I'd willingly beg the Dark Prince to make me sin for him and afterward pray for salvation at her altar."

"You are such a fucking horndog, you know that?" I laugh softly, grateful that he's trying to take my mind off Lincoln.

"I admit it. I fucking love sex. And not to brag, but I'm fucking good at it, too. Not that you would know since you are keeping your legs locked up tight for golden boy over there. Sometimes I want to slap the idiot for being such a moron."

"Shh. If you want me to behave, then you have to too, Tom."

"You're right. I'm sorry." He smiles sweetly at me, placing a kiss on my temple.

We dance like this for a few songs as I try to rein in my hot-headed temper. It's only when I catch a glimpse of Lincoln's ocean-blue eyes staring at us that knee-jerk reaction kicks in, making me try to get out of Tom's embrace. However, instead of succeeding in pushing him away, he only holds me tighter.

"Nice and pretty, Ken. Remember the endgame."

I bite my cheek but end up placing my forehead on Tom's chest, praying he's right.

A few minutes later, he lets me go.

I open my eyes, scanning the room for Lincoln, but he's nowhere in sight.

"Where did he go?"

"Outside, babe. Couldn't stomach it anymore, I guess."

I immediately pull away, only for Tom to hold my hand to prevent me from getting far.

"Don't do it, Ken. You're only going to get into a world of hurt," he says, his eyes begging me to stay.

"We're already hurting," I confess, giving him another kiss so he can let

me go.

When he drops my hand, I don't hesitate and run like the wind after the boy who has my heart. Once I'm in the front yard, I desperately look around to see where he might be in the sea of college kids lounging about. When my eyes lock on his discarded Thor's hammer on the ground, my gaze catches a glimpse of Lincoln's long blond hair disappearing into the Oakley Woods. Without a second to spare, I run in his direction.

"Lincoln!" I yell, running after him.

"Go away, Ken," he slurs, walking further into the woods.

"Will you stop?!"

"NO! I said go away!"

"That's not happening. Not until you tell me what's gotten into you tonight?"

He swiftly turns around, his bloodshot eyes meeting mine.

"Why do you insist on tormenting me? Why, Ken? Why?!"

"I don't mean to torment you." I fidget in place.

"But you fucking do! Don't you get it? I asked you for space, and still, you don't give me any."

"Because I can see in your eyes that space is not what you need. You need a friend," I explain patiently, unsettled with the mean glare in his gaze.

"A friend? Is that what we are, Ken? Friends?" He walks menacingly toward me, making me take a step back until my back is flush against a tree.

"You're my best friend," I whisper.

"But that's not what you want me to be, now, is it?"

The minute I'm about to lower my eyes from his, he lifts my chin with his knuckles so that I'm unable to hide from him.

"You know what I want," I tell him truthfully.

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"No, Ken, I don't."

"I want what I always wanted." I swallow dryly. "I want you."

He lets out a gruff groan at my confession, leaning his temple on my shoulder. I run my fingers through his hair, loving the silky feel of it on my skin, while his shoulders begin to relax.

"You're hurting again, aren't you?"

"I'm always hurting," he admits, his scent wreaking havoc on my senses.

"I can ease your pain," I tell him just as my heart kickstarts inside my

chest.

“Can you?”

“All you have to do is share it with me and let me take some of the burdens off your shoulders.”

He lifts his head up a smidge until our faces are but a hairsbreadth away from each other.

“What if the reason I’m in constant misery is because of you?” he says at last.

“You don’t mean that.” I shake my head, cursing the unwanted tears that spring up at the corners of my eyes.

He leans into my ear, his sweet breath fanning against my cheek.

“Oh, but I do. If you weren’t in my life, things could be so much simpler.”

“You’re lying.” I slam my fist into his chest, not wanting to hear another cruel word come out of his lips.

“No, Ken, I’m not,” he whispers in my ear, his nose running up and down the small patch of skin behind it. My body reacts instantly to this small touch, making me tug at the strands of his hair. “If you were someone else, things could be so much simpler,” he continues on, pressing one kiss then another down my neck. “But you’re you, and I’m me.”

I squirm under his touch as his hands start to caress down my body.

“Linc.” I sigh, needing more of his caresses.

“I wonder if there is a parallel world out there where you’re mine,” he muses, just as his knuckles graze my sensitive nipples.

‘*I’m yours now,*’ I want to say, but the words remain lodged in my throat when he starts to kiss my neck, trailing his tongue and tasting my heated flesh.

“I wonder if in another life, I could have taken you anywhere I wanted to. Fucked you right up against this tree trunk, buried my cock in you to the hilt.”

His dirty words have me writhing away and soaking my panties.

“I wonder how beautiful you would have looked naked under pale moonlight as I fucked you raw from behind,” he murmurs, biting my earlobe.

When I moan out at the image he planted in my mind, Lincoln turns me around at lightning speed, pressing my cheek to the cold tree trunk.

“Why did you follow me out here, Ken?” His brutish voice becomes ragged, and oh so fucking sexy.

“Because I was worried about you.” I pant, rubbing my thighs together.

“Does your fiancé know you came running after another man?”

I don’t dare answer that loaded question.

“Does he know that you run to me every time?” he groans as his steel cock rubs itself against the crack of my ass, his hands now fully cupping my breasts.

I lean my head back on his shoulder, my eyelids falling closed of their own accord, reveling in all the sensations he’s coaxing out of my body.

“If you were mine, I’d never let you out of my sight.”

‘I am yours!’ I shout inwardly.

“And I sure as shit wouldn’t let you run into the woods after some guy whose only thoughts are to ravish you raw.”

“Oh, God.” I squirm, needing more of his contact.

“Who’s in pain now, Ken? You or me?”

“I don’t want any of us to hurt.”

“Of course, you don’t. You know exactly how to take the pain away, don’t you?” he counters bitterly, a tinge of resentment in his tone.

Instead of fighting with him, I chose to fight *for* him.

I pull the zipper of my jumpsuit all the way down to my navel and then grab his hands that had fallen to my hips and bring them back up to my heavy breasts.

“Fuck. You never did play fair.” He hisses when he feels my nipples perked up, already eager for his attention.

His deft fingers begin to play with them so expertly that, in no time, I’m moaning in ecstasy.

“Is this what you want, Ken? To make a fiendish monster out of me again? To make me take what isn’t mine? What can *never* be mine?”

“That’s not true. I’ve always been yours, Linc. Always.”

“Don’t,” he grunts before biting my neck and sliding his hand down my stomach. “Please don’t make me,” he begs for mercy, but I’m too turned on to keep this from happening.

Before he can hesitate, I hold on to his wrist and shove his hand down to my drenched panties.

“Fuck,” he growls. “You’re already wet.”

“If you touch me, then I’ll always be ready for you.”

He starts toying with my clit with the pad of his thumb while my juices coat his fingers.

“Look at us,” he says huskily, licking at his bitemarks. “What a pair we make. Two wild animals going against nature.”

“No, Linc.” I lick my lips, frantic for his kiss. “We’re just two people who desperately love each other.”

“Ken.” He sobs, placing gentle kisses on my shoulder blade.

“Shh, Linc. Just touch me,” I demand sweetly.

He hides his face in the crook of my neck, breathing heavily as he continues to play with my clit until I’m cumming on his fingers, his name on my lips.

“You’ll ruin me,” he says, tears now in his eyes. “I need to rip you out of my heart. Teach me how,” he pleads. “Please, Ken. Teach me how.”

His suffering is so intense that his whole body starts to tremble. Ever so slowly, I turn around and hug him as his silent tears streak down his cheeks. He’s shaking so badly that I spin us around, so he can lean against the tree for support.

“I don’t understand. Why do you keep fighting us? Why can’t we be together?”

“Don’t ask me that.”

“No! You have to tell me. Please, Lincoln. Don’t make us suffer any longer. You belong to me like I belong to you. Why do you insist on pushing me away?” I cry, my own suffering coming out, loud and clear for the both of us.

But before he says anything, the sound of footsteps approaching silences him. He claps his hand over my mouth and slams my chest against his. I try to listen closely to see if I recognize who is in these woods with us. I recognize the voice immediately. It belongs to Ava, one of Stone’s friends from the Southside. She’s not alone, though. She’s arguing with a boy. I think I hear her call him Chase. But just as they are about to rip each other’s heads off, their argument abruptly stops. It doesn’t take us long to realize that whatever they were arguing about was just foreplay.

Linc and I stare silently into each other’s eyes, both of us understanding that we can’t make a sound. Otherwise, we’ll get found out. I mimic his shallow breathing, watching our chests rise and fall in sync. But now that he’s the one pushed up against the wall, having Lincoln this vulnerable sets my imagination ablaze. I keep my eyes fixed on his while my hands trail down his chest and onto the bulge inside his pants. His eyes go wide in alarm. He shakes his head and mouths the word ‘no’, but I unzip him anyway until

his gorgeous cock has sprung free and is in my hand.

He releases his hold on my mouth and leans into my ear while my thumb runs over the crown of his cock, soaking up his precum.

“Don’t,” he orders, low enough that only I can hear, but my wicked smile tells him that I’m not going to listen to him.

I raise my thumb to my lips and suck on his essence, Lincoln’s eyes instantly hooding to two thin lines.

This time I’m the one who leans into his ear, licking the lobe and giving it a good bite.

“You can’t stop me, Linc. Just like you’ll never be able to make me stop loving you.”

And when my hand wraps itself around his length and gives it a good tug, he lets out a loud groan that is thankfully synchronized with the couple fucking not a few yards away from us. I sink down to my knees, his eyes closing further. He shakes his head again, his last attempt at stopping me. I smile up at him before wrapping my lips around his cock.

He slaps one hand over his mouth with the other on the trunk behind him to keep his knees from buckling. His eyes bore into mine as I take all of him in. I devour him just as much as I cherish him. Tears stream down his face as he grabs my hair and keeps to my rhythm. I hum around him, loving the way he responds to his cock hitting the back of my throat. When his thighs tighten, I know that he’s close, making me dive further onto him until his crown passes my tonsils. He cums on a muffled wail, and I swallow all of him down, contented and overjoyed for being able to make him reach his peak so easily. The instant I get back to my feet, he wraps his hand around my neck and pulls me to him, his lips crashing on mine. His ardent kiss is deep and animalistic, proving that he wants me as much as I want him. But it’s all bittersweet because his tears keep falling down. Once he pulls his lips off mine, I clean the tears away from his cheeks, replacing them with tender kisses.

When we hear the couple start heading back into the mansion, we don’t move and just stand there, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Ken—” he begins, and I already see all the words of regret on the tip of his tongue.

“If you’re a monster, then so am I,” I say before he has time to get a word in.

“Then I guess hell has a spot for the both of us.” He caresses my cheek

lovingly with the back of his knuckles.

“Hell is for other people, Linc. We deserve more.”

His head falls to the side, no longer willing to look at me.

“Linc.” I try to coax some sort of comment from him.

“Leave me alone, Ken. You got what you came for. Be satisfied.”

“How can I be when I still don’t have you?”

“You have me! Don’t you get it?! You have me! God have mercy on my soul, but you fucking do. Just don’t ask me to do that again. Please. I can’t. I won’t.”

“But—”

“Don’t, Ken! For the love of all that’s holy, let me keep one ounce of decency in me. Please.”

Hurt by his words, I take two steps away from him.

“It’s always going to be like this, isn’t it? You’ll never tell me why we can’t be together, will you?”

“You have your secrets. I have mine,” he deadpans, back to his stoic form.

“One day, that won’t be good enough,” I threaten, hating how my voice cracks in the end.

“Maybe that will be the day you finally give up on me.”

“Is that what you want?” I ask, my eyes burning with the tears I don’t want to shed.

“That’s what I need,” he answers sullenly.

“Right.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “And what about my needs?”

“You have a fiancé to meet those.”

As if he just slapped me with those words, I turn around and head back to the party, the sound of Lincoln’s footsteps right behind me, needing to make sure I make my way back safely.

Is this all I’ll ever be able to get from the man I love?

That he would rather keep me at arm’s length than ever love me?

When we break through the woods, Tom is waiting for me at the door. I walk right to him as he eyes Lincoln behind me and wraps his arm protectively over my shoulder, pulling me closer to his side.

“This party is a bust. Let’s go home, babe,” Tom says, loud enough for Linc to hear.

Once we are at the end of the drive, far enough that no one will overhear, he leans down and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“You know the problem with you, Rylands? You just can’t take no for an answer.”

Chapter 22



Kennedy

“I take the fifth. Answering that question honestly will only get me in trouble.” I overhear Colt cackling to Lincoln just as I’m about to slide in and sit beside him in our favorite booth at The Grind.

“I thought you lived for getting in trouble. What did you do now?” I smile at him while trying not to flinch when Jefferson takes his seat next to Lincoln.

Usually, I’m able to spend my break having coffee with Lincoln without my brother shadowing me, but today he made it a point to drive me over.

“Oh, you know the usual. Pissing people off left, right, and center.” Colt smirks.

“Just another day of being you, then,” I tease playfully.

“I heard Easton wants to rearrange your face. Is that what we’re talking about?” Jeff asks, taking a sip of his coffee.

Immediately I snap my attention to Colt instead of wringing my brother’s neck since it’s obvious he’s here to gloat.

So this is why he wanted to tag along today.

“Please don’t tell me you tried something with Scarlett?” I direct the question toward my friend instead of letting on what my true thoughts are.

“Hell no! Scarlett’s his girl. I wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pole. You know that.”

“Thank God.” I fake a relieved sigh.

Colt may be many things, but he would never make a move on his best friend’s girl.

“Why so worried about Scarlett? She doesn’t seem to like you very much,” Colt asks curiously.

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling that vibe from her, too,” I mumble, not really

caring to divulge why I give Owen's favorite bird the creeps in front of my brother.

"You have to be less intimidating, sis. Otherwise, you'll lose all your friends," Jeff taunts, thinking it will rattle me.

"I don't mean to be with her. I just have to put more effort into welcoming her into the fold. Scarlett just needs time. I'm sure once she realizes we're on the same team, she'll warm up to me."

And by that, Jeff, I mean she's under my watch.

Don't fuck with her.

"You mean like you did with Finn's girl?" Colt chimes in amused. "Don't think I haven't noticed you all up in Stone's business."

"I like Stone. She's feisty."

And just the ally I needed.

"She's a pain in the butt but whatever. Walker seems to be happy."

"Now, all we have to do is find someone who makes *you* happy." I wiggle my brows at him suggestively, knowing full well my diabolical brother has pushed Professor Harper into his path.

Still, if I go by my brother's failing track record in messing with my friends, I wouldn't be surprised if the next couple in our group is none other than Emma and Colt.

"I think you have a better chance at setting Lincoln up with someone. Colt doesn't do commitment, do you?" Jeff teases Colt while simultaneously throwing a bucket of ice-cold water in my face.

Lincoln, however, doesn't even lift his eyes off his coffee mug.

In fact, come to think of it, he hasn't said one word since I sat down. Not even a hello.

Ever since the Halloween party, we've been slowly trying to get back to the way we were. I've realized that the more I push him to admit his feelings for me, the more he slips through my fingers. So even though it goes against my very nature, I've been adamant in using all the tools in my toolbox to implement some goddamn self-restraint when it comes to Lincoln. And I was finally seeing the fruits of my labor, honestly believing that we were starting to reconnect and find our way to each other again. I even cooked Thanksgiving dinner at his house, just to show that if it's a friend he needs in me right now, then that's what I'll be.

For now, at least.

So why is he so quiet all of a sudden?

I swear his hot and cold demeanor is giving me fucking whiplash.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” Tommyboy suddenly appears beside me, putting a pin in my thoughts around Lincoln’s uncharacteristic muteness. “Are my eyes deceiving me, or is this a Dead Presidents’ reunion? Oh no, wait. It can’t be. Last time I checked, Teddy was in the club, not Colt. Little late in trying to step into his shoes, aren’t you?”

“Tom.” I seethe, hating the name that just passed through his lips.

“Don’t be like that, babe. I’m just messing with Turner here. He can take a joke, can’t you?”

“If by joke you mean having to look at your face, then yeah. I’m all about having a good laugh.”

Tom is about to say something in return when Lincoln finally graces us with the sound of his voice. Only the words that come out make me wish he’d kept his vow of silence.

“I think you should have coffee with your boyfriend somewhere else, Ken.”

I don’t even have the courage to say anything back, but instead, I stand up and walk out of The Grind with my head held high, even if my heart is shriveling inside.

Tom quickly goes to grab my hand, but I pull it away on instinct.

“Don’t be pissed with me. I’m not the one you should be mad at.”

“Oh, no?! What the hell was that talk about Teddy for? You just said it because you knew it would push his buttons.”

“Well, someone has to. The idiot deserved the reminder that his inability to make up his mind almost made it so he lost you once. And by the way he just booted us out of there, I’d say he’s trying to lose you again.”

“Tom—”

“Don’t say anything now. Your brother is coming,” he explains, placing his arm over my shoulder.

“You okay, sis?” Jeff asks, openly concerned once he’s left the coffeehouse.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” I gift him my fake pearly-white smile.

When both Jeff and Tom share glances with one another, I roll my eyes.

“I’m fine, Jefferson. Lincoln has a lot on his plate, so we should all cut him some slack.”

And by a lot on his plate, I mean you blackmailing him, asshole!

“Whatever you say,” he retorts, not as forgiving.

“Hey, Jeff, you mind if I spend some alone time with my girl for a second? We have some stuff to talk about for the wedding. Take my car back to class, will you?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you all back at school.”

Once Jeff leaves, we both walk toward my brother’s SUV.

“I hope you wanting to speak to me in private means you have something for me,” I say once we are alone in my car.

“First things first. How are you really?”

“I’m fine, Tom.” I rest my head on the headrest and close my eyes.

“Are you sure? Want me to kiss it all better?” He laughs, trying to lighten the tense mood.

“I’m not in the mood for your wit, Tom.” I sigh, tilting my head toward him.

“I know, babe,” he whispers under his breath consolingly. “I hate to tell you this, but I think I know why Linc was being a prick. And it has nothing to do with my smart mouth back there.”

“Did my brother—”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It wasn’t him. It was my folks.”

My brows pinch together in confusion.

“Your parents? What do they have to do with anything?”

“They sent out the ‘save the dates’ last week. I’m sure most of the Northside received it this morning. Linc, too.”

“Damn it, Tom! This is getting out of hand,” I yell at him in frustration.

“Just go with it, Ken. We’ve still got a year.”

“Feels like less to me,” I grumble.

“Hey, look at me, babe.”

I stare into his eyes, the same doe-like gaze that tells me he wants nothing but to see me happy.

This is a side of Tom no one knows about.

The one that isn’t creepy or skeevey or trying to get in someone’s pants. He’s been a true friend to me over the years, and I will always treasure his friendship.

“Maybe this is a good thing. Maybe Linc will finally man up and go after what he wants. You’d be amazed at how quickly a man will act when he feels the time is running out on him. Give it time, Ken.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. We have more important things going on, anyway. How is Stone working out with your dad?”

“She’s taken to the campaign job like a fucking pro. I still don’t know why it was so important for you that she works with my homophobic father, but at least he doesn’t give her any shit. I think all her tattoos scare him.”

“That’s good. What about my brother?”

“He still hasn’t said a peep to me. Sorry to say his pillow talk is nonexistent.”

“Still think you could get it out of him without actually having to sleep with him.” I scoff.

“Hey, if I can’t have the sister, then at least let me enjoy her twin,” he jokes with a laugh, making me slap his shoulder. “I’m kidding. I’m kidding.” He continues to chuckle. “Besides, I’m only human. Jeff is hot as fuck and has a mouth like a Hoover.”

“Ew, gross. Please don’t give me the sordid details about you two banging.”

This time, we both laugh together.

When we simmer down, I entwine my hand in his and give it a little squeeze.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For helping me. For being my friend.”

He shrugs with a smile.

“You helped me out first, remember? Being my beard isn’t exactly easy. Besides, that’s what friends do for each other.”

“I’m still grateful. Sometimes I feel like you’re my only true friend.”

“Don’t say that. The guys love you.”

“They love me so much they’ve kept a huge secret from me.”

“I’m not sure what they have done to be too ashamed to tell you, but you forget that I’ve known those guys all my life, too. If they didn’t tell you, it’s because they were trying to protect you.”

“And who protects them against Jeff?”

“Babe.” He starts with a frown. “What if you’re wrong? What if your brother isn’t behind whatever is happening with your friends? What if it’s someone else?”

“No. It’s him. I’d bet my life on it.”

“How can you be so sure?” he asks, his forehead wrinkling.

“Do you know what it means to be someone’s twin?” He shakes his head. “It’s knowing that every dark thought that has ever crossed his mind has

passed mine at one point or another. When we see an enemy, we have this incessant need to eradicate them from the Earth.”

“That’s pretty fucked up, Ken,” he says, fear laced in his voice.

“That’s just who we are.”



“Kennedy! What a lovely surprise. I wasn’t sure you’d come tonight,” Naomi Price states, sounding genuinely surprised to see me at her doorstep.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s Christmas,” I exclaim, lifting the two large bags in my hands filled with Christmas presents to drive the point home.

She timidly smiles at me as she ushers me in the door, taking my bags from me and handing them over to one of her staff to put under the Christmas tree.

But when Naomi makes no move to take me inside, where most of my friends are probably gathered, my hackles rise.

“Was I not supposed to come?”

“No, dear. It’s not that. I just assumed your father wouldn’t let you come celebrate Christmas with us. The Price family isn’t exactly well-liked around the Northside right now.”

Right.

The sex tape.

I should have known that her reluctance to let me in her home stemmed from embarrassment and not because she didn’t want me here.

“You’re family, Naomi. My father could put up as many roadblocks as he wanted, and I would still come tonight.”

“In other words, he took offense at you spending Christmas here instead of at home?”

“Honestly? Since my mother passed away, we hardly celebrate any holidays anymore. I doubt he knows where I am right now. Or cares.”

Her soft, gray gaze saddens for me, and I hate how honest I just was with her.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you have more family to share it with.” She smiles, giving my hand a comforting squeeze. “Come. Everyone is in the living room drinking port before dinner.”

I follow her anxiously through the large mansion until we walk into the living room.

“Look who Santa brought!” Naomi singsongs, calling everyone’s attention to us standing under the threshold of the living room’s wide double doors.

“Barbie!” Stone jumps happily off Finn’s lap to rush into my arms.

I hug her while inspecting the rest of the room. Scarlett and Easton are huddled on the couch together, and Richard Price sitting in a lone chair to their side. There’s no sign of Colt or Lincoln, though.

“Where’s Lincoln?” I whisper in Stone’s ear.

“I’m right here, Kennedy,” he announces evenly, walking into the room.

Stone releases me from her grip before strutting back to her boyfriend, thinking I’d want to speak to Lincoln in private.

“Hi,” I say in a soft whisper.

“Hi.”

My shoulders instantly slump in disappointment as a response to his frosty tone.

“You haven’t been answering my calls.”

“Why would I? There’s nothing more for me to say.”

“That’s not true.” I begin to protest.

“Why are you here, Ken?” he interrupts with a razor-blade edge to his voice. “Shouldn’t you be spending your holidays with your fiancé?”

“No. I wanted to spend it with my family, Lincoln.”

“He’s your family, now,” he retorts coldly, leaving me standing rooted to the spot, speechless, and walking inside the room to take his place next to Finn on the couch.

I muster up a smile and walk in, taking my seat next to East and Scarlett. I try to ignore how Scarlett instantly goes rigid beside me, making East frown in return.

“I’m glad you made it tonight, Ken.” He smiles at me while rubbing up and down Scarlett’s back.

“I wouldn’t miss it. Thanks for inviting me over. Lately, I feel like I’m no longer welcome.”

He follows my gaze to where Lincoln is seated, now animatedly talking with Stone and Finn.

“Hmm. You two have been kind of off recently, haven’t you?”

“Were we ever on?” I laugh weakly.

“Whatever it is, you guys will work it out. You always do.”

