A HARMLESS LITTLE

MELI RAINE

A HARMLESS LITTLE GAME

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About the Author

A HARMLESS LITTLE GAME (HARMLESS SERIES #1)

BY MELI RAINE

Four years ago I lost my virginity on live, streaming television.

Too bad I wasn't awake for it.

The video went viral. Of course it would. A Senator's daughter on camera? Wouldn't you click "share"? Besides, that's what three of the four guys in the video did.

Share.

They shared me.

But that fourth guy? The nondescript one in the background in the upper left corner of the screen, just sitting on the couch? The only one who did nothing?

Not one single thing.

That was my boyfriend, Drew.

And that was the last time I saw him.

Until today, when my father—now on a path to the White House—hired him as head of security for my new team as I return home after four years of "recovering" in an undisclosed location that involved white lab coats, needles, pills and damage control.

You see, the other three guys never went to jail. Never had charges pressed.

Never faced consequences.

Until today.

Game on.

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Author's note: I also write romantic comedy as <u>Julia Kent</u> and paranormal shifter romance as one-half of the writing duo <u>Diana Seere</u>. Check out those books as well.;)

In the video I'm wearing three scarves. One around my waist as a bright, electric blue belt that cuts neatly through my white, A-line dress.

One around my pony tail, a vibrant purple that was supposed to be the "in" color that season. Maybe even the next season. I think I was trying to be ahead of the trends. I don't really remember why I picked it.

Can't we just say I liked it? Isn't that enough?

And, finally, one around my neck, a red scarf the color of pinched skin and flushed fever. The color of arousal.

The color of pain.

When I got dressed that morning I didn't know. *Couldn't* know.

I had no idea three fashion accessories would be used to tie me up so a group of "friends" could assault me. It was as impossible as thinking that my morning coffee mug would be used to bash in my skull, or that my purse would be used to choke me. That just doesn't happen. *Shouldn't* happen.

Boring objects in our lives should not be used to hurt us.

But those scarves burned. They bound me. They held me in place.

They gagged me.

Those objects of beauty became instruments of torture.

I don't blame the scarves. They're just pieces of cloth.

The men who used them are the ones I hold responsible.

And the man who did nothing to stop what happened was the worst of all.

Here's some basic arithmetic:

Three scarves.

Four men.

Three attackers.

One boyfriend.

What do you think hurt me the most? The scarves? The hot, swollen, unlubricated flesh that violated me like I was just a fold of meat to jack off into? The wrenched shoulders and torn ACL from being trussed and tied up like something in a bad porno? The broken cheekbone from being raped from behind so hard my face smashed into the coffee table leg more times than the ER doctor could document?

Or knowing that my boyfriend—my *best friend*—just sat there on the couch and watched? I don't really have it in me to pick which was worse. They're all the worst.

How do I know any of this?

The video, of course. You've seen it. I know you have.

Everyone has seen it.

Hell, people in Inuit villages in East Greenland have seen it. I know this because of the emails. The Tweets. The Facebook posts. The Snapchat and Instagram and even Pinterest pins that mock me tirelessly although I don't have those accounts.

Even now, four years later. It persists.

Pain never dies.

Neither does online shaming.

Then there are the dick pics. Oh, God, the endless dick pics. When you're a senator's daughter and you get drugged and gang raped on live, streaming television and the taped video is later broadcast on every legitimate media web page and pirate torrent site on the planet, you tend to draw out the crazies.

The ones who think sending you a picture of their naked, erect little sausage is like bringing candy and flowers on a date. Like that picture will make you sleep with them. Become their girlfriend.

Become their property.

It seems half the world thinks I "deserved" it. That I got too drunk and passed out and got "what was coming." Um...what was coming was the three men who drugged me. Set up a camera. Created an online channel.

And told the world to watch.

How many people get to watch a live deflowering?

And how many people get to later watch themselves being, as one of the guys referred to it, "devirginized."

That's right. Not only was I violated by three frat guys I considered friends, but they took my virginity, too.

They took so much from me that night, four years ago.

Four years is a long time.

But time's up for those men.

Time is finally on my side.

"Ms. Bosworth?" The voice that interrupts my thoughts is within feet of my position in front of the wide picture window. I'm gazing out at the manicured gardens that roll out like airbrushed Thomas Kincade paintings.

I turn to see the "activities director," Stacia, looking at me with cold concern. They're all cold here, smooth and efficient but really unemotional. "Activities director" is what this mental hospital calls a therapist. I've spent four years living here at the Island Meditation and Serenity Center.

Now it's time to leave the Island, go home, and face real life.

"Yes, Stacia?" I ask, pretending to be serene. I smooth a hand across the back of my long, straightened hair. Today is all about keeping up appearances. Nice hair, make up, fashionable clothes, and a pleasant look. My heart feels like a jackhammer and my skin wants to run away. I make myself smile. It perks me up a little.

A little.

"Your helicopter is here. Senator Bosworth sends his regrets that he cannot be here at the Island for this homecoming," she replies. "But he will see you when you land in mainland California, back home."

Home.

What's home? I've spent nearly one fifth of my life here, on this island off the coast of Southern California. I came here at nineteen and I'm leaving just weeks shy of my twenty-third birthday.

Home is just this place where all the fear and mess is. And my dad, Senator Harwell Bosworth, is waiting for me there. He must be back in his state, working on a campaign. He's two years away from running for re-election for a third term as one of the two senators from California. Big state. Big ambitions.

And I'm a big old mess for poor Daddy.

My "incident" happened one week before he ran for re-election last time. I have no idea if it helped him or hurt him. All I know is that he won the election back then. For four years, I've been sheltered from the news. Every movement, every web search, every phone call and text I make is monitored by staff here.

I need to ask Daddy whether my scandal gave him more points in the election. Did he get the sympathy vote?

I glance nervously at Stacia, as if she can read my thoughts. If I were to say that aloud I would be accused of being negative. Of dwelling on pessimistic "ideations."

I would have time added to my stay here.

One thing you learn fast when you're in a mental hospital: lie. Lie a lot. No one wants you to tell the truth.

Least of all *you*. Telling yourself the truth takes a kind of raw courage. Few people have it. You have to be willing to look deep into your own soul and see all your flaws. All your darkness.

All your own evil.

I give her a sad sort of smile. That's normal, right? For a daughter to be happy to leave but a little bit sad her dad can't come. "I understand," I say. "He's a busy man, and I wouldn't want to interrupt his work. He loves me, and he'll see me when I get back."

She nods, smiling. The smile doesn't reach her eyes. It never does with any of the staff here on the Island. I can see her checking off something on a list in her head. I said the right words. I kept her from stopping me. I really will go home today.

I pretended well.

See? I can fake being a human being.

Just long enough to get home.

our father has sent a security team to escort you," Stacia explains, her eyes watching me. I am a lab rat to her. Nothing more. I am a creature you watch and document. If my behavior changes and I act outside the lines of what is expected, that will be put in my chart. I am always watched. Always observed.

All of my actions are reported.

To my father.

Stacia's eyes widen slightly. It activates alarm bells in me. She is waiting for an answer. I've hesitated a little too long. I've made a mistake. I smooth my palms against the tops of my thighs and pretend to yawn. I make up a non-verbal excuse for waiting to answer.

Her eyes go back to normal as I give a small smile and say, "That's my dad. Always caring about me." My lips curl in as I try to look like I'm so grateful.

One of her eyebrows goes up slightly. The movement lifts the corner of her mouth. She is pleased. I have given an appropriate answer.

"Your belongings have already been packed and are in transit to your home. All you need to do is grab your handbag and any items you didn't pack, Lindsay." Stacia's smile almost reaches her eyes. Almost.

In a different world, in a different time and place, she and I would be in the same peer group. I would guess she's only a few years older than me. Her hair is long and dark, pulled back in a sleek braid. Dark brown eyes, with eyeliner applied expertly, and long eyelashes finish the sophisticated look. She could be a Kardashian—before all the plastic surgery they've had done.

I wonder what she does outside of work. Is she a partier? A quiet woman who reads and watches movies for fun? Or, maybe, she likes to hike and mountain bike.

As her eyes go cold again, I suddenly don't care.

Why did I ever care?

Stacia is the gatekeeper for me. If I can't fool her into thinking I'm fine and ready for the outside world, I'm stuck.

And being stuck has become unbearable.

"All I have is my purse," I say with a smile. I work hard to make it reach my eyes. If the staff thinks I'm faking this, I am screwed. I look outside and see the helicopter through a window. A tiny sliver of one of the blades juts out. The wind outside is a little wilder than usual. When you live on an island for four years, you learn to pay attention to the wind.

"Then you're ready."

My heart nearly floats out of my chest and gets carried off on the breeze. Does this mean I really get to leave? Have I truly made them all think I'm whole and healed?

I can't think about the fact that I'm not.

I'm really, really not.

But as long as they think I am, that's what counts. Four years after being raped by three men and let down horribly by a fourth, I should be healed. I should be better. I should be ready to pick up the pieces of my old life and move on.

Stacia certainly thinks so. She clicks the pen over and over, her hand hovering above the clipboard in her hand. I know what those papers are. I keep my hands straight by my side. I control my breathing. I keep my face neutral.

Then I realize she needs more from me.

Just one more little show of appropriate emotion before I can be released.

I reach down and pinch myself where the tender skin of my hip meets my thigh, and bite down on my inner lip as hard as possible. I shudder, and tears spring to my eyes.

I sniff. She looks at me, surprised, and I give her a shaky smile. The shakiness isn't fake. I really am shaking.

Because I'm worried she won't let me go home.

"Of course," I say, filling my throat with the emotion she expects. "Of course, it's hard to leave after four years here. Heck, that's—what? Almost a fifth of my entire life? A sixth?" I take in a deep breath and ignore the raw taste of cut flesh in my mouth. My breath tremors as I exhale. "It'll be hard to leave this place behind. But I have to. It's the only way I can grow."

Click.

Unclick.

Click.

Unclick.

And then Stacia takes the ballpoint pen and makes an efficient flick of her wrist.

Checkmark.

She signs the paper at the bottom, unpops it from the clipboard, and walks over to me. She smiles. It seems genuine.

"Let's get you out to that helicopter," she says, mouth widening.

My inner joy mingles with the sound of heavy, quick footsteps, coming down the hallway. We both turn our heads to follow the sound.

"Ah," Stacia says. She's clearly been expecting whoever is coming. "It's the head of your security detail. Your father said he has a new man with tremendous experience in protecting foreign dignitaries in dangerous situations around the world. He's perfect for a senator's daughter. You're going to be safe no matter where you are, from now on, Lindsay."

I hold back a snort. I know that's not allowed. Instead, I tilt my head, like I'm trying to understand what she's saying. Except, I actually know what she's really saying.

Daddy doesn't trust me, so he's assigned me high-level babysitters disguised as bodyguards.

"What a relief," I say, continuing to fake it.

The steps halt, the door opens, and—

In walks my second biggest nightmare.

Short, clipped chestnut hair. Brown eyes the color of well-worn leather, eyes that blaze with intelligence and a guardedness no one could ever breach. He's bigger than the last time I saw him, four years ago. Broader. More muscular. He's a controlled, contained man who has a James Bond air to him.

And he's looking at me right now with eyes so cold they might as well be icebergs.

"Lindsay, let me introduce you to Andrew," Stacia starts.

Drew. Oh, God, it's true.

"Andrew Foster will be your new security specialist. He and his team will keep you safe." I snort.

He stares.

Stacia's eyes leap from Drew to me and back. "Is there a problem?" she asks, brows turning down. That's more emotion than I've seen in her for four years. Her gaze darts between me and Drew, assessing the situation. No matter what, I lose if she decides something's going sour here.

Even if Drew is the one gone bad.

"No." Drew and I say the word at the exact same moment, in the same tone of voice. It sounds like a sharp clap, a single sound that shatters noise.

"You two know each other?" Stacia asks, her fingers caressing the paper. Without that discharge form, I can't leave. If Drew ruins this for me, it will be the second time in my life he's fucked up.

The first time was four years ago when he let three of our friends rape me.

And while this situation right now doesn't have quite the same horrific consequences, I'd prefer he not ruin my escape.

Without answering Stacia, Drew looks away from me and opens the door. "Ms. Bosworth?" he says, gesturing for me to walk out.

Ms. Bosworth.

It's like that, is it? You date a guy for three years and one day, you're just a client. A Ms.

A stranger.

I freeze. Stacia's eyes narrow and she takes in Drew. He cuts quite a figure. Besides looking like a giant marine in a suit, he's wearing an earbud with a small microphone. The outside of a gun holster presses against the bottom of his suit jacket. He looks like a Secret Service agent.

Close. He's pretty close to being one.

"Senator Bosworth is waiting for you, Ms. Bosworth," Drew says in a voice so polite I want to slap him. My palm tingles at the thought. Seeing him is enough of a shock. Being treated like some

stranger is so much worse than his presence.

I can't mess up, though. Stacia could still stop me from leaving.

"I haven't finished her discharge papers," Stacia interrupts. Her tone is clear: she's the one in charge.

"That's not my problem," Drew barks back. His tone is even clearer.

It says, You're wrong, Stacia.

I find it hard not to smile. I bite my lips to stop. I've never, ever seen anyone take on Stacia. Not once in the four years I've lived here at the Island Meditation and Serenity Center. The fact that it's Drew is even more surreal.

Why is Drew here? *Drew*? Why would my father hire him to protect me? Drew was off to join the Army as an officer. To fight in wars. To become a four-star General like his dad, with the family goal of hitting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff one day.

Now he's a hired gun for politicos like my dad?

This makes no sense.

But I know how to seize an opportunity. While living here for four years, drugged up for most of them, has made me soft, it hasn't made me stupid.

I walk toward the door. Drew is the threshold between imprisonment and freedom. I may hate him. I may cry into my pillow every night wondering why he let them destroy me four years ago. I may still burn with the heat of a thousand suns for him.

But I'll be damned if I won't use him to get home.

As I walk past him, his arm holding the door open for me, I make the mistake of inhaling. The all-too-familiar scent of his aftershave, soap, and a distinctly male scent makes my mind turn into millions of pieces of memory. My body floods with the heat of passion and love. Tempered by four years of pain, it's an emotion that comes in a giant tidal wave of the loving past and the broken now.

My stomach twists like a wet rag in the hands of an angry god.

My heart, though—oh, my poor heart. It beats double time, speeding fast as if it could make up for lost years and find Drew, track down his own twinned heart and give it a welcome kiss. As if we were still lovers graced with the easy give and take of people who just know.

Just...know that they're meant to be together.

All that emotion flits through me in two seconds. In the time it takes to inhale, I'm transported to the paradox of fate. The old Lindsay, battered and bruised beyond recognition, turns out to be crouched deep inside me, still there, still watching.

And summoned by the scent of a man I never thought I'd see again.

"You can't," Stacia snaps, bringing me out of the split-second reverie. "You can't just take Lindsay." Her eyes narrow, then flit from me to Drew. "Wait a minute. 'Andrew'?" Her eyes widen. "You're *Drew*?" She gives me one of those searching looks I know so well. The kind she uses in therapy sessions where she accuses me of withholding my emotions.

Where she's right.

I halt, my arm brushing against Drew's elbow as he moves from the threshold into the hallway. He curls his body protectively, as if forming a shield between me and Stacia.

A bitter taste fills my mouth. I begin to sweat, the sheen chilling my skin. I'm so close to leaving. I look out the window and see the helicopter.

Drew says something into his mouthpiece, then herds me to take three steps. Somehow, though, he does not touch me.

Oh, how I wish he would.

No! Where did that thought come from?

"You can't!" Stacia repeats, her voice going higher with shock and panic. She's shocked because he's disobeying her. The Drew I knew four years ago had no problem disobeying an order if he had a reason.

My father has clearly given him a reason.

"Watch me," Drew tosses back over his shoulder as he walks behind me, setting a fast pace. My heels click-clack on the hallway tiles. I pick up my speed. I don't need to be told twice to move fast. I have no idea how much power Stacia has to keep me here, but it dawns on me that maybe she has less than I thought.

My first real smile in four years spreads my face as a grin takes over. I see my reflection in the glass walls as we walk down the hallway toward the double doors that take us outside.

And then I realize Drew's watching me.

Watching me smile.

Plood pounds through me as I slam the double-doors open, the blinding sunlight making me halt. I've been outside thousands of times here on the island, but never without supervision. Technically, I'm supervised right now. But this feels different.

"Mr. Foster! Drew! You need to stop!" Stacia comes running behind us, her voice angry and loud. By the time she reaches us, the helicopter blades have begun to rotate with an aching slowness that makes my pulse quicken. It's like watching a kitchen mixer slowly start. Anticipation makes me tingle, knowing that soon, that helicopter will contain me.

Drew reaches out and touches my shoulder. I flinch, but stop. He lets go. Why do I wish he wouldn't let go? My skin is like a suit of cotton that covers millions of buzzing bees under the surface.

He whips around and faces Stacia, his sunglasses on now. "I need to accomplish my mission," Drew answers, his words tight. "You do whatever paperwork you need, but Lindsay is done here." And with that, he's made Stacia as important as a plastic grocery bag carried into traffic on the wind.

He reaches for my elbow without permission and I'm walking next to him, two steps for each of his, giddy and panting as my hair starts flying behind me from the force of the wind the helicopter blades make.

"Senator Bosworth will—" Stacia's words are cut off by the loud droning sound that comes from the helicopter engine. Suddenly, I don't care that Drew is the one taking me away. He's the reason I'm here. The reason I've suffered for four years. Later, when I'm home, I can scream at Daddy and have him fire Drew. I can yell and rage against whatever possessed my father to pick my ex-boyfriend to be my so-called "protector."

Not now, though.

Now, he can get me the hell out of here.

I stumble right before the open door to the copter, my hip crashing into Drew's as my ankle turns inward. I don't fall. His hands hold me up, his muscles powerful and coiled under that suit jacket, his assured grip both infuriating and intoxicating.

He doesn't say a word. Just picks up right where he left off, guiding me to the helicopter. I climb in and he reaches across my body to pull the seatbelt harness over me. I finally recover my wits and bat at his hands.

"I'm not a child," I shout. He retreats, palms toward me, but he watches like a hawk to make sure I secure myself appropriately. Then he shuts the small door and hands me a set of earphones that look like catcher's mitts. I hold them in my hands but don't put them on.

It occurs to me that he's observing me closely because I am his mission. Not because he has

residual feelings for me. I'm a client. I'm a paycheck.

I'm a checklist for Drew, just like I was a checklist for Stacia.

Maybe I'm trading one kind of imprisonment for another.

Drew thumps the pilot on the back and we begin our ascent, Stacia below us and screaming on a phone, waving wildly at the rising chopper, her face twisted with anger at losing. I'm not sure what she just lost, and whether I'm the winner, but that smile on my face?

It widens.

I watch the island become smaller and smaller as we rise. The six clusters of three buildings each were all I knew for four years. I see the outdoor pools. The tennis courts. The rock labyrinth and the paths through the gardens. Golf carts cluster by the facilities building and the dock has a new boat there, likely filled with new candidates for "serenity work."

Someday, I might actually miss this place.

Nah. Scratch that.

I flip Stacia the bird just as she looks up and catches my eye. Or, at least, I imagine she does.

And then we're off, the ocean below us an endless stretch of watery ribbons that feel just dangerous enough not to watch.

"Happy?" Drew asks, pointing to my face. My smile must be pretty huge to get that kind of comment.

His eyes darken as I stare at him, not speaking. Whatever hint of a smile was on his face disappears. All his muscles go slack. He is neutral. A blank wall. Just like all the workers at the island.

I let the stare last for ten, twenty, thirty seconds. Then we shift into eternity.

Finally, I lean toward him, lowering my voice, not bothering to shout above the noise. If I say this in just the right frequency, he'll hear me all right.

"I hate your fucking guts. Don't you ever, ever speak to me again," I say. "Are we clear?" I put on my headphones and maintain eye contact. I fight the urge to give him my middle finger, too.

His face does not change expression. He puts on his own headphones and maintains eye contact, not backing down from the challenge of my intensity.

And then he gives me a finger, too.

It's one thumb, standing straight up.

Message received.

Mission accomplished.

We land in California, the ride a long

We land in California, the ride a long hour. It feels long because I closed my eyes the entire time and pretended Drew wasn't there. My mind did, at least.

My body, on the other hand, reminded me every aching second that he was across from me. Blood rushed through me like bike messengers in a contest to see who could deliver a message the fastest. Drew spent most of his time calmly inventorying me. On the island, I'd learned to watch people who watched me. I can crack my eyelids open half a millimeter and appear to be asleep.

Drew watched me for that entire ride. And I felt every second of it.

Why? The word loops through me with an obsessive mantra. My therapists on the island would tell me that if I couldn't get it under control, they would increase my meds and decrease my media time. I shiver, the quick twitch unnerving.

My therapists don't have any control over me. Not anymore.

We begin to land.

I breathe in slowly, willing my mind to stop chasing itself. I exhale, imagining the pain drain out of me. My therapists told me that the pain I hold onto in my body is the source of my suffering. The medications all dull the pain.

Pain is my enemy.

And Drew let all that pain happen.

A thousand questions ping against the walls of my skull. I can't ask him any of them. Not one. If I crack open that vault, I'll never stop. I have to end this self-torture.

"Your father is in his office in the south wing of the house," Drew shouts as the helicopter blades slow down. "He wants to see you before you go to your room."

Your father. The south wing. Your room. These are words that have meaning, but I've been gone for so long.

I ignore Drew. If I pretend he doesn't exist, I can cut down on suffering, right?

"Lindsay?" Drew shouts.

I pointedly ignore him and unclip my seat harness, scrambling out the door before he can stop me.

My high heels sink into the lush grass at the landing site. This slows me down. All I can think about is getting into my house. My home.

And getting away from Drew.

My progress ends with an abrupt wall of six feet plus of muscled man in front of me. I crash into him, his movement so swift I don't see it coming. My face smashes into his chest, the soft weave of

his cotton shirt like the smooth skin of the back of his hand brushing against my cheek.

A small cry of desire comes from the back of my throat. I twist the sound until it is outrage, but deep inside I know.

I know what it really is.

And I hate myself for it.

"Lindsay, I—" Frustration fills his voice, lowering it. His voice is so deep. So commanding. I'd forgotten how he could make electricity flow through my body just by saying my name.

"I'm sorry," he says. My ear is pressed against his broad, hard chest. I feel the words more than I hear them. The vibration and cadence make it clear he's apologizing. Heat radiates off him like he's the sun and I'm in his orbit.

I break away. I'm not his moon.

"You should be sorry," I snap, marching toward my destination, fighting the soft ground. I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to do this. Not now. Definitely not right now. I haven't seen him for four years. Four long, painful, horrible years. More than 1,400 days of waking every morning knowing I wasn't with him. Knowing he sat there that night and did nothing while three men raped me. Degraded me. Used and abused me and enjoyed it.

My body goes into a full-blown supernova, skin on fire at the thought. My rage cannot be contained by a mere mortal body.

I turn around. He's right there, following me.

"Go the fuck away, Drew. I told you. I hate your guts. Leave me alone."

At least, I think that's what I say. My mind can't process words and thoughts right now. I am fixated on the red door at the back entrance of the house, the sprawling mansion that is the only home I've ever known, aside from Daddy's townhome in Washington D.C. If I can make it to that red door without Drew touching me, if I can make it to my bedroom and to my medications where I can take enough to fall asleep, maybe I can get my brain to work again.

And stop the flood of emotions that are making me crazy.

But no.

Drew follows.

I ignore him and storm through the red door. I stop in shock.

Everything is different.

Everything.

Gone is the white carpeting my mother always told us to keep clean. Gone is the chandelier that glittered like diamonds at night when it was turned on. Gone are the heavy green curtains that framed each window.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

The floor is blonde hardwood now, the walls textured with subtle earth colors, all beige and cinnamon and lemongrass tones. I see a zen rock garden and a small water fountain burbling in the corner, water pouring over carefully stacked and balanced stones.

The parlor room looks like a spa. It looks, disturbingly, like one of the spas at the island, and I recoil in horror.

"Lindsay!" booms my dad's voice as he opens the door to his office wing. "Welcome home. I see Drew is doing his job well. You're home safe and sound."

Sound, maybe. Not so sure about safe.

And job? What does *that* mean? I open my mouth to ask, but am met with a face full of cashmere suit jacket.

Daddy offers me a big hug, like he's the loving father and I'm his prodigal daughter. Much of this is for show. For Drew's sake, and to impress any of the servants who see my homecoming. If we weren't being watched, he'd give me a half-hearted "hello" or say virtually nothing. I know that the drama from four years ago ripped him apart, but mostly because having your daughter gang-raped on live, streaming television can cause a few bumps for your publicity team when you're a United States Senator.

Funny how that works.

Like Drew, though, I can't forgive Daddy for what he did. Drew did nothing to stop it, but Daddy's words after the event were like pouring salt on the wound.

I can't believe you let that happen isn't exactly the sentence most people want to hear while they're soaking in the bathtub after having three men drug you and hold you down and enter nearly every orifice on your body.

They couldn't fit their cocks in my ears. Otherwise, my body was one big game of insert the peg into the hole.

I can't believe you let that happen.

Daddy shakes Drew's hand and I start to gag. The retching feeling is stuck in my throat. I don't make a sound. They ignore me, heads huddled together, eyes on the ground as they murmur and whisper, conferring and transferring information.

I am just a fleshbag. A possession. A piece on a chess board that Daddy moves where he wishes for optimal game play.

And Daddy always plays to win.

I walk into the kitchen and reach for a glass in the cupboard, but instead find breakfast cereal bowls.

Everything has changed.

Four cabinets later and I locate the glasses, new green-tinted tumblers. All the appliances are new, sleek stainless steel nestled in between countertops made of polished pearl marble. Not granite. Marble. I'll bet Daddy had it flown in from Italy or Slovenia or some obscure country where he helped open a new trade agreement.

Being head of the Foreign Relations committee meant every personal decision carried a political attachment to it.

Even choosing not to prosecute the men who raped his daughter.

The past and the present are blending together in whip-quick succession as I stand in front of the water dispenser, impatiently waiting for my glass to fill. My head is pounding and blood rushes through me like waterfalls are in my ears. My hair is plastered to the back of my neck and every word I can't hear between Daddy and Drew makes me want to scream.

I know they are talking about me. Figuring out the best way to handle me. Well, Drew's done his job. Goods have been delivered. Lindsay is *under control*.

And having me contained is Daddy's biggest wish. You can't do damage control on someone who isn't corralled.

I laugh through my nose at the thought, then feel the prickly sensation. The one that happens right before white dots fill my vision.

Oh, no.

y knees always fill with a kind of numb tingle right before it happens, like they're balloons being pumped full of novocaine. My hand slips and the full glass tips over in slow motion. I see the water pour out over the lip, splashing on the ground as I fall.

A part of me braces for the pain of bones against the cold tile of the kitchen floor.

And then warm, powerful arms catch me. I'm braced for an impact that never happens. An arm slides behind my knees, the other under my arms and I'm in the air, Drew's masculine scent surrounding me like a protective mist. He's marching with determination, cradling me carefully. My eyes are closed. I know all of this only through my other senses.

Lavender. I smell it, and the scent of beeswax, plus something else unique. As I'm gently laid down on smooth, cool cotton blankets I open my eyes and realize I'm in my old bedroom.

Unlike the rest of the house, it is exactly the same. Exactly. Not a single item has been moved in four years.

I exhale without realizing I've been holding my breath. Relief pounds through me like a pulse. If Mom and Dad changed my room, I would probably have a nervous breakdown.

"Jesus, Lindsay, don't do that again," Drew rasps in my ear as he sets me down. The brush of hot breath against my earlobe makes me shiver. All the heat in my body pools between my legs. And then it begins to throb, like a beacon begging for Drew to find his way home.

For four years I have suppressed every sexual feeling inside me. My therapists told me that was unhealthy, but I didn't care. Don't care. Never, ever cared and never will.

My body is betraying me, though, as it comes alive from Drew's touch.

"Don't do what? Faint? So sorry to disappoint you, Drew. I'll work harder to control involuntary responses to overwhelming situations next time, and all just for you." Sarcasm fills my voice, the sound dripping with contempt. I have to marshal the negativity. If I don't, the sound of my own craving will fill the room and Drew will hear it.

Know it.

And reject it.

He flinches, but doesn't back down. "I meant," he says, eyes made of steel, "that you have to be more careful."

"Worried about my safety, suddenly? What a refreshing change."

This time he goes silent, nose flaring with anger, mouth tightening.

Daddy walks in and looks at me with an expression of concern tinged with something more calculating than just a father's worry.

"Maybe you're not ready to come home, Lindsay." Daddy and Drew exchange a look. "Maybe this is too soon," he adds. Drew's face remains blank.

No.

Hell, no.

A switch in my brain flips, pushed by the sheer force of my will to go from A to B. Click. I give him my best fake-genuine smile, tempered slightly with the pretend feeling of being overwhelmed by fainting.

By life.

"I'll be fine, Daddy. Just fine. I need a few days to adjust," I say in an even tone. I've practiced this for four years, and fooled the staff at the island, so Daddy's no match for me.

His shoulders relax, tension pouring out.

Right answer.

"That's my girl," he says, already thinking about the next major item on his daily To Do list. Anya, his long-time executive administrator, walks in the room, head bent over a clipboard and a stack of files, a wireless phone earpiece in her ear like something out of a Star Trek movie.

"Senator Bosworth, the foreign relations committee is holding an emergency session on..." Her voice trails down as she realizes Drew and I are in the room.

"Lindsay!" Anya's steel-blue eyes light up with genuine warmth. Her ash-blonde hair is coiffed perfectly, cut in an easy, layered style befitting a fifty-something woman, and she's wearing a pearl-grey suit. For fun, she runs triathlons.

Daddy wouldn't know when to go to the *bathroom* without Anya. She runs his life. Daddy thinks he's the big, powerful senator with all the connections, but if Anya ever quits he'd be as helpless as an infant.

"Hi," I say, waving awkwardly from my bed. I sit up on my elbows. Thankfully, I chose to wear pants for this homecoming trip. I tuck my feet under me and sit up, grabbing a pillow for support. Suddenly, vulnerable, I feel like I'm naked even though I'm fully dressed.

Anya gives my dad a questioning look. "You didn't mention Lindsay was coming home." She's smiling and friendly, but there's a tone under those words. I feel instantly vindicated. Anya's clearly been on my side this entire time.

Unlike Daddy and my mom.

And Drew.

"We weren't sure until the last minute that she was," Daddy says, matching her tone. His message is clear: *Don't cross me on this*.

The only hint that Anya's disturbed by all this comes from the slight widening of her eyeliner-heavy eyes. Tight cheeks rise up in a smile.

"What a wonderful surprise!" Anya turns away from Daddy, drops her armload of papers on my desk, and reaches for a hug. I stand, my legs more sure than they were just a couple of minutes ago. Drew reaches for my elbow, as if to steady me, but I pretend I don't notice.

He doesn't actually touch me. I'm not sure how I feel about that, but in the balance, I think I'm more disappointed than relieved.

Knowing that makes me panic.

And flush.

Anya's hug is warm and sincere, the first true *welcome* I've felt since I escaped from the island and walked into my own house. It occurs to me that my mother isn't here. I haven't seen her. Is she even home?

I open my mouth to ask, then stop myself. Daddy, Drew and Anya are all giving me covert side glances. I'm under a microscope. Now isn't the time to ask about Mom.

Besides, I pretty much know the answer. Why would she be here today, of all days, when she could only make the time to visit me once a year on the island?

A raw feeling pulses in my chest. It rises up, threatening to strangle me. Like hands on my collarbone, wrapping around the soft skin of my neck, it seeks to cut me off from my life source. I can't breathe. My skin hums. I'm being watched in my own home. This is supposed to be my safe place. My sanctuary.