“I used to think that, too. Now I’m not so sure.”

“You care for him,” Scarlett interjects, her posture softening as she takes me in.

“She more than cares for him, Scar. She’s in love with him. Isn’t that right?” Easton chimes in with a sullen expression on his face.

“Yes,” I mumble under my breath, never taking my eyes off the boy I have loved all my life.

It’s only when Scarlett places her hand on my knee that I pull my gaze from him to look at her.

“Then fight. Don’t give up. When you love someone with all your heart and soul, you never lose hope. Never.”

I offer her a timid smile and think about when Easton left her to follow his mom to New York. Even though she was suffering, there was this gleam in her eyes that said she knew that her love would return to her. She didn’t know when or how, yet she never lost faith.

I wish I was woven from the same fabric.

I want to believe that somehow I will win Lincoln’s love.

But as the days pass by, I feel him pulling away from me even more.

And by the way that Easton stares at Scar with true love in his eyes, my chest tightens further, unsure if there will ever come a day when Lincoln will look at me that way.

“Dinner is served,” Naomi calls out with a wide smile on her face. We start to get up from our seats, but then Easton stops us.

“Actually, Mom. I’d like to say a few words first before dinner, if that’s alright?”

She nods approvingly, her husband lovingly hugging her to his side.

Easton lets out a breath, looking abnormally nervous.

“Shit. I don’t even know where to begin. I do wish Colt was here for this.”

“Where is the asshole anyway? I haven’t laid eyes on him in days.” Finn directs the question to a stoic Lincoln.

“I have no idea. I’ve called and texted him and have only gotten radio silence.”

“Hmm. Knowing Colt, he’s probably shacked up with Professor Harper right about now,” Stone jokes.

“Wait? Is Colt really dating your ethic’s professor?” I ask, unable to contain my elation that I was right.

“He’s doing something with her. Not sure if you can call it dating.” Stone

wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“Easton.” Richard Price clears his throat, his not-so-subtle way of wanting to move the conversation along.

“Right. No matter. Although I wanted all my friends here when I did this, I can’t wait another second. It’s actually killing me that I had to wait this long,” Easton explains, throwing a loving glance at a confused Scarlett.

“Scar, since the moment I met you, I knew that I wouldn’t ever meet another woman quite like you. I tried to fight it, and Lord knows you did too, but in the end, we were always meant to be.”

“Easton—” she starts to cry.

“I never felt worthy of love, even when I was constantly surrounded by it. It took me falling in love with you to realize that I have a heart, Scar. A heart that beats only for you. It’s yours and will always be yours. And if you’ll have me, I promise to spend the rest of my days using this same heart you brought to life, loving you.”

Just as Easton goes to one knee and pulls out the ring box in his pocket, my eyes and Lincoln’s meet. And what I find in his are all the words Easton just spoke that he wishes he could say to me, but never will.

And before Scarlett has even given her reply, my love turns his back and walks away.

Chapter 23



Lincoln

“And who is this?” Ken asks overly sweetly when my date and I approach her.

“This is Anna Trott,” I introduce stoically. “She works for the Richfield Foundation with me. Anna, this is Kennedy Ryland and her fiancé, Thomas Maxwell, Jr.”

“Hi.” Unlike Kennedy, Anna’s full-on grin is sincere. “When is the big day?”

“Six months from now. Summer wedding in June. Isn’t that right?” I reply in their stead, raising my glass of champagne to the happy couple.

“Yes, we’re both very excited about it,” Tommyboy announces, and I don’t miss how he places a protective hand on Kennedy’s lower back, soothingly stroking it with his fingers.

I school my features to look as impassive as possible, but the need to pull the fucker’s fingers off her is overwhelming.

“Your face is familiar. You’re Georgia Trott’s daughter, correct?” Kennedy chimes in, her melodic voice taking my mind off her boyfriend’s wandering hand.

“Yes, I am. And I think you may be right about us meeting before. I’m almost certain we met at the debutante’s ball years ago.”

“Right. I remember now. You were the one who wanted to dance with Lincoln. Looks like you got your wish.” Kennedy stretches her fake smile further so as not to grind her teeth in contempt. “So tell me, is this your first date?”

“No.” Anna blushes, batting her eyelashes at me. “It’s our fifth, actually.”

“Fifth.” Ken’s eyes widen with accusation. “Sounds like you two are becoming serious.”

“I hope so,” Anna proclaims, squeezing my arm affectionately.

I offer her a gentle smile, but inside I feel like the worst fucking piece of shit there is for leading Anna on. Even if by some miracle I succeed in getting Kennedy out of my system, I doubt I’ll ever be serious about anyone. Unfortunately, I’m running out of options. If dating a nice girl like Anna won’t do the trick of making me fall out of love with my own fucking sister, then there is only one more alternative I have left—to leave Asheville forever.

Unbeknownst to my friends, I’ve been toying more and more with this idea.

The only reason I didn’t leave town already is because The Society waged war on us. I can’t leave Colt, East, or Finn when someone is out for their blood because of a crime I alone committed. But the minute I’ve put this whole blackmailing fiasco to rest, then the only choice I have left to preserve my sanity, as well as my soul, is to skip town as soon as possible. There is no way I can stay here and watch Ken live her life without me and still keep both.

I may be in denial in regards to many things, but not that.

I won’t be able to bear watching her walk down the aisle and vow to love Tommyboy for all her days next summer. I’ll lose my mind seeing his baby grow in her belly and witnessing her joy of raising a family that isn’t mine. Hence, why it will be best for all parties involved if I just disappear for good.

How does the saying go?

Out of sight, out of mind, right?

Hopefully, the old proverb has some merit to it, and not the one about how absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Once Ken is married and I am gone, time will be kind to her and erase any love she might have had for me from her heart. And I will find my peace in knowing that she can finally be happy without the constant reminder of the boy who broke her heart walking around in her midst.

“Babe, you’re out of champagne,” Tom states all of a sudden. “How about we get you a refill?”

“I think that’s a good idea. It was very nice to see you again, Anna,” Ken adds, her gaze fixed on the girl hanging on my arm instead of meeting my eyes. “I hope you have a wonderful time tonight.”

“I’ll make sure that she does,” I retort evenly, trying not to cringe when Ken misses a step and squeezes Tom’s arm for support.

“Your friends seem quite lovely,” Anna remarks once they have left us alone.

“Hmm.” I thin my lips, placing my champagne flute on a waiter’s passing tray. “I believe I owe you a dance. Will you do me the honors?”

“I’d love to.” She beams excitedly, only piling on my mountain of guilt.

We stroll to the dancefloor and start to dance while Anna talks animatedly about the latest Richfield project she’s been involved with. I nod and smile, letting her take the lead in the conversation while I let my mind roam freely to other more important issues.

As usual, my aunt’s New Year’s Eve party is filled to the brim with Asheville’s finest, unaware that somewhere in this very room hides, in plain view, the organization that has been a thorn in my side since Summer ended. I push all thoughts of Ken to the back of my mind and try to focus on what Emma and Colt discussed with me earlier this evening.

Could Colt’s girlfriend be right?

Is The Society somehow linked to us, Richfields?

My gaze meanders over to Uncle Owen, who looks to be two sheets to the wind already. No matter how much Emma insists he is an active member, I don’t see how he could possibly be behind the malicious letters sent to us. I know my uncle. He doesn’t have it in him to be this cruel or vindictive. He also wouldn’t raise a hand to harm Colt, no matter the cause. And he also would never hurt me.

My eyes continue to scan the room, only to fall on Aunt Colleen next. If anyone had the balls of steel to lead such a nefarious cult of vigilantes, it would be her.

But that also doesn’t make sense.

There was no love lost between Crawford and her.

In fact, if my mother hadn’t died the same day he did, I have no doubt in my mind that she would have celebrated his death with caviar and Don Perignon.

Which leaves me to question then who could possibly be behind our tormentors.

Could it be the Senator? Tommyboy’s father?

Or is it the new governor who took my father’s place when he died?

Who could it possibly be that I’m not seeing?

Who is it?

But just as my eyes glance over the crowd in search of an answer, they

land on Kennedy at the far corner of the room, looking utterly alone and desolate in her thoughts.

No matter what I do, every thought I have always takes me right back to the girl with sky-like eyes. The reason why I've been too distracted to solve this puzzle in the first place.

When I see my cousin, Meredith, leaving the dancefloor to have a seat and rest her feet, I use that as my excuse to gain some alone time myself.

"Anna, if you'll excuse me, there are people I need to talk to. Would you mind it terribly if you kept Meredith some company while I attend to business?" I tilt my chin over to where my cousin is sitting down.

"Of course not. Please take as much time as you need. How about we meet up later at the stroke of midnight?" She blushes, revealing her desire for wanting me to kiss her into the new year.

I nod with a weak smile and take my leave. It's only when I step outside that I let my smile drop from my lips. I head toward my aunt's greenhouse, thinking it will be a safe spot to get some much-needed quiet. If the other years' festivities are any indication, then I only have a few more minutes before everyone rushes outside to watch the fireworks. And right now, solitude is my only companion.

Unfortunately for me, my self-imposed isolation doesn't last long.

"She's very pretty." I hear a voice call out from behind me, the same voice I hear in my dreams almost every night.

I don't dare turn around, but my ears listen to the soft click-clack of Kennedy's heels drawing closer to me.

"Very pretty, indeed. Flawless brown skin, big beautiful brown eyes, and a smile as warm as an Asheville afternoon in May," she continues on as she bridges the small gap between us. "She's actually quite perfect." She sighs, saddened, her finger tracing over my shoulder blade and burning me with her featherlight touch.

I keep my heart in check as her warm breath on the nape of my neck wreaks havoc on my senses.

"Not only is she stunning, but she's intelligent, too, from what I've just heard inside. Since people saw you two dancing together, they can't quit singing her praises. How accomplished and well educated she is, and how fortunate you found someone that comes from such a respectable Northside family. She's polite and agreeable, but not enough to make her dull. Oozes confidence without coming across as intimidating, and she already shares

your desire to make this world a better place by working for your family's philanthropic foundation. The perfect girl for the perfect Richfield heir. I doubt anyone could find her equal."

Although her voice sounds like molasses dripping off her tongue, I hear the bitterness in it.

"How can anyone compete with such a selfless, exquisite creature?" she asks melancholily, pressing her cheek to my back. "Not me, that's for sure."

I shut my eyes tightly and fist my hands at my sides, just to prevent myself from turning around to hold her in my arms.

"I'm neither good, nor selfless, nor kind. And I'm sure as shit not nice." She laughs meekly. "I'm my father's daughter through and through while pretending to strive to be my mother's."

To this lament, I have no choice but to turn around and grab her wrist before she can touch me again.

"What are you doing, Ken?"

"I can ask you the same thing. What are *you* doing, Linc?"

Her light blue eyes shine up at me so expectantly, praying that I will make all her self-doubts disappear and instantly dim when I don't.

"You should really get back to the party," I say after a pregnant pause and release my hold on her.

"So should you. Or are you going to leave your date stranded all by her lonesome?"

"She's not alone. I left her with Mer."

"Meredith. Of course." She huffs. "She always did think I wasn't good enough for you. For your family. Now she's gone and proven it, finding you a better girlfriend than I could ever be."

My eyes search hers, and I realize that she's drunk one too many champagne flutes tonight.

"I think it's best you return to the party. Or better yet, have your fiancé take you home before you do or say something you regret."

"Don't you dare lecture me on regrets, Hamilton! You have no idea what it is to live with them every day."

"You're no victim, Ryland, so stop acting like one. I will not be manipulated by you." I snap, walking further into the greenhouse just to get away from her.

"Oh, I know damn well what I am, Hamilton!" she yells right at my heel. "Unlike you, I have no misconstrued ideologies on that front, thank you very

much.”

“Misconstrued ideologies?” I furiously turn around to face her. “And what are those, pray tell?”

“The stoic act you put on to make people believe you’ve got your shit together and that nothing gets close enough to touch you is fucking bullshit! I know you, Lincoln! You can fool the entire world, but you will never fool me.”

“Fool? Fool?!” I breathe out rapidly. “Is that how you fucking see me, Ken? Really?!”

“You fooled me,” she stammers.

“And just how the fuck did I do that?”

“You fooled me into falling in love with you.”

My heart literally cracks down the middle at her words, my anger evaporating into thin air with the snap of a finger.

“That was never my intention,” I reply softly.

“Liar.” She sniffles, wiping a stray tear off her cheek. “But I guess it doesn’t matter anymore. Now you’ve got Anna, right? And I have Tom. So, my tears are all for nothing. Me loving you all these years was all for nothing. Me waiting on bated breath, for you to come to your senses and tell me those three little words I have begged and prayed to leave your lips, is all for nothing.”

The pain in her eyes summons my own, and like a coward, I turn my back and shy my eyes away from her so she doesn’t see the misery she’s inflicting on me.

“Ken... just go. I can’t do this with you right now.”

“What can’t you do?” She hiccups on a sob.

“This.”

“And what is *this*?”

“What do you want from me, Ken?!” I shout, pulling the strands of my hair from their roots.

“What I’ve always wanted! I want you!!!” she shouts from the top of her lungs, slamming her fists on my back.

I spin around to face her once more, my eyes stinging with unshed tears.

“You can’t have me!”

“Why?!” she shouts violently.

“Because... because I don’t love you!”

“I don’t believe you!”

“It’s the truth. You just can’t bear to hear it.”

“You’re lying, and I can prove it,” she belts out, flinging herself into my arms, leaving me no alternative but to catch her.

And before I’m able to stop her, Kennedy’s lips collide with mine, forcing me to taste her tears on my tongue as she puts into this one kiss all her love and sorrows. She continues to take advantage of my moment of weakness, pressing her warm body against mine, her nails digging into my scalp to keep me just where she wants me.

“Tell me again that you don’t love me,” she orders, her lips now at my neck.

My cock swells just with her scent alone.

Fuck!

Fuck!

Fuck!

I’m all sorts of fucked up in the head.

I want this.

I want this.

No.

No.

I can’t...

I just can’t.

“Please... stop... Ken.”

“No. Not until you admit you want me just as much as I want you. Admit it,” she says, her teeth scraping over my jaw, her hand running down my chest until it’s cupping my hard cock.

“I can’t let you do this to me again, Ken. I can’t,” I beg, tugging forcefully at the end of her hair.

“Why not? When it’s obvious your body likes me touching it.”

“It doesn’t.”

“You’re lying again, Linc. Let me show you just how much you want me. How much you need me.”

Kennedy then takes a step back, her mascara streaking down her apple cheeks. She pulls at the bow that ties behind her neck, her dress falling to the ground instantly, revealing light pink lingerie and a garter belt.

Fuck!

She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I stare into her thunderous blue skies as she takes hold of my trembling

hand, making me cup her face and then trailing it down her body. I don't do anything, telling myself that she's the one using my hand for her own needs.

This is not my hand.

It belongs to someone that can touch her.

These are not my lips.

They belong to a man who can actually kiss her.

But this heart?

The one that beats to the sound of her name?

That is mine.

But unlike all the times she was able to seduce me in the past, tonight, I'm fully aware of my actions and their consequences. So when Kennedy keeps her hold on my hand, forcing it to touch her most sacred of places, making sure to brush my fingers along her soaked pussy, showing me how wet she is, I fucking lose it. I pull my hand out of her grasp and wrap it around her slender neck.

"Do not tempt a desperate man," I growl through gritted teeth.

"Why not? He can't be more desperate than I am."

I lean my temple to hers, feeling her warm breath fan my cheeks as I shut my eyes and drive a dagger into her heart.

"Because what you want from me, I'll never give you. Get Tom to fuck you because I never will again."

The slap she gives me stings less than the hurt in her eyes. Kennedy claps her hands over her mouth to silence her cries, her tears freefalling now. She stares at me like I'm a complete stranger to her, and God, if I were, what a kindness that would be for both of us.

Unable to withstand such pain, both hers and mine, I turn around and go home, leaving my date, my friends, and my fucking shattered heart behind.

Chapter 24



Lincoln

I frown at the familiar sound of Colt's Bugatti pulling up my driveway. I look at my watch and verify that it's barely six in the morning, which leaves me to wonder what could have possibly happened to have him coming to my house so early.

Unlike me, I doubt my cousin had such a restless night, twisting and turning in bed, watching the hours pass by. Somewhere around five, I gave up trying to sleep and went for a run in the woods. But not even after a full hour of running was I able to escape last night's events.

The way Kennedy looked right through me—as if she didn't even recognize the person I'd become—will forever haunt me. She'll never forgive me after all the horrible things I said and did. If, after the way I behaved, she can still consider me a friend, then she's more forgiving than I could ever be.

I wait for Colt to knock on my door before I open it for him, praying he can take my mind off the girl who will always be forbidden to me.

"Put some clothes on. We're going for a walk," he says in place of a greeting.

I feel my brows push together, wondering what fresh hell has gotten him so upset, but I do as he says and pick up the hoodie I had discarded after my run. My hackles rise further when he refuses to say a word to me as he leads me back to the Oakley Woods. We walk for what feels like an eternity and only stop once we arrive at that horrid shed, where on the night of my parents' murder, we burned the evidence of my crime.

"What's wrong, brother?" I finally ask, not liking the fact he led me here of all places. "Colt?" I insist when he doesn't respond.

"Emma is wrong about it being our family behind The Society," he finally replies, his expression devoid of emotion.

“Oh? Yesterday you seemed positive that we were.”

“As cliché as it sounds, a lot can change overnight.”

Don't I know it.

Before last night there was still a sliver of hope that I could stay in Asheville with my brothers, but after the fiasco that went down with Kennedy, I came to the obvious conclusion that leaving my home was the only way I could give her a chance at happiness.

My gaze turns to my cousin once more, his carved-in-stone expression giving way to apprehension.

“Colt, where is this coming from? How can you be sure?” I question.

“Because when The Society sent me the first letter, they also sent me a video recording with another set of instructions. They wanted me to discover a family secret and share it with the world.”

Damn it, Colt. Why didn't you tell me?

I keep my features in check, so he can explain himself without being worried he's let me down in any way.

“And did you find it?” I ask, wanting to get to the bottom of this.

“I did.”

“And?”

“Let's just say that our family couldn't be involved since they don't want what I uncovered getting out. We're looking at the wrong people.”

“You're deflecting, Colt,” I retort impatiently. “What did you find?”

“I found out that my father is Scarlett's dad, too.”

“What?!” I blurt out, taking a step back to look him in the eye.

“Yeah. I didn't get the specifics, but I overheard my mom and dad talking about it this morning. She's his daughter.”

“Hmm,” I mumble, taking in this bombshell of a secret. “Everyone knows Uncle Owen isn't the most faithful of husbands, but this would be quite the scandal for the Richfield name if it ever got out. Definitely something the family wouldn't want to make public. If The Society wants this publicized, then you're right—it can't be us. What's their game, then?” I rub my chin, wondering what The Society's endgame is with all of this. So far, there is no rhyme or reason to their madness, and that unsettles me.

Colt mumbles something else, but my mind is too busy trying to piece this impossible puzzle together to hear him properly.

“What?” I ask him to repeat himself.

“I said that Scarlett isn't the only secret kid my dad has.”

Wait, hold up. There's more?

"Owen fathered someone else?" I ask, confused as to who else my straying uncle knocked up.

But instead of giving me a name, Colt only nods.

"Who?" I ask outright, but as I stare into my beloved cousin's emerald eyes and begin to see such anguish and misery in them, my throat clogs, and my pulse starts to race.

"Colt, who?!" I yell, holding on to his shoulders for balance, not risking falling to my knees. But when Colt hesitates in saying the name I see so clearly in his eyes, I unlatch my grip from him and step back, shaking my head, unwilling to believe it. "No, it can't be."

All of me shakes as Colt finally gains the courage to tell me the truth.

"You always knew you weren't Crawford's son, brother. In these very woods, you told me how he confessed you were someone else's bastard and not his. We were thirteen, remember? We broke down. We cried. But it didn't matter because we knew we would always have each other to weather any storm. This is just another one we never saw coming."

No.

It can't be.

It can't.

They wouldn't do this.

No.

How could they do this to me?!

"Linc," Colt pleads, stepping closer to me, but I step away, afraid that if he even touches me, I'll explode from rage, and he'll get caught in the crosshairs.

"That's not possible. It can't be possible," I continue to mumble, not wanting to believe all the years I spent suffering over one lie.

One fucking lie that was close to destroying me forever.

"It is, brother. I heard my father confess to it himself. It's true. I swear on my very life. This is real."

"No!!!" I scream at the top of my lungs, placing my hands over my ears just so I can live in denial for a few more minutes.

Hate.

Their hatred of me consumed me to the point of ruin even after they no longer lived.

Kennedy's face comes to the forefront of my mind, right along with all

the ugly, cruel words I told her the night before.

I don't love you.

Fuck Tom, because I never will again.

I watched in agony as the love of my life was shattered and slain right in front of my eyes, knowing I had been the one who shot the bullet into her heart. My pain and anguish are so overwhelming that I fall to my knees, tears streaking down my face.

“They lied to me!” I yell as my fists pound the dirt at my feet. “They both lied to me. They hated me so much they made me feel like I was an abnormal freak. That something must have been seriously inherently wrong with me. They let me believe that I was sick in the head. Twisted. Perverted.”

“I know.” Colt sobs right at my side, hugging my shoulders so I don't break into tiny pieces.

“Why didn't my mother tell me?” I ask, wondering how she could have led me to believe such a twisted lie.

“My guess is she was too afraid of Crawford's retaliation if she ever told you the truth.”

My God. He's right.

Crawford would have killed her.

If that fateful night is any indication of just how deranged her husband was when he found out my mother was yet again pregnant by another man, then telling the world that his wife bore someone else's child, his brother-in-law's no less, would have been too much for his frail ego to take.

He would have killed her then and there, and I would have been too young and powerless to stop him.

“Are you sure, Colt? Are you fucking sure?”

“I am.”

I hold my head in my hands while Colt hugs me to his side, never wanting me to face any hardship on my own. Just like he's always done throughout my whole life. The brother I always wanted was right here all along. But as I take comfort in knowing Colt is truly my brother, so does the misery of discovering that Kennedy is not now, nor ever has been, related to me in any way.

Those bastards!!!

“They told me she was my sister, Colt. My fucking sister! How could they do this to me? What fucking pleasure could they have had in making me feel like I was a depraved monstrosity for loving her?”

Colt stays silent, the look in his eyes answering my question for him.

My father and brother hated my very existence so much that they took joy in my pain. It became a game to them. I was just another toy to play with and torture, a rag doll they would take turns driving pins and needles through just to see which prick would cause the most damage. I let that realization wash over me, and as the time passes and the cold January air begins to chill my bones, my anger dissipates.

They are dead.

I'm alive.

They tried to ruin me.

Yet, I prevailed.

Nothing either one of them ever did to me broke me like they wanted.

I'm still here.

They are not.

I hang on to that knowledge with both hands, the solace I need to push me out of my frantic state and back into a world where Kennedy is not my sister but the girl I can love freely and unconditionally. The girl who was always my destiny, even when they tried to steal it from me.

“How do you want to play this, brother?” Colt finally says when he sees I’ve regained my composure. “Are you going to confront *him*?”

And by him, he means my real father.

The man I believed I would always have in my corner kept the truth from me, willing to see my soul rot instead of revealing his dirty secrets.

“Yes. I need to know everything. No more lies,” I reply sternly.

“What about The Society? Now that we know this is what they were after all along, we’ve got to give it to them. All I need to do is make one call, and this shit will be broadcasted on every news channel and social platform within minutes.”

“Your thirst for vengeance won’t do us any favors, Colt. Even if it is what The Society wants.”

I’ve had enough hate to last me two lifetimes.

I will not be the instrument to ruin another life.

Even if my uncle does deserve it.

“You, of all people, should understand why I don’t give a fuck. My mom and *our* dad brought this all on themselves.”

“Even so, let me talk to Owen first, then we can figure out what to do next.”

I breathe easy when Colt, *my brother*, offers me a nod.