Maybe I've traded one prison for another.

And the worst part?

Now there really is nowhere safe in the world for me.

"I'm so glad you're home, Lindsay," Anya whispers in my ear. "It's been far too long. You're welcome at my house any time. Let's have dinner one night next week. And Jane would love to see you, too."

Jane. I jolt, shivering like a spider runs up my spine. I haven't seen Jane since the night she found me.

Broken, battered, bruised, bloodied...and still tied up with those three bright scarves.

"I'd like that," I say evenly. "How is Jane?"

"Oh, she's working for this new tech start-up," Anya says brightly. "Got her degree in computer science. You know how she always had such an analytical mind? Now she's using it."

I give her one of those socially-appropriate smiles. It's pure instinct, the corners of my mouth moving up in response to her facial expression and tone.

"That's great."

Daddy and Drew are conferring, heads together, voices low and monotonic. They're like sonar in human form.

I'm on their radar, and they're always tracking my mood.

"Senator Bosworth," Anya says, all business suddenly, reaching for her stack of papers and whatnot, "we need to get to the lawn for the helicopter trip."

Daddy looks like he's just been handed a brand new shiny red bike for Christmas. His relief at being able to leave me makes those invisible hands on my throat tighten just enough to make me cough.

Drew holds up one finger in Anya's direction, never taking his eyes off Daddy. "He'll be there in a minute, Anya. You go ahead and get the crew ready."

With a curt nod, she submits, then spins on one heel and leaves.

Drew's ice-cold eyes make my heart restart, the hands loosening at my neck, my body expanding with the pounding of blood running in double time.

Before he can say a word, I mimic Anya, not giving him the pleasure of ordering me out of the room.

ou're demanding way too much from Lindsay." I'm almost around the corner and into the living room when I hear Drew's angry voice. I skitter to a halt, nearly pitching forward but grabbing the wall in time. He sounds like he's ready to punch Daddy.

"I'm in charge here. I'm her father. I'll decide what she can and cannot handle."

I hold my breath. There were times in the Insight Center...er, mental institution...when I had a chance to overhear private conversations. The staff were so careful, but eventually people slipped up. Never Stacia. Never, ever, did Stacia make a mistake, but the lower-level counselors and nurses sometimes sat in small groups and quietly talked about the patients.

Talked about me.

Listening in on Daddy and Drew fighting about me is even more riveting than those snippets from the past.

"I thought I was in charge of Lindsay's security," Drew snaps. He makes no other sound. No sigh, no grunt, no nothing. He's so self-contained. I can imagine his face, eyes hooded and fierce. I can see my dad in my mind's eye, too. Blank face, burning eyes, and the body language of a dangerously powerful man who can squash you like a bug.

I know I'm right. If I peek around the corner, I'll confirm I'm right.

My heart slaps against my ribs like someone playing a bongo drum. The erratic rhythm fills my ears. Blood rushes to the surface of my skin like angry bees, and swoon.

"I thought so, too," Daddy snaps back. "And part of your job involved determining whether she was ready."

Ready for what?

"She's been more than ready. Four fucking years, Harry." Drew's voice drops to the kind of hiss reserved to brutal contempt. It's the voice you use with someone when you have nothing left to lose.

It's starting to occur to me that maybe Drew isn't just here for the paycheck, after all. If I had any illusions that he and Daddy have been best buddies while I've been gone, they just disappeared.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me," Daddy answers. He doesn't correct Drew on using his first name, though.

"You know you've been having her drugged up to keep her quiet."

"I've done no such thing." Daddy's voice detours from his calm, cold focus. He sounds slightly panicky, which makes my stomach turn numb, electric shocks radiating out from my navel.

What? What? Daddy never, ever sounds like this. Senator Harwell Bosworth doesn't do panic.

"What Monica and I have done, as Lindsay's parents, is to consult with the medical and

psychiatric experts to make sure she receives the best transitional care possible so she can reassimilate into daily life," he adds. By the time he's done, he's back in control.

My heart beat isn't, though.

"And that included being drugged with enough sedatives to kill a baby elephant for nearly three years?" Drew's voice is so calm it's like they're talking about the weather, or the Kentucky Derby, or a sale at Brooks Brothers.

It chills me to the marrow.

Because I know, and Daddy knows, that every word coming out of my ex-boyfriend's mouth is deep truth.

"Is that what they told you at the island?" Daddy's laugh is harsh, coarse, like sandpaper meant to rub up against your skin and make you bleed slowly. "I knew it was a mistake to give you access to Lindsay's medical records."

Huh?

"Not a mistake. Probably the best decision you've ever made in your career, Senator."

I can feel Daddy's physical reaction, even if I can't see him, as Drew shifts from first name to honorific. My breath tightens. My legs feel like jello encased in numbing gel. My eyes flicker, unable to settle on one object. I look at the thermostat, the door lock, a crystal vase on a side table. Each item is like a snapshot.

My ears take in the tsunami of truth about the man behind the curtain who has been controlling me for all these years from afar.

"You know exactly why Lindsay was at the island. You know what those monsters did. And the media storm after was a nightmare for her. The accusations, the recriminations, the god-damned attacks on her character. The never-ending paparazzi, the speculation, the spun stories about her state that night."

I have no idea what Daddy's talking about. All I remember from four years ago is waking up, tied and bound, stuck to the carpet by what I later learned was my own, dried blood, with Jane over me, weeping and frantic, calling the police.

And then I woke up again, on the island.

I've spent four years there reconstructing everything about that night.

What Daddy and Drew are talking about, though, is all new to me.

"She wasn't drunk or high, sir. I've told you that a thousand times. I was there for most of the night."

Most? I almost scream the word aloud. I clap my palm over my mouth to stop myself. It's like kissing a wall of ice. Drew was there for every second. I watched the video. I have ways of getting information online, even on the restricted venue of the island. Part of my misery—part of my healing —has come from watching the footage over and over, deconstructing every frame, understanding who did what.

And who didn't do anything.

"You weren't there long enough," Daddy spits out. Drew goes silent. I can't see them, but I can imagine them. Daddy's voice lacks conviction, though. It's clear this is an old argument. They've said these words to each other before. How many times? How well worn are the arguments between them, the discussions and analyses about me?

And what does Daddy mean that my character was attacked?

"She's stronger than you think. But don't expect Lindsay to be anything close to the young woman you knew before the attack," Drew says in a sharp voice.

"Of course not! She's traumatized and—"

"That's not what I mean." A chill shoots up my spine. Has Drew caught on to me? Has he figured out I'm faking so much?

"Then what?"

"When she learns the truth about what happened after the attack, she'll, well..."

Daddy just sighs.

"We have therapists for that. And, worst case, she can return to the island."

No.

NO!

I press my palm against my mouth so hard I feel my lower teeth dig into the knuckle of my middle finger. My skin tastes like copper.

"That's not what I mean, sir."

From Harry to Senator to Sir? Drew's contempt for my father shines through as this conversation continues. How long before he starts calling him asshole?

The thought makes a hysterical giggle rise up in my throat. I bite my finger on purpose to keep it down.

"Then say what you mean!" Daddy growls.

Drew clears his throat. His voice drops. I can barely hear him, but I can make out his words.

"When Lindsay learns that the attackers convinced a group of her friends to lie and say she was drunk and high, and that she encouraged the gang rape, she will be out for blood."

My own blood freezes.

"And when she sees the news articles, and when you go on the campaign trail with her in tow, you're going to have to deal with all of those lies being dredged up again."

"I know that damn well, Drew. And your job is to protect her from—"

"And she won't take it like a victim."

"Excuse me?" Daddy chokes out, clearly shocked by Drew's words.

My heart pumps ice through me. I can feel chunks of it rolling against my skin. Drew's words are more frightening than anything anyone has said to or about me in four years.

Because he's right.

Oh, dear sweet merciful deity, he's figured me out.

For real.

"You think you've brought Lindsay home so you can prop her up on the campaign trail and make a picture of a perfect family. And with enough dodging and deferral, and public relations spin and volleying, you can."

Daddy's voice floods with relief. "That's exactly why she's home."

"But do not underestimate Lindsay's agenda."

Oh, God.

Daddy makes a snorting sound. I can imagine his eye roll. "Lindsay? An agenda? What agenda does Lindsay have beyond shopping for a whole new wardrobe so she can keep up with the latest fashions?"

Ouch.

"Is that really how you see her?" Drew ends his sentence with a derisive huff.

Daddy's silence says everything I need to hear.

"You think of her as a puppet, Harry."

So now we're back to first names.

"I think of her as my *daughter*." A tone of anguish I've never heard comes out of my father. It warms me. A little.

"And I think of her as a human being who is independent and has her own feelings, thoughts, and reactions. You want her to fit into your plans for the campaign. And she might."

"She will."

"Don't count on it. She's sharper than you think. always has been. You've underestimated her for years. When I saw those medical records—" Drew's voice breaks off, choked with emotion. "That mental institution just doped her up to shut her up."

"Dammit, Drew!" Something bangs, hard, like Daddy's slammed his fist on a table.

"And you can argue all you want, but the bottom line is this: she's home. I'm glad she's home. I'm glad she's out of a place she probably only needed for the first few months, and mostly just to heal outside of the limelight. But you've done her no favors keeping her hidden for so long. Between what she's about to learn about her reputation, and the juicy, vicious gossipmongers who are going to love to get their hands on any tidbit about her, you've set Lindsay up for a mess."

"You done lecturing me?" Daddy's voice has gone cold and dismissive. It's the voice of my childhood.

"No," Drew says casually. His words make me bite back a smile. "It's bad enough she's been cloistered for so long. That's one issue. The other is that she won't react the way you want her to. And the cat's out of the bag. You can't just stuff her back into that institution again."

"What do you plan to do about that?"

"Me?" Drew's voice goes up just enough to make me warm up.

"Yes, you. Your job is to control her."

"My job is to *protect* her."

"Same thing." I hear footsteps. A door slams.

And then, quietly but clearly, I hear Drew hiss:

"What the hell have I gotten into?"

Greep my way back to my bedroom and stare at the ceiling fan, resting on the bed, trying to get the confetti that flies through my mind at the speed of light to slow down.

I thought coming home would give me freedom. Closure. A fresh start. I thought I knew most of the answers about the incident four years ago, and could move forward with a new future that might always carry the scars of the past, but that would still be okay.

But no.

The press thinks I was drunk and high and asked for...for that? Asked to be tied up and gang-raped by three fraternity brothers, old friends of Drew's who I had—until that moment—trusted with my life?

Instead, they stole my virginity.

My innocence.

My sense of trust.

Worst of all, my first love stole my soul from me.

And now he's...defending me?

Nothing makes sense. Everything is upside down. When I went through my debriefing on the island, Stacia told me I could call their therapeutic hotline any time I needed support. I know that's a trick, though. If I make that call, Daddy'll put me back there in a hot minute.

I have no one to talk to. No one to turn to. My group of friends—Mandy, Jenna and Tara—were my besties. The four of us went everywhere, from the day we entered the pre-school we all went to, all the way through prep school. That night, four years ago, we'd all been home from college and partying like high school.

Did I drink? Sure. A few. Drew brought them to me.

Did I do drugs? No. Never.

Was I drunk? I didn't think so. I've run through the night a thousand times in my mind, and I remember three drinks over the course of three hours. Stacia tells me the mind reinvents whatever it needs to change to fit a person's inner desires. We want to believe that bad things can't happen to us, so we reshape memories sometimes.

She never outright said that's what I did. And I know I didn't.

I've always thought that last drink must have been drugged. Spiked. Because after I finished it, the room turned to blurred cotton. Drew's face had just disappeared, like layer after layer of lace had been overlayed until he just wasn't there any more.

Until he stopped existing.

Until he turned into nothing.

Nothing at all.

Something way too close to tears tickles the edges of my eyes.

I start humming a Katy Perry song. One saving grace on the island: I was allowed to listen to almost any music I wanted. Songs about rape and abuse were carefully selected out of my playlist. Otherwise, I had free reign. The humming cuts through the blizzard in my mind.

The sound of my own voice in my throat feels like a weapon. It's mine. Mine and only mine.

In the distance, a lawnmower starts. One of the cleaning people turns on a vacuum. And as I fade off to sleep, unable to fight my absolute, bone-weary exhaustion, I let the song die in my throat, my final conscious thought one, single word:

Drew.

* * *

GREY. Every part of the world has turned a pale, dirty grey that makes me shrink back in terror. It's cold and still, the chill seeping into each inch of my skin. My bones feel like icicles. I look down. I'm wearing a thin, cotton dress that goes to my ankles, my wrists, and that is three sizes too big.

The cotton is grey, a scratchy, stiff fabric that fills me with an uncontrollable impulse to tear it off. I would rather be naked in public than wear this garment one more second.

A large shadow covers my head, then passes. How can there be a shadow when the whole world is grey? I look up to follow the movement of whatever created the dark splotch and see it's a vulture. His eyes meet mine and the moon shines so bright, so suddenly, like a spotlight shoved two inches from my face, blinding me.

Then blackness. I close my eyes, disoriented and terrified. The grey turns into a fine mist that smells like rotten eggs, and as I reach up to push the hair away from my face I can't. My wrists are bound behind me.

I open my mouth to scream.

I can't.

My mouth is filled with my grey dress. I am naked, the whole dress being crammed down my gagging throat by the feathered wing of the vulture. It's eyes are filled with a murderous glee, as if it is human and intelligent, as if it savors what comes next.

My breasts tingle with the cold fear of being defiled by unseen fingers, my core spasming with horror as I'm invaded, over and over, penetrated and helpless, the pain too much, too much, until I can't take it but the scrabbling creatures in my brain won't stop moving, can't escape, can't flee, and I can't—I can't—I can't—

I WAKE up covered in sweat, my hands above my head, sitting up, my fingernails clawing my throat. The harsh rasp of my breath feels like I'm drowning, unable to get enough air, my lungs filled with the abuse in my dream, a kind of liquid poured into me that I can never expel.

Coughing, I feel the moan rise up from my core, as if it needs to speak, as if I can find it a voice.

This is one of the dreams that has plagued me for four years.

I thought coming home would make it stop.

A light turns on in the hallway. I grab my pillow and cover my face, crawling under the covers

and resting on my side, away from the door. Eyes wide, heart twitching like I'm being defibrillated, I force myself to breathe evenly. Fighting instinct, I make it happen.

I have no choice.

I've had no choices for four years.

Someone is on the other side of my door. Shadows along the small crack at the base of the threshold tell me I'm right. The door creaks softly, like someone is pressing their hands against it. Are they shoving their ear up to the wood to listen for me?

I have to give them nothing.

Did I scream? Cry out? Gasp so loudly they heard me? I can control my behaviors when I am conscious, but the subconscious and the unconscious...ah, they are finicky mistresses. So hard to control.

Three faces flash before my open eyes, memories frozen in time. John, Stellan and Blaine.

Funny how they look just like the vulture in my dream.

Those eyes.

The person on the other side of my door knocks softly. Tentative, they're exploring whether I'm awake or not. I hold my breath.

Go away, I think. Just go away.

To my surprise, they do. The shadows and the shuffling in the hallway tell me so.

I spend the next three hours until dawn staring at my ceiling fan, willing it to move.

I do not close my eyes.

Home.

I'm home. I can smell it. At some point, I must have dozed off, because I wake up with drool in the corner of my mouth and that hazy feeling you get when you're not quite sure whether you're asleep or awake.

That scent? It's the smell of carbs.

Carbs and cinnamon. My two favorite food groups.

Something in the room is ringing. The sound is electronic, and it takes me a while to recall the sound.

It's a mobile phone.

I sit up and search the room, my eyes running across the surface of my dresser, nightstands, desk, and coming up empty.

Then I realize it has a hollow sound.

Three, four, five times it rings, and as I stand and search, I finally discover it in the left, top drawer of my desk.

I open the drawer. It is empty other than the phone, which is brand new.

I haven't had my own phone in four years.

A stripe glows at the bottom of the screen. I tap it, then remember. You swipe it. I do, and a man's voice speaks from the phone.

"Hey, sleepyhead." It's Daddy.

"Hi. What's this phone?"

"Yours. You need one. That's how the world works, sweetie. Your generation has smartphones to keep you on track. I have Anya."

His attempt at casual humor makes me smile. I laugh because it's expected of me, but a part of my chuckle is genuine. Something in my belly relaxes. A layer of tension releases.

"One day Anya is going to retire and you won't know what to do with yourself, Daddy. You'll just pause in place, like a robot without its energy source, and freeze."

"She has to wait until after my two terms as President before she can retire."

I laugh again.

"It's in her contract," he adds. This is an old joke. Anya's younger than Daddy and is about as likely to retire as Daddy is to give up on politics. Both will never happen. This is safe territory for conversation.

"Are you home?" I ask, making polite conversation. I already know the answer.

"Back in Washington." If I had a dollar for every time he said that, I'd have...well, enough to buy a nice computer.

Or, as I cradle it in my hand, a very nice smartphone.

"Lindsay, today is your day to decompress. Catch up on life. Learn how to use your smartphone, go to the spa, find your old friends..." The last little bit dies on his tongue. I know why, because I overheard what he and Drew said last night. But he doesn't know I know, so I listen to his changing voice as he tries to cover for his own inner turmoil.

At least, that's what I want to think. Because if my own father isn't experiencing any kind of doubt or concern on the inside right now, on my first full day since coming home for the first time in four years since the attack on me, then I need to re-evaluate everything I know about love.

"I'll be fine." I pretend to yawn. "I plan to spend the day going on a nice run, seeing Mom, organizing my room, and getting ready for whatever comes next."

"Sounds like a plan." Daddy loves plans. He worships his to-do lists. He hates winging it. Of course, when you have Anya organizing your every move, and you're a two-term United States Senator, you can think your success comes from being overly scripted.

But that's not important. What is important is this: I think he's no longer worried. The more I deflect and make him think I'm fine, the sooner he'll give me more freedom.

And I need all the freedom I can get, because after a few days, it will be time to enact my plan.

Daddy doesn't know I have plans, too.

Plans that have nothing to do with him.

"It is a plan, Daddy," I say, smiling while I talk. I learned that on the Internet, in some article I read. You sound happy if you smile while you talk. Confidence radiates out from the tone that comes with a smile. I hope it works.

A sudden flash of memory, like a picture in my mind, makes me gasp. The vulture. The vulture, shoving the grey dress down my throat. Tiny beads of sweat break out on my chest and I feel my breath quickening.

No. Not now.

"Lindsay? Are you all right?" he asks. "Your voice sounds strange, suddenly."

"Just stretching," I huff, trying to tell the flopping twelve pound bass that is burrowing in under my collar bone to stop moving. "Getting ready to run. Gotta go. Love you."

"Love you—"

I push end call and slowly slide to the floor, the warm carpet against my back more soothing than any meditation chant. One skill they taught me at the island: how to brace myself during a panic attack.

Maybe I did learn more than deceit during my four years there. Huh. Who knew?

My phone rings again. It's set to that old fashioned ring tone, like the kind in those 1970s movies Mom makes me watch sometimes, with the rotary phones. I need to change that to something more hip, but right now I have double vision and it feels like my scalp is on fire. First things first.

Stop the panic attack.

then

Change the ring tone.

"Yes?" I muster as much strength as I can for the call, because chances are good it's my father again.

"Honey, I almost forgot," he says, as if we hadn't hung up at all. "We need to have a meeting tomorrow morning. You and I. Breakfast, at nine am, in my office."

"In Washington?" I choke out.

He laughs. "Good lord, no. I'll be home late tonight. You know I hate to spend any more time here in D.C. than I have to."

Click.

The room spins, and not because I'm actually dizzy. Meeting. Breakfast. Tomorrow at 9am. I stand and search the desk for a piece of paper to write that on, then stop. I stare at the phone in my hand.

I have so much to relearn, I think, as I open the Calendar app and teach myself how to enter the appointment in the app.

I'm also very, very aware that while this is my phone, it's not my private phone. Everything I say, everything I do, every tap and swipe is being monitored by someone. Maybe Daddy. Perhaps Drew. More likely, it's someone I've never met, who is being paid to make sure I stay within the lines Daddy wants to keep me in.

And that's life, right? As long as I paint within the lines I'll earn my gold star. Four years ago, someone dragged my bloody body across those lines and made a big, huge mess on the canvas called life. None of that was my fault, but I've been held responsible for it for four years.

I'm still being held accountable for it.

But that's all about to change.

CHAPTER 10

ne of the best tips I picked up on the island is this morning drink called Bulletproof Coffee. You mix hot coffee, unsalted butter, and this weird brain-building oil and drink it on an empty stomach. The island staff claimed it helped to boost endorphins and elevate neurotransmitters and a whole bunch of biochemical neurochemistry blah blah blah that never made sense to me, but I did know one thing:

I felt great on the mornings when I drank it after waking up, and then went for a run.

Connie, the woman who runs the kitchen, is new to me. She's short and plump, with greying, chinlength hair, and she wears square, fashionable glasses with red frames. Her apron is red and has nothing on it. Not a single stain. I only know who she is because as I walk into the kitchen, she looks up and walks toward me like a drill sergeant who finds an errant recruit wandering around an Army base.

"Connie," she says, shaking my hand like it's an old-fashioned water pump. "So nice to meet you, Lindsay."

"Thanks. You too." I don't ask what happened to Michelle, the former kitchen manager. I'm sure my mother fired her. Household staff rotate through the compound like balls on a roulette wheel.

"What can I get you?" she asks.

"I can get my own, thanks. I just need a blender." I smile, trying to put her at ease. She's tense and aware, but not in an anxious way. She's like a general.

"No need. It's my job to get to know your tastes, Lindsay. I can make your life seamless if you let me."

The bark of laughter that comes out of me can't be contained. If only it were so easy.

She reddens. "I meant in terms of your diet."

"Right."

Connie clearly isn't the type to give lots of warm fuzzies, and yet some emotion is there. Nothing negative. I think she's the type who likes to be in control of her space. I met a lot of staff members like this at the island. Figuring out where their boundaries were became an art. As I stand here and try to figure out the fragile social space between me, my own home, and this new woman in charge of food in my home, I realize how sick and tired I am of reading other people to make sure I fit within whatever box they think I should be in.

And yet, I don't have a choice.

Daddy could send me back to the island in a heartbeat.

And I have way too much work to do here.

"So," I say, breaking the uncomfortable silence, "I drink this stuff called bulletproof coffee for breakfast."

Her face lights up. I mean, I know that's an expression people use all the time, but in this case, it literally lights up. Her blue eyes become bluer. Her cheeks fill in with a lovely shade of pink. Her entire demeanor warms.

"Finally! Someone in this household who is edgy! Your father just wants fresh fruit and waffles every morning, and I think your mother subsists on black coffee, one apple, and air."

Our eyes meet.

Friend.

I think I have a friend.

Connie turns away and rummages in an upper cabinet, pulling out whole bean coffee and a small, amber jar. "I have coconut oil, and I know I have grass-fed unsalted butter in the refrigerator. Will that do until I can order some of the special oil you need to replace the coconut?"

I'm floored.

I must look shocked, because she laughs. "My son is really into paleo eating, and exposed me to this crazy coffee about a year ago." When she smiles, she looks so much younger. Maybe she's just one of those people who has a cold demeanor and then, when you scratch the surface, turns out to be super nice.

Maybe.

For the next five minutes, she does all the steps I'm used to doing on the island, and suddenly, we're both sitting at the kitchen island, sucking down our respective coffees.

"Mmmm," I say, admiring the taste. "What's that sweetness?"

"It's just vanilla bean. Ground. No sugar." She adds the sugar part defensively. I know why. My mom would ream her out if she added carbs to coffee.

I drink the rest down swiftly, then smile. "Thanks."

An awkward silence appears suddenly, like an unwanted house guest. Her eyes turn down and fill with a troubled look.

Ah. She knows. I'm sure everyone on staff knows about my past. Of course they do. How could they not? I know the video made the media rounds four years ago. You can still find it, here and there, on YouTube and other video sites. Daddy has an entire social media reputation management company on the job twenty-four/seven, scouring the Internet and filing removal demand notices whenever it appears, but it's like trying to throw starfish back into the ocean.

The task is insurmountable.

"That was good. I appreciate it, Connie." I put my empty mug in the sink and turn around, adjusting my arm band that holds my tiny mp3 player. My earbuds hang around my neck like a tie, and I'm already dressed for my run. The rush of coffee starts to hit me and I'm antsy. Time to run out all this overwhelming confusion.

"Any time, Lindsay. Anything you need, I'm here." Her eyes pierce me. "I mean that."

First time anyone here at home has said that, and it's a perfect stranger. I haven't even seen my own mother yet. Tears threaten to overpower me. I can't let them.

"Thanks," I say again, and then walk away, knowing it's rude. Sometimes, you have to be rude instead of falling to pieces in front of someone. If I have to pick, I'll choose rude every time.

I rush through the double French doors out to the large stone patio and stop. A fine mist covers the view to the ocean, and the air smells like salt and hope. In two hours all the mist will burn off and the sun will be back out, but for now, I embrace this. The morning chill is just enough to give me

goosebumps, but as I start off with an easy jog I know the cold will fade fast.

I jog, shoving the earbuds in, and let Nine Inch Nails take me out of my own head and pound all my feelings into my bones, one step at a time.

CHAPTER 11

wo miles later and I'm flushed, the heat emanating from within. My plan runs through my blood like a pathogen. I'm infected with this germ of a thought that came to me about a year ago.

I know how to get back at them. All four of them.

Except now, maybe, only the three.

Having Daddy assign Drew to be in charge of my security detail is a major blow to my plan. For four years I just assumed he was in on the rapes. That he was complicit. One look in his eyes yesterday dissolved all that. There is no way he was part of it.

And now I have to rethink everything I thought I knew was true.

Taking Drew out of my plan makes this so much easier. Technically, he didn't violate me. He wasn't part of the crew who used my own clothing to tie me up. His body never, ever penetrated mine to the bone. He didn't bloody me. Bruise me. Steal my soul.

But by doing nothing, he was worse.

So much worse.

I picked my running playlist based on the pace of the songs, choosing beats meant to drown out the world. I'm flying now, the strenuous clip making me huff as I nearly sprint on the carefully-groomed walking path that Mom designed about ten years ago. It's exactly two and a half miles and today, I plan to run it four times in a row.

If I exhaust myself and turn into a noodle, it'll be the best possible outcome for this impossible transition home.

Something touches my shoulder. I shrug, then scream behind closed lips. I feel heat behind me. Animal heat. Next to me. Vibrations from someone make me rip my earbuds out and sprint—hard. Someone's following me, and at this point in the path, there's no safety. I'm completely encased by some giant, thick-vined plant that feels like a spiny cage and can't be seen by anyone at the main house.

Something touches my shoulder again.

I throw myself to the ground, remembering my self-defense training classes at the island. Women have more power in their leg muscles, so when you're being attacked, drop. Use that power. Scream. Fight.

Fight.

I coil my leg back, ready to strike, and look up.

To find a very amused, panting, sweating Drew looking down at me. He's wearing cargo shorts

that look out of place, running shoes, and a tight, light-blue t-shirt that is soaked with perspiration. No sunglasses. A headpiece for a cell phone.

Cargo shorts?

And then I see the gun strapped into a belt around his waist.

"What the hell?" I scream, keeping my legs ready. Maybe Daddy made a huge mistake. Maybe Drew really was part of the attack and what if he's here to get his turn, now.

As I make eye contact, all the amusement in Drew's expression drains out.

"Are you out of your mind?" I scream again. "Get the hell away from me!"

He steps back, then says something into his mouthpiece.

"I'm sorry for scaring you, Lindsay. I just didn't want to come up on you from behind and—"

"And what? Scare me more?" My heart feels like it took off into outer space, beating so hard I feel my pulse pound in my neck. The artery is like a bass drum.

"There was no perfect way to let you know I was here."

"Then don't be here."

"That's not an option."

"What?"

"You can't be allowed to roam an estate of this size alone. It's too dangerous."

"It's too—what?" I'm dumbstruck. Truly dumbstruck. "I've never needed a babysitter at my own home before, Drew!"

"That was then."

"You asshole."

He offers me his hand to help me up. I ignore it, shove my earbuds in, and continue my run. I'm fleeing, no pace, no steady gait. I'm running like a spooked fawn in the woods, fleeing a potential predator, and damn it, Drew can tell.

He follows, but at a respectful ten paces behind me.

I can't stop thinking about him. No song on my playlist is disruptive enough to stop my thoughts. No rhythm is strong enough to override my awareness of him. His bronzed skin glistens back there, the sun peeking out and kissing his legs. His tight t-shirt conforms to broad pees that have thickened in the four years since I touched him. That chest used to have a place where my cheek could fit perfectly. Those corded, muscular arms used to wrap around me in passion, in pleasure, in comfort and in joy.

My tortured heart nearly cries out as I think about it. Willing myself to stop isn't working. How do you stop thinking about someone who is so close? How do you stop feeling so much for a person who betrayed you so deeply?

Four years of therapy and I still don't have an answer to those questions.

Five miles into the run and my legs are crying out for relief, but I keep going. No matter how high I turn up my music's volume, I hear his footsteps behind me, the shuffle of dried leaves on the path, the sound of his steady, but increasingly labored, breathing cutting through the earbuds. I can't drown him out. Can't lose him. Can't stop remembering he's there.

Maybe that's just it.

Maybe that's the answer.

halt suddenly, the epiphany so strong it's like it sucked all the kinetic energy out of me. A wall of muscle named Drew slams into me from behind, pitching me to the ground, my cheek in mulch and dirty, his entire body pressed against mine from the back.

And God help me, it feels so good.

"Oh, shit," he mutters, jumping up. The chill from the loss of his heat is like another betrayal. I'm not sure who betrayed whom, though. Am I betraying myself by feeling all this for him after what he did?

I am breathing so hard it feels like sandpaper lines my throat and nose, but I stay on the ground, face down, knowing if I turn over he'll read every emotion I have for him in my face and I will be revealed for the fool that I am.

"Lindsay! You okay? Do I need to get a medic in here?"

"This isn't a war zone, Drew. A medic?"

"You sure about that?"

"What?"

"That this isn't a war zone?" He sits down on a giant round rock on the edge of the path, planting his elbows on his knees, drinking from a small water bottle in his hand.

I turn my face, the smooth, cool dirt like a caress. I look at him. Study him. He's become the kind of man I always imagined he'd become. So strong. Commanding. Powerful in a graceful way, like he owns the world and has authority because it's natural for him. Not because he's ambitious, but because he's called to step up to the occasion.

"You see any guns around here, other than the one on your belt?" I mutter.

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I do."

He blinks at me, his breathing slowing down, his body relaxed as he stretches his calves. They're so defined, the muscles curving into a heart right above the Achilles tendon. I remember touching those legs. Running my palms along the sleek muscles. Exploring his body back in a time when every touch was a promise. When undressing was an exciting game. When being naked together in bed was about boundaries and crossing them one by one in a playful passionate way, as we made our way towards an intimacy that needed to be cultivated.

Four years is a long, long time.

"I'm not here to hurt you," he blurts out.

Huh?

I finally roll up and sit, my knees red and scraped. I brush them off and look at him. His eyes burn with so many questions. I'll bet mine do, too.

"You already did," I reply.

He winces. I stand. This conversation is dangerous. Being alone on this path is risky. Drew won't hurt me. I know that in my soul. The danger and risk isn't the normal kind.

The danger and risk is that I'll let myself fall for him again.

Fall for a guy who let those monsters do unspeakable things to me.

How messed up am I to still want him? What kind of woman still has feelings for a man who would do what Drew did to me? Am I that self-destructive? The therapists on the island said yes. They told me that while it was normal to have feelings for Drew, it wasn't normal to hold on to them.