“Let’s go home. I have a lot of thinking to do.”

And by thinking, I mean begging. I have to get on my knees and beg Kennedy to forgive me. Not only for last night but for all the years I made her wait on a love that was never to come.

The Society can wait.

Ken is the only thing I care about.

And just as Colt and I make the long walk home and break through the woods, my eyes land on a familiar silhouette sitting on my steps, waiting for me.

Always waiting for me.

The minute Kennedy sees us, she immediately stands up and shoves her hands into her white puffy coat’s pockets.

What a heavenly sight for sore eyes.

I’m coming, sweetheart.

I’m coming.

“Leave,” I growl at my brother before I march toward the only girl I have ever and will ever love.

Colt chuckles under his breath but starts walking toward his car, knowing that I won’t want to be interrupted for the foreseeable future.

“Before you say anything, hear me out,” Ken starts to explain before I’ve even made it half the distance to her. “We said a lot of things we didn’t mean last night. And before you tell me to leave, I want you to know that I’m not going anywhere. I will not lose you, Lincoln. I won’t. So you can continue to be a total jackass to me if you want and say all the mean things you think will push me away. I’m here to tell you that it’s not going to work. I’m going to fight for you. I’m going to fight for us. Even if you don’t want me to. I’ll fight until my very last breath.”

Her words only fuel my resolve, and like a hunter who has finally met a worthy prey, I rush my steps.

“Linc, please say something. I’m dying here.”

And just as she’s about to open those beautiful pink lips again, I grab the nape of her neck and forcefully claim her mouth with mine.

Mine.

Always and forever.

She lets out a little whimper before wrapping her arms around me and letting me kiss her like I have always pictured in my most sordid of fantasies.

But before I let myself claim all of her, I break the kiss and cup her cheeks in my palms, needing to make something clear.

Her eyes are beautifully at half-mast, still in a daze after that one kiss.

“Look at me, sweetheart,” I susurrate. Her heavy eyelashes slowly open, love and adoration right there in her gaze. “I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you. And no one will ever take you from me again. I’ll kill the motherfucker who dares try.”

“What?” she gasps, her voice trembling. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“No. Either I’ve fallen asleep after the worst night of my life and I’m dreaming, or I’m dead and this is heaven.”

“You’re not dreaming, Ken. But this is heaven. You being mine makes it so.”

Tears stream from her eyes, her grip on me tightening.

“Don’t fuck with me, Hamilton. This better be real.”

I can’t help but laugh, even when I notice my own tears starting to fall.

“This is real, Ryland. And I’ll fuck with you whenever I damn well fucking please. You’re mine now, and I’ll never let you go.”

And just like that, my lips return to their rightful home. I kiss her like a man desperate to suck out all of her essence, needing it just to survive. She jumps up and wraps her legs around me, a chokehold on my body, so she’s sure I’ll never let her go again. Our tongues wrestle with each other’s, our teeth nibbling and biting, while our locked lips only give us enough of a gap to take in air. I hurriedly walk us inside, slamming the door behind me with my foot, needing to take her upstairs to my room before I lose my mind.

“Tell me again,” she begs in between kisses.

“I love you. I love you. I love,” I repeat, vowing to tell her every day, from here on out, just how much she means to me.

“I love you so much,” she retorts on a sob. “So much.”

I’ve barely made it up one stair when she starts rubbing her pussy on me, making me ravenous with want.

“Fuck, Ken. Let me just get you to bed and make love to you like you deserve.”

“Beds are for sleeping, not fucking, Hamilton. I need you now.”

Her nails dig into my neck as her heels dig into my lower back.

“Fuck,” I groan, gently putting her down on the steps before I take off my hoodie and nestle it under her head.

“Linc,” she begs when I’m taking too long for her.

“Always so greedy. So impatient.”

“Only for you. Always for you.”

I pull my sweats down just enough to release the bulging hard-on underneath while Kennedy shimmies out of her panties and unzips her winter coat.

“Lincoln,” she wails so desperately for me she can’t see straight, much less take off her clothes.

“I know, sweetheart. I know,” I whisper back before kissing her once more.

And when I dive into her warm, wet pussy, everything around us ceases to exist. I thrust down deep into her core, her loud moans bouncing off the walls. My hand grips her hip while the other cradles her cheek, my mouth always on her as if from this point on, all the air that travels to my lungs needs to come from her lips first.

It’s messy and brutal, but so is our love.

It’s not pretty.

Or comfortable.

And it sure as shit doesn’t come out of any fairy tale book.

But it’s ours.

Which makes it perfect.

We continue to fumble and fuck. Kennedy’s thighs squeeze me to her, keeping me prisoner as I pound into her tight pussy. Her core clenches around me as if it too wants to hold me hostage. And like a willing prisoner of war, I throw my white flag at her feet and surrender to her, giving my love all of me in every sense of the word.

“Lincoln!” She cries, her eyes rolling to the back of her head, as I hit that one spot inside her that has her quivering under me.

“I got you. I got you,” I roar, cumming inside her and following her over the precipice, unwilling to let her go anywhere without me ever again.

I crane my neck back just enough to look at my love as she returns to my arms from the heavens. With hooded eyes, she stares back up at me with such happiness that my heart weeps for all the years we have been deprived of this. Deprived of loving each other with all our heart and soul.

“No,” she whispers, running her finger over my lower lip when she sees my tormented thoughts have taken me from her. “No more tears. No more suffering or pain. I’m done with all of it. It’s only you and me now, Linc.

You and me. Forever.”

“Forever,” I vow, pressing a kiss on her lips.

“Forever,” she repeats, and that bright shine in her eyes I once worried I’d never see again returns with an almighty vengeance, making my heart swell up two sizes while pumping blood to my already half-mast cock.

“We have a lot to talk about, sweetheart.”

“I know.” She smiles, running her fingers through my hair. “But how about we put a pin in that for a little longer, and you take me into the next room and get me naked?” She wiggles her brows suggestively while tilting her head to the living room.

“You always did have a one-track mind, Ryland.”

“And don’t you forget it, Hamilton.” She giggles joyfully.

“Fine. On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Give me your phone.”

“My phone?” Her forehead wrinkles in confusion as she searches for the damn thing in her coat pockets. “And can I at least ask what call could possibly be more important than you having your wicked way with me?”

I grab the phone out of her hands and throw her a wink while stifling the wide grin that wants to come out. I scroll through her contact list until I find the name I want and press dial.

“Hello?” Tommyboy answers drowsily on the second ring. “Babe, it’s early as fuck. Everything okay?”

I try to temper my anger at his ease and familiarity with my girl.

But that’s about to change.

“This isn’t Kennedy,” I announce coldly.

“Lincoln,” he states, sounding more alert. “What do you want?”

“What I’ve always wanted. Your fiancé. And now that I have her, I’m never letting her go. This is me telling you the wedding is off. If Kennedy ever walks down the aisle with anyone, it will be with me. No one else. Is that understood?” I growl through gritted teeth to drive the point home.

“Damn well took you long enough. Sure thing, asshole. Consider the engagement called off. Oh, but Lincoln. You hurt one hair on her pretty blonde head, and I’ll have your nuts for breakfast. Ciao, dickwad.”

He hangs up on me, taking the wind out of my sails.

“Not the way you thought that call would go, huh?” Kennedy grins, taking the phone out of my hands.

“No, it wasn’t,” I utter in sheer confusion.
She gives me a soft peck on the lips and wraps her arms around my neck.
“Like you said, Lincoln. We have a lot to talk about.”



I lie on my side, running a finger along her naked back, the fire burning in the fireplace giving her skin an otherworldly glow. We never did make it upstairs, preferring to camp out on my living room floor for the rest of the day.

“Hmm.” She purrs. “I must have dozed off.”

“You did.” I smile. “I think I finally wore you out.”

“Not possible.” She smiles with her eyes still shut.

I lean in closer to her and gently rub my nose along the length of hers before giving a little kiss on the tip.

“How is my heart?” I whisper, needing to know how she’s coping with everything I confided in her today.

“Happy,” she replies, her eyelids fluttering open. “The happiest I think I’ve ever been.”

“Even after all that I told you? After all the secrets that kept us apart?”

She inches closer to me until her chin is perched on my chest.

“None of this was your fault, Lincoln. You don’t need to feel guilty about any of it. They are the ones who deserve to be punished. Not us. We’ve been punished enough.”

“I know, sweetheart. But they’re gone now. They can never hurt us again with their lies.”

Her lips quirk to the side, her gaze falling to the tattoos on my chest.

“What about your father? What about Owen? Are you going to confront him, tell him that you know the truth?”

“I am,” I reply, twirling a lock of her hair around my finger. “I’m tired of lies, Ken. I need to know everything and start fresh.”

“What about your sisters, though? Are you really going to tell the world about your mother’s affair with your uncle and bring ridicule and shame to those girls? Meredith might have Aunt Colleen’s cold heart, but not Irene and Abby. Those girls love their father. It will break their hearts knowing he’s not the man they think he is.”

“I might not have a choice.” I frown, thinking about The Society’s

ultimatum.

“A friend once told me that you always have a choice, Lincoln. Even if you don’t like the one you know you’ll end up making.”

“And by friend, I assume you’re talking about Tommyboy?”

“Yes,” she states, looking up at me expectantly. “I couldn’t have survived these past few years without him. He was my rock through all of this. Without him, my father would have found someone else to sell me to. He saved me, Lincoln.”

The love I hear in her voice brings forth all my insecurities and jealousies.

“I need to know. I won’t fault you if the answer is yes. I just need to know. Did you ever... I mean... did you guys ever...”

“Sleep together?” She finishes for me. “I love Tom with all my heart, but not like that. I couldn’t sleep with someone I didn’t love. And since I only ever loved you, I guess that should answer your question.”

She lowers her eyes from mine, but I still catch a glimpse of the sadness embedded in them. Shame assaults me instantly at how I haven’t been as loyal to her as she was to me all these years. I pull her chin and bring her back into my view.

“You know they never meant anything to me. Not one. They were just a way to push you out of my heart, but none came close.”

“Not even Anna Trott?” she whispers.

“No, not even her. There was only you in my heart, Ken. Only you.”

The faint smile that tugs her lips isn’t enough to quench my guilt.

“Should I have told you, sweetheart? Should I have told you the truth?”

“Truth? You mean the lie your bastard of a father and Teddy told you that we were brother and sister? That truth?” she says with a snarl.

“Yes.”

“No.” She shakes her head vehemently. “Thinking you didn’t want me for whatever reason was torture, but if I thought you couldn’t love me because we were somehow related... well that... let’s just say I couldn’t live in a world where you couldn’t be mine.”

“Neither could I,” I whisper softly to her, caressing her cheek with the back of my knuckles. “I tried though, Lord knows I tried, but you were very persistent.”

“I’m sorry. If I knew the pain I was causing you, maybe I would have stayed away.”

“Don’t be sorry, Ken. I should have known that it was all a lie in the first place. God, or the universe, or whatever you want to call it, could not have given me you just to steal you away. The love I tried to repress only grew stronger with time. That should have been my first clue. If you were my sister, then I shouldn’t have been able to fall deeper in love with you with each passing day.”

“No. I guess not.”

“Are you saying if the roles were reversed that you could?” I arch a brow.

“I’m not as good as you are, Lincoln, so I can’t answer that.”

“You’re good enough. You’re perfect.”

She giggles.

“I think love has made you blind, Hamilton.”

“My eyes see you just fine, Ryland. I know who you are and what dwells in your heart. You’re perfect, and nothing you can say or do will ever change the way I see you.”

“Nothing?” She bites her lower lip.

“Nothing.”

“Not even this.” She flirts, kissing my chest, trailing her tongue down my pecs, then over my navel and to the shaft that is already hard and ready for her.

“Not even that,” I rebuke, falling on my back and planting my arms behind my head while she grabs the base of my cock.

“So if I was to put your cock in my mouth and suck you dry, I would still be perfect?” she taunts with a cocky smirk.

“You’d be more than perfect.”

Her tongue trails over the bulging vein of my shaft, making me shudder in anticipation.

“Are you sure?” She can’t help but tease, knowing the sweet agony she’s putting me through.

“You always did like to torture me with that beautiful mouth of yours.”

“True. But this mouth is good for other things, too.”

“Is that so?”

She nods, licking her lips.

“Show me.”

The little devil has the nerve to throw me a wink before wrapping those lush pink lips around me and swallowing me whole.

Fuck.

Ken starts sucking my cock like she can't get enough of its taste on her tongue. Her hands grip my waist for balance as she bobs away, saliva running down the corners of her lips. She moans in approval as my cock swells inside her warm, wet mouth.

Unable to stay still, I remove my hands from under my head and weave my fingers into her hair, pushing her down as far as she can take me. My love never backs down from a challenge, so when she relaxes her throat until I'm deep inside her gorgeous mouth, I'm not surprised.

"Fuck, Ken. I'll never tire of seeing you like this."

The small tug of her smile, knowing she's conquered me so completely, does my heart in. I pull at her hair, my cock leaving her mouth in a loud pop.

"What's wrong?" she asks, wondering why the hell I stopped her.

"Jump on my cock, Ken. If I'm cumming, it's going to be inside your sweet pussy."

With hooded eyes, she crawls up the length of my body at rapid speed.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you want to knock me up, Hamilton. We haven't used a condom once."

"Either way, do you really care, Ryland?" I growl when she wraps her hand around my shaft and aims it right at her dripping center. "Or are you as desperate as I am to have my cum dripping down your thighs?"

She answers me by sliding down my cock and strangling it with her pussy. My eyelids turn into slits as she starts fucking me, her nails digging into my chest.

With Ken, it will always be like this.

A bit of pain to balance out such ecstasy.

I watch in awe as she arches her back, her breasts bouncing to the motion of her taking everything she wants from me. I take a mental picture and keep it locked away in my mind forever for safekeeping. I lay there and marvel at the way her long hair flows over her shoulders. Her eyes shut, and her lips part into a glorious smile as she rides me into oblivion. At this moment, she is a goddess—an ethereal being brought down from the heavens to rule over my body, heart, and soul.

She will forever be my embodiment of perfection.

My perfectly flawed love to rule over me for the rest of my life.

My queen of hearts and damner of souls.

And as she cums, with my name spilling from her lips, I tell God and the devil alike, they are no match for my love. My soul is hers to do with as she

sees fit.

Chapter 25



Kennedy

“I do know how to make breakfast, sweetheart. You don’t have to eat dry cereal straight out of the box,” Lincoln teases, running his hand up my thigh as I gobble down another handful of Fruit Loops.

“Is that so? What’s on the menu, then?” I muse, leaning back onto his countertop, hiking my leg until it’s wrapped around his waist.

“Hmm.” He rubs his chin and says, “You know what? I can only think of one thing I want to eat right about now.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, placing the box to the side.

His hand goes straight to my core, his fingers teasing my slit.

“I don’t think we both could eat what you have in mind.”

“Are you sure? I hate to deprive you of something so delectable.” He smirks, just as the pad of his thumb begins to toy with my clit in that expert way that only he knows how.

“Hmph.” I bite into my bottom lip, my ass now lifting off the counter just to seek his hand.

“You don’t look like you believe me. See for yourself,” he taunts before sliding his hand away and inserting two of his digits into my mouth. “See? You taste like fucking honey.”

“Hmm.” I hum, sucking his fingers clean.

His gaze starts to morph into that delicious storm I know can only be tamed by being inside me. And even though I’m sore from all the sex we’ve had over the last twenty-four hours, the idea of Lincoln’s tongue lapping at my center has me dizzy with want.

I free his fingers from my mouth with a loud pop and place my bare feet on the edge of the counter, widening my legs so he can see how needy I am for him.

“Breakfast is served, Hamilton. Dig in,” I goad, pushing the top of his head down, so he can go to his haunches and have a perfect view of his favorite meal.

But just as he’s about to satiate his hunger, a slam of a car door outside stops him.

“To be continued,” he whispers before kissing the inside of my thigh and standing back up.

“Whoever just coochie-blocked me is on my shitlist.” I pout, picking up the box of cereal and shoving my hand inside.

“It’s probably Colt. My brother did us a solid by giving us the whole day yesterday to be together, but we still have things to talk about.”

My heart flips at the loving way he’s already referring to Colt as his brother. I would also be overjoyed if the cocky asshole didn’t just pop by at the worst time. I could have been singing Lincoln’s praises right about now, but instead, I’m left with lady blue balls.

Argh.

You owe me big time, Colt.

“Looks like you two had fun.” Colt smirks when he walks into the kitchen.

“I... um... I’ll leave you boys to talk. I’m going to grab a quick shower and get changed,” I respond quickly, not comfortable letting my boyfriend’s brother, of all people, see me dressed in only a T-shirt and not much else.

But just as I’m about to make a quick getaway, Lincoln pulls me by the waist, twirls me around in his arms, and lays one hell of a kiss on me. It’s a kiss that tells the whole world I am his and only his, and when we break apart, a bit of me dies that we couldn’t deepen it further. We then break away, my heart still thumping madly in my chest, when Lincoln tugs a strand of my hair behind my lobe and whispers in my ear.

“I will have my breakfast, Ken. Morning, noon, and night. I intend to feast on it. Are you good with that?”

So good.

My whole skin heats up at the image of him devouring me, and when Lincoln’s gaze falls to my lips, I can’t help but lick whatever taste still lingers from his fingers.

“Ken, you said something about taking a shower, remember?” Colt announces, reminding us he’s in the room, too.

Shit.

“Right.” I smile, walking out of the room.

“And make it a cold one, Ryland!” Colt yells mockingly behind me.

“Bite me, Turner!” I shout back.

I sprint toward the living room to pick up my dress and shoes and head to the nearest bathroom as fast as I can. Lord knows I really could use a nice long shower right about now, but I need to know what Linc and Colt are talking about more than I need to wash my hair. So I take what I’m sure is the quickest shower known to mankind and rapidly put on my clothes. I run like the wind back to the kitchen when Colt tells Lincoln the last thing that I’d ever thought I’d hear today.

“Emma might be pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” Lincoln repeats.

“Pregnant?!” I shout, stumbling into the room.

“That was a quick shower,” Colt accuses before softening his prickly demeanor when he sees both Linc and I are on pins and needles waiting for him to continue with what he was saying. “We don’t know for sure yet, but it’s a definite possibility.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Linc asks in a soothing tone.

“Honestly, I’m not sure yet. Everything has happened so fast that I haven’t had time to digest this news myself. Me, a dad? Why does that sound like a recipe for disaster? I’m going to fuck the kid up before he’s even born. I just know it.”

“Don’t say that, Colt. You’ll make a great father. I know you will,” I interject, giving his arm a comforting squeeze.

I know Colt. He might be a pain in my ass sometimes, but he’s one of the most loving and loyal people that I know. He’ll make an excellent father. Of that, I have no doubt.

Unfortunately, by the look in his emerald eyes, he’s not as confident.

“I’m not so sure. It’s not like anyone in this room has had the best role models when it comes to the dad department,” he mutters, dismayed, but then shrugs off the lamentation and directs his attention to me. “Speaking of pricks, do you know why your dad asked Emma to come to the school today?”

“I have no idea. School stuff, I suppose? He is the dean, and she is a professor.”

“Right.” The frown on Colt’s face is just as deep as my own.

It’s winter break. The second day of the year, for crying out loud. If my

father called Emma into a meeting, I doubt schoolwork is on his mind.

“When do you guys find out about the baby?” I ask, extremely chipper, not wanting Colt to have the same dark thoughts I am.

“I’m supposed to pick up some tests at the pharmacy later on before I pick up Emma from school.”

“I have some errands to run in town, so how about I go with you and help out?” I ask him while hurriedly putting on my winter coat, trying to pretend I don’t feel the weight of Lincoln’s suspicious gaze on me.

“That would be great.” Colt beams gratefully.

“I wish I could tag along, but I have a few things to do here,” Lincoln adds, reminding us all that he wants to talk to his father today.

“Call me when you finish. Ken, are you coming with me or what?”

“You know I am. Just need to do one thing first,” I reply before flinging myself into Lincoln’s arms and kissing him stupid.

He lets out a laugh when I break away and taps the tip of my nose with his finger.

“You didn’t tell me that you had errands to do in town.”

“I don’t. I just thought Colt needed someone to take him by the hand. You don’t mind that I go with him, do you?”

“Of course not. I was just hoping you’d be here with me when I talk to Owen.”

“I thought you wanted to talk to him in private with Scarlett,” I ask, saddened that I didn’t think to volunteer first.

“I do. It would just have been nice to have you there for moral support.”

I look at my watch and see that it’s not even nine yet.

“I’ll be an hour. Two tops. Ask him to come over for lunch, and I’ll be here by then.”

“Promise?” he asks in a whisper, his open vulnerability making me melt into his body.

“I wouldn’t miss it. I’ll be here.”

I cup his cheeks with my palms and place a chaste kiss on his lips.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Ken. Come home soon.”

“I will.” I smile and run outside, where Colt is already nervously pacing.

“Come on, Turner. Let’s see if you’re going to be a daddy.”



After our trip to the pharmacy, Colt still looks like he's about to hurl, so I take him to the closest baby clothes store I can find. All he needs is a little shove in the right direction, so can he understand that he's making a mountain out of a molehill. He'll be a great father. If only he could believe in himself as much as I do. As much as Emma undoubtedly does.

"It's cute, right?" I ask, lifting a little onesie with the words 'Daddy's Little Darling' embroidered on the front.

"It's fucking terrifying," he stammers.

"Snap out of it, Colt. God!" I shout in his face, going to the balls of my feet just to give his shoulders a quick shake. "Will you stop thinking about yourself for one goddamn minute? You think Emma isn't as scared as you are right now?"

"She's stronger than me."

"No, Colt. She's not. Trust me. I know a thing or two about acting like you have it together when, in reality, you are just as terrified as the next person. Now stop being a little bitch and look at the onesie. How can you be afraid of something that comes in such a small size, huh?"

He runs a thumb over the embroidery and softens.

"It is kind of cute, huh?" he says, a little sparkle in his eye.

Now you're getting it.

"It's freaking adorable," I chime in happily.

"Hmm," he mumbles, picking up another onesie and smiling at it.

"Tell me something, Colt. Do you love Emma?"

"With all my fucking heart," he assures me with the strongest of convictions.

"Then you will love this baby even more because it will symbolize what you two feel for each other. This baby will be the luckiest kid ever because it will be born to two parents who love each other just as fiercely as they will love it."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Now, man the fuck up. And when Emma takes the test, you will be right at her side, supporting the result—baby or no. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yeah." He starts to chuckle under his breath, liking the idea of being a

daddy more and more.

“You kind of want her to be pregnant now, don’t you?”

“Fuck yeah! Look at this!” he shouts, pulling out a pair of pajamas with the words printed on it saying, ‘Party at my crib. 2 a.m. Bring a bottle.’

I’m laughing at his enthusiasm when my phone vibrates in my bag. Thinking it might be Lincoln, I quickly go to retrieve it, only for my heart to drop to my stomach.

“Ken, is everything alright?” Colt asks, concerned.

“Yep, all good.” I plant a fake smile. “You okay if I leave you? I’ve got something else that requires my attention.”

“Sure. No problem.”

I leave a quick kiss on his cheek and wave him goodbye. When I get outside of the store, I bring out my phone again, only to confirm what I saw inside.

My brother found the hidden app I planted on his phone and deleted it.

Fuck!

I scroll the history on it and see that the last place he was at was back at school.

“The hell are you doing at school, Jeff?”

I look at my watch and verify I still have an hour before Owen reaches the Hamilton Estate. It’s going to be tight, but I need to know just what my brother is up to. I order an Uber, and within ten minutes flat, I’m rushing through the school wondering where the hell my brother could be. And then I remember Colt said that Emma had been called in this morning to talk to my father. What if it weren’t my scumbag father but Jeff instead? What if he’s here to follow through on his threat against her?

I can’t let that happen.