I cling to those feelings. Four years of clinging makes my fingers ache, and yet here I am. Here I am, now, alone with him and looking at him with a pleading in my eyes that must scream out to him.

Tell me why.

Tell me why.

Tell me why, damn you.

He flinches. Maybe I really do have telepathic powers, because he stands, his breathing picking up again, his face twisted with emotion. His eyes are dark with a mixture of protectiveness, rage, and a desire so strong it makes me hold my breath.

When his hand touches my scraped knee, I gasp. When his other hand reaches for mine and clasps it, I flood with heat. My pulse quickens and I keep my eyes down. If I look up, I'll reach out for him. I'm two different Lindsays inside right now. I'm the angry, betrayed Lindsay who wants Drew to suffer like I have.

And then I'm the sad, lonely Lindsay who just wants my best friend and boyfriend back.

I can't look up. If I look up, if I meet his eyes, if I squeeze his hand and feel his skin, if I move one millimeter I'll fling myself into his arms and beg him to love me like I thought he did.

Before.

Before.

I stiffen.

"I—" He starts to talk. I look up and pull my hand away, standing.

And without another word, I limp off, back to the house. He follows. I can feel him. But he doesn't say another word.

I can fix my own damn knees, thank you. I can tend my own wounds.

I can protect myself.

I don't need Drew.

I don't need anyone at all.

ou're in charge of your own personal schedule, Lindsay," Anya says with an apologetic tone, "but your father insisted I set up this informal coffee date with Jane so you could transition back to your regular life. He felt Jane would be a good entry point."

Transition. Entry point. My father turns friendship into management jargon.

"Jane," I say, nodding. Jane is Anya's daughter, and we were in the same loose, larger circle of friends for a while. Jane's the person who found me, tied up and bleeding, after—

Well, after.

Anya just smiles and waits with anticipation, as if I'm supposed to say more.

"Does Jane want to see me?" I'm more blunt than I should be. The morning's craziness infused me with a sense of boldness. Maybe I don't need to read everyone and conform to their expectations of me.

What if, instead, the world had to shape itself around what I want?

That idea is scary. Wouldn't it be great to have that kind of power?

Anya looks shocked at my words. "Of course she does, Lindsay. She always liked you."

Liked.

I smile. "I'd love to see her. I never got the chance to thank her."

Anya's face softens with compassion. "You never, ever need to thank her for that. My God, honey. She just did what any decent person would do."

Any decent person.

Right.

Like...Drew?

Oh. Wait. Drew didn't do anything.

Scratch Drew off the Decent Person List.

"Still..." I say, dipping my head in that way people do when they're showing humility. "I can't wait to catch up with her."

Right answer. Anya's face spreads into a relaxed smile. She reaches out and squeezes my wrist with a warmth any mother should possess. "Great," she says. "Two o'clock at The Toast."

I jolt slightly. The Toast. Our old coffee shop hangout. I haven't thought about that place in years. Frankly, The Island had fabulous coffee and of all the things I longed for, coffee wasn't one.

The Toast was a total hippie dive shop, the kind of place that had vegan muffins forty years before being vegan was popular. They have an ancient espresso machine that looks like something out of the kid's movie, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. We used to go slumming there when we were in high school

and thought it was funny to hang out with the aging hippies.

Now, though, I think I'd really feel comfortable there, because no one ever judged me when I sat alone at a table and just drank coffee while I stared out a window.

The whole not being judged aspect is more appealing than the coffee.

"Sounds good. Do you have Jane's number in case I need to call if there's a problem?"

Anya points to the phone in my hand. "It's already programmed in there."

By the time I verify that she's right, she's down the hall and in her office again.

And I'm left holding yet more evidence that my entire life is programmed.

Whether I like it or not.

"Hey! Another bulletproof coffee?" Connie asks, turning the corner and carrying a small basket of fresh herbs. I learned this morning, as I came in from my disastrous run, that she has continued the tradition of the chef's herb garden. Mom insisted on that when I was a kid. Speaking of Mom...

Where the hell is she?

I shake my head. "No. Thanks. A little too much if I have two a day," I say with a smile. I lean on the kitchen island and ask in a conspirator's voice, "Have you seen my mom today?"

Connie's eyes widen. There's a calculation there. She's trying to decide how much to tell me. My heart tightens with cynicism.

She's one of them, I remind myself. No one in this household is on my side.

Sometimes, not even me.

"Monica is supposed to be home sometime this afternoon. There was some charity committee she had to serve on, and it went on for longer than expected."

I smile. "You mean her chemical peel caused more skin reddening than expected."

Connie blushes and looks at me with her mouth slightly agape.

"It's all code, Connie. I know my mom. If Daddy's gearing up for a new campaign, Mom's trying to lose weight, defy gravity, and turn back the clock. This is how it works."

Connie just nods, her fingers worrying the sprigs of herbs.

I notice she doesn't say anything more, though. I wonder where Daddy found her. She feels like she's half CIA, half Cordon Bleu.

That's probably about right.

I look at the clock. 11:11 a.m. If I were on the island, I'd be in group therapy right now. Lunch at noon. Water aerobics at 1 p.m. I know the schedule and am trying hard to forget it. This is my life now. I'm home.

And I have a two o'clock coffee date with an old friend.

My phone rings, startling me. I swipe and the phone screen says it's my mother.

I close my eyes, lean against the counter, and brace myself.

"SWEETIIIEEEEEEEE," she gushes into the phone. "My darling is back!" Monica Bosworth is a stereotype of a stereotype. I would have to say that at least half of my therapy sessions over the past four years have been about her. You would think that those hours would have been spent processing the gang rape, but no.

They were spent processing my mother's reaction to the event.

"Hi, Mom," I say, forcing a smile.

"Hi, Mom'? My daughter finally comes home and 'Hi, Mom' is all she can manage? You're so understated, Lindsay! You should be shopping! Celebrating! Ooooo, we should have a party!" she adds, breathless with possibility. Her voice changes, going low. "But a quiet one. Nothing that triggers press coverage, of course."

"No, really, Mom. Please," I say, rolling my eyes. "Don't go to all that trouble." I know the code. She isn't really going to throw me a party. I know what's coming next.

She lowers her voice. "Good point. I wouldn't want to re-traumatize you by inviting a bunch of people because there's always that one person who says the most inappropriate and rude comment to you."

Right.

Mom doesn't realize that she's that person.

"I'm sorry I'm not there, Lindsay. You know how busy this time can get," she says, shifting into her no-nonsense voice. "I'm at the spa and there's been a delay."

I called it.

"It's fine, Mom. I know how it works when Daddy's getting ready for a campaign." A cold wave of liquid steel fills my stomach. I know one of the reasons I've finally been let out is because Daddy's about to campaign again. I'll be expected to show up to events, to be pristine in my appearance for campaign photos and appearances. Smile, be on stage, hold hands with Daddy, film commercials, and basically, be a cardboard cut-out version of The Perfect Daughter.

It's a role I could handle four years ago.

I wonder how much the press has turned me into The Imperfect Daughter.

And then it hits me: I have a smartphone. With search engine apps. I can search myself. On the island, I had limited moments when I could research. Mostly, new staff members who came in were the only way I got unfiltered Internet access. Using regular computers in the labs there was a joke. They filtered my name. I couldn't even research myself.

But a staff member who needed a \$50 bill would sometimes let me use their phone for fifteen minutes. That's how I saw the video. I spent every penny of my discretionary money on bribes for access to unfiltered Internet.

And then there was the staffer who taught me about the dark net. The untracked underbelly of the shadow Internet, where nobody can see what you are doing or monitor your searches.

"Well," she chuckles, "this year it's a little different, dear. Your father's campaign won't be anything like it was four years ago."

Ouch. See?

"Has he had a meeting with you yet?" All the gushy, over-the-top love is gone. Mom is back to being a senator's wife. Cunning, sharp, and on top of every detail in support of her powerful man

"Tomorrow. We're having a breakfast meeting."

"I see." Oooo, that means she's not pleased. "I'm surprised he's waiting that long."

My neck starts to tighten. A sharp pain between my eyes feels like someone's pierced me with an ice pick. I know from stress reduction sessions with therapists that this is just a stress response. It's a reaction. I can control this. I can't change my mother, or take away her words, but I can change me.

"I hope everything heals fast, Mom. When can I expect to see you? Can't wait."

She sounds surprised as she says, "Tomorrow, of course. I'll see you tomorrow. I wouldn't miss that meeting for the world, dear."

Click.

"I love you, too, Mom," I mumble into the phone, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Someone snorts. I pivot, realizing I forgot that Connie was still in the kitchen with me.

Uh oh.

"That was my mother."

"I gathered."

"She's excited I'm home."

"Any good mother would be."

Oh. This is getting interesting.

"And she's going to see me tomorrow morning when I meet with my dad." Why am I babbling? Why am I telling a stranger any of this? I feel like my body has suddenly become thousands of long strands of thin ribbon, and a strong hurricane is on its way, the edges whipping through my ribbons and sending me in every direction.

Footsteps interrupt my thoughts. Connie turns toward the sound, too. Drew walks in, showered and changed, wearing a dark suit, that maddening ear piece, and a blank look on his face that makes me want to scream.

My whole body rushes, like a wave crashing on the shore, and I'm left with hundreds of emotions all twitching and pinging, like starfish trapped on the sand.

"The breakfast meeting?" he asks, reaching for an apple from the bowl in the middle of the kitchen island. He takes a bite and chews, looking at me with eyes that give away no hint of emotion.

"Does everyone know about the breakfast meeting? Is the gardener invited, too?" I snap.

"It's an important meeting."

"It's just Daddy gearing up for another campaign. I know the drill. This is his third one. I've practically memorized how it goes."

Connie and Drew share a weird look I don't understand.

"This one will be different, Lindsay," he declares. Connie chooses this moment to go out of the room, mumbling something about ordering more wine.

"Really? Is he going to lose this time? Or you mean because he has to deal with the terrible tatters of his daughter's slutty reputation from four years ago."

He nearly chokes on his bite of apple.

Hah. Emotion. Gotcha.

Drew recovers quickly, eyes narrowing, as he asks, "What, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"What *should* I mean?" I'm not giving one inch here. I know they all know a lot that I don't know, and they're working very hard to hide so many details from me. Why?

Drew moves so swiftly it's like I lost three seconds of my life, because now his hand is on my elbow and he's leaning so close to me I can smell his soap. It's lime and clove, with an undertone of musk that makes me shiver.

I inhale deeply. I let him keep his hand on my elbow.

"I am here for you, Lindsay. I'm not just a hired gun whose company is your security detail. You really don't understand what you've come home to. The truth will unfold over the next few days and weeks. I'm not the one to tell you most of those truths, but I have a feeling I'll be the one who helps pick up the pieces from the destruction those truths will cause."

His voice is intense and low. He's not angry, though. Resigned, actually. He sounds like a man who knows something bad is about to happen and has no power to stop it.

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning to catch his eye. Our faces are inches apart. I can smell coffee and apple as he breathes. I wonder if his lips are as sweet and tasty as they used to be.

Stop it! Stop thinking about him like that! a voice screams inside me.

The confetti in my mind whirls up into a cyclone of pain. Panic bubbles up. He's touching me, and I'm breathing hard, and while some of that is anxiety, way too much of it comes from need.

"Like I said—I'm not the one to tell you the truth. That's not my role."

I snort. "Yeah, I've noticed. You back away from doing lots of things."

And with that, I wrench my arm out of his grasp and storm off to the garage, where I should be able to find a driver to take me into town for my coffee date.

Unless that's changed, too.

he Toast has remodeled its way into the twenty-first century. I have the driver go past it three times before he finally explains this is the only coffee shop in the seaside town where I grew up.

"Ms. Bosworth, this is it." My driver's name is Silas. Silas Gentian. He's about my age, maybe a little older, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. They're the kind of eyes that make you do a double take, so blue they're almost washed out. He has impossibly long eyelashes and he looks terribly stupid wearing a chauffeur's hat.

In a different time, I'd have found him hot and would flirt. Tease him about the hat.

Not now. Probably not ever.

Gone are the giant green vines from plants older than me, wrapped around wooden support beams.

Gone are the giant, silk tie-dye banners draped all over the sunny, light-filled coffee house.

Gone are the posters from Woodstock and The Grateful Dead and other bands from my dad's era.

In its place is sleek stainless steel, mosaic walls, mood lighting in lampshades made from earth tones, and coffee that's twice as expensive.

And, I must admit, as I take a sip of my latte—twice as good.

Jane is late. It's two twenty and I'm starting to get nervous, wondering if I'm being stood up. Every cell of my skin feels like it's humming, and I'm about as self-conscious as you can be. I have a prescription bottle of tranquilizers I can take if I ever get so anxious I feel like I'll pass out. They're in my purse, which I clutch against my hip like it's a life preserver.

As I scan the coffee shop for the thousandth time, searching for Jane, I realize Silas is in a chair in the corner, sipping a coffee.

He's scanning the room, too.

Chauffeur? How could I be so naive.

He's my security detail.

I'm about to stand up, walk over to him, and ream him out when Jane bursts through the front door, looking frantic and disheveled. She whirls around and catches my eye, her expression morphing into a surprised joy.

"Lindsay!" she whispers, rushing to me, grabbing me in a hug that reeks of desperate relief.

Tears fill my eyes. Where do they come from? The bridge of my nose stings with the surprise of emotion, and our hug is genuine. My first year on the island, when I wasn't heavily drugged, I begged to be allowed to talk to Jane. They told me it would be too traumatic for me. I was allowed to write

letters, though. Jane wrote back. The letters were always short and perfunctory. Once, a sentence was blacked out.

See? Prison.

Jane never wrote another letter after that one. And I understood why, after I figured out how to decipher what the staff had hidden from me.

I have so, so many questions for Jane.

"You look great!" she gushes, her mouth next to my ear.

"How do you know? You can't even see me. I don't exist."

We laugh wryly and hug each other even harder. I haven't had anyone treat me like this in four years.

You know.

Like a normal human being you want to spend time with.

We pull away and I see she's crying. She uses the pads of her fingers to wipe away the tears and preserve her make up.

She sniffs. Jane looks a lot like a younger version of Anya, only with long, wavy, brown hair that curls at the ends, right below her waist. She has an ethereal look to her, and is willow-thin, unlike me. I'm athletic and muscular, with a short waist and long legs. We're a study in contrasts with my blonde, straight hair and brown eyes.

Plus, she hasn't been penned up in a psychiatric institution for the past four years.

Details, details...

"Let me get a coffee and I'll be right back!" she says, dashing off to the counter, waving her hands in front of her face to dry her tears as she orders a plain black coffee. In less than a minute, she's back at the table with me, and she reaches for my hand, her eyes combing over my face, taking me in.

"You look *so* good," she says, her voice catching. Something about the way she's cataloging me puts me on alert.

"You, too. I love the way you did your eyes." Jane uses a makeup technique like the singer Adele, to give her eyes a beautiful, bold look. She fits in perfectly here in this coffeehouse, a strange quasi-industrial throwback that looks like it fits in Seattle more than in this fake little elite town, with corrugated steel ceilings and distressed walls, stucco and concrete unpainted and slapped on seams with just enough haphazard precision to be a specific design. Long cords hang from the ceiling, large gears from factories woven in with lightbulbs.

She laughs. "I ruined it with my crying!" Her eyebrows turn in and she stares at me. "I just can't believe—" Quickly, like a wet dog, she shakes her head. "Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Say it."

She waves her hand. "It's not—"

I grab her wrist, maybe with a little too much urgency. Jane cringes and gives me a side glance that makes it clear I should let go.

I don't.

"Everyone is hiding so much from me, Jane," I say softly. My voice is controlled. "Please. Whatever you're thinking, just be honest. That's all I want. Honesty. Truth." I sigh, weary to the bone.

I let go of her hand and give her a very vulnerable look. I don't want to be this raw, but I am. I don't have a choice.

We sit in stunned silence. I grab my latte and down more of it. Jane blows lightly across the top of

her hot coffee and stares at a spot over my shoulder.

Finally, she says, "When I saw your face the last time, your cheekbone was broken. Your eyeball was sunken in, and your face was swollen. I just am so happy you look like you. That they didn't permanently scar you."

And then a look of horror consumes her.

"Not... I don't mean that you weren't...I'm not minimizing what they—oh, hell, Lindsay, I don't know how to even talk about what happened to you." She squeezes my hand and gives me a look of such honesty that I feel like my heart's being ripped out of my chest. "I'm sorry. I'm being so stupid and saying all the wrong things and—"

I squeeze her hand back. "No! No," I say, my voice filled with pain and appreciation. "You're the first one who's treated me like a human being who was hurt. Like someone who is real. Like a *person*."

I tip my head down and feel the tears gather on my lashes, pooling, then dropping, onto the sleek, steel tabletop.

We both struggle not to cry. We both fail.

"I'm so sorry you went through what you went through, Jane."

"Me?" she squeaks. "You're the one who—"

"That doesn't mean it wasn't hard for you, too. Finding me. Calling the ambulance. Trying to write to me and being....well..."

"Censored? Yelled at?"

Our eyes meet, open and jaded.

"We have a lot to talk about," we say in unison.

As we smile through tears and gather ourselves, a new kind of warmth fills my chest.

I have a friend.

For the first time in four years, I have a real friend.

here do we start?" she asks, direct like her mother. "They can't shut me up like they did a few years ago. We're face to face now. I'll tell you anything you want to know." A shadow passes across her face, like she's rethinking her words, but it floats off.

"I want to know everything."

"You'd need months, Lindsay." A chill runs through me. I know she's not exaggerating. The fact that she's serious makes me realize how high the stakes are here.

Someone really, really doesn't want me to know some dark secrets about what happened after my attack.

"They really never prosecuted anyone," I say. It's not a question. I know the answer. I have to say it, though. Say it to someone. I don't ask it like a question, but the inquiry is still there.

She shakes her head slowly. "No. You were taken to the hospital. They did a rape kit." She paused, composes herself, then continues. "Once your mom and dad were called, everyone was shooed out. Me, Mandy, Jenna and Tara tried to see you."

"And Drew?"

She frowns, her nose wrinkling a little. Suddenly, she looks nothing like Anya at all. "I don't..." She shakes her head, as if trying to recall a memory. "I don't remember him being there."

"Is it true that Mandy, Jenna and Tara turned against me? Said something about me to the press?" She pales. "You know that. Good." She cringes. "I mean, good that I don't have to break it to you."

Oh, there's no *good* here. "So it's true."

She mutters an expletive. "I figured someone else would have told you by now. That maybe that's why you were in that...that place for so long."

"Huh?"

We frown at each other.

"I think we need to start at the beginning," Jane says slowly.

"I thought we were."

"Yeah," she says, tilting her head, studying me. "So did I. But I think I need to go way back. Back to finding you."

My jaw clenches. "Right. Go ahead. I can handle it."

She blinks hard, then says, "I was at the party, but left right before the police say the attack happened. I got sick, and needed some food, so Mandy, Jenna, Tara and I all went to get tacos. We asked you if you wanted to go with us, but you were on the couch with Drew and just gave us this

half-hearted wave."

I rack my brain to remember. "I did?" I have no recollection of that. I can close my eyes and remember everything up to a certain point.

Then it all goes blank.

And then I wake up on the island.

"I've run through that night in my mind a thousand times, Lindsay," she says, wrapping her palms around her cooling coffee, her eyes unfocused. She leans closer and lowers her voice. "There was no reason to worry about leaving you. It was you and Drew on the couch. Stellan—"

I flinch. I haven't heard his name in four years. Stellan, Blaine and John.

There. I thought their names. Stacia would be so proud.

Jane frowns. "Er, *they* were there. They'd never—I mean, no one had ever had a problem with them, and your boyfriend was graduating from West Point. Drew's not exactly a wimp."

"Right," I say weakly.

"I wish I could go back in time and make you come with us."

"Me, too. But we can't rewrite the past." Stacia taught me that phrase. Funny how it comes out now.

"We went out for tacos," Jane continues. "We were gone for a while. The place was busy. But I had left my car at the party. Mandy, Jenna and Tara dropped me off. I ran in to use the bathroom and found the place empty. I rushed to pee and get out of there. The vibe in the house creeped me out. Then I heard a weird..." Her voice chokes off. "A weird groan."

Someone has put an elephant on my chest.

Her eyes narrow, questioning me. Then she asks, "You sure you can handle this?"

I take a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Yeah."

Her eyebrows pitch down with skepticism, but she continues. "You were naked." Her face flushes with embarrassment for me. "And tied up with all these brightly-colored scarves. It was disconcerting. And then I realized you weren't wearing a red scarf. You were covered in blood."

She closes her eyes and looks like she's holding her breath. She bites her lower lip. Seconds pass. When she lets it go, I see deep tooth marks.

"And?"

"And what I later realized was semen."

"Oh." The word comes out of me like someone has blown, lightly, on a dandelion gone to seed, as if all that was needed was that one puff, enough to spread scores of seeds into the wild.

"I screamed and rooted through my purse for my phone." Jane puts her hand over her heart. "My mom yelled at me, later, when I told her the story. She said the scream could have brought the attackers back." She snorts. "Like I was thinking clearly at the time?"

I don't know what to say. I feel like I'm watching me and Jane from ten feet above us, floating on the ceiling, looking down.

"I called 9-1-1. When emergency services asked me what the problem was, I couldn't really say it. I just said I'd found a woman tied up and bleeding, and I thought she'd been s-s-sexually assaulted." Jane's hand that isn't holding mine is now shaking. I see it tremor on the table top.

I see it from ten feet away.

"Oh." A thought occurs to me. "How did you know?"

Jane's entire body leaps a fraction of an inch into the air. "How did I not know, Lindsay?" she hisses. Then she closes her eyes. "It was, um..." She's trying to compose herself. I feel sympathy. This must be so hard for her. All my sympathy is radiating to her. I squeeze her hand.

And yet my own emotions feel so far away.

"It was the blood. Where all the blood was. Your face was covered in blood and, um, you know...but your lower half was worse. And your shoulder was dislocated and—"

"Okay." I think I'm about to throw up. I guess my feelings aren't so distant, after all. "I understand."

"I'll stop," she says in a rush of words. "I'll stop and I'm sorry, but you asked and there's so much to tell and no one lets us talk about this. No one." Her eyes dart to catch mine. For a split second, I swear she looks excited. That can't be right.

Must be nerves.

"Us?"

"I mean...me. I said us because—" An expression of distaste covers her face. "Because I don't know. I'm still used to us being us. Not me only being me."

"Because Mandy, Jenna and Tara did something."

"Oh, yeah. Did they ever." For the first time since we started talking, Jane struggles to make eye contact with me.

"What did they do?"

"You really don't know?" She's shocked. Genuinely shocked, her mouth in a little O of reaction, her wide eyes so innocent and filled with a sense of outrage on my behalf. "How isolated have they kept you?"

"Very." The part of me that is ten feet in the air, watching this scene unfold, moves about five feet closer. I can tell I can trust Jane. She's not playing me. I'm not some specimen for her to watch and control.

"You mean, you know *nothing*? I thought you said you knew about what Mandy, Jenna and Tara did."

"I woke up in a mental institution four years ago, Jane, and haven't had any contact with the outside world that hasn't been carefully monitored since. Yesterday was the first time I've had any freedom." I roll my eyes. "If you can call it that."

I'm not telling her the whole truth. I know more than I let on. But why should I show all my cards when I don't know if she has any tucked away somewhere?

I can't trust anyone.

But God, I really want to.

"No one explained...showed you the video...told you about the press coverage?" Based on her reaction, I can tell she thinks I'm lying.

She's right, but there's no way I'm admitting that.

"No. I do know Daddy won his re-election, though."

Her face twists into a snarl of rage I didn't know Jane could manage. "What the f—" My phone rings, halting her words.

I look at the screen and swipe.

It's Stacia.

CHAPTER 17

Istare dumbly at the screen. My stomach throbs, like there's a pulse in there.

"You answering it?"

"No." I turn the phone over and pretend my past isn't chasing me.

"It's not your father, is it?"

I look Jane square in the eye. "It's my primary therapist. My manhandler. My babysitter from the Island."

"The Island?" Her eyes are neutral, gathering information, curious.

"The mental institution Daddy's been hiding me in all these years."

"So it's true," she gasps. "I knew you were in there for two years, but when they told me to stop writing you letters, when they said you didn't want to be friends any more, I..."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and look down at the shiny table top. The rest of my latte's gone cold. "They said that?"

"Yeah. I figured they were lying, but I also didn't know. Maybe you hated me like I imagine you hate Mandy, Jenna and Tara. I wasn't part of that, though."

This is so confusing.

"What did the girls actually say? What do you mean? I don't know anything about this part. I know they did something. That's all I know."

"They lied to the press. Lied to everyone. They said you got drunk and high and invited the four guys in the video to, um...to have sex with you. At the same time."

And now I'm twenty-thousand feet above this conversation, untethered in space, gasping for air.

"Mandy, Jenna and Tara all said that?"

"At different times, yes. About two days after it hit the news. You were all over the place, Lindsay. Major network news, cable news, the BBC, you name it. Online, too. None of the major news outlets showed the video. That appeared on tiny little websites slowly, like someone was trickling it out to each website one at a time. I know your mom and dad hired a company to get the copies taken down, but it was on enough sites that..."

"I know. I've seen it." But I never realized my own best friends were the ones who started the rumors.

Her head jerks up from her cup of coffee. "You have?"

"I found ways to access the Internet without being monitored."

Her eyebrow quirks up and she leans in. "Sounds like you outsmarted a lot of people."

"I have some new skills," is all I can say. "So my best friends conducted a smear campaign on

me." A wall of grief hits me.

Anger will come next. I know all about the emotional waves. Maybe Stacia was right. Maybe I'm not ready for any of this.

"They lied. I tried to talk to them but they shut me out." Jane's eyelashes flutter. "I was never part of your core group. I wasn't best friends with them like you were. But I thought I was good enough friends—especially with Jenna—to find out what was going on. They blew me off. Sent their parents' household staff to handle any call I made. I even tried to go to Jenna's house. They wouldn't let me past the gates. Her household manager told me if I tried again, they'd file a restraining order against me for stalking."

My turn for my jaw to drop.

"What? That's not Jenna!"

"None of this makes sense, Lindsay. But the shit they said about you..." Jane's not one to throw around curse words.

The full impact of my nightmare is starting to hit me. I thought I'd come home to re-integrate after being abused. I've carried rage for four years because the men who did this to me were never prosecuted. No charges were filed. I assumed Daddy didn't press charges because he wanted to protect his precious political career. But now...

"No charges were filed," I choke out.

She shakes her head sadly. "Mandy, Jenna and Tara all gave statements to the District Attorney. Quietly, of course. Once your dad knew about that, he said keeping this a private family matter was best."

"Oh, God." My body feels like I'm hurtling through the air, falling from the sky without a parachute. My skin burns from the rush of free fall. No one is there to catch me. I'm about to break every emotional bone in my body and I'm helpless to stop it.

I am powerless.

"Lindsay!" Jane's voice snaps me back, a little, to reality. "You look green. Oh, I'm so sorry."

"No, no," I say faintly. "It's fine."

"It's anything but fine."

"More of the pieces make sense now," I whisper. "Why Mandy, Jenna and Tara never wrote letters. You did. You always did." I feel my voice tear in two. I can hear it, too, in the way I say my words. "You did until they sent a letter that blacked out a sentence. After that, your letters stopped."

She tilts her head in surprise. "Blacked out a sentence?"

"Yeah."

"What sentence?' She shakes her head fast. "Never mind. Of course you don't know what sentence they blacked it out. Geez, Lindsay, what was that place? A prison?"

I shrug.

"Oh."

"A very, very nice prison. With every drug and therapy you could imagine. No contact with the outside world except letters and net-nannied Internet access. I could watch all the Disney movies and 1930s classics I wanted, but heaven forbid I asked to see Buzzfeed."

"You've been treated like a nine-year-old all these years?"

"Something like that. They let me finish my bachelor's degree online. Someone sat with me the entire time, watching every move. Every mouse click."

"How did you manage?"

"I spent a lot of time online entering stupid contests and writing book reviews."

She gives me a very strange laugh, her mouth twisting in a grimace.

I shrug.

Jane lets out a low whistle, then looks at her empty cup. "I need another round for this."

"I need something stronger."

Her face spreads with a smile. "There's a bar next door. Quiet, with booths. No one will bother us."

"But what about ID?"

She laughs. "ID? Lindsay! We're twenty-three."

In more ways than one, I'm still nineteen inside.

"Right. let's go."

Mickey's Bar is about as classic Irish dive bar as you can get, with green Boston Celtics jerseys and signs everywhere. The bartender gives us a wave and we sit down in a booth. Jane orders for me, because I am apparently too stupid to know how to do this, and a plate of fried bar food arrives along with two mixed drinks.

"What's this?"

"Cheesy french fries with bacon," she jokes, pulling one fry off the pile of fat and dairy fun, the cheese stretching out in a long string she finally has to break with her fingers.

"Ha ha. I meant the drink."

"It's a Cosmo. Cranberry juice and vodka. Give it a try."

I haven't had alcohol in four years. I don't confess that to her. I just take a sip.

It transports me, instantly, back to that night.

Fighting the shaking fear inside me that can't distinguish between the past and the present, I chew my food. It tastes like gravel. Bacon and cheese-covered gravel. I swallow, then take another sip of the drink.

Jane is about to open her mouth and say something when she frowns, then looks to the side.

"Is that the same guy from the coffee shop? Is he following us?"

I turn to look.

"Don't look! Don't make it obvious."

But I know exactly who she's talking about, and I don't care if it's obvious.

"That's Silas. My 'chauffeur." I use finger quotes.

Jane looks at him overtly now. She lets out a sound of admiration. "He can drive me any time." "Jane!"

"What? He's hot." She sighs. "I haven't had sex in a year, Lindsay. Not with anyone other than myself, I mean."

I'm not sure I can handle this conversation. I've had my share of girl talk. Just...not in four years. My silence hangs between us. I drink most of my Cosmo, then pick at a fry.

Jane suddenly says, "I did it again, didn't I? Insert foot in mouth. I'm sorry, Lindsay. I shouldn't joke about sex."

"Why not?"

"Because ...because you..."

"Haven't had sex, ever?"

Jane looks like someone hit her in the face with a frying pan.

"What?"

"What those guys did to me wasn't sex. It was rape. And until that happened, I was a virgin."

"You and Drew never..."

"We, um, played. You know. Did stuff." The alcohol is making it easier to talk about this. I want to talk about this. *Need* to talk about this. This is what normal people in their early twenties do, right? This is what I did four years ago. I sat around with my female friends and talked about sex.

Now I've gone from loads of friends to exactly one.

And I don't have sex.

And I lost my virginity in a gang rape.

Trying to be "normal" isn't really working so well for me.

So far.

"Lindsay, we don't have to talk about sex."

"I need another one of these," I say, holding my drink glass by the stem and wiggling it. The cocktail server happens to look over and see me. She nods.

Jane smiles. Her eyes are so kind. "You've really been through so much, haven't you?"

I lean back against the booth and sigh. "Yeah."

"And now, with your father's new campaign."

"Right. Big meeting tomorrow morning about that," I add, pretending to use my father's serious, deep voice. "Gotta rally the family around Senator Harwell Bosworth so we can make America strong!"

Jane giggles. "And my poor mom will be working one hundred and twenty hour weeks."

"As opposed to her hundred and ten hour weeks she already works?"

We share a weary smile. The server brings us both a new Cosmo. Jane looks surprised, but finishes her old one, then picks up the new one.

"A toast."

"To what?"

"To old friends and new beginnings."

I smile. It feels real. I clink my glass against hers and say, "I can definitely drink to that."