I run in the direction of her classroom and pray that she’s there and that hopefully, Jeff isn’t. When I reach the auditorium, I’m out of breath, and frankly, I’m pissed. I’ve had it up to here with my brother’s games. It ends today.

The place looks visibly empty, but with Jeff, nothing is ever as it seems. I’m about to walk up the aisles to see if he’s hiding behind any chairs when a strict voice behind me calls out my name.

“Kennedy? What are you doing here?” Emma asks, surprising the living shit out of me.

“Professor Harper?” I croak, my gaze still scanning the room.

When there is no sign of him, I relax a little, but not enough to put my mind at ease.

“Is there something I can do for you?” Emma says, reminding me of her presence.

Shit.

Think fast, Ken.

Think fast, girl.

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Oh?”

“Colt told me where to find you. I thought we might have a little talk, just us girls.”

“Us girls?” she repeats skeptically.

“Yes,” I confirm evenly. “Colt tells me you might be pregnant.”

“He did, did he?” She scowls, not pleased that her boyfriend has spilled the beans with me.

“Yes. I didn’t realize you two were so serious,” I state sweetly while eyeing her up and down as if she were lacking.

“We are. However, I don’t see why that should concern you.”

“Right. I guess you wouldn’t, but it does. I grew up with Colt all my life. He’s what you would call my annoying older brother in a sense.”

“Colt has enough siblings.”

You don’t have to tell me, sister. I’m in love with one of them.

“Doesn’t change the fact he’s still my family, and we protect our own.” I throw in my pearly-white smile, the one that is sure to take her off the scent as to why I’m really here.

“If I didn’t know any better, that sounds vaguely like a threat, Miss Ryland. If that was your intention, I have to warn you I don’t deal well with threats.”

“Please, Emma. You can call me Kennedy. And no, I’m not threatening you. I just want to make sure your intentions with Colt are noble. However, if this baby is somehow the way you found to trap him, or if you don’t care for him as he does you, then yes, it is a threat.”

I watch Emma walk over to her desk and sit on its edge, crossing her arms over her chest while staring me down.

I have to give her credit.

The look she’s leveling me with would put the fear of God in most people.

Sorry, Emma. I don't scare easily.

But when all this shit is over, I truly hope we can be friends.

“What some people consider to be an admirable action to protect their friends, others might call a toxic state of possessiveness. Immature jealousy or even envy of what they can never have.”

I can't help but laugh.

She really is a ballbuster.

Perfect for Colt.

“You were always my favorite teacher, Emma. It'll be fun having you around,” I singsong before strutting out of her classroom.

Okay.

Emma is fine. She's safe. So maybe my asshole of a father really did just want to talk shop with her. But that still doesn't answer why Jeff is here. Maybe our father called him for something. Maybe his car broke down, and he needs Jeff to come and pick him up.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Maybe.

All these fucking maybes are doing my head in. My paranoia could be playing tricks on me, but my gut tells me otherwise. It tells me that Jeff is up to no good. What that is exactly, I haven't the faintest idea. I decide to head over to my father's office, hoping he can tell me where his son is. Although, I'm sure that, by now, Tommyboy has told his family and my father that our engagement is off, which means that I'm in for one hell of a tongue-lashing.

I don't have time for that, though.

I need to get back to Lincoln.

He needs me.

“Fuck you, brother. I'll deal with you another day,” I grit out, heading toward the parking lot instead of my father's office. But just as I make up my mind to leave, a loud cry rings through the air, chilling me to the bone. I run in toward it, knowing the sound of that voice could only belong to one person.

“Emma!” I shout, running madly through the halls only to stop in my tracks, Jefferson standing right at the precipice of the stairs leading to the first floor.

“You're too late, sister.” He smiles, that ghastly maniacal grin of his that has me cringing.

“What did you do?!”

“The same that was done to me. Tell Colt I’m done with him now. Consider us even,” he explains, walking slowly toward me while I stay rooted to my spot. He stops when he’s shoulder to shoulder with me, and I try not to flinch when he pulls my hair off my shoulder.

“All that’s left is one more chess piece to move on the board,” he whispers in my ear. “Sometimes, no matter how well the game is played, the queen can’t save her king. Be prepared for my checkmate, dear sister. It’s coming sooner than you think.”

Chapter 26



Lincoln

I'm already at the door when Easton's truck drives up to the estate. I naturally assumed I'd be nervous when Owen got here, but instead, here I am, palms sweaty and heart beating at the thought of seeing Scarlett.

When East parks his car right in front of the house, I catch a glimpse of her tear-soaked face through the window, my best friend comfortingly whispering something in her ear to soothe her nerves. He dries her eyes and gets out of the car, throwing me a knowing nod before he opens her door. I wait on bated breath, wondering if the cause of her tears stems from happiness to know she has a brother or sadness for being deprived of one for so long. I, too, battle the same emotions.

Scarlett steps out of the vehicle and walks slowly toward me, Easton right behind her for support. When she reaches me, I swallow the lump in my throat and square my shoulders, so she can take comfort in the fact that one of us has got their shit together.

But when her eyes lift off the ground and finally meet mine, I see the wear and tear of all the years she thought she was alone in this world, with little to no family to call her own.

"Scar..." My voice breaks at the end.

And with the sound of her name barely escaping my lips, she runs the small distance between us and throws her hands around my neck.

"I'm such a fool. I'm such a fool." She cries onto my shoulder as I hold her tight.

"Shh, Scarlett. Everything is okay," I console, stroking her back.

"No, it's not." She hiccups. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, Scar. Nothing."

She pulls away, her glasses foggy with tears. I take them off her face so she can dry her eyes with her palms while she takes a fortifying breath, before I hand them back to her.

“I knew, Lincoln. I’m so sorry, but I knew.”

I feel my brows pinch together in bafflement.

“You knew I was your brother?”

“No. Not that. I had no idea Owen was my father. I promise you, I didn’t,” she reassures me, almost breathless. “Please don’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you, Scar. It’s okay. Just tell me what you meant.”

She throws a glance over at East, who gives her a reassuring nod. She then turns her attention back to me, fear and sorrow in her eyes.

“My mother made up a story that my father was this struggling singer back in Vegas. I never even imagined Owen could have been my real father. I should have, considering he was always a permanent fixture in my life, but I didn’t. I should have known he loved me like only a father could. I’m ashamed that I was so blind to the truth for so many years. Especially since I knew he had fathered another child outside of his marriage.”

“You knew about me?” I ask, taking a step back as if the world just tilted on its axis.

“I did. God forgive me, but I did.” She starts to shake, her tears falling once more. “He and my mother were extremely close, and he confided in her, and she, in turn, confided in me. I was young and foolish at the time, and I didn’t think anything of it. Before I ever came to Asheville, to me, the name Lincoln was just that, a name. Not a real flesh and bone person. And even when I got here, we had never truly met, and I didn’t think it was my place to reveal such a secret. Especially because I had already given my loyalty to the only father figure that I’ve ever had. But then East and I fell in love, and you and I started spending time together in the same group of friends, and I was riddled with guilt that you didn’t know. Especially since you had just lost your whole family. I know what it feels like to be alone in this world and not have someone we can call our own. But instead of telling you the truth, I kept my vow to Owen that you’d never hear it from me. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The anguish she’s feeling is heartbreaking, and the need to unburden her of all this guilt she’s been carrying around for so many years is overwhelming. Instantly my protective nature takes over, and I bring her once more into my arms. She melts into my embrace immediately, and the sibling

bond that I've always shared with Colt kicks in.

"You were a child, Scar. A child who had lost her mother and was brought to a new place where the only people you could trust were the ones that had always been in your life. I don't judge you for wanting to be loyal to the one person who has always given you love and affection. But you're not alone anymore. You have a large family now. A man who loves you with all his heart and a brother who cares for you and very much like to get to know you better."

She pulls away just enough to look up at my face.

"You forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," I answer truthfully, gifting her a warm smile.

And when her quivering lips stretch into a beaming smile of her own, my soul sings, and I hug her once more, suddenly laughing at how my life has done a complete one-eighty.

Less than forty-eight hours ago, I had no one.

Now I have a brother who would follow me to the ends of the earth and a sister who sings like an angel and has the heart of one.

Easton clears his throat beside us, making us aware of his presence.

"I hate to break up this family reunion, but you guys are forgetting that Owen should be here any minute. How about we go in and get ready to give that asshole a piece of our minds."

"East—"

"Save it, Scar. Don't defend that asshole. What he did, keeping you guys in the dark, was wrong. I don't care how much you love the prick, he was wrong, and you guys need to confront his ass."

I feel Scarlett's reluctance in regards to Easton's harsh words, but he's right to a point. My uncle, nay, my *father*, needs to come clean and explain why he chose to keep us both in the dark for so long. But a part of me understands Scarlett's hesitation. For all his faults, and there are many, Owen has always tried to be there for us in his own way. He was there for Scarlett when her mother died, making sure she had a safe place to stay at such a vulnerable age. He has been my constant, the one person I would go to when I felt unsure or fragile. But his lie not only deprived me of a father that I could have looked up to, but it also enabled me to buy into the lie that I was Montgomery's illegitimate son. And that lie almost cost me my sanity.

"Are you going to invite us in, or are we going to freeze our butts off out

here waiting for this schmuck?" Easton smirks, pulling his love out of my arms and into his own.

And just as I'm about to lead them inside, we hear a car in the distance drive our way.

"It's showtime," East announces, too enthusiastic for my liking.

"Go inside," I order. "And East, whatever you hear, I want you to keep your opinions to yourself. Scarlett and I have to be the ones to confront him, as well as decide if we want him in our lives after he's said his piece."

"Save me the lecture, Linc. Scar has been on my case all morning to give the jerk a chance. I swear you two are more alike than you know. Why I never saw the resemblance in the first place is baffling to me."

"I actually think I look more like Colt than Linc," Scarlett counters with a mischievous smile.

"Fuck, baby. Don't say shit like that. I do not want to have the mental picture of Colt's cocky-ass face the next time my face is in between your legs."

"Easton!" She slaps his shoulder teasingly.

"What? It's true!" He pouts, pretending to cringe at the idea.

"I love you both to death, but if we're going to do this, then let's get ready. He's here," I warn, just as I see a flash of Owen's car bumper and headlights.

Both East and my sister hurry inside while I stand unmoving, wanting to be the first person my father sees. He slowly gets out of the car, his shades perched on the bridge of his nose.

"Long night?" I ask, keeping my voice even.

"The longest. Still haven't cured the mean hangover I got on New Year's two nights ago," he mumbles, rubbing his forehead.

"I saw that. I've never known you to try and find the answers to your problems at the bottom of the bottle, Uncle."

"Who says I was?" He arches a brow. "I could have been just celebrating the upcoming year like everyone else was that night at the party."

"I don't think you were. I know the look a man gets in his eyes when he's trying to escape his misery. And you, Uncle, were the spitting image of that."

He smiles and pats me on the back.

"I forgot how perceptive you've always been, son. Nothing gets past you, does it?"

Son.

All my life, he's called me that, but only now do I realize it was never meant to be an endearment.

It was just his inconspicuous way of claiming me as his own.

"I will tell you one thing, though," he adds less cheerfully. "I never was one to handle my liquor well. I've always enjoyed a glass of bourbon here and there, but it's been ages since I let myself fully indulge."

"And why is that?"

"An abundance of alcohol in the bloodstream makes for poor decision-making. Let's leave it at that, son," he continues on with a frown. "But let's not waste our time on such thoughts. How about you tell me why you called me this morning to meet up. What's on your mind, son, and how can I help?"

"Let's go in. I'm sure it will be clear to you as to why I called in a minute."

"Sounds mysterious. But okay then, I'll bite." He chuckles, taking his shades off his face and storing them in his inside coat pocket. He then places his hand on my shoulder as we walk in through my front door, and I lead him into the living room where Scarlett and East are waiting for him.

"Scarlett. Easton. What a lovely surprise. I didn't know you'd be here, too." He smiles, albeit perplexed with their presence.

Scarlett squeezes Easton's knee—her silent way of telling him to behave—before she stands up off the couch and directs her deep brown eyes onto the man standing at my side.

"Hello, Father. It's nice to see you, too."

Owen's face pales as he steps back away from me, his erratic gaze bouncing off Scarlett and me.

"You... you... you know," he stutters.

"And what exactly do you think we know, Owen? That you're Scarlett's father?" I question coldly while walking to stand at Scarlett's side. "Or that you're mine?"

The revelation knocks the wind out of him, forcing him to lean against the closest piece of furniture he can find to keep his balance. Scarlett's protective instincts kick in, and she starts to rush to his side, but I hold her arm to keep her beside me.

"You've gone a little pale there, Turner? Cat got your tongue?" East can't help but provoke.

"Easton, not now," Scar reprimands, but she makes no further attempt to aid our father.

“I have to say, I have imagined this day coming in many ways, but never with you two together,” Owen explains with a meek chuckle. “Let me just sit down for a bit, so I can gather my bearings, then I’ll tell you all you want to know.”

He sits down on the armchair, running his hand through his dark hair, a nervous tic that I share with him.

How did I never see what was right in front of my eyes?

How did I let Crawford and Teddy’s hate blind me from the truth?

“Dad,” Scarlett whispers worriedly. “Are you okay?”

Owen’s gaze lifts off the floor, a tender smile to his lips, as he stares at us both.

“You have any idea how long I’ve waited to hear you call me that, my sweet girl? It’s been torture keeping this secret from you.” He then redirects his sights on me. “From you too, Lincoln. I must have opened my mouth a million times to tell you, but I always lacked the courage to do it. For that alone, I don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

“Quit stalling and start talking, old man.”

“Easton, enough. Give him some time,” Scarlett chastises, taking a seat beside her fiancé.

“He’s had time, Scar. He’s had shitloads of time to come clean, and he didn’t.”

“Easton’s right, Scarlett,” I interject in agreement. “You have had plenty of time to tell us the truth, Owen. I won’t let you leave this house until you tell me everything. And I mean everything.”

My father’s forest-green eyes take on a sorrowful hue, but he gives me a curt nod, conceding to my demands.

“Where do you want me to start?” he questions, defeated.

“From the beginning would be preferable,” I retort, crossing my arms over my chest.

“That far back, huh?” He chuckles, disheartened. “Very well, if you insist.” He lets out a long exhale and leans back in his chair. “When I was younger than you are now, I thought the world revolved around me. That it was there at my beck and call to do with how I best saw fit. My parents weren’t at all pleased with the shallow, insubordinate, selfish person I was becoming, though.”

“Mystery solved on where Colt gets it from.” Easton coughs under his breath.

“Shh. Let him speak,” Scarlett is quick to scold.

“No, no. Your fiancé is right. My Colt was a lot like me back in the day, although I think a certain professor has done a nice job at polishing his rough edges.” Owen beams proudly. “But I digress. Since I was becoming what my parents considered to be a tarnished stain on their good name, they arranged for me to spend all my free time at the local Baptist church and to be a contributing member of society by being a part of their various charities. If I hadn’t been under the assumption that it was either that or risk losing my inheritance, I would have put up a larger fight. Of course, I only conceded because, in the back of my mind, I thought I could bullshit my way out of the mess I had found myself in.”

Now even I have to admit his description of himself sounds eerily similar to my brother.

“And that was when I first met your mother, Scarlett,” he explains with adoration in his voice. “You remind me so much of Angela, sweetheart. Like you, she had a voice that could melt even the most jaded of hearts, and her friendship, to this day, is one I will always cherish. She opened my eyes to a world I never took the time to see. As we spent endless days on the Southside helping those in need, I began to realize how fortunate I was and how unjust life can be for others. She was the first person who took the time to make me understand that I had a responsibility to help those who could not help themselves. To put aside my own selfish antics and care about something greater than trying to satisfy my own shallow needs. Being Angela’s friend had a profound impact on me, and for a moment, I confused my awe for her for love.”

He lets out a sigh, his stare fixed on Scarlett’s watery gaze.

“Angela never gave in to my attempts to woo her, though. She had plans to leave Asheville to become a singer. She couldn’t do that if she made the fatal error of falling in love with me. I never faulted her for her ambitions. I wanted to see her fly, not clip her wings. Still, I had my reservations that I would ever care for a woman quite like I loved your mother, Scarlett. She used to tease me that one day I would know what real love was and that it would knock me on my ass. And like all things, Angela was right about that, too,” he explains in a wistful tone. “She had just told me that she was going to leave after she graduated her senior year of high school when my parents insisted Price and I take the Richfield sisters to that year’s debutante ball.”

At the mention of his father, Easton’s ears perk up.

“My dad took Colleen Richfield to a ball?” he asks incredulously.

“I didn’t say that. Unbeknownst to us at the time, his grandmother was in conversations with the Richfield matriarch in handing him off to Sierra—your mother, Lincoln.”

“And the plot thickens,” I retort, enrapt by his story.

“Yes, it sure does.” He grins. “While his old shrew of a grandmother thought the youngest Richfield heir would be an appropriate match for her only grandson, my parents thought I would be a perfect contender to win the heart of none other than Richfield’s eldest daughter—Colleen. I admit that I didn’t pay their wishes much mind at the time. All the occasions that I had been in Colleen’s presence, I couldn’t stand her *holier-than-thou* personality. While Angela was warm and loving, Colleen had all the traits of an ice sculpture. But then came that night...” he whispers as if thrown back into the memory. “Everything changed that night. I should have known that Angela was right. When love strikes you down, it’s very hard to get up on your feet again. I fell in love irrefutably with Colleen that night, and I’ve never stopped since.” He laughs joyfully, like one would when they meet their soulmate. “I instantly became infatuated with her. Followed her around like some lovesick fool. Promised her the stars and the moon if only she gave me half a chance, but even then, she knew I was full of shit.” He continues to chuckle. “She saw right through me and called me on my shit, and God help me, but I fell in love with her even harder than I could ever have imagined possible. Somehow, I broke through her resolve to keep from falling in love with me, and the day I asked her to be my wife is still one of my happiest memories.”

“If you loved my aunt so much, then how could you ever betray her with my mother?” I question, honestly baffled by his tale.

“Oh, son. There is still so much you don’t know.” He deflates, his shoulders slumping. “Love, no matter how pure, still holds tribulations. My marriage with Colleen was no different. I loved her with all my heart, but being a part of the Richfield legacy took its toll on me. Once Meredith was born, I finally saw the sacrifices I had to make, and for years I struggled with them. So much so that one day, I packed up my bags and left.”

“Wait? You left Aunt Colleen? Why is it the first time I’m hearing about this? Does Colt know?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “No one does. When I left, Colleen made sure to tell everyone I was away on Richfield business in Europe. No one had the slightest inkling that I was just a skip and jump away in Vegas with Angela.

She was the shoulder I went crying to when my marriage was falling apart.”

“And that’s when it happened,” Scarlett chimes in, piecing the puzzle together.

“I’m ashamed to say it was. I was a heartbroken mess, and Angela had spent the last few years alone, and the loneliness of it all had worn her down, too. One night, one thing led to another, and we found solace in each other’s arms. The very next morning, we knew we had made a big mistake. We cared for each other deeply, but we weren’t in love. My heart already belonged to Colleen, and Angela only had room in hers for her music. I was about to put my tail in between my legs, go home, and beg Colleen to take me back when she surprised me by coming to Vegas herself. That’s when she told me she was pregnant with Colt. With a positive pregnancy test in one hand and divorce papers in the other, she told me I had a decision to make. Either I come home to be the father to my children that they deserved, or I let her and my kids go on without me. I made the decision there and then that Colleen and my babies were more important to me than any sacrifice the Richfield name demanded of me. But if I was going to come home, I needed to be honest with my wife. I told her what had transpired between Angela and me, and if she didn’t want me back because of it, I would understand.”

“But she did take you back,” Scarlett adds, just as immersed in the story as the rest of us.

“Oh, Colleen took me back alright, but her heart was off-limits to me now,” he confesses on a somber exhale. “I was welcomed back into my house, and as far as the Northside was concerned, Colleen and I were a united front. But behind closed doors, she wouldn’t even let me touch her. Those months that she kept me at arm’s length were brutal. I thought for sure I had lost my wife completely. Then one night, as I was passed out drunk on my couch after drinking my sorrows away, my love came back to me. And without so much as a word, we made love, and for the first time in months, I dared to hope. I was so starved for her affection, so desperate for Colleen to love me again, I only saw what I wanted to. The next morning, I woke up in a daze, wondering where she had gone to in the middle of the night, and found her lying asleep in our bed. I woke her up and told her all the words she wouldn’t let me say the night prior. How much I would only ever love her, and if she gave me a chance, I’d do whatever it would take to win her heart. Even damn my soul if need be. With tears in her eyes, she accepted my terms, but as the moment passed and I thanked God that she sought me out

the night before, she became quiet. Too quiet.”

“It wasn’t my aunt who sought you out, was it? It was my mother,” I finish for him, finally understanding how I was conceived.

“Yes,” he confirms, both embarrassed that he was too drunk to know the difference between his wife and his sister-in-law, as well as at having to be the one to tell me that my mother tricked him when he was at his most vulnerable.

“Sierra was young, barely twenty, when she tried to ruin my life just to hurt her sister. She never forgave Colleen’s part in her arranged marriage to Crawford. As far as she was concerned, Colleen was the instrumental force that kept her from marrying the man she loved—Montgomery Ryland. So, if she was miserable, she wanted her sister to feel the same pain of losing the man she had given her heart to.”

Unable to process all of this standing up, I slump down onto the couch at Scarlett’s side, her hand immediately entwining with mine.

“I don’t want to tarnish the memory of your mother in any way, Lincoln. That’s not why I’m telling you this. You asked me for the truth, and although I wish I could spare you this grief, I’m being as honest with you as I can be. What she did, combined with my own betrayal with Angela, could have easily ruined my marriage and my life as well as my children’s lives—not only Colleen’s. I never forgave Sierra for that, and when she told me she was pregnant with you, my resentment for her only grew. Colleen was more forgiving than I was, considering she was pregnant at the time. And then, as if God wasn’t happy with my suffering, Angela announced she was pregnant with you, Scarlett.”

“Were condoms not around back then, old man? I mean, for fuck’s sake!” Easton belts out, throwing his arms in the air.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I did use a condom when Scarlett was conceived. The thought, however, never crossed my mind when I thought I was making love to my wife. So, save me the outraged theatrics of how poorly I conducted myself in the past. I do just fine chastising my foolish behaviors on my own,” he retorts snidely.

Easton throws him an unimpressed glower, while Scarlett just squeezes my hand tighter.

“Why didn’t you tell us, Dad? Why didn’t you tell me?” she questions, not hiding the hurt in her voice.

“Oh, my sweet, sweet, girl. I wanted to. I really did want to. But how do

you have that type of conversation with a child? Your mother was adamant I keep the truth from you at all costs, worried you'd think less of her. She honestly believed you'd think she was some kind of homewrecker when it couldn't be further from the truth. And when she passed, I didn't have it in my heart to break the promise I made to her. I swore I would always be in your life, that I would watch over you, that you would never want for anything. And I kept that promise, Scarlett, even if I could never tell you how it's been my greatest joy as a father watching you grow up into the woman you've become. That goes for you too, Lincoln. A man could not be prouder of a son."

"A son you let live with a monster who abused and tormented him every chance he could. Yes. I can see how proud you must have been."

"Lincoln—" he starts to protest.

"No, Owen. You might have given my sister a safe space to fall back on when her mother died, but with me, all I got was your shoulder to cry on. You knew how cruel and mean Crawford could be, how my mother and I suffered in this very house while he and Teddy were alive. And yet, you never lifted a finger to help us. Instead, you held on to the resentment of what she did to you, and because of it, we both suffered for it."

I stand up to my feet, coaxing him to do the same, the tears in his eyes unable to move my heart.

"I understand why you kept silent. You had my cousins—no—you had my sisters and brother to worry about. Coming clean and telling the world you fathered a bastard with your own sister-in-law would have broken their hearts as well as ruined your reputation. You might have kept Scarlett in the dark, so as to pay homage to her mother's memory, but with me..." I take in a breath to keep my thumping heartbeat in check. "With me, you fed me to the wolves to fend for myself. I almost lost the love of my life because of your lie. Because you selfishly chose your self-image over my wellbeing."