CHAPTER 18

ane waves to the server, a young woman about our age, and whispers something in her ear. The woman looks over at Silas, grins, and gives Jane a thumbs' up.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm having some fun." We drink our Cosmos and just relax. I don't ask her what she's up to, because I have a feeling I'm about to find out anyhow.

I forgot how nice it is to spend time with someone you're comfortable with. Someone you don't have to pretend with.

And as if on cue, my relaxation is interrupted by the entrance of a man in a suit.

It's Drew.

"Damn it," I mutter, watching him enter and approach Silas. Could they be any more obvious? They look like Secret Service agents.

Jane follows my gaze and does a double take. "That's Drew!" she gasps. Her face reddens. "Oh, no."

"Why? What's wrong with Drew? Aside from the obvious, I mean."

"It's just—he—I mean..." The server approaches Silas and Drew, and sets a drink down in front of Silas, who looks super confused. Drew's face tightens with anger. Clearly, Silas isn't supposed to be drinking on the job.

"I sent that drink to Silas," Jane confesses.

"I figured."

When the server motions to me and Jane, Silas blushes furiously. Drew looks at us. Jane gives a little, silly wave, fluttering her fingers.

Drew gets up and comes toward us as if Jane gave him an engraved invitation. He marches up to her side of the booth and hip checks her, sliding right on in.

"Did you just offer my security officer sex on the beach?"

I spray him with a mouthful of my Cosmo.

Drew looks down at his now-wet chest, which is lightly misted with the fine, fruity droplets of my delicious drink.

"Well."

Jane bursts out laughing, the kind of nervous giggling you can't control with a drink in you and a hot guy sitting next to you, covered in your friend's spray.

I am feeling loose and overwhelmed, silly and slightly panicked, and I can't stop laughing, either. Drew stares at me, his face impassive, but I see a smile in his eyes.

"Occupational hazard," I finally gasp, still hysterical.

"I've been sprayed with bullets before, but never with a mixed drink."

"There's a first for everything," Jane says, grabbing the spare cocktail napkins from the table and patting his chest gently.

He watches her, the corners of his mouth twitching with a repressed smile. Silas walks over, holding his drink called Sex on the Beach, and sets it down in front of Jane.

"That's very kind of you, Ma'am, but I can't accept this." He and Drew exchange an unreadable look.

"You sure you can't have sex on the beach?" she asks sweetly.

Silas's face turns even redder. I didn't think that was humanly possible. He's freaking adorable.

"I, um." He thrusts the drink toward Jane, who gives him a flirty look. "I just can't, Ma'am."

"My name is Jane."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You can call my mother 'Ma'am." Jane reaches into her purse and pulls out a business card. I realize I have no idea what she does for a living. Last I knew, she was a computer science major at Cal Tech, but as I'm learning every second of these hours home, nothing is the same as it used to be.

She hands the card to Silas. "But you can call me *any* time."

Drew groans. I groan. Silas just turns into a beet.

I share a look with Drew. We're both smiling. It's like that feeling you get when you come in from the cold, your hands and feet turned to ice, and you sit down in front of a roaring fire as someone hands you a huge mug of coffee you wrap your fingers around.

Like the sun parting the mist covering the bay and making you think you're catching a glimpse of heaven.

It's like I can touch normal. Just with one fingertip, but still...

"I see Jane got bold," Drew says to me from across the table.

"Lots of things changed in four years," I reply.

"Yes. Lots," he says.

Silas just stands there, all broad shoulders and dimpled cheeks, his eyes on Jane. I glance over his shoulder as a mane of thick, long, perfectly-highlighted honey-gold hair walks in, topping a body that looks like it stepped out of a Vogue Magazine issue.

A chill runs through me, even though I haven't seen the woman's face. I know that hair, though.

Lots of things *haven't* changed in four years.

Jane tenses, then looks where I'm looking.

"No way," she mutters under her breath. "Of all the places one of them could be today, she's here?"

Drew looks over and goes rigid. Makes eye contact with Silas, who gives him a slight frown, trying to read Drew.

"Mandy," Drew says under his breath. He looks at me. He looks at Jane. Then he leans over and almost bumps heads with Jane as he says, "You told Lindsay?"

She and I both nod.

"Got it," he replies. "Let me handle this."

Before I can ask him what the hell he means by *that*, he's up and over to the bar, where Mandy's settling in on a bar stool. He lifts one leg up and hops into the seat, thigh muscles straining against the cloth of his suit pants, his waistband exposed as his jacket shifts.

I see his gun.

I shiver.

"You cold, Ms. Bosworth? I can escort you out." From the flared nostrils and clenched jaw on Silas, I am pretty sure he knows who Mandy is. It occurs to me that a network of people hired by Daddy have more knowledge about my own life than I do.

It's scary.

Right now, though, it's also deeply comforting. Mandy's outnumbered four to one in this bar. My ex-friend can go to hell.

I haven't even had time to digest what Mandy, Tara and Jenna did four years ago. Why they lied. What drove them to betray me. What on earth made them think it was acceptable to go to the press and say that I got drunk and high and asked those three pigs to rape and torture me. Jane's memory of my broken cheek makes me touch it, fingertips seeking out the smooth contour of my reconstructed eye socket.

I see Drew watching me, puzzled, and then his face goes completely slack. A simmering rage is underneath, though, because he clearly understands what I'm doing. I haven't seen him in four years and never, ever wanted to be this close to him again, and here he is, as empathic and intuitive as he was when we were together. When we were happy.

When we thought we had forever ahead of us.

He turns back to Mandy at the bar and brushes her hair away from her ear. His mouth goes toward her neck and I see his lips moving. As the words pour out, her entire back stretches up, like an invisible Puppeteer has a string attached to the top of her head and is slowly pulling it up.

Then she turns to Drew with a murderous look on her face and starts to look my way.

His hand snaps up and grabs her jaw. It's not a rough gesture, but it's a damn powerful one. Mandy's bright blue eyes widen so much they look like billiard balls. Drew uses his other hand to reach into his jacket pocket and throws a twenty dollar bill on the polished bar.

Then he lets go of Mandy, stands up, grabs her forearm, and escorts her out of the bar.

I don't watch once they're out of my peripheral vision.

I'm sick to my stomach. Mandy was always the queen bee of the group, the ringleader, and the one you thought long and hard about pissing off. Watching her manhandled like that by Drew brings a certain kind of delicious enjoyment to a part of me.

The part that feels like I'm spinning out of control on a patch of ice in a car with no steering wheel is about to throw up.

"Drink," Silas insists, shoving a glass of water at me. I look around, blinking, as if I've just teleported here. The world disappeared for a few seconds, like it was on pause. I look outside and can see through the glass windows of the bar that Drew and Mandy are having words. Mandy's having more words than Drew, and he's pretty much ignoring her.

Is he actually on his phone while she yells at him?

Jane takes in the scene and snorts. "Drew never was Mandy's favorite person in the world."

"I think Mandy is Mandy's favorite person in the world. Always was."

"It's funny," Jane says thoughtfully. "I always admired her. Thought she was so put together and pretty. And then after...you know..."

"My attack."

"The attack—after the attack, she got up in front of all those cameras and played it up for the audience. Told the world you'd been drunk and high and reached for John, Blaine and Stellan. She said she was speaking out to save the reputation of fine men."

I'm sick to my stomach again. No amount of water Silas can bring me will help.

"She said that?" I ask, looking at her again. She looks like a monster.

She is a monster.

"Yeah."

"You were there, Jane." I look at her across the table. "You know the truth. I had one or two drinks. No drugs. I never, ever asked for any of that to happen to me."

"I know!" She seems genuinely scandalized that I might think she thought otherwise. "And I told the police the same thing, when they came to our house."

"The police came to your house?"

She nods. "They interviewed as many people as they could find from the party. The only ones who spoke up, though, were Tara, Mandy and Jenna. And me."

"There were twenty or thirty people there!"

"I know. Didn't matter. The loudmouths won. Mandy got her ten minutes of fame on CNN and MSNBC as the friend of the girl who asked for it."

Gut punch.

"Oh, hell, Lindsay, I didn't mean it. That's just...that's how you were portrayed."

"The ER did a rape kit?"

She nods.

"And they didn't analyze it or give me an exam to..."

"Once Mandy started saying you'd been drunk and high and it was consensual, all the law enforcement stuff halted. Just...went dead."

"Daddy," I whisper.

Drew walks in through the front door and looks cool as a cucumber. Appearances are deceiving, though. I know he must be agitated after that incident with Mandy.

My legs start to itch, like there are nerve impulses in them begging to be released. I want to jump up and grab Mandy and beg her to tell me why she would lie like that. All my friends knew I would never, ever ask those guys to...be with three men at the same time like...sleep with them with Drew right there.

And the beating. The torture. Being defiled in every hole I possessed. It took weeks for my mouth not to taste like blood and spooge. To swallow without the metallic slime of a man's semen at the back of my throat. My lips had cracked open and the corners had been ripped and bleeding. Every time I moved my mouth, the wound had reopened.

At least, that's what I remember through the haze of drugs and surgeries and more drugs.

So, yeah. I want to run out there and ask her a thousand ugly questions about a million ugly truths amidst the giant, big fat lie she and Tara and Jenna told the world.

Instead, I jump up and bolt for the bathroom, where I throw up until Jane comes in and calls out my name.

" \mathcal{J} indsay?"

I say nothing.

"You okay?"

I say *more* nothing.

"Stupid question," Jane mutters to herself. "Sorry."

"S'ok." A hand appears under the bathroom stall door. It's holding a small plastic cup with ice chips in it.

"Here," Jane says. "I was pretty sure you were throwing up."

I take the cup. "Yeah."

"Drew's really worried about you."

I snort.

"He is," she says again, as if we're arguing.

"About time. Too bad he wasn't so worried four years ago."

The door makes a slight rattling sound. "What does that mean?" Jane asks.

I say nothing. Suddenly, she inhales sharply.

"Oh, my God, Lindsay. He was the fourth guy?"

"Oh, please," I snap. My mouth tastes like fermented cotton and my head throbs with pain. "Like you didn't know?"

"Mandy and Jenna and Tara spread these vicious rumors, but no one believed them!" I can't tell whether she's lying or not. I need to believe her, so I do.

"You mean, people believed their rumors about me, but they couldn't believe their rumors about Drew?"

Her turn to go silent.

"I never thought about it that way," she finally says in a squeaky voice.

"I should never have come home," I groan. My purse shuffles against my hip and I remember my pills. I remember Stacia's call earlier. Maybe I'm really not ready for all this. The island looks so much better. More appealing. Life was so simple there. I knew what was expected, even if I couldn't always manage to do exactly what they wanted.

Out here, in real life, the complexities are so much more convoluted.

"Don't say that, Lindsay. You have every right to be home. You've suffered enough."

"Define 'enough," I moan, sucking on a piece of ice.

She makes a snort-laugh. "I think there's a picture of you in the dictionary next to the word

'suffering,' Lindsay."

Jane wasn't this sharp four years ago. While I always liked Jane, I'm coming to admire her now.

"Huh." I make a sound that's half laugh, half recognition of the truth in her words.

"Look. You have a lot to face. Mom and I wish your parents had brought you home a long time ago ____"

- "You and Anya talk about me?" I ask, surprised by the thought.
- "Of course we do."
- "Oh! Because of the .. because you found me that night."
- "No. Because we like you. We care about you. We hate what happened and wish we could change it. And Mom's been telling your dad for two years now that it was past time for you to come home. He said the people at that place you were in were telling him you weren't ready."
 - "I've been ready for a long time."
 - "How long?"

I pause. I think. "About two years."

- "What the hell did they have you do there for four years?"
- "I knit 126 sweaters in knitting therapy."

She laughs. It's a guilty sound, like she's not supposed to find that funny.

"I'm serious! They were insistent on knitting therapy. I finally started to 'show progress' when I suggested we knit penguin sweaters for environmentalists to put on penguins under oil slick conditions."

- "That's a thing?"
- "Yeah."
- "Penguin sweaters?" Her voice takes on a slightly hysterical tone.
- "Yeah."
- "Like, with little holes for the—the—the flippers?"
- "Yeah." I can't stop laughing now. We sound like hyenas.

Someone knocks on the door.

- "Lindsay? Jane? You okay in there?" It's Drew.
- "Penguin sweaters!" Jane screeches.
- "What?" Drew calls back.
- "Flipper holes!" I shout.
- "They're not making any sense," he mutters through the door.
- "I observed them drink only one and a half alcoholic drinks, sir," Silas says back.
- "I observed them drink only one and a half alcoholic drinks, sir," Jane mimics, her voice going high and loud with the effort.

I can't stop laughing. My sides hurt. This is worse than throwing up. I'm sitting on the floor of a bar bathroom with my face pressed against the scraped bathroom door, the metal cool and rough, and I'm laughing about knitting penguin sweaters as part of my therapy in a mental institution where I lived for four years after being gang raped on live, streaming television.

I double up and laugh some more.

Because, really, what else can I do?

The outer door opens and Jane screams.

- "OUT! This is the women's room."
- "And I'm head of Lindsay's security detail and need to make sure she's okay."
- "What's she going to do in here, Drew?" Jane challenges him. "Hang herself on a tampon string?"

Now I really can't stop laughing. I hear Silas in the background, coughing to hide a chuckle.

- "Fine." I hear Drew leave and the door close.
- "He's really insistent, isn't he?" she asks, slowly opening my door. I roll onto the ground and stare up at her.
 - "He's my security detail."
 - "Yeah, but he doesn't have to be an asshole about it."
 - "I heard that!" Drew calls through the door.
 - "Good!" Jane and I shout back in unison.
 - "I shouldn't be mean to him," I say, standing slowly. "He did get rid of Mandy for me."
- "Yeah." Jane thinks for a minute. "But he hates her guts, too. So I think he got plenty of personal satisfaction out of that one."
 - "Why does he hate her?" I wash my hands in the sink as Jane leans against the wall and talks.
 - "Why do you think? For what she did to you."
 - "Why would Drew care?"
- "Because he—ooooooohhhhhhh." Jane's voice winds down like a toy running out of batteries. "Shit. Was he *really* the fourth guy in the video?" I can tell she doesn't want to believe it. I can't blame her. I don't want to believe it.

I've spent four years wishing it weren't true.

CHAPTER 20

eah. He was." I've never, ever admitted that to anyone. Not Stacia. Not the secondary therapists. Not Daddy or Mom or...anyone.

"Fuck," she says under her breath.

"Right."

"So he just sat there on the couch and did...nothing?"

Jane gets it. Instantly.

"Right."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know."

"No, Lindsay. It really really makes no sense. Drew loved you so much."

I can't have this conversation. Not now. Not here.

Maybe not ever.

This was a huge mistake.

"Lindsay, after you...after the attack, Drew was hospitalized, too."

I feel like my body is too big and too small at the same time.

"What?"

"You probably had no idea. No one knows exactly what happened, because he was in the hospital and then suddenly he was shipped overseas for his first tour in Afghanistan."

"His *first* tour?"

"Yeah. He did two tours. Came home with a bunch of medals and started his security company with some guy from the service. Now he provides security for a ton of politicians and my mom says he's a big deal in the field."

As Jane goes on about Drew, my mind tries to wrap itself around what she's saying. I hold up one hand.

"Wait. He was *hospitalized* after my attack? Why? What'd he do—strain his neck trying to get a better look? He's on the video doing nothing. Just sitting there. Watching. Watching them rape me."

Jane's face twists with grief and distaste. I know it's not directed at me, but a plume of self-consciousness and shame fills my blood. My bitterness is seeping out in my words.

Jane sighs. "I know. It's still a mystery. And you know Drew."

"No. Actually, no. I don't. I thought I did, but clearly..."

"I meant how quiet he is."

"Quiet?"

"Closed up. Shut tight. Like a drum."

That's actually *not* the Drew I knew.

"What do you mean?"

"He was always the strong, silent type."

"Not with me," I say softly.

"With the rest of us he was. You don't get to be a West Point student for nothing. He had it all, Lindsay. Brains, looks, athleticism, and the officer's commission after he graduated. And then you were attacked, he was hospitalized, and *poof!* No one saw him for three years."