"What? I don't understand. How could I have possibly—"

I scoff at his naive ignorance.

"Crawford told me my father was Montgomery, Owen. He told me that Kennedy was my sister. The one girl I have loved all my life. That's the lie you could have prevented happening if only you had been decent enough to claim me as your son."

"Holy shit!!!" Easton bellows behind me. "Fuck! So that's why you let her get engaged to your dick brother and then Tommyboy. Jesus, what a

mindfuck!”

“Mindfuck is right. And you, *Father*,” I spit out the word sarcastically, “In my mind, are just as responsible for every minute I spent in utter agony. If not more. I’d expect such vile action from them, but you... I fucking loved you, and you only ever loved yourself.”

“Lincoln,” Scarlett whispers beside me, pain in her gaze for both her newfound brother and the father who was always at her side since day one.

I tilt my head to the side and clasp my palms to her cheeks.

“I’m so happy to call you my sister, Scarlett. You’ve made my best friend whole, and I will never have enough words to tell you just how grateful I am that you came into both of our lives. But don’t ask me to forgive him. I can’t. The wounds are just too fresh.”

She lowers her eyes as I press my lips to her forehead. I then turn my attention back to Owen, who looks just as lost as I once felt.

But not anymore.

“Please, leave, Owen. You’ve done enough for one lifetime. You’re no longer welcome in my house.”

But just as he’s about to beg me to reconsider, a slam on my front door grabs my attention. I turn around, and suddenly I see my girl, tears falling down her cheeks.

“Ken! What’s wrong?” I rush to her.

“It’s Emma. Oh, God. It’s Emma. We need to go. Now! We need to go!”

“What? What do you mean? Talk to me, sweetheart. What happened to Emma?”

“She fell. She was at the university, and she fell down a flight of stairs. Please! We have to go! Colt and Emma need us.”

“Fuck!” Easton howls, grabbing Scarlett’s winter coat, handing it to her while he struggles to put his on.

“Hurry! We need to see if the baby is okay!”

“Baby?!” Owen interrupts, alerting Ken to his presence.

“Didn’t you know? You’re about to be a grandpa, old man,” Easton goads before grabbing Scarlett’s hand and clipping him on the shoulder.

We all rush outside in a mad dash, Owen running to his car while East and Scarlett take his truck.

“Go on ahead in front of us. I’ll take my car and meet you there,” I shout over at Easton.

He gives me a curt nod and starts blaring his horn for Owen to get the

fuck out of the way so he can rush to Colt's side.

"It's going to be okay, Ken. I promise. Everything is going to be okay." I try to console her as we run to my garage.

"No. It's not. He's lost his goddamn mind, Linc. He's lost it," she mumbles incoherently as we reach my car.

I'm about to ask what she's trying to tell me when a black envelope on my windshield chills my blood cold. Before I have time to grab it, Ken is already on it, breaking the red seal and taking out its contents.

"See? I told you! He's lost it," she proclaims before handing me the dreaded Society letter.



YOUR TIME HAS COME AT LAST, LINCOLN.
WE HAVE BEEN EAGERLY EXPECTING YOU.
THIS IS YOUR ONLY CHANCE FOR REDEMPTION.
SACRIFICE YOURSELF, AND ALL WILL BE FORGIVEN.
DON'T ASK FOR HELP. DON'T TELL YOUR FRIENDS.
IF YOU DO, THEIR BLOOD WILL BE ON YOUR HANDS.
ALL EVIL MEN MUST PERISH.
YOUR JUDGMENT DAY HAS FINALLY ARRIVED.

THE SOCIETY



“How... how did you know about this, Ken?”

“Linc, we don’t have time for this now. Look? He left us coordinates to put in the GPS. This is where he is. We have to go there now and stop him.”

I place my hands on her shoulders and give her a little shake since it’s blatantly apparent my love knows more than she led us to believe.

“Stop who, Ken?! Who is doing this to us? Who is The Society?!”

“My twin.”

Chapter 27



Lincoln

“I don’t like this,” I exclaim as we enter a part of the Southside that most people who actually live here wouldn’t dare enter. “We also shouldn’t have left the letter behind with the coordinates written on the back.”

“We had to, Linc. Stone and Finn are bound to come home and see it. Someone needs to know where we are,” Kennedy says, squeezing my knee while always keeping her eyes on the road.

“And just exactly is that? I have no idea where the fuck we are. Do you?”

She shakes her head despondently.

“Well, wherever Jeff is leading us can’t be good. You should have stayed behind like I told you.”

“No. I won’t leave you. Not when I just got you. Besides, whatever my deranged brother has planned, I need to be there to stop him. I might be the only person who can.”

“I still don’t feel comfortable leading you into danger. It’s obvious he only wants me. I just don’t know why.”

She chews on her bottom lip nervously.

“We’ll know soon enough. We’re here,” she states, pointing to a run-down gas station.

“It looks like it went out of business years ago. Why would he bring us here?”

“Only one way to find out, Hamilton. Come on,” she orders, and before I’m able to grab hold of her, Kennedy is already jumping out of the car.

“Shit,” I grumble as I quickly get the seatbelt off to follow her.

When I finally get out of the car, Kennedy is madly scanning her surroundings, kicking the dirt at her feet when she doesn’t find anything.

“That fucker! He’s toying with us,” she shouts, throwing her arms in the

air in frustration.

“He’s been fucking with us for the past few months. I think that’s half of the fun for him. Watching us get rattled and confused.”

“I know. Still, he brought us here for a reason. We just need to look around and find out what it is.”

As we search the empty station, I throw a glance at my love every few seconds.

“I can feel you staring, Hamilton. If you have something to say, just say it.”

“You know that one day you’ll have to tell me how you found out about all of this. About the letters from The Society. About Jeff. All of it.”

“Linc, I think we have more pressing matters to worry about than me playing at Veronica Mars,” she quips back, still looking around for some small clue as to why we are here.

I stop what I’m doing and walk over to her, wrapping my arms around her waist to stop her manic state. I need to know just how far into the rabbit hole my girl has gone.

“No, sweetheart. I think I’m going to need those answers now.”

She looks away from me, but I gently grab her chin, so she has no choice but to look me in the eye.

“The truth, Ken. How did you find out?”

She lets out an exhale and nestles her head onto my chest.

“I knew something was wrong when school started. You and the guys were all acting so strange. Like you were about to jump out of your skin at any given moment. And when months passed by, and you all refused to tell me what was going on, I had no choice but to get the answers myself. So I did some snooping in your room and found the first letter in one of your books. When I saw it, I knew either someone was playing a cruel joke on you, or it was legit, and you were in danger. I’ve been on high alert ever since.”

“And why would you think your brother is behind all this?”

“He just is. There is nobody else who could have concocted such a plan.”

“Oh, no? What about your fiancé? I’m sure he has a bone to pick with me after stealing his girl away.”

“First of all, it’s ex-fiancé. And you heard him yourself on the phone. He’s fine with us being together. It’s not Tommyboy, Lincoln. He wouldn’t do this. He’s my friend.”

“Friend?” I scoff the word like it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

“Linc, are you really going to play the jealousy card right now? Look around. We are in deep shit here. Your focus should be on my brother and not Tom.”

“Fine. If you think this is your twin’s handiwork, then I’ll believe you. But why, though? Why would he go through all this trouble just to make our lives miserable?”

“Because you have what he never will.”

“And what’s that?”

“The Richfield name.” And just as the cursed name leaves her lips, her eyes narrow in on something behind me. “I know where he’s taking us.”

“Where?” I ask after letting her go.

She walks across the street to a nearby tree and picks something up off the snow-covered ground.

“What is it?”

She turns around, her face showing a deathly shade of white.

“All stories have a beginning, Linc. This is mine.”

I stare, confused by her cryptic words, my gaze falling to her open palms where a disfigured melted-down toy soldier rests.

“I don’t understand. What is that?”

“A toy.”

“I can see that, but what does it mean?”

“It’s my father’s,” she stammers. “I remember seeing it when I was younger, lying on a dirty floor. Jeff picked it up, and my father slapped it out of his hands. He said that we would never know what true struggles were because he had made sure to never live in filth again. It was up to us now to finish what he started.”

“When did this happen? Where, Ken?”

“I had forgotten. I had forgotten.” She shakes her head, staring at the small toy in her hands.

“What did you forget?”

She swallows, her chest heaving up and down.

“Momma was off with Aunt Colleen somewhere for the weekend, some kind of girl’s retreat, I think. My father was pissed he had to stay back and look after us. Jeff had just broken one of my favorite toys, and I couldn’t stop crying. My father got so mad that he packed us in the car and took us for the longest drive. I had never seen him so angry. I remember being afraid. Jeff

wasn't, though. He was just curious where our father was taking us."

"And where was that?"

Her head starts to look around the deeply wooded area behind the gas station.

"Ken? Where did your father take you that day?"

"He took us back to our beginning, he said," she whispers as if trapped in the memory. "He took us to the house he grew up in on the Southside to show us that we had to do everything in our power not to return to this level of squalor. This is where he wants us to go. Do you know what that means?" she asks, strangling the small object in her fist. "It means Jeff knows I'm with you. I'm the only one who would have understood the clue he left behind."

Fuck.

I run my fingers through my hair, not happy her deranged brother has pulled her into his games.

"Ken, tell me where it is. Tell me and go back to the Northside. Everyone should be back at the hospital. Go there and tell them everything you told me."

She shakes her head, vehemently denying my order.

"I'm not leaving you, Lincoln. Not now. Not ever. Besides, I couldn't tell you where to find the house, even if I wanted to. I need to show you and pray I still remember how to get there. We're going to have to leave the car, though," she explains, her gaze tilting to the woods that surprisingly feel rather reminiscent of the Oakley Woods next to my house. "Do you have your phone with you? I left mine in my bag back at the house."

"No. When you told us what happened to Emma, I left before I could even think of grabbing it."

"No matter," she states, too calm for me not to worry. "When Finn and Stone see the letter, I'm sure they'll get help. We just need to make sure they know where to look," she says matter of factly, running back to the car and opening up my glove box. She scribbles something down and places it on the windshield of my car, just like the twisted Society letter her brother left earlier today.

She runs back to me and entwines her fingers with mine, leading me into the unknown woods. Even though it snowed, it isn't enough to leave our footprints behind. I really hope whatever Ken wrote is enough to lead our friends to whatever place Jeff wants us to go. Or maybe I should be asking for the contrary. That our friends don't find us and avoid them the danger

Ken and I are so willing to face on our own.

We walk for miles, Ken looking every which way, unsure of her steps.

Whatever lesson their father wanted to make by taking his children to the place he grew up, it didn't make as much of an impression on her as it did on her twin. But just as I'm about to call an end to our search, an old sign with my name on it stops me in my tracks.

Richfield Plantation.

"We're getting closer," she says, relieved that she's found what she was looking for.

"Does my family own this property?" I ask, still bewildered at finding the wooden sign nailed to a tree trunk.

"I think so. Why do you look so surprised? Your family owns most of the property around Asheville, the Southside included. This was just another plantation they had back in the day. I'm sure there are many more that you don't even know about," she explains, almost as if she has a better understanding of my family's history than I do.

I keep staring at the sign, an ominous feeling running down my spine.

"Lincoln! Come on!" she shouts, slapping me out of my stupor.

I follow her lead while my intuition screams at me, demanding we turn back.

Nothing good will come out of today.

Death's song whispers in my ear, its claws scratching down my throat, as my love continues to pull me by the hand to an unmarked grave that may soon be my final resting place. I make sure to keep all these thoughts running through my mind hidden from Ken, as she walks with purpose through the woods, adamant at stopping an evil that may not surrender so easily.

"There!" she shouts victoriously, pointing to a ramshackle shed, very similar to the one that still haunts my dreams.

"I thought you said we were going to the place where your father grew up."

"And we are. This is it."

This is not a home.

This is where hope comes to die.

On hesitant feet, I walk closer to the old slave shack while plagued with all the evil, inhumane things that must have been done here years ago. It's only when I draw closer that I realize it's not the only one. Behind it, at least fifteen more wooden houses stand, all in various states of neglect. Hidden

away, deep in the Southside, these slave quarters still remain erect, a reminder of how mankind is capable of the most monstrous of acts.

I'm still trapped in my own thoughts when Ken lets go of my hand and races toward the house.

"KEN! NO!" I scream, running after her, climbing the three small steps to the house's porch, and entering the main door.

"KENNEDY!" I yell when I see her body lying unconscious on the dirty floor.

I kneel beside her to see if she's still breathing when I feel a shadow looming behind me, forcing me to look over my shoulder. I only catch a glimpse of Jeff's mad grin before he hits my head with the butt of the gun, resulting in sudden darkness pulling me under and away from whatever diabolical plans he has in store for us.



I hear mumbled voices around me, but it hurts to open my eyes to see who they belong to. My head is splitting in two, and my ears are still ringing loudly from the pistol-whipping I suffered. I try to rub at the back of my scalp to ease the ache, only to find that I can't since my wrists are bound and tied to a chair with cable ties.

"Sorry about that, sis. You wouldn't go down without a fight. You never do."

"Jefferson?" I croak out too softly for him to hear me.

I try to regain consciousness, but as my eyelids struggle to open, I'm instantly reminded of where we are and, most importantly, why we are here.

"Let me go, Jeff! This isn't funny!" Kennedy yells beside me, wrestling to break out of her own binds.

"Who says it's supposed to be?"

"Jeff, let me go. I mean it!"

"Why should I? Besides, aren't you comfortable sitting there? I mean, is it so different than being tied to the role society has put you in? The one where you have to pretend to be something you're not just so that everyone can marvel and wonder how they could ever be as perfect as Kennedy Ryland."

"You know I'm far from perfect." She snaps, still rocking on her chair, attempting to break free.

“That’s just it. You are. Or at least you could be if you only gave a shit.”

“Jeff,” she growls through gritted teeth. “Get me the fuck out of here. NOW!”

“Not so fast, dear sister. We still have a show to put on, and I don’t want you to miss a single second of it.”

“What about me? Am I a part of the act?” I ask, bringing Jefferson’s attention to me.

“Hello there, sleepyhead. I was wondering when you’d join us.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Some asshole got the drop on me from behind like a coward.”

“Linc,” Ken whispers beside me, a warning in her tone.

“No, sis. Let Lincoln have his say. I’m dying to see how he’s going to play this.” Jeff grins, rubbing the barrel of his gun under his chin.

“How about you let Ken go, and I’ll show you just how I intend to end this little game of yours.”

“Always so altruistic. Always wanting to be the knight in shining armor. But I’m having a hard time seeing how you’ll be able to save her.”

“Why would Ken need saving? What are you talking about, Jeff?”

“I’m talking about you watching the woman you love die before your very eyes and you not being able to do a thing about it.”

The fucking bastard is bluffing.

He must be.

“You won’t hurt Ken,” I interject, calling his bluff. “You love her just as much as I do.”

“MORE! I love her more! I have sacrificed everything! Everything so she could have the world at her feet, and how does she repay me? She has the nerve to fall in love with the one man I have vowed to ruin. The sister I love doesn’t exist. Or maybe she never did. So, this is me righting a wrong. She’s made her decision, and now I’m making mine.”

“Don’t listen to him, Linc. He’s only trying to rile you up,” Ken explains assuredly, but I’m not as convinced her brother wouldn’t follow through on his threat.

“You really are psychotic. You know that, asshole?!” Kennedy adds, trying to pull her brother’s attention off me and back onto her.

“There is that word again. Tsk, tsk. I thought you’d have a better definition for me by now.” He laughs sinisterly. “I always liked the term sociopath myself. Just has a certain ring to it, doesn’t it? Psychopath just feels

so messy to me. Uncouth and without flair. It lacks that *je ne sais quoi*. Definitely too unappealing for me, and it sure as shit doesn't do me justice." He laughs.

"Looks like the sessions with Georgia really fucked with your head, brother."

"Now, Ken. Don't tell me the good doctor didn't make an impression on you, too? I'm sure she left a small shadow of doubt in your head that it might have been you she was talking about. I saw the look in your eye when she and our father were arguing in the hall. How when he blurted out the words psychopath and sociopath, you felt your heart beating madly inside you, thinking that somehow she saw your inner demons. Are you going to deny it?"

Ken thins her lips.

"Well, rest assured she wasn't talking about you. After spending every Saturday morning talking about feelings and shit, during the summer no less, I was over and done with therapy. After a few sessions, I became so bored with her incessant yapping, I knew I needed to do something to force our father into never bringing us back to her office again. Do you want to know what I told her to make that happen, sis? What confession I made that had Georgia calling in the troops and worrying for my mental wellbeing? Well, do you?"

"No," Ken utters with a loud yawn, feigning boredom at her brother's ramblings like he must have been with his shrink.

"Yes, she does," I interject, needing him to keep talking, hoping it will buy us enough time for me to figure out a way to get us out of here.

"Ah. Glad to see at least one of you is interested in playing along." He continues to grin menacingly. "First, Georgia did that whole song and dance asking me questions about Mom, how I felt now that she was dead. Blah blah blah," he explains, waving his gun around. "I mean, I missed Mom. Of course, I did. She was probably the only person who actually saw me for who I was and didn't judge me for it. But I wasn't going to stand around for months on end and cry about it. She died. People die. It's the natural order of life. But I knew saying such things to Georgia would set off some alarms. But then she realized that I was faking my answers and tried to pry into my head more. So one day, I decided to answer one of her questions with the truth to see what would happen."

"What was the question?" I ask, acting interested in his maddening

monologue.

“If I could recall the first memory I had of my mother. Simple enough, no? I’m sure she was expecting me to recite some night that Mom tucked me into bed or took me to the park. Something mundane like that. But that’s not the first memory I have of Mom at all. No. The memory that sprung immediately to mind was when she caught me in the bathtub trying to drown you, Kennedy, and didn’t tell a soul about what I had done.”

Ken’s eyes immediately go wide, her jaw dropping open at his confession.

“I cannot tell you how much I have laughed about that day over the years. How you never questioned why you were always so terrified of the water, not even wanting to take swimming lessons because the mere idea of it scared you to death.”

“I don’t believe you.” Ken shakes her head in denial.

“I don’t care what you believe. It’s the truth. We were three at the time, and Father was supposed to give us our baths and watch over us while we played with our toys. But then he must have gotten side-tracked when one of his whores called his phone. He left us all alone in the tub and went outside so Mom wouldn’t overhear him making plans with his mistress. Hmm. It might have even been Sierra calling.” He points at me with the front of his pistol at the mention of my mother. “Who knows? All I know is that my sister was particularly impossible to tolerate that day,” he says before aiming his sights on Kennedy. “You were babbling on and on, and I just wanted you to shut up so I could play with my toys in silence. I told you various times to shut up, but when you refused, I held you by the neck and pushed your head underwater. Mom found us like that seconds later. She grabbed you out of the tub, trying to calm your hysterical crying, while I just played, finally having the tub all to myself.”

Unable to console her, I watch the blood drain from Kennedy’s face as she processes her brother’s confession.

“When Mom came back to the bathroom after taking you to your room, I knew she was different. Disappointed. Angry. Maybe even afraid of me, but if she was, she didn’t show it. Nor did she bite Dad’s head off for leaving us all alone when he returned. She kept it a secret and never brought the incident up again.”

He lets out a loud exhale, his stiff demeanor instantly relaxing.

“God, that feels good to say at last. Secrets are quite debilitating, aren’t

they? They take their toll after a while. And since I've just shared one of mine with you two, I think it's only fair you start sharing your own."

"Linc and I don't have secrets," Ken is quick to say.

He tilts his head to the side, inspecting his sister.

"She lies well, doesn't she, Linc? Sometimes I think she can lie even better than me. Beautiful, isn't she? Even when the words that fly out of her mouth are complete and utter bullshit."

"Jeff—"

"No, sis. It's time you tell me what I want to hear. Lincoln, too. And spare me the tales about you two being together now, I already know. When you didn't come home on New Year's Day, I got antsy and went looking for you. I kind of wish I didn't, though, since I got quite the eyeful when I found you two lovebirds hooking up all lovey-dovey by a fire. I'd say it was romantic if I didn't find the whole thing nauseating." He shudders in disgust.

"You spied on us?!" Ken shouts, appalled.

"Relax. I only stayed long enough for Lincoln to tell you why he never made his move on you. I swear I thought Colt would never uncover the truth. He sure took his sweet time."

"Wait? So you knew all along I thought we were brother and sister?" I ask in outrage. "How long did you know?"

"Hmm." He lightly taps the barrel of the gun to the top of his head. "I might have been sixteen, perhaps. Teddy had a perverted notion of what constituted pillow talk. He couldn't shut up about how he broke your little heart and fucked with your head. I swear the thought of you crying all alone in your room with the lie he and his dad fed you gave him a boner."

This time I'm the one who is taken aback.

"You and Teddy... you two..."

"Having trouble with your words there, Lincoln?" Jeff taunts. "If you're asking if Teddy and I were a thing, then the answer is no. Him taking his frustration out on me and fucking my ass whenever he felt like it was hardly the basis of a healthy, loving relationship. But since my sister refused to even let the fucker touch her, someone had to pick up the slack. Thanks for that, by the way, Ken. Being Teddy's fuck doll opened my eyes to a new world of pain."

"You're lying!" Ken shouts. "I saw you! I saw you!"

"Saw me what, huh? Just exactly what did you see?" he shouts back at her.

She chews her bottom lip, pure hatred in her gaze.

“I don’t have all day, sis. By now, the police are looking everywhere for you, thinking you kidnapped golden boy over here and pushed Emma to her death, resulting in a miscarriage. Tick tock, sis. You’re running out of time.”

“Why would the police be looking for Ken? And why the fuck would they think she would ever hurt Emma?” I ask, troubled by this new revelation.

“Nuh, uh. Not yet. We’ll get there. First things first. Tell me, Ken, what did you see that made you hate me so? And don’t try to deny it, either. You changed on me back then, and I want to know why.”

“I’m not telling you squat!”

“No? Well, maybe this will have you singing a different tune,” Jeff mutters before cocking his gun and pointing it at my temple.

“Jefferson!!!! STOP!” Ken shouts out in hysterics.

“I want you to tell me. All of it, Ken, or I’ll blow his brains out.”

I stay emotionlessly still while my love pulls at her ties, trying to free herself.

“Stop, sweetheart. Just tell him what he wants to know,” I plead when I see blood dripping from her wrists with how forcefully she’s pulling at the cables.

“I can’t,” she whispers on a sob. “You’ll hate me if I tell you.”

“Never. Never. Just do as he says.”

Ken closes her eyes, letting her tears fall where they may as she composes herself.

“Not getting any younger here, sis.” Jeff snaps.

“Fuck you!”

“Nope. Sister fucking is Linc’s fetish, not mine. Try again.”

She lets out a long exhale, opening her eyelids to stare at her brother like she could murder him on the spot.

“When you and Teddy started to hang out together, I knew something wasn’t right. Teddy isn’t the kind of person who would hang out with his girlfriend’s brother just for kicks. And after he forced himself on me and you said you would make sure he’d never do that again, I needed to know what you both were up to. So one night, I followed you.”

“Let me guess. It was around the same time you put a tracker on my phone?” Jeff asks, lowering his gun from my forehead.

“Yes,” Ken admits, her gaze never wavering from him.

“What next?”

“I followed you to the Southside to a bar. I stayed in the car and waited until you two came out. Only when you did, you weren’t alone. A woman was with you.” She swallows down her disgust before she continues on. “I watched Teddy rape her right there in front of my eyes while you just stood guard and waited for him to finish. I saw you, Jeff! You didn’t even flinch. You just stood there. How could you have just stood there and not helped her?!”

“Help her? Help her?!” he repeats, the pitch of his voice rising. “Better that fucking whore than me! Better her than you! Or was I supposed to let him do to you what he did to that Southie bitch? God, Ken. Get off your fucking high horse and see the world as it is. Teddy scratching his itch with trailer trash scum made it possible for you to be left unscathed. Trust me, you would not have survived suffering in her stead. Do you know why I know that? Because I still bear the scars he left on me from his brutality. So excuse me, sister, if I don’t cry a river for some fucking whore whose john got too rough with her. She got paid for her troubles, while I got jack shit for mine.”

Ken grows silent, both saddened and enraged at hearing her brother’s plight.

“Nope. Don’t do that.” Jeff shakes his head. “I want to hear the rest.”

“There is nothing more to say,” she retorts, looking away from him.

“I know there’s more. You know how I know?” he asks, shoving his hand into his pocket.

Once he has whatever he wants to show us in his hand, he takes two steps toward Kennedy and opens his palm. Her eyes are two huge saucers staring at his hand, both in shock and trepidation.

“These look familiar to you?” he asks.

“Yes.” She nods, looking like the devil himself walked through the door.

I stretch my neck as far as I can, catching a glimpse of two diamond earrings in his palm.

“I thought you might. Now that you understand that there has never been any secret you could keep from me, how about you tell me about how you murdered Teddy?”

What?!

“What is he talking about, Ken?” I demand, wanting desperately for her to deny his claim that she had any hand in my brother’s death.

“Well? Don’t keep loverboy here in suspense. Tell him how you

approached Teddy's whore slash drug peddler and convinced her that the next time he came looking to score, she would sell him a bad batch of heroin. Tell him how you paid for his death with our mother's earrings, no less. Come on now, sis. Don't go all mute on us now that the conversation is finally going somewhere. Tell him. TELL HIM!"

Ken's bloodshot eyes strain to look at me, but in their depths, I see the truth to Jeff's words.

"You caused his overdose?" I ask incredulously.

"I had to stop him, Linc." She begins to sob. "He was hurting you, and he was hurting everyone else that found themselves in his path. When I saw him rape that woman, and I remembered your own mangled and bruised body, I knew something had to be done to stop him. If I didn't, then no one else would, either."

"That wasn't your decision to make, Ken."

"Oh, and whose was it? Yours, perhaps?" Jeff chimes in, tilting his head my way. "Or do you think it's only my sister who has blood on her hands?"

"What are you talking about?" Ken snuffles.

"You know what? You two really could have been something extraordinary if you didn't lie to each other all the time. What you don't know, dear sister, is that both you and your boyfriend here were instrumental in killing Teddy. You made sure he got the drugs that would cause his overdose, while Lincoln watched as Teddy started to choke on his own vomit and did nothing."

"That's not true!" I protest. "I called for help."

"Did you really, though?" Jeff insists. "Or did you stand by his bed and watch the life drain from his eyes?"

"How did you—"

"How do I know all of this? Because while in those precious few seconds you battled with yourself over letting your brother live or die, I was hiding in his bathroom."

"No, that's not true. I would have seen you leave." I shake my head.

"Just as you saw me go in and out of your house at all hours before and after Teddy died?"

"The hidden passageways," I blurt out, the epiphany hitting me hard across the face.

"Good. You're getting it now."

"That's how you were able to leave the letters and spy on us all these

months. You knew about the secret passageways all throughout the house.”

“Yes, I did. A little info Teddy gave me back in the day, so I could come and go as I pleased without anyone being the wiser that I was in his room. What would the world think if anyone found out he liked raping underage boys? The scandal,” Jeff jokes, but it never reaches his eyes.

Ken flinches at the reminder that Teddy abused her brother in that way.

“What? Feeling sorry for me now?” he taunts, going to his haunches right in front of her so that they are at eye level.

“You might be an unhinged sociopath, brother, but not even you deserved to suffer under Teddy’s hand.”

“Good thing that I got rid of him then, isn’t it?”

My brows pinch at the bridge of my nose while Kennedy’s forehead wrinkles, both of us showing our bewilderment.

“Whoops.” Jeff laughs, placing the gun on his lips. “Did I just let that slip? Darn it. I wanted you two to be in suspense a little longer. You see, neither one of you was successful in killing Teddy. Sure, your drugs did the trick, Ken, and your hesitation in helping him out also helped, Lincoln, but like Momma always said, if you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself.” He throws us a triumphant smirk. “I’m the one who placed a pillow on Teddy’s head and watched him die. Little old me was the one who finished your dirty work. You’re welcome.”

He stands back up on his feet and cracks his neck from side to side.

“All of this talk has made me thirsty. I’ll be right back,” he announces, but before he walks through the door, he throws us another lethal look. “I’d say stay put, but I doubt you’ll get far. Ken can also vouch for me. I’m one hell of a shot.”

When his footsteps outside are no longer audible, I jump in place, trying to get my chair as close to Ken as I can.

“I’m sorry, Lincoln. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. We’ll get out of this mess somehow.”

“I’m not talking about Jeff. I’m mean Teddy, Lincoln. I’m sorry I let you down.”

My chest constricts at her misery.

“Hey.” I start, now able to touch my pinky finger with hers. “I don’t give a fuck about my brother. I just wish I had the courage to end him sooner. I’m the one who’s sorry you felt you needed to protect me that way. I should have never shown you my bruises. You didn’t deserve to have that on your plate.”

“You mean you forgive me?” She sniffles.

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

“Are you sure? Because I’ve never felt one ounce of remorse for killing him, Lincoln. Not once.”

I lean my head toward her, and she mimics my motion until our temples touch. Her breath fans my cheeks, and I breathe it into my lungs.

“Nothing you could ever do would make me love you less. Nothing, Ken.”

“Not even knowing I’m a killer?”

“No, my beautiful, vengeful monster. Not even that.”

I press a tender kiss to her lips, her tears making the moment even more bittersweet.

“Just no more secrets, Ken,” I tell her when we break apart. “Secrets are what have kept us apart all these years, and they are what Jeff is using against us. No more, Ken. We have to tell each other everything. Agreed?”

She nods.

“Good, sweetheart.” I’m about to seal our vow with a kiss when loud claps pull us away from each other.

Jeff continues to clap, his eyes holding a threatening edge to them.

“Glad to see we are all so willing to share our dirty, filthy secrets with one another. My sister has had her turn. Now I think it’s only right you go next, Lincoln.”

I square my shoulders and straighten my spine.

“Fair enough. What do you want to know?”

He smiles.

“I want to know what you whispered in your father’s ear before you blew his head off.”

Chapter 28



Kennedy

Lincoln goes oddly still at the nonsense my brother just spat at him.

“Stop it, Jeff. That isn’t funny.”

“I wasn’t trying to be. Don’t believe me? Fine. Actions speak louder than words anyway, and lucky for me, I have video proof of it.”

Lincoln’s expression remains carved in stone while Jeff pulls out his phone and begins to scroll through it. While he’s busy playing his game with us, I start taking inventory of everything that can help us get out of here. He has a phone with him, which means I can call for help if I’m able to get my hands on it.

Shit. No. I can’t.

Even if I were to call nine-one-one, where would I tell them to go?

My gaze then skips to the two bottled waters Jeff must have left at the door when he returned from his trip outside. Since the nearest store is miles away, I can only assume he had them in his car, which means that it’s close. Somehow my brother must have found a better route to get here than the one we took. All I have to do is find a way for Lincoln and me to break free from our cable ties and find the car. Of course, to do that, I also have to find a way to either distract my brother or hit him hard enough that he can’t follow us.

“Hey.” He snaps his fingers in my face to grab my attention. “You won’t want to miss this,” he gloats before going to his haunches so he can hold his phone on my lap. Once he sees he’s got my undivided attention, he presses play on the video on his screen. It takes me a bit to understand what I’m looking at since the image isn’t so clean nor the sound clear when it begins. But when I see Teddy’s father limp to his desk and pull out a gun, my blood runs cold. I hold my breath as I watch Crawford aim his gun at Lincoln’s chest as his mom launches herself in front to protect him. The instant she falls

and the spot of blood from the bullet wound to her stomach begins to grow in size, I realize I'm watching her final moments on this earth. I jump in my seat when another loud shot sounds through the small phone. Colt is now the one holding the gun, having fired a bullet into his uncle's leg to keep him from doing any more harm. But my eyes aren't on my friends or on the monster that plagued my love for most of his life. They are fixed on Lincoln. My heart breaks for him as he and his mother share the last words they will ever say to each other. Lincoln holds her limp body to him, consumed by an agony only a son who loved his mother and lost her could possibly comprehend.

But when Crawford begins to rejoice in his wife's death, my golden-hearted boy disappears from my very sight, and in his place stands the embodiment of pure, unadulterated vengeance. I don't look away as Lincoln hushes something in his supposed father's ear before he kills him.

Love makes monsters of us all.

"So, Lincoln, are you going to tell me what you said, or do I have to find ways to persuade you into telling me?" Jeff taunts, hitting my knee with the barrel of his gun to make his remark clear.

"I told him to say hi to Teddy for me. Something along those lines," Lincoln finally reveals, refusing to look at me.

"Fucking priceless." Jeff chuckles in amusement.

"Linc," I call out loud enough that it can be heard above my brother's evil laugh. "Linc, look at me," I add, running the tip of my finger along his. "I'm so sorry about Sierra. I had no idea. She didn't deserve that. You didn't deserve that."

His eyes narrow into two fine slits as he takes a fortifying breath.

"Jesus! God, love is blind." Jeff continues to laugh. "Is that all you're going to say? 'I'm sorry your mom is dead?' Did you even see the man you claim to love blowing his father's brains out?"

"Crawford was never his father!" I snap, angered my brother wants to dig at the wound that still hasn't healed in Lincoln's heart. "He deserved what he got. I'm glad Lincoln killed him. Glad!!!"

Jeff falls on his ass, pushing himself away from us as he starts cackling like a fucking hyena. Every high-pitched squeal of laughter only adds to my disdain. He's fucking loving this and not even trying to hide it from us.

"It was you," Lincoln states evenly.

"Come again? I didn't catch that," Jeff says in between chuckles.

"It was you. You're the reason she died."

“No. No. No.” He shakes his head. “We all saw the video. Sierra died because of a bullet meant for you. Her death is on your hands. Not mine,” he hollers.

“He was going to kill her long before I entered the room. I saw it in his eyes when he was beating her with his cane. He wanted her bruised and broken before he stole the light from her eyes. And all because of you,” Lincoln continues on, his voice so calm that a lump forms at my throat. “Did you know? That my mom was pregnant? Did she tell you?”

When Jeff begins to scowl and repeatedly tap the gun against the center of his forehead, a cold sweat begins to trickle down my neck.

“It was yours, right? She was carrying your baby inside her. Since Teddy died, my father could no longer stand the sight of her, so I know he hadn’t touched her in years. But she somehow got pregnant anyway, and I think you were the father. Am I right?”

With his knees up and his legs spread wide, my brother balances an elbow on each knee, staring daggers into Lincoln.

“I wasn’t going to tell you that part, but I never assumed you’d be able to figure it out on your own,” he mumbles, disappointed that Lincoln was able to put two and two together. “When Teddy died, your mom was a fucking mess. Always blaming herself for not having seen the signs of his drug use. Thinking that maybe deep down, she might have had an inkling of what was going on right under her roof but was too afraid of her own son to say anything. Like Teddy would have cared. He thought himself to be invincible. A fucking god, even. He thought he could fuck and torment everything that walked and do all the blow and smack he wanted without paying the price for it. Well, we all know how wrong he was, don’t we?” Jeff scoffs with a bitter snarl to his lips.

“Your mother took his death hard, though. Not that you’d know the hell she went through. You were too busy pining over my sister to see the misery that Sierra was in. It was so easy for me to get close to her. She was so starved for affection that when I knocked on her door and told her that I missed Teddy too, even though he was a lousy friend to me, she bought it, hook, line, and sinker. Our relationship was platonic at first, but I dropped little hints here and there that I was starting to fall in love with her. I ambushed her with every shitty line guys say to get into a woman’s pants. She resisted me for years. But in junior year of college, I must have said or done something right because, pretty soon, I was knee-deep in your mother’s

pussy. Didn't hurt that I looked like my scumbag father, either. Sometimes when I was fucking her into the mattress, she used to call out his name. I guess it's true what they say. You never forget your first." He huffs.

"Everything was going according to plan until she started avoiding my calls and refusing to see me. I heard through the grapevine that she had started to go to AA meetings at the First Baptist Church in Walnut Grove. I sent her a text telling her that we needed to talk and that I wouldn't take no for an answer. I made sure to take Tommyboy's car just in case someone saw us together and waited in the driver's seat until she came out of the church. I didn't want anyone to know about us until I had put a fucking baby in her. I was not going to fuck this up like our father had done all those years ago," he affirms with a sneer.

"Unfortunately, the pastor's niece saw me pick Sierra up, and for a second, I was worried that Tommyboy's tinted windows hadn't done their job. Thankfully they must have because when I sicked Easton on her, she would have ended up telling him what she saw. And since none of you came to my doorstep demanding justification, I knew I was in the clear. But I digress." He laughs, stretching one of his arms to grab a water bottle. He takes a quick sip, and of course, doesn't offer us any.

Evil villains aren't known for their hospitality.

"Where was I? Oh, right. I was telling you about when Sierra told me the good news. After I picked her up at the meeting, with tears in her eyes, she finally told me those three little words I had been dying to hear. She was pregnant. Finally. I was starting to wonder if she was too fucking old to get knocked up, and all my efforts were for naught. But thankfully, I got my wish, and the next Richfield heir would have my blood in him. I needed that meal ticket more than I needed my next breath. Emma Harper and her fucking meddling made me lose any chances of me getting into law school the next year. Fucking bitch had no qualms failing my ass, but she was all too pleased to help that good-for-nothing Southie get a scholarship. Even went as far as getting her a job in New York at some fancy lawyer's firm. But it was all good. I didn't care anymore because I was set for life now that Sierra was carrying my baby. Or at least I thought I was." His nostrils start to flare in anger.

"All she had to do was carry my damn baby for nine months. That's all she had to do. But instead, she was talking to me about how she didn't see how there was a way that she could keep it. How she couldn't in good

conscience bring another life into this world to suffer in the same way her precious Lincoln had growing up. It took me hours to convince her that our baby would not have the same life. That I could protect her and the baby. I pointed out how she wanted our baby just as much as I did since she was no longer drinking and attending regular AA meetings to maintain her sobriety because she already loved the life that was growing inside her. I made her promise me that she wouldn't do anything hasty and that we would make a plan to leave Asheville together before she started showing. But instead of doing what I told her, the stupid bitch had to run her mouth to her husband the following night. As I see it, you and she were responsible for taking what rightfully belonged to me. You killed my baby. My one shot. And for that, you had to pay."

"You're psychotic!" I yell after having to listen to the ramblings of a delusional monster.

Jeff's fake grin morphs into something that sends chills to my bones.

"Now, now, sis. That isn't very nice," he rebukes, inching closer to me. He places the gun beneath my chin and forces it up so I can face him. "Words hurt, and like I told you before, the word you're looking for is sociopath. And besides, can you really sit there and call me that considering all the things you've admitted to? Takes one to know one."

"Get the fuck away from her!" Lincoln demands on a growl, his cool composure no longer in place.

"Or what, Linc? What are you going to do?"

"Cut me out of these binds, and you'll get your answer."

"Ah, there he is. The wolf in sheep's clothing. I always knew you had a murderous streak in you. I didn't have to see you put a hole in your father's head to know that. The way you hesitated to come to Teddy's aid told me all I needed to know. You're just as fucked up in the head as me and my sister are."

"No, dear brother. Your damage far outweighs ours. I can assure you," I spit out.

"I'm really starting to get annoyed with your aggressiveness, Ken. Be nice to me, and you might live to see another day."

"Like I'd ever believe you."

"No, no. I never lied to you." He shakes his head, swinging the gun in his grip and then pointing it at me. "And to prove it, I'll give you a chance to redeem yourself. But your boyfriend here, his fate is already sealed."

My nails slice into my palms at his words.

He's going to kill Lincoln.

"The fuck?!" We hear someone say from behind Jeff.

When Jeff turns around, a beaming smile instantly crests his face.

"Tommyboy! You're just in time," Jeff shouts in excitement.

What is he doing here?

Why are you here, Tom?

Tom's gaze bounces from me to Lincoln, and I see the split second of fear in his eyes before he masks it with boredom.

"So that's why you texted me? If I knew we were going to be playing this type of game, I would have dressed for the occasion."

"Isn't that sweet of him," Jeff cajoles, walking closer to Tom.

"I should have known you were a part of this." Lincoln seethes beside me, and I don't dare say anything to correct him.

There is no way Tom knew the lengths Jeff would go to.

He's just another pawn in my brother's twisted game, and right now, I'm afraid of how he'll use him.

"Tom! Get out of here! Now! Call the police!" I shout, fidgeting madly in my chair.

"Shh, now, sister. You'll scare our guest. Come in, Tommy. Have a seat. We were just having a little one-on-one, revealing all our secrets," my brother explains while grabbing a chair from the corner of the room and placing it right in front of Lincoln and me.

"I... um... I'm sorry I missed it," Tommy stammers, reluctantly sitting on the chair my brother offered him.

"No, you're just in time." Jeff strokes Tom's hair with one hand while he places the gun to his cheek. I see how it takes everything in Tom not to flinch when the cold steel rubs against his skin. "Let me do a quick recap for you. Lincoln here killed his old man, while my sister tried to kill her last boyfriend. You must have done something right for her not to go after you. I wonder what that could have been?"

"I'm just a better lay than Teddy was, I guess," Tommyboy tries to joke.

"No. You're not," Jeff responds coldly. "I should know, right, sis?" He winks at me. "I've had them both, after all. Although I have firsthand knowledge that Teddy never fucked you, I am curious if Tommyboy has?"

"What the fuck?!" Tom exclaims, pissed that my brother would utter such a question. "I have no idea why you texted me to come to this shithole, but

I'm not playing this game with you anymore."

"Oh yes, you are," he announces, placing the gun to the side of Tommy's temple.

"Jeff, you know I'm down for any kinky shit you usually have in mind, but I think I'll pass on whatever is happening here," Tom says, getting up, but Jeff slams his shoulders down, forcing him to sit back in the chair.

"No. Not until my sister answers me. Tom here has been your fiancé for years now, yet I know you never slept with him. Why?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Okay, don't answer me then. I'll ask Tommyboy instead. Why haven't you ever fucked my sister? You had no problem fucking everyone else in Asheville, so why not her?"

"Because she wanted to wait until we were married," Tom lies, and I'm thankful for his quick thinking.

"No. That's not it. She fucked Lincoln here, and he didn't even put a ring on her finger."

When Tom's eyes lower with a tinge of hurt in them, a pang hits my chest.

This is why my brother is asking him all these questions.

To see him suffer.

So that I can see him suffer for me.

"You see that, Ken? He's heartbroken. You didn't know, did you?" Jeff laughs, confirming my suspicions. "For someone who needs to know everything about the people around her, you sure are blind when it comes to those closest to you."

"Fuck this. I'm leaving," Tom spits out on a snarl.

"Sit your ass back down, Tommy! You leave when I say you can leave!"

Tom sits back in his chair, his eyes incapable of looking at me.

"You could have had it all, Ken. First with Teddy, then with Tom, but you threw it all away because of him," Jeff states, pointing the gun toward Linc. "He never wanted you, but still, you followed him around like a puppy. It was pathetic the way you groveled for his scraps. You didn't even care to give either Teddy or Tommy a chance. I had to be the one to do damage control and step in to make sure neither one of them lost interest in you."

"Are you looking for a thank you? Because you aren't getting one." I seethe.

"There you go again, always acting tougher than you really are. But we

know the real you, don't we, Tom? The vulnerable insecure girl who puts up a good front but inside is crying for her mommy? The girl who is capable of vicious, cruel things and can still walk into a room with her head held high like she's untouchable. You think Lincoln will want you after you admitted to trying to kill Teddy? You think he understands the darkness in you like I do? He doesn't!"

I try not to look at Linc, but in my peripheral vision, I see him staring daggers into my brother.

"Tom, however, does. Don't you? Tell her."

"I told you I'm not into the whole hostage kink you got going," Tom jokes, but when Jeff slams the end of his gun against his head, his teasing smile drops from his face.

"Tell her what she refuses to see. Tell my ever-perceptive sister that she is blind to the world that revolves around her. Tell her how you really feel. Tell her!"

Tom refuses to say a word, but the misery in his eyes tells me everything his lips refuse to say.

"You see it, don't you?" My brother continues to instigate. "Even though Tommy here refuses to say it, you've always known how he felt about you. Deep down, I know you knew. You knew he was in love with you. So much so that he accepted playing whatever little game you put in front of him. Did you really think I'd fall for his charms? That he would be able to get anything from me just so he could run back and tell you? I'm insulted that you think so poorly of me."

"I'm sorry, Tom," I tell him, preferring to ignore my brother's taunts and focus on the friend that's hurting right now. "I really am sorry."

"I know," he responds wistfully. "Me too."

Jeff yawns exaggeratedly.

"Is that all you have to tell him? I'm sorry?" he counters. "Oh, well. Sorry, Tom. I guess she really didn't give a shit about you after all," Jeff says and then, to my horror, shoots his gun through Tom's temple. Tom's blood spatters all around us, the warmth hitting my face as I watch my friend stumble to the ground.

"TOM!!! NO!!!"

Lincoln is shouting obscenities at Jeff, but I don't hear a word.

All I see is the friend who had been with me through thick and thin the past four years lying dead on the floor because of me.

“This is what happens to fools who get caught in your web, sister,” my brother yells before planting a kiss on my forehead and kicking Tom’s limp body on the floor. “I hope now you’re taking me fucking seriously. No more games, dear sister. It ends today.”

And with those words hanging in the air, he picks up a water bottle and walks through the front door to get some fresh air, like he didn’t just kill one of my closest confidants.

“Ken! Ken! Kennedy!” Lincoln shouts, trying to coax a reaction from me. “Ken, sweetheart. Please come back to me.”

“He’s going to kill us,” I mumble, my lips quivering in fear while I cry for the dead friend lying just a few inches away from me. “He’s going to kill us all.”

“No, don’t think that way.” Lincoln tries to reassure me.

I turn to him and say, “He is, Linc. He killed Tom. He did nothing wrong but he was my friend, and he fucking killed him!”

Lincoln leans his head toward me so that I can press my forehead to his while I mourn my friend’s untimely death.

“Someone will come for us, sweetheart. Someone will come.”

“If they do, it will be too late.”

“You can’t think like that, Ken. Please, don’t think like that. Don’t give up hope.”

“How am I supposed to have any hope after what he just did? My brother is psychotic. He will kill us just for the fun of it.”

“This isn’t about fun for him. Jeff wants something,” Lincoln explains patiently. “Think about it, Ken. If this was only for laughs, he would have killed us both by now.”

“That’s a sobering thought.”

“It’s true. Use your head, Ken. You know him best.”

“I don’t know him at all.” I sob, staring at the lifeless boy who had been my brother’s lover as well as my friend.

“You’re wrong, sweetheart. I think you’re the only one on God’s green earth that knows who your brother truly is. He wants you to see this side of him. He wants you to. So ask yourself why that is. Why is it so important to him that you see his darkness as well as confess to your own?”

I blink rapidly, the tears blurring my vision as I try to make sense of what Lincoln is trying to tell me.

“He wants me to be like him,” I finally say, connecting the dots. “He

doesn't want to feel like he's alone anymore. That there is someone in this world that understands him because they are just like him."

Lincoln's ocean blue eyes soften at my answer.

"Yes, I think that's exactly what he wants."

"Do you think I'm like him?" I hiccup on a sob.

"No, Ken. Not for a minute."

"But how can you be so sure? You heard what he said. I tried to kill Teddy."

"So did I. Otherwise, I wouldn't have hesitated in calling for help. You would never kill an innocent person. I know what lies in your heart. I also think I'm starting to understand why he had Colt snooping through the skeletons in our family's closet until he found out that Owen was my father."

"I don't understand. Wasn't the end goal just to tarnish the Richfield's good name?"

"That could have been one of the reasons, but I think his main one was that he wanted Colt to put an end to my belief that you were my sister. Jeff knew that the instant my brother learned the truth, he would run and tell me. And once I found out that we were not related in any shape or form, Jeff knew I'd come for you. He was banking on it."

"But why? He could have let you continue on suffering. What did he have to gain by joining us together?"

"The cruelest thing that can happen to a man is letting him have a small taste of paradise, only to steal it away from him afterward," he mumbles, his gaze fixed on my lips.

Lincoln then plasters a small smile on his face and raises his head to look me in the eye.

"All Jeff wants is you, Ken. His sister. His twin. His other half."

"What do I do, then? How can I use that to get us out of here?"

"Not us. You."

"What?" I stutter at the seriousness in his eyes.

"You are going to get out of this place. You will make Jeff believe that you're on his side by showing him that your loyalty is only to him and no other."

"And how do I do that?" I ask, staring at Tom's cold body.

"By making the sacrifice he craves most. You're going to have to kill me."

I'm about to open my mouth to protest, but the devil himself waltzes back

into the cold, abandoned shed. I try not to cry as he pulls Tommyboy's body by the ankles and drags him to the opposing corner of the room.

For good to prevail, all evil must perish.

I've heard the mantra more times than I can count.

But just like Jeff, I felt rage all my life. An all-consuming anger in me that wouldn't quiet down. However, unlike him, I never let the darkness settle inside my soul, and that's because I had something in my life that my brother didn't.

Love.

I have all the tendencies of being a world-class bitch, set to do more harm than good, but love was the one thing that kept me from losing my morality. Of course, sociopaths like my brother can emulate such a sentiment, but they can't truly ever experience it. Not really. I, on the other hand, can, and my love is also entangled with an undying amount of loyalty. How I show such loyalty might be fucked up, but it's still something I consider sacred. I guess you can say that the only thing that kept me from going full Darth Vader was my friends. *My family*. And there was only one person that silenced the rage in my head better than any other.

Lincoln Richfield Hamilton.

My broken boy with a heart of gold.

He sees through every soiled part of me and still loves me.

No light can survive without shadow, and we only know that darkness exists if there is light to compare it to.

Lincoln is my light.

The yin to my yang.

And while I see our flaws with perfect clarity, he only sees our perfections.

I won't let my brother steal the one person who prevented me from becoming like him.

And as if reading my thoughts, my reflection sinisterly smiles back at me, sending a shiver down my spine.

We both have blood on our hands, but only one of us will make it out of this alive.

What is the difference between a psychopath and a sociopath?

I guess Jeff's about to find out.

Chapter 29



Lincoln

I watch in silence as Jeff places the blanket he retrieved from his car earlier on a shivering, sleeping Kennedy. She stirs for a second but then nestles under it for warmth, continuing in her slumber. He then steps back and just watches over her with a solemn expression on his face, confirming my suspicion that she is the only one he cares about and doesn't want to hurt.

Even if I didn't see it with my own eyes how much he cares for her, his long tale about how he made sure to suffer Teddy's abuse instead of her was enough to make his true feelings for her clear in my mind.

But there is still so much I don't understand.

So many loose ends to be accounted for.

So much of his unhinged mind still to sort through.

"Why the games, Jefferson?" I ask, drawing his attention off his sister and onto me. "Why send me and my friends those letters and have us jumping through all those hoops? Why pick Stone, Scarlett, or Emma? Why them?"

"Why not? They served their purpose, didn't they? Just pawns that needed to be moved around the chessboard in a game they didn't know they were playing."

"It was never about the girls, was it? It was always about us."

"Not quite." He smiles. "I only ever wanted you, Lincoln."

"I don't understand. If you only wanted me, then what did you have to gain in going after my friends?"

"Why else? When your dead body is found back in your home's library, with a copy of the video that I have of you killing your father, plus a letter from an ominous vigilante organization, Finn, Easton, and Colt will corroborate the story I've carefully fabricated. They'll explain how they had

to endure being under The Society's thumb for months and how their blackmail was becoming more vicious with each passing demand. I'll even place Tommy's slain body next to yours, so it looks like he was caught in the crosshairs of The Society's wrath. And while the Sheriff's Department searches high and low for the boogeyman, I'll be hiding in plain sight, grieving for my dead friends."

"So The Society was just a hoax, then? The perfect alibi to use to get everyone off your scent," I state matter-of-factly, not hiding how pissed I am that I fell prey to a madman's elaborate plan.

"Hmm," he mutters as his gaze falls back on Kennedy.

"There's only one fault in your plan," I quip.

"And what's that?"

"What are you going to do about her?" I tilt my head to the girl sleeping beside me.

Jeff rubs the butt of his gun against his chin, staring at his sister.

"I haven't decided. Maybe I'll kill her, too. Collateral damage for getting in the way of The Society's thirst for justice."

"You wouldn't kill your sister," I announce assuredly, his steady glare back on me.

"Wouldn't I? She's been more trouble to me than she's worth."

"Doesn't matter. You still won't kill her."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself."

"I am." I grin.

His nostrils flare at my smug smile, his glower turning somewhat manic.

"Why? Why are you so sure?"

"Because like me, you can't help who you love. And for all your faults, you love your sister. More than me, remember?"

The words have barely passed my lips when he bitch-slaps me with the barrel of the gun, successfully splitting my bottom lip and chipping one of my front teeth from the impact. I spit out the blood pooling in my mouth onto the floor and straighten my spine, staring at him head-on.

"Too much truth for you there, Jeff?"

"Shut the fuck up. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's where you're wrong. I understand perfectly. I know what it's like to love someone with all your heart and soul and not be able to show it."

"I said SHUT THE FUCK UP!" he yells at me, awakening Kennedy from her restless slumber.

“Will you keep it down?” she mumbles with a yawn. “Seriously, Jeff. You are the worst kidnapper in history.”

Jeff’s angry demeanor softens somewhat with his sister’s light teasing.

“Well, most kidnapped victims don’t take catnaps.” He huffs, but there is a playful twinkle in his eye.

“Whatever.” She scoffs. “I was having the worst nightmare, anyway. I dreamed you had killed my friend. Oh, wait. You did.”

“Are you really still mad at me for killing Tommy?” He chuckles. “It’s not like you really cared about him. If you did, you wouldn’t have sent him to suck my cock just to get me to tell him all my secrets.”

“First of all, I never told Tom to sleep with you. That was all his idea. If I knew your intention was always to kill my friend, then I would have told him to bite your limp dick off.” She smiles at him while batting her eyelids a mile a minute.

He snorts at her sass, oblivious to the small nervous glance she throws my way. She waits for Jeff to recompose himself before donning a stern expression on her face.

“Do you think Emma survived the fall?” Kennedy muses, lifting her wrist just enough so she can stare down at her nails.

“I’m not sure, but I doubt Colt’s baby did.” Jeff laughs, all too pleased with himself.

“How did you know she was pregnant, by the way?” I interject inquiringly.

He looks at the heavens as if seeking patience at my asking such a stupid question.

“I was hiding back at your house, checking up on you two, when he arrived to share his good fortune. At first, I planned to get rid of the professor altogether, but when Colt announced she was pregnant, it felt like fate. He had a hand in making me lose my child, so it was only fair I had one in making him lose his. And eye for an eye, if you will.” He has the gall to wink at me. “Although,” he starts, diverting his glower back to Kennedy. “I am curious why you don’t sound more concerned about Emma’s wellbeing? When I pushed her down the stairs, you didn’t look too happy with her getting hurt.”

“Well, dear brother, I’m just considering my options. Thanks to you, there aren’t many I can choose from since you’ve killed Tom, and I expect that Lincoln will be next,” she explains with an annoyed tone. “As far as I

can see, my only choice now to get what we want is for me to talk my way back into Colt's heart. I did it before. I'm sure I can do it again."

"We?" he counters with an arched brow.

"Hmm." She nods. "The only hiccup to that is Emma. If she lives, then we have a problem."

"Do we, now?" He rubs his chin, reining in the genuine smile that's itching to play on his lips.

"Yep." Kennedy pops the 'p' at the end. "Unless, of course, you're willing to fall on your sword and go after one of the Turner girls instead. Meredith will never fall for your charms. She's too astute for that. However, Irene and Abigail might be easier to fool. Food for thought." She shrugs, earning a loud chuckle from her brother.

"Sometimes, I think you're the only one who can still surprise me. When we were younger, I used to fantasize about bashing your head in just so I could see your thoughts and secrets spill out on the concrete. I've always had this constant need to know what else you could be hiding from me."

"All you had to do was ask, and I would have told you."

"Hmm. Perhaps. But where would have been the fun in that?" He smirks. "However, I can't help but be intrigued. Are you no longer upset that I'm going to kill your one true love? Your fucking soulmate."

"I never said he was my soulmate. You're the one who assumed as much," she explains coldly.

Jeff takes this in, and I see the wheels in his head starting to work double time.

"I don't believe you," he says after a long pause.

"Frankly, brother, I don't care what you believe. I'm cold, I'm hungry, and a little peeved that you haven't let me use the bathroom once since you tied me to this chair." She huffs in discontentment.

He takes a good long, hard look at Ken, and just when I think he's going to ignore her nonchalance attempts to set her free, he surprises me by taking a box cutter out of his back pocket and walking toward her. Ken's facial features remain a perfect blank canvas, and if I didn't know her heart, I'd believe every word coming out of her beautiful lips. I watch patiently as he cuts through her restraints while Ken makes an effort not to flinch from the feeling of the razor blade so close to her wrists.

"You can take a piss outside, but remember I have my eye on you."

"Like I care," she rebukes with a roll of the eye and a flick of her hair.

Ken doesn't look at me once as she struts out the door, fully aware that her brother is right behind her. Jeff stops at the threshold, gun pointing at his sister while she squats under the closest tree she can find outside to relieve her bladder. Since it's already dark, I half wish she would take the opportunity and make a run for it, but with the full moon outside casting light in every direction and Jeff's claims of being a good shot, I don't want her to risk it. A few minutes later, she returns back to the shed looking pissed.

"You, dear brother, are on my shitlist for making me pee in the woods in the middle of winter."

"Would you have preferred I brought in a bucket for you to use instead?" he goads, finding his sister's outrage amusing when she flings him her middle finger.

After she's cracked a smile at him, she then turns to fix her stare on me.

"Daddy was right, you know? These Richfield bastards have it too good. They'll never have to worry about a goddamn thing their entire lives. Always thinking that the world revolves around them. It's sickening."

Jeff's puzzled gaze follows his sister's onto me.

"Kennedy, don't let Jeff get into your head. You're not like him, sweetheart," I plead nervously, making sure the tone of my voice rises an octave for added effect.

"I think you're wrong, Lincoln. I think I'm more like my brother than you think. Deep down, I always knew I was different. My brother just admitted his horrors to us, and I didn't even bat an eye. If I were in his shoes, I might have done the same thing."

"No." I shake my head vehemently. "He's deranged. You're not."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," she declares before turning to her side, where her brother now stands. "Hand me the gun," she orders.

"And why would I ever do that?" he questions distrustfully.

"Because I'm going to prove to Lincoln that I'm not as perfect as he thinks I am. You want him gone, right? His death is what you always wanted, correct? Then what better way for him to die than having the woman he loves murder him in cold blood?"

"Kennedy! Don't do this!" I yell, my heart thumping madly in my chest, hoping Jeff is buying her act.

But to my chagrin, Jeff isn't so easily convinced.

"Is it true people think I'm the one who pushed Emma?" Kennedy asks out of the blue when she senses her brother's hesitation. "Because if it is, you

need to come up with a plan to clear my name. I'm serious, Jeff. I'm not going to take the fall for that one."

"I'm sure I can come up with something," he mutters, his gaze bouncing between his sister and me.

"You can't do this! Kennedy, listen to me! You can't do this!"

"Hand me the fucking gun. I can't stand to hear him whine like that anymore," she states, bored, stretching her open palm to her brother while nervously fisting her other hand behind her back.

"Nah, sis. I think I'll go with my original plan and kill him myself. You're going to have to sit this one out."

"Okay. It's your show," she singsongs, skipping back to sit in her chair, making a show of crossing her legs. "Just hurry it along, will you? Like I said, I'm tired and hungry. So the faster you get on with this, the faster I can go home."

Her leg bounces impatiently up and down, while Jeff's scrutinizing gaze never leaves her.

"Would you really kill him? If I asked you to, would you do it?" he asks after a pregnant pause.

"Give me the gun and find out," she replies with a deep southern twang.

"How do I know you won't kill me instead?" He cocks a brow.

"You don't. And I still might after what you did to Tom. I'll never forgive you for killing him." She pouts, crossing her arms over her chest and turning her head the other way, so he doesn't have a clear view of her face. The silence in the room is deafening as he takes in her words.

"I'm sorry," he finally says, letting out an exhale. "I just wanted to prove a point when I killed him. I might have overreacted."

"You think?" she counters sarcastically, still acting pissed.

"You're right. I didn't need to get him involved in all of this, but neither did you. So as I see it, you're half to blame for his death, too."

"Whatever. I don't want to talk about this anymore. Kill Lincoln, or if you want, kill me. Just get it over with already. I'm done with this."

"I'm not going to kill you, Ken. That was never part of the plan," he admits, love merged in his soft tone. "Come here." He tilts his head to Kennedy, beckoning her over. "To show you I mean it, I'll let you do the honors of killing your boyfriend. Then we can go home and talk it out. Come here, Ken."

On shaky knees, she stands up from her seat and walks toward him.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.” He smiles tenderly at her before gently moving the hair away from her face so he can have a clear view of it. “Do you still remember how to shoot a gun?”

“Momma took me to the same gun ranges as you, moron. If you remember, then so do I.”

“Good.” He chuckles softly, taking a step back to her side so that Ken can aim the gun at me. “Remember, just breathe through it. In and out. Steady your hand,” he instructs while the gun pointed at my chest grows heavier in her grip by the second.

She places a quivering finger on the trigger, a single tear running down her cheek as she perfects her aim.

My beautiful, vengeful monster.

My hands grip the arms of the wooden chair, desperate to touch her and soothe her guilt.

Her shame.

But in the end, all I can do is keep my sights fixed affectionately on her, silently encouraging her to do what needs to be done.

“I love you,” I mouth silently, her lids squinting in grief at the declaration.

And with a loud cry, my love, my heart, *my very soul*, turns to her side and pulls the trigger aimed at the heart that loves her. Jeff’s eyes widen at the bullet hole in his chest, taking two steps back before he falls to the floor. Kennedy flings the gun as far away as she can before rushing to kneel by her brother’s side.

“Fuck. Good shot, sis,” he teases as she grabs his head to place it on her lap. “I knew there was a fifty-fifty chance that this would happen, but I never believed you would do it.” He grins as he starts coughing up blood.

“You gave me an opening I couldn’t refuse.”

“I guess I did,” he whispers back, still smiling.

“You shouldn’t have killed Tom, Jeff. You shouldn’t have tried to kill Lincoln. You just shouldn’t have tried to do any of it.”

“Noted.” He continues to cough out blood while she holds his hand with all her might.

“Do you... do you...” Cough. Cough. “Do you... love me... today, sister?”

She shuts her eyes and lets her tears fall.

“Yes, brother.” She sobs. “I love you today.”



“Can you tell me again what your brother said to you?” Sheriff Travis continues to interrogate.

“Is this really necessary? She’s still in shock,” I reprimand, holding on to an inconsolable Kennedy as we sit on the steps of the shed while the deputies ransack inside for evidence of the foul play that occurred.

“I’m afraid so, Lincoln. While it’s still so fresh in both your heads, I’m going to need both your statements.”

“It’s okay, Linc. I can do this,” she whispers to me softly.

I press a kiss to her temple and stand up straight, holding her hand and giving it a light squeeze—my way of telling her that I’ll hold tight and that she’ll always have me by her side.

“What do you want to know, Sheriff?”

“I just need your version of these events, Kennedy. Just explain what your brother confessed to you both tonight.”

“Very well. After he was able to lure us here under false pretenses, my brother told us that he had an affair with Sierra, Lincoln’s mom. Soon after Teddy passed away, in their joint grief, they struck up a friendship and became very close. One thing obviously led to another because, years later, their relationship turned physical. When Sierra discovered she was pregnant with his baby, they decided the best thing to do was to leave Asheville, thinking it would be safer to serve Governor Hamilton divorce papers this way. She knew Lincoln’s father had a bad temper, and since she was in her forties, she feared that any added stress might cause a miscarriage. Unfortunately, before they could leave, Governor Hamilton caught Sierra and my brother together in his home one night. Lincoln’s father was so enraged that he got a gun and killed Sierra on the spot. My brother, mad with anger and grief, ended up taking the gun from the Governor’s hand and shooting him. One time in the leg to subdue him and the other... well... the other ended up being the kill shot. When Jefferson realized what he had done, he left the mansion and began to think of ways to discard the gun. He and Teddy used to frequent a bar on the Southside, which I’m sure you’ll be able to corroborate. I believe my friend, Stone Bennett, saw them quite often there. Having a familiar lay of the land, Jefferson paid someone in the Southside

crew to dispose of it. I think that must have been when Tucker Dixon got a hold of it. Months passed, and no one had reason to suspect him of the crime he had committed, but my brother still grew delusional in his grief. He had to blame someone for his unbearable loss, and since he couldn't blame himself for what occurred, in his unhinged mind, he blamed the last Hamilton standing. He blamed Lincoln for his misfortunes."

"What about your fiancé, Thomas Maxwell Junior? What was his role in all of this?"

"If you check my brother's phone, I'm sure you'll find a text asking him to meet my brother here," she explains, without hinting at the fact that we made sure to scrub the phone clean and erase any damning evidence on it, except for that text to Tommyboy.

"You see, Jefferson never intended for me to show up. His plan was only ever to take his revenge out on Lincoln. But when he saw that I had tagged along with Lincoln, curious as to why my brother wanted to meet him here, of all places, he had to think quickly on his feet. That's when he texted Tom, thinking he would be the only one who could persuade me to leave and let him continue on this irrational vendetta. But once Tom arrived, he immediately knew what Jefferson was up to. They were very close, you see. The closest of friends, so I'm sure my brother must have confided in him about what had transpired that awful night Lincoln's parents died. Tom tried to save us but got a bullet in the head for his troubles." Her voice cracks in the end, still in deep mourning over her friend.

"Sheriff, either ask your questions, or we're done here," I threaten through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Kennedy," he laments, completely disregarding my threat. "So once you saw that your brother wasn't in his correct mind and he aimed the gun at Lincoln, you took action."

"I had to." She cries. "He would have killed Lincoln next if I didn't stop him."

"I understand this must be extremely painful for you. Not only losing your fiancé in such a way but also losing a brother. A twin, no less. But you did what you needed to do, Kennedy. Take solace in that."

"Thank you," she responds with little emotion behind it.

"Now Lincoln, I have to ask if there is anything Kennedy might have left out. Anything that was left unsaid?"

But before I open my mouth, Aunt Colleen appears from behind him and

shuts down any further questioning.

“I think both my nephew and goddaughter have had enough for one night. Consider this case closed, Sheriff. My sister’s murder, too.”

He clears his throat, pulling at his collar, but offers her a curt nod.

“Yes, I believe you’re right. Again, my condolences.”

“Keep them. We have no need for your condolences. If you had done your job in the first place, then two lives might have been spared tonight.” She snaps at him before placing her attention on Kennedy. “Come with me, child. The paramedics should have a look at you.”

Kennedy throws me an anxious look, but I give her a comforting nod and help her up.

“My aunt is right. You’ve been through one hell of a night, sweetheart. Let her take you to the ambulance so the paramedics can have a look at your wrists.”

I plant another kiss on her forehead and hand her off to my aunt. I’m about to tell her not to leave my aunt’s side when I see my friends running toward us, calling out our names.

“Go, Lincoln. I’ll take care of our girl for you.”

“Thank you, Aunt Colleen. I appreciate it.”

My aunt takes Ken to the ambulance standing by at the top of a nearby hill, where most of the other cars are parked. Only now, in the dead of night, with all the police lights on, are we able to see where Jeff must have been going every time he left us alone in the shed.

“The fuck happened?!”

“Are you okay?”

“Tell us everything. Is it true about Jeff?”

Finn, Easton, and Colt ask simultaneously.

“I’ll tell you everything. First things first, though, how are Emma and the baby? Are they okay?”

Colt preens at the mention of his woman and the child she has in her belly.

“They’re both fine. Scarlett and Stone are with her back at the hospital. Dad, too. When Mom called him to tell us what was going on, he thought it best to stay back at the hospital with the girls, thinking you might not want him here.”

I frown at the remark but don’t have time to dwell on it when East asks me what they all want to know.

“Just tell us, Linc. Is it really over? Was it Jeff all along?”

I nod.

“Yes. It was. There is no Society. There never was.”

“Are you sure?” Colt chimes in, unconvinced. “Emma showed me a lot of proof that says otherwise the contrary.”

“I’m sure, brother.” I sigh in relief, placing my hands on Finn and Easton’s shoulders. “Jeff confessed to everything. There is so much I have to tell you, but rest assured that even if a nefarious secret society does exist, they have more important things to do than blackmail us.” I smile widely at them. “It’s over, brothers. It’s over.”

Chapter 30



Kennedy

One month later

“When do you think you’ll be home?” Lincoln asks over the speaker in my car, his husky voice making my pulse quicken.

“I promise not to take too long. Stone and I just need some retail therapy and to catch up on some girl talk. Give me just a couple of hours, okay? I’ll be home before you know it.”

“I’ll hold you to it, Ryland,” he replies, more subdued. “No, I’m serious, Ken. Take all the time you need. I’ll be here when you get back.”

My heart melts at how I can almost hear his smile through the phone.

“Thank you. How about later we go out and see a movie or something?”

“Actually, I already have the night planned out for us.”

“Is that so?” I laugh.

“Hmm. Let’s just say I have a little surprise that I’ve been waiting a long time to spring on you.”

“A surprise, huh?” I maul my lower lip, recalling the engagement ring he has in his sock draw just waiting to be put on my finger.

This one, however, I intend to keep.

“I’m not saying another word until you get home.”

“Okay, then I guess I better get a move on.”

“You do that.” He chuckles, my chest warming at the melody. “I love you, Ken.”

“I love you more.”

“Not possible, sweetheart. Not possible. Hurry home.”

“Okay. Bye.”

I hang up the phone, the wide smile on my face disappearing at the sight

of familiar black iron gates coming closer into view.

“Oh, Lincoln. But it *is* possible.” I sigh while pressing in the code for the gates to open.

I drive up to The Brass Guild and hand over my keys to the valet.

“Miss Ryland. You’re late,” Ruby reprimands as she meets me at the door.

“Good afternoon to you, too, Ruby,” I singsong, showing her all my pearly whites.

She keeps her stern expression on her face as she walks me over to the stairs.

“I don’t need a babysitter, Ruby. I can find my way to the meeting room by myself. It’s not my first rodeo, you know?”

“You could have fooled me. You know how she hates tardiness.” She eyes me up and down, taking my measurements.

“Do I look worried?” I cock a brow while placing my fists on my hips.

“No. But then again, fools rarely are.”

“Forgive me if I don’t take your advice to heart,” I snarl at her.

“Oh, are you still bitter that the girls told you I kissed your boyfriend?” she taunts, knowing damn well why she got on my shitlist. “That’s what I thought. Very well, then. See yourself up. I have better things to do with my time anyway,” she states evenly before sashaying away.

I’d love nothing more than to wring her little neck for kissing Linc, but I’ve got more pressing matters to be worried about. I hold on to the railing and walk up the flight of stairs, all the way to the top floor. As expected, Owen is at the door, with two of his most trusted security guards beside him, diligently keeping it guarded so that his wife can safely conduct business inside.

As I draw nearer to him, one of his ‘little birds’ passes by me in a dash, handing him a manila envelope, undoubtedly with a detailed memo of her findings from the previous night.

“You’re late,” he admonishes when I reach him.

“So I’ve been told. However, it looks to me that you are, too. Shouldn’t whatever is inside that envelope be included in today’s meeting?” I ask sweetly, flicking the papers in his hand.

He throws me a smile, one that I’m sure he’s used on most of the female population in Asheville. Even well past forty, Owen Turner is still his wife’s favorite secret weapon. If his ‘little birds’ can’t obtain the intel she needs,

then Colleen sends him to seduce the wives of her targets and gets him to coax it out of them. I'm sure half the women he's slept with just wanted to fuck him to get one over on the almighty and righteous Colleen Richfield Turner. The thing is, she is very aware of that fact and exploits it for every morsel she can.

I let out a sigh of relief that Colt will never fill his father's shoes on that front. Like Colleen, Owen is more than willing to sacrifice himself for the cause, just not his children. Well, three of them at least will be spared. The Richfield legacy needs a successor, after all.

"Please, by all means," he says, handing me the envelope.

"I'd rather not. I'm already going to get an earful for my tardiness. I don't want her to think me incompetent, too."

The way that Owen laughs at my sass reminds me too much of Lincoln. As if reading my thoughts, his laughter simmers down.

"How is he? How is my boy?"

"He's fine." I chew on my bottom lip.

"Good. I'm glad," he retorts, saddened, his gaze lowering to the floor.

"I... um... I think he might propose tonight."

At that statement, Owen lifts his head, utter joy floating in his green abyss.

"It's about time, Kennedy. I know you'll make him very happy."

"I hope so."

He opens his mouth to say something else but then reconsiders and closes it.

"What? What were you going to say?" I ask him.

"Do you think if I called to congratulate my son on his upcoming nuptials, he'd answer my call?"

My heart cracks down the middle at the vulnerability and longing in his voice.

"I think when you love someone, you fight with everything you've got to keep them in your life."

"Hmm. Scarlett told me the same thing recently."

"Where do you think I heard it from, if not from your daughter?" I wink at him before placing my hand on the doorknob.

"Be careful in there. My wife is in a foul mood today."

"Is she ever in a good mood?" I roll my eyes.

"She has her days." He smirks. "Go on in, Kennedy. She won't bite."

Much.”

“Geez, thanks for that reassuring pep talk.”

“Anytime, darling.” He chuckles while I take a deep breath and open the door.

As I walk into the large room, I feel all eyes on me, particularly the disapproving glare coming from Aunt Colleen at the head of the table. With my head held high, I take my respectful seat, the one my mother held before I was initiated.

“My apologies for the rude interruption. Please proceed, Miss Bennett,” Colleen states, pulling my attention to the girl at the center of the room. “Were you able to find the proof we needed?”

Stone gives me a little consolatory nod before continuing on with her discourse.

“Yes, ma’am. I know it took longer than desired, but I was able to find a direct link in Senator Maxwell’s campaign funds to the Russian human traffickers you suspected. It’s all there in black and white,” she explains, pointing to the large folder in front of my godmother.

“Good. I was starting to worry we’d never find it. After his son died so brutally, the good senator has been milking his heroic death for all its worth to gain votes. We can’t allow a man like that to hold the highest post in our government, now, can we? Thank you, Miss Bennett, for your service. You’ve done well on your first assignment. You’ve impressed me and the other ladies sitting at this table immensely. If Charlene nominates you to take her chair when the time comes and you keep showing us such efficient work, then we’ll gladly accept your nomination.”

“Thank you, ma’am. It will be an honor to have a seat at this table,” Stone replies, throwing a quick glance over at a proud Charlene Walker.

Stone then steps back and walks to the end of the room with the other prodigies in training. She takes her spot right next to Meredith, who is giving me the evil eye, probably pissed that I dared come late to our monthly meetings. I can’t hold her being upset with me against her, though. Meredith has been conditioned to take our meetings very seriously, wanting to show her mother that she is fit for the role that was destined for her. But while I already have a spot at the table, she still has to wait her turn until her mother decides to step down.

She’s always been envious of me because of it, not understanding that for me to have this seat meant that my mother was no longer alive to fill it.

“Next on the agenda.” My godmother begins, only to stop when I get up from my seat.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d like to have a few moments of your time.”

“You know the rules, Kennedy. If there is a subject you’d like to bring to the table, then you must wait your turn.”

“I think past events have garnered me a smidge of indulgence when it comes to rule-breaking, don’t you?”

“Very well.” She exhales exaggeratedly. “However, if this is about your father’s impending court case, we’ve already ruled that he be found guilty and sentenced to the fullest extent of the law. I hope you’re not here to ask for leniency on his behalf. Neither I nor any of this society’s members will grant it.”

At the mention of my father’s name, the rest of the women sitting around the table begin to whisper with each other. After Emma told Colt what my father had tried to do to her that fateful day at school, Colt made sure she pressed charges, while his mother was all too happy to fire his ass.

At the news that the Dean of Richfield University had been fired due to gross misconduct and sexual assault, women started to come forth out of the woodwork in great numbers to give their own testimony of what a rotten scumbag my father was. All of them went on record with their detailed descriptions of how my father had used his role as dean to intimidate and manipulate them into sleeping with him. Both faculty members and female students alike all came forth with their own accounts of how much of a rapist pig he was.

“I don’t care about my father,” I announce loudly to quiet the room. “He can rot in a jail cell for the rest of his days for all I care.”

“Good,” Colleen chimes in. “I’m glad we agree on that front.”

“We do. However, if your past actions are anything to go on, it’s the only thing we may ever agree on.”

“I’m not sure what you’re implying, child.”

“I’m not a child anymore, Colleen. I haven’t been one since my mother died, and I was inducted into The Society. My mother swore to me, on her deathbed, that this organization was established to help those who could not help themselves. But time and time again, when I came to you for aid, you refused me at every turn. My mother had spoken of family, justice, and honor, but for the past ten years, I have yet to see any honor in anything you’ve done.”

The room bursts into utter chaos at the words I had just flung at my godmother's feet. Colleen's eyes turn to ice as she stares me down, while everyone around me loses their minds at my speaking this way to our fearless and infallible leader.

"Enough!" she shouts, standing up and placing her open palms to the table.

While everyone simmers down, I stare at the large portrait of Laura Richfield—the woman responsible for The Society even existing—hanging on the wall behind Colleen and point right at it.

"Do you think when your great grandmother started this society that she would have condoned you letting a sixteen-year-old girl kill in the name of eradicating evil from this world? Was that how she envisioned making the world a better place—by making murderers out of children?"

More mumbled whispers ensue at my statement while my godmother stews in her seat.

"Or would she have slept peacefully at night knowing one of her own had to kill her own twin brother because you refused to help when she specifically told you that he was using this very society as a scapegoat to harass and torment her friends?"

"Do not fault me for your unhinged brother's actions. You are just as accountable as I am. Had I known the boy knew of our existence, I would have dealt with him myself a long time ago," she says coldly.

"By killing a thirteen-year-old boy? Because that's when he learned about us. He heard you and Mom talk about The Society the same day you told me. He saw my initiation letter through the window. Was I supposed to put my brother in harm's way then by telling you he overheard everything? Would you have so easily disposed of my family then?"

"This is your family!" she exclaims loudly, slamming her fist on the table.

"No, it isn't. My family is Finn Walker," I state before throwing a glance at his mother. "And Stone Bennett," I announce, pointing to Stone at the end of the room. "It's Easton Price and Scarlett Davis, and it's Colt Turner and Emma Harper." I stare at my godmother when I call out her son's name. "And it's also the man who holds the fabric of my family together—Lincoln Richfield Hamilton. These people are my family, and this society failed to protect them when they needed it most. And because of that, I can no longer in good conscience continue on as a member. The Society my mother talked

so proudly about does not exist. Somewhere along the line, while we were fighting monsters, we became them, too. And I refuse to be a part of it any longer,” I state clearly, loud enough for every Asheville woman here to have heard me. “So now I ask you, godmother, will you accept my resignation and give my mother’s seat to someone who still naively believes in the cause, or am I to be taken care of, too?”

Colleen stares daggers into my soul as if wanting to strike me down just with her eyes, but I hold steadfast, head held high.

“The Society accepts your resignation,” Charlene Walker belts out, standing up from her seat and surprising everyone, including me, in the room.

“The Society accepts your resignation,” exclaims the woman standing at her side, also up on her feet, unafraid of Colleen’s possible retributions.

“The Society accepts your resignation,” another calls out and then another. And another.

“The Society accepts your resignation,” they all start to say in unison, while Colleen’s usually emotionless expression begins to crack, and possibly, for the first time ever, she finally sees the error in her ways.

“The Society accepts your resignation,” repeat all of them, slamming their fists on the tables and creating the thumping soundtrack to my freedom.

And with those words ringing loud and clear in the air, I start walking out of the room, not even bothering to give my godmother a second glance to see the look on her face as she comes to the cold realization that her untarnished legacy is crumbling right in front of her eyes.

The Society was never my destiny.

My destiny was always him.

My blue-eyed boy.

My golden-hearted love.

My Lincoln.

Epilogue



Lincoln

Fifteen years later

“The polls look good, Linc,” Stone affirms while scrolling through her tablet. “Or should I say, Mr. President?” She winks at me, gaining joyful cheers from everyone in the room.

“Now, guys, let’s not throw a parade just yet. We still have two more weeks to campaign, and the winner of the election is still anyone’s guess as far as I’m concerned.”

“Don’t pay my husband any mind. You all know he’s not one to toot his own horn. Luckily for him, though, I’m not plagued with the same false sense of modesty,” Kennedy coos, sliding next to me and planting a kiss on my cheek.

The love and pride in her eyes have me hugging her to my side even more tightly.

“Hmm. Guys, can I have five minutes alone with my wife, please?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Everyone on my campaign team immediately starts to disperse, hurriedly scattering to other divisions of the house so they can continue to work.

“Wait. Don’t go yet, Stone.” I grab hold of my campaign manager’s arm before she’s able to leave the room.

“What do you need, boss?” she asks, putting her electronic toys away to give me her undivided attention.

“You know I hate it when you call me that, Stone.”

“Pretty soon, I’ll be calling you, Mr. President. I wasn’t bullshitting, Linc. The voters love you.” She beams.

“Right now, the only voters I’m concerned about are my friends. Any

news if they'll be able to be here on election day?"

"Easton and Scarlett are flying from London the morning of since Scarlett has a concert the night before that she can't cancel. Emma and Colt should be here in a couple of days from their book tour, though."

My heart doubles in size with the knowledge that my best friends are busy living their best lives. My Grammy-Award-winning sister is promoting her latest album all over the world, accompanied by her fiercest fans—her husband and their son.

But while Scarlett and East take over the music industry, Emma and Colt are busy dominating the book world.

With Emma's keen intuition for piecing clues together and Colt's growing obsession in researching all things occult, they have both written over twenty mystery novels in the past fifteen years. Their ongoing bestselling series focused on secret societies has been so successful that with each new release, the book instantly hits the number one spot in all of the bestselling books in both the Wall Street Journal and USA Today.

"What about your husband?" I ask when I realize that Stone didn't mention Finn. "Will he be able to make it, or is he too busy helping Elon Musk and SpaceX to make time for little ol' me?" I joke, earning a giggle from Stone.

"Oh, Pretty Boy will be here, alright. Even if I have to go to Cape Canaveral myself and drag him here."

"Glad to hear it." I smile at her, knowing that she misses Finn just as much as she wants to have him share in my big day. "Thanks, Stone. That's all I need to know. I'll come to find you after I finish talking to my wife."

"You got it, boss." She salutes teasingly.

Once I've made sure that everyone has left the room, I pull Ken to my chest and wrap my arms around her.

"Is there something wrong?" she asks, placing her open palms on my chest while lovingly looking up at me.

"Does something have to be wrong for a man to want some alone time with his wife? I just had this immense need to kiss you, and I'd rather not have an audience while I do it."

And before she's able to give me a witty reply, I crash my lips to hers and silence her words. Like with any kiss we've shared throughout the years, Ken melts into me instantly, giving me her all and expecting me to do the same.

"If you knew you were going to kiss me like that, then you should have

asked for more than five minutes,” she says, breathless when we break apart, her hooded gaze unable to hide the hunger that lies in her blue-skies for me.

“Hmm. Did you have something specific in mind, Mrs. Hamilton?”

“Oh, I have plenty of things in mind, Mr. Hamilton.” She wiggles her brows suggestively, taking a few steps back toward the table behind her while pulling me by my tie so I’ll follow.

Like I’d ever need the incentive to follow her direction.

Wherever my Kennedy decides to take me in this life of ours, I’ll always be sure to follow her.

So when she hikes up her skirt and spreads her legs wide to show me the way home, I don’t hesitate. I kiss her madly and passionately as I pound into her warm center, uncaring if everyone outside this room hears her wails of ecstasy as she screams out my name.

And just as she reaches her peak, I tell her how much I love her, how I have always loved her, and will always love her for the rest of my days. With beautiful tears of joy in her eyes, she shatters in my arms, professing her undying love for me, making sure that even in this, I follow her lead and come undone.

“Can you imagine doing that in the oval office one day?” She laughs after we’ve composed ourselves again.

“Leave it to you to think such things,” I tease, touching the tip of her nose with mine.

“I love my husband.” She shrugs unapologetically. “And I think I’m entitled to show him just how much anytime and anywhere I want. The Oval Office, not excluded.”

“With that attitude, you’ll be a wonderful First Lady.” I chuckle.

“I hope so.” She mauls her bottom lip, suddenly worried.

“Hey, Ken,” I whisper lovingly, lifting her chin with my knuckles. “You will be an amazing First Lady. You’ve worked just as hard as I have to achieve our dream. Just think about all the good we have accomplished and will be able to accomplish once we win. We’re a team, Ken. It’s you and me. It’s always been you and me.”

“I love you.” She sighs, nestling her head onto my chest and hugging me tightly.

“Not as much as I love you.”

“Doubtful.”

“It’s the truth. You are my destiny. Always and forever.”

She cranes her head back and smiles.

“And you are mine.”

I lean down and press another kiss to her lips, only for a knock on the door to interrupt us.

“Sorry, boss. I need to run over this speech you wrote for tomorrow’s rally one more time,” announces Alan, who is one of my aides.

“Duty calls. Better get used to it.” Kennedy giggles, giving me a peck on the cheek. “I’m going to find Stone. There are some numbers I want to crunch with her one more time.”

“Okay, sweetheart. You go do your thing. We’ll meet up later. Alan, call my staff in and show me the edits you’ve made to my speech.”

The hours fly by, and before I know it, it’s well past nine in the evening.

“Sorry, guys, but I promised the twins that I would go upstairs and kiss them goodnight. How about you all grab some food, and we circle back here in fifteen? Sound good?”

I don’t wait for their reply because I know that, just like me, they’re running on fumes and need some nourishment to refuel. A little break will do us all a world of good.

As I walk through my overcrowded home, I see everyone is busy at work, doing their very best in trying to get me into the White House. Never in a million years did I ever think I’d go into politics, but after working for the Richfield Foundation for so long, I realized that most of the problems in my community that I was trying to fix kept resurfacing after a time. All my efforts were merely band-aids because the root cause of the issues never went away, and they wouldn’t go away as long as the same laws were passed, and our government mismanagement continued on.

So with the encouragement of my friends and family, I left the Richfield Foundation in Meredith’s capable hands and ran for senator. I never expected to win, though, much less fill the seat in the Senate that Tommyboy’s father had left vacant after his campaign funding scandal broke out. But by some miracle, I did win, and I have never looked back.

Thankfully with Washington D.C. being only an hour and a half flight, I was still able to keep to my roots and stay in Asheville. Even after all the hellish experiences I suffered here, in this house, no less, this was still my home. And after Dorethea and Sierra were born seven years ago, there was no other place Kennedy and I would want to raise them.

And with my darling twins on my mind, I hurry my steps upstairs toward

their room to wish them both goodnight, only to find that Aunt Colleen beat me to the punch and is currently reading them a bedtime story.

Kennedy doesn't like my aunt spending alone time with the girls too much, but with the mayhem of going on the campaign trail across the whole country for the past year, my wife finally relented. I always found it odd that Kennedy took a sudden dislike to her godmother since she idolized her as a kid. But whatever rift occurred between them, neither my wife nor my aunt ever confided in me about it.

However, since neither Ken's mother nor mine is alive to enjoy and spoil their granddaughters, Aunt Colleen was all too happy to fill the empty space they left, sliding into the role of substitute grandmother like a pro.

Lord knows she's had enough experience with Colt's kids. Emma and Colt have outdone us all by a mile by having three girls and two boys. Finn and Stone, not too far behind us with two boys of their own, while Easton and Scarlett have just their two-year-old baby boy, making him the youngest addition to our clan.

My little family is not so little anymore.

"Aunt Colleen." I knock on the door to make her aware of my presence. "Do you mind if I give a quick kiss to my girls?"

"Daddy! Daddy!" they both shout, jumping out of their beds and running toward me.

"Hey, my gorgeous girls," I greet, going to my knees so I can hug them to me and kiss them. "Have you two been giving Nana Colleen a hard time?"

"No, Daddy. We've been good. Real good," Dory exclaims proudly.

"Me, too, Daddy. I've been good, too," Sierra adds.

"Good. I'm glad. Because if you're really good, I was thinking later this weekend we could sneak out of the house and go over to Uncle Richard and Aunt Naomi's to play in their treehouse for a bit. Maybe afterward, we could even get Grandpa Owen to take us horseback riding. What do you say?"

"Really, Daddy?"

"For real, Daddy?" they both ask expectantly with wide eyes.

I nod.

"But that means you girls can't stay awake past your bedtime, and neither one of you looks to be too sleepy to me. So..." I cock a brow.

They both sprint into their beds and pull up their duvets until they almost cover their tiny heads.

"Huh. I guess I was wrong." I wink to my aunt. "Goodnight, my beautiful

girls. Sleep well.”

“Night, Daddy.”

“Goodnight, Daddy.”

“I’ll just wish them goodnight, and then I’ll be on my way, too,” my aunt states, starting to get off Sierra’s bed.

I hold her shoulder to keep her to her spot and give it a little squeeze.

“Take as much time as you need. You know how much my girls adore you.”

“And I them, Lincoln,” she confesses with a smile, patting my hand that still rests on her shoulder.

I throw her a sincere smile and head out of the room, only to stop and lean against the wall when I hear my girls giggling.

“Nana, is it true that Daddy is going to be the youngest president ever?”

“It most certainly is, Dory. And he’s going to be amazing at his job. You just watch.”

“But does that mean we have to move to the big white house that is always on TV, Nana?” Sierra asks with a hesitant voice.

“I’m afraid so, but don’t you worry those pretty little heads of yours. Your momma and your daddy are going to do amazing things there. And you girls are going to meet so many new people that you won’t even have time to feel homesick.”

“Are you coming with us, Nana?”

“No, sweet girl, I’m not. But I promise I’ll come and visit as much as I can.”

“Promise?” they both plead, making my heart squeeze inside my chest at how attached they’ve become to my aunt.

“I promise. Now it’s time you two went to sleep.” I hear her shift on the bed to kiss my girls goodnight. “Goodnight, my darling girls. And remember what I’ve taught you—”

“Honor, loyalty, and family above all,” the twins mimic happily in unison.

“That’s it, my darlings,” my aunt cajoles, love and pride in her voice.

And before my aunt leaves the room and catches me eavesdropping, I start walking back downstairs, content in knowing that the future will be in good hands as long as there are little girls like mine with such mantras playing in their heads.

The End

Thank you so much for reading Do No Evil.

If you enjoyed this book baby of mine, please consider leaving an honest, spoiler-free review.

It may only take you a minute to write, but reviews are how books get noticed by other readers.

By writing a small review, you are opening the door for my love stories to be enjoyed by so many others.

I'd also love it if you would check out my [website](#) and I invite you to join my Facebook Reader's Group, [Ivy's Sassy Foxes](#).

Much love,

Ivy
xoxo

Ivy Fox Novels



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[Breathe Me](#)

[Breathe You](#)

Acknowledgments

This is the section where I usually thank each and every person who had a hand in helping me write those two remarkable, albeit sometimes painful, words—The End. But for *Do No Evil*, I decided to go in another direction.

Mind you, everyone that has helped me achieve my dreams knows I'm forever grateful for everything they've done for me and that they will always have a place in my heart. You guys know who you are. I could not love you more if I tried.

As most of you know, music is a big part of my writing process, so it shouldn't surprise you that this book has more songs on its playlist than any other. I tried to convey my love and respect for music in Scarlett's and Easton's book because I wanted to pay homage to the muse that inspired this series in the first place.

This story only exists because I was lucky enough to come across Jaymes Young's song *Moondust*. For months, I heard this man sing so heartbreakingly beautifully about a love that he had to keep hidden, buried deep in the confinements of his soul, just so that his true love could have a chance at happiness. If you want to know how Lincoln's voice sounds in my head, then I suggest you have a listen to it. My mind was bursting with ideas regarding the reason behind such a tragedy that this man could not love the woman he was so clearly madly in love with. And then one day, this line in the song crept up on me—men reap what they sow. Now, I had heard this song on repeat for months. MONTHS, I tell you, but that verse never struck a chord with me until that day.

And, boy, after that, my plotting fingers couldn't write fast enough. Because right there and then, I had my villain. And for me, the villains of a story are just as important as the heroes, sometimes even more so. I'm a complete sucker for a good antagonist that lurks in the shadows and keeps our heroes always on their toes, never knowing when they are going to strike. And if you've read any of my other books, then you know how intentionally detailed and three-dimensional I like them to be. So, if you have ever felt bad for one of my villains or thought there might be redeeming qualities to them, just for me to kill them off in the end, I'm so sorry about that. My bad.

I just like to show how easy it is to go all Darth Vader (as Kennedy would put it), given the right conditions and lack of love and affection. Don't be surprised if one day I write a book where the villains win, though. I've been itching to write a love story where the bad guy gets the girl. LOL.

So, for the better part of 2019, while I was writing my reverse harem romance books, I was diligently putting all the pieces together to create one huge-ass puzzle that I thought my readers would enjoy solving.

I'm not going to lie. This series kept me up at night long before I even mentioned its possible existence to anyone. Like the workaholic and perfectionist that I am, I needed to make sure that every bread crumb I left in one book, tied perfectly with the next crumb, and then the next until it all tied together to create one huge bombshell of a finale. Of course, some of you were onto me on who my villain was, but I hope I threw in enough twists and turns to keep you on the edge of your seat.

However, there were some things I purposely left out to let the reader's mind wander in the what-ifs of it all.

Did Stone join The Society after all?

Was it Colleen's plan all along to have Lincoln in the White House?

Was Colt true to his word and outed Owen as being Lincoln's father?

Yeah, I'm going to keep my lips sealed on that front. Half of the fun about reading a good book is imagining what comes next for our beloved characters.

Although I will say, I wouldn't mind writing a series on the Turner girls. Meredith, Irene, and Abigail really got my creative juices flowing. We'll see.

As you can see, I'm going to have a hard time letting this world go after three incredible years of working on it. I can promise, however, that I will still write Naomi and Richard Price's novella with some cameos from the rest of the Northside clan and parents that will be included in The Society boxset next year, so keep on the lookout for that baby.

I really hope you all got as much satisfaction out of this series as I did.

It's been one of the most extraordinary experiences in this author journey of mine.

Thank you for all your support and love that you gave The Society.

And Lincoln.... Thank you for singing your song in my ear and making this series even possible.

I owe you one, Hamilton.

With lots of love and gratitude,

**Ivy
xoxo.**

About the Author



Lover of books, coffee, and chocolate ice cream!

Writer of angsty new adult, contemporary romance, some of them with an unconventional twist, Ivy lives a blessed life, surrounded by her two most important men—her husband and son.

She also doesn't mind living with the fictional characters in her head that can't seem to shut up and keep her awake at night.

Books and romance are her passion.

A strong believer in happy endings and that love will always prevail in the end. Both in life and in fiction.