"He was in Afghanistan for three years?"

"Most of it. I heard through my mom that he came home briefly. Went back. Some awful incidents happened there. Then something about a big success his unit had, and how he was a hero along with his team. They did something strategic and received a bunch of medals and accolades from Congress and the White House. But you'd never know. Drew never said a word. And then his parents died."

I feel like Jane just threw a brick at my head. "His parents what?"

Jane groans and shoots me an apologetic look. "I keep forgetting you don't know so many things that happened. It's been about a year."

"It's new to me."

"Yeah. it would be. I'm sorry, Lindsay. Drew's parents died in a car accident. Single car. Went off a canyon road while he was in Afghanistan."

"Oh my God!" Jim and Donna were good people. Really great parents. Warm and loving, sweet and kind. Drew and his older sister adored them. I went on family vacations with them. I'm speechless.

"How is Sarah taking it?"

"She's married and has a toddler now."

"Whoa." I wonder if coma survivors feel like this. "Wait. Did they ever find out what happened with Drew's parents?"

"What do you mean? The car went off the road. They think maybe Drew's mom swerved to avoid hitting an animal? They went down a huge ravine. Crashed. It took more than a day for a group of mountain bike riders to find them. By then it was too late."

"Drew was in Afghanistan?"

"And Sarah was back home in San Diego with her baby. It was a big mess. The whole community rallied to try and help. Not financially—the Fosters were fine, of course—but poor Sarah really bore the brunt of it. She had to get Drew back home from overseas, manage the funeral stuff, and the press...."

Just like that, some kind of switch flips in me.

I am done with this day.

Done.

"You know, Jane, I think I need to go home." I press my palms into the countertop around the sink and let my head drop.

Her hand is warm as she gently sets it between my shoulder blades. "I understand. Of course. Let me get you back to the Grove." Daddy named our house The Grove a long time ago, christened by the planting of tiny weeping willows that now tower over the estate like sentries.

"That's my job," Drew says through the door.

Oh, crap. Was he listening this entire time? The door opens and in walks Drew again, eyes flat and still. If he's feeling anything underneath that placid exterior, it's well hidden.

"You're sick," he declares, reaching for me. "You need to go home. I've already called your—"
"Oh, sure. Call Daddy the second Lindsay doesn't do exactly what she's told to do," I snap. "The

minute she doesn't act like a programmed robot, we have to get the senator on the line and make her behave!"

"—doctor," he says, finishing his sentence. "I've already called your doctor, and she's meeting us at the Grove." Drew gives me an even look that says nothing. He's being very patient.

Too patient.

"Doctor? What doctor?"

"Stacia."

I see red. "Did Daddy give you permission?" Now I'm just lashing out. I storm past him to find a very surprised Silas just outside the door. He's reading a bulletin board advertisement for some band. "Ms—"

I cut him off by flipping him the bird. He makes a sound of surprise, like he's hurt. I don't care. Walking out of the bar, I fling open the main doors, take a right—

And start running.

'm really not equipped for the twelve-mile run back home. I'm wearing casual leather shoes, for one thing, though they don't have any heel at all. Also, I have on a cotton t-shirt, a jangly metal necklace made from reclaimed copper water pipes, and dressy yoga pants. I wasn't exactly worried about looking like a fashion plate when I left the house this morning.

Clearly.

I don't sprint. I make a sharp left-right-left and find myself parallel to the town's main park, a lush affair that uses so much water that there is a group on the corner, picketing twenty-four seven, in an effort to "drought shame" the town. In her rare letters to me, Mom's described this phenomenon, how the ongoing drought in California is dredging up all kinds of local social, political and economic problems.

I run right past a group of people with protest signs, and keep going until I find one of the larger side streets that will eventually take me to the main road to get home.

After a few blocks, I'm sweating.

Within two miles, I'm drenched.

By three miles, I realize I'm not alone.

Either Drew or Silas is following me. They're both dressed in full suits. Idiots. I'll have to have a private talk with Daddy at our meeting tomorrow and insist that if I have to have a security detail, they've got to dress more fashionably. Jeans and t-shirts are fine. This Men-in-Black look has got to go.

"Go away," I call back.

"Can't," a man's voice shouts. "It's my job."

"To stalk me?"

"To protect you." Damn, he's suddenly close, voice louder, spooking me.

I come to a dead halt. Whoever's behind me slams into me. I've left my knees unlocked and my thighs tight and coiled, ready for impact, so he bounces off me and falls to the ground.

Whoever he is, he's back up before I can turn around.

Drew. It's Drew.

Of course it is.

"Fuck off, Drew," I say, giving him the finger, and taking off at a massive sprint, running as if I'm being chased.

He keeps up with me, legs like a robot's, face impassive. At the island, physical activity was encouraged. Every three months they held an island marathon.

Guess who won? Not just my age group. Not just the women's division.

Overall.

Every marathon, eleven in a row.

I slow my pace and decide that nine more miles is a great workout for me. My eyes drift down to Drew's wingtips.

Oh, this is going to be fun. My loafers can outrun those wingtips.

Three more miles and we're on a secluded path, running along a dried out river bed, once-lush greenery turned to brown, decaying stalks.

When I ran on the island, I had a mantra that flowed through my head in beat to my pace. It went:

I-am-do-ing-fine.

I-am-do-ing-fine.

I-am-do-ing-fine.

I would repeat it thousands of times as I peeled off the miles, and habit makes it consume my overwhelmed thoughts. Six miles isn't enough to kill off the flashes of despair that begins to hit me like sucker punches.

My friends all turned against me.

My father drugged me to shut me up.

Everyone thinks I'm a whore who asked three guys to fuck her at the same time.

Drew just sat there during the video and let them hurt me.

My own mother didn't make time to be here my first few days back.

The ache rises up beneath my collarbone, a bubble of pain that will burst and hurt, tearing through my fragile chest like napalm. I know Drew's behind me, but he's keeping a respectful distance between us. He must be soaked completely through that suit jacket. Serves him right.

I start to laugh at the thought but my breath chokes in the middle on a sob that is so big it feels like I've swallowed the planet. Like it's a big ball lodged in my throat, something that I can't breathe around. It's cut off all the air and I am dying, gagging, unable to breathe or think or—

I fall, staggering off to the side, slipping between two bushes down a small little grass-covered hill. I roll on my side, then over and over, three times, until I stop. I only stop because of inertia.

And I still can't breathe.

Drew's above me in seconds, stripping off his suit jacket, putting it under my feet and saying my name, over and over, so soft it's like butterflies kissing my face. He's unbuttoning his dress shirt and bunching it up, putting it under my neck. I stare, eyes fluttering, scaring away all the beautiful little soul mates who were kissing me moments ago.

Tears form in my eyes and pool until they break, pouring down the sides of my face, dripping into my ear. I roll on my side, hip grinding into a small stone in the grass, and I pull my muscles in, becoming a tight little egg, as if I could form a shell around myself and never let the soft, vulnerable parts touch air.

Wouldn't that be nice? Too bad it's impossible.

"Lindsay? You hurt?" Drew's fingers hover over me. I can tell he wants to touch me, and God help me, I want him to as well. I'm sick, aren't I? Wanting someone so desperately who betrayed me?

I cannot let go of that thought.

I try and I try and I loop, infinitely perplexed by how something so simple can take over my mind. Easy, right? Walk away. Don't look back. He's an asshole and I am worth more. So much more.

Why do I miss him so much? Why do my instincts override my own self-preservation?

The sob finally breaks open, bursting like a bubble that gets too big, the surface tension stretched

until it cannot hold. My body shakes, the effort to stay so curled up getting to me. I press my cheek against the palm of my hand and just break down.

I fall apart.

I die.

Not literally, but it feels like it. Too many pieces of new information. Too many expectations. Too much isolation and too much pain being so close to Drew with a thousand questions and nothing but sheer torture between us. And four years of silence.

His hand touches my shoulder, the gesture kind, and oh, Lord, please forgive me, but I turn toward it, seeking comfort. Seeking a shred of humanity in this sea of nothing but pain.

He reaches for me and sits on the ground, pulling me into his lap and soon I'm in his arms. I collapse. I thought I already had collapsed, but it turns out there's another layer. Drew smells so good. He's hot and sweaty and it's a little stifling, sniffling into his chest. I don't care. He smells like Drew. The old Drew. The Drew I knew a lifetime ago. The man I loved with every fiber of my being until he turned into someone I didn't recognize.

Someone who didn't protect me.

His fingers caress my back, right where my ponytail rests between my shoulder blades. He's whispering low, soft sounds that are meant to give me comfort. I take it all in, my sweat-soaked shirt pressing against his ribs, my bare calves scratching against the wool of his suit pants. He's warm and has arms like walls, tight and muscled, a fortress where I can finally, desperately find sanctuary and safety.

"It's okay, Lindsay," I realize he's murmuring. "It's okay."

It's not. It's really, *really*, not okay. In fact, right now my entire life is the opposite of okay. But his crooning is so sweet, so needed right now, that I let him say all these words that I know aren't true just so I can spend a few more minutes in his arms.

My mouth betrays me.

"It's not okay. It's never been okay," I mutter into his white, cotton shirt.

He stiffens, muscles going tense. Drew's sigh feels like an admission of guilt. "I know. I—I just don't know what to say to make this all better for you. I hate seeing you like this. I hate knowing you're coming back to all the bullshit and you don't know anything about what you're in for."

I sniffle. That's a lot to take in. My fingers clutch the sweaty fabric of his shirt and I stay still, hoping he'll say more.

He doesn't.

If I close my eyes and just listen to his heart beating double time, with my ear pressed against his chest, can I make the world go away? Can I hold time in check like this? What if we had a pause button? A big old red button you could push when life turned into a giant tornado of pain.

Pause until it all ended, and then resume life.

Drew pulls back. A light breeze passes between our separated bodies. My knees burn and I look down, seeing raw skin, red blood filling in like a kid with a red marker and a paint-by-numbers kit. I let go of his shirt and look up at him, a wave of self-consciousness hitting me. This is the part where I look into his eyes and see pity. The part where he's just doing his job. Comfort the client. Make sure she's not hurt. Do your job exactly right so you get paid.

That's how this works, right?

Except, when I look at him, it's like finding out there are eyes made of nothing but love.

"Everything I thought about coming home is wrong," I say, staring back with eyes that feel like hollow craters. If only his eyes could fill mine. "I thought I'd come home and pick up my life. It might

be a new life, but it would be a life. Away from the drugs and the mandatory group therapy and individual therapy and art therapy and—fuck all that therapy!"

One corner of his mouth twitches as I say this, his head tipping to one side, his eyes more compassionate than I ever remember. I spent years hating him. Years.

And all those years, wishing he still loved me.

"And then here you are," I continue, my voice cracking with emotion. I have imagined this moment thousands of times. This is my chance. I get to hit him. Punch him, Kick him in the balls and scream and scratch and claw and get my revenge.

But suddenly, I'm kissing him.

How in the hell did that happen?

His white cotton t-shirt is hot and damp, my hands clenching the fabric, palms riding up his arms, enjoying the feel of his wide, broad back, rippling with muscle under my touch. He tastes like coffee and sweetness, like a welcoming party and a roaring fire in winter. Like a past that we never got a chance to share, and a future I ache to have.

"Lindsay," he whispers between kisses, then presses me hard against him, his tongue more demanding, parting my lips with an eagerness that betrays his cool, controlled exterior. His hands are in my hair, one cupping my cheek, and with our mouths we say so much.

Without uttering a single word.

I'm transported to a place where I'm wanted. Needed. Craved and treasured, even if it's just for a few fleeting seconds in Drew's arms. This is so familiar. This is so foreign. I feel both at the same time, suspended between two worlds.

And then I wrench myself away, reeling from the dissonance. What am I doing? Panting hard, my breath forced out of me like an exorcism, I wipe my lips with the back of my hand and stare at him like this is all a figment of my imagination.

"C'mere," he says, pulling me dangerously closer. Dangerous because I can feel his breath on me. I want to feel his breath on me. The more I feel his heat, the closer his mouth is to mine. I want to kiss him again. I want it so, so much.

But I can't.

"No," I say, the longing in my voice so obvious I can't even fool myself.

"No? Why not?"

"I can't kiss you like that again, because I hate you."

don't think you really hate me, Lindsay," he says softly, his thumb grazing my lower lip, his eyes smoky and troubled. When he talks to me like that, I unravel inside.

I want to unravel like this, become a long line of ribbon I can wrap around him, tight, and never, ever let go.

Which means I can't. I have to stop this, now, before I lose myself completely.

"You don't know anything about me, Drew. Quit trying to make assumptions when you have no idea." The burn of his mouth lingers on mine. I can taste him, that unique flavor that I just recall as Drew when I give myself permission to revel in memory. I keep watching his mouth, as if by looking at it I can learn something.

It just makes me want to kiss him again.

I can't kiss him again.

If I do, I'll lose myself in him. That kind of self-hatred would be the final, ultimate betrayal in my life.

When you betray yourself, there's really only one resolution.

And that's suicide.

Given that I'm not interested in offing myself, that means I don't even have a choice right now.

I have to get away from him. Stop looking at those hot, full lips. Stop thinking about how his tongue tasted moments ago. Stop thinking about his hands on my back, one sinking into my hair. Stop thinking about how he pulled me closer, as if he really wanted me.

Fantasy.

It's all a stupid fantasy. A damn determined one, though. I can't seem to let it go.

Standing fast, I move away from his touch. It feels like a kind of death. Drew's faster, though, and before I realize it, he's holding my elbows, making me look at him.

The backs of my knees tingle when I look into those eyes. Real emotion fills them, overflowing into his expression. It's like he really cares.

I'm inventing that, right? In group therapy sessions at the island I was told that one of the most dangerous moments back home is when you project emotions onto other people. Wishing someone felt a certain way didn't make it true.

Oh, how I wish what I see in Drew's face were real.

The ache rises in me, a steady sorrow that comes with a sigh.

"Lindsay," he says, tilting his head just so. Heat radiates off him in waves, and not because we've been running. I hear footsteps coming fast. Drew's glance darts toward the sound.

"Silas," he mutters to himself, eyes flashing as he pulls me closer with urgency. "Listen. I can't say this twice. Nothing you think you know is true. *Nothing*." His tone is vicious, a startling change from a moment ago. "Remember that, no matter what happens."

Dark hair, a black suit, and a man racing toward us is all I see as Silas appears, barely huffing from exertion. By the time he comes between the bushes Drew's a respectable distance from me. No one observing us now would have any clue we were just kissing a minute ago.

No one could guess.

"Ms. Bosworth," Silas says, one eye twitching as he looks me over. "Your knees." He gives Drew a sharp look. "You didn't call for backup?" He looks around the park, eyes like an eagle's.

"She tripped. No attacker."

Silas' shoulders drop. How cute. He's still naive enough to care. "Good. You need medical attention?" He looks at me again. I think this is the most I've ever heard him speak.

"I'm fine."

Drew jerks his thumb toward me and leans in to Silas. "She's always fine."

Silas doesn't react. Good man. Stay stone-faced. That's how Daddy's security detail always works. They're statues.

Statues with lightning-fast reflexes and guns.

All the emotion from minutes ago needs to go somewhere. It's still there. In me—my heart, my mind, my gut, my *everywhere*. Just because Silas appeared and Drew and I have to play fakey-fake doesn't mean the feelings left. Oh, no. If only life were that simple.

Instead, they lurk. Like guerillas engaged in an undeclared war, all my feelings—desire, love, need, want, arousal, intrigue, self-righteousness, indignation, you name it—they crouch behind whatever item they can to find sanctuary. Finding safety from the wretched real world isn't easy.

In fact, it's so hard you'll drive yourself insane trying.

Silas offers me a hand and pulls me up, Drew's eyes on him the entire time, locked on our grasping hands. Too bad, buddy. Don't like me touching another man?

I'm not yours, Drew.

For a brief second, those words scream so loudly in my head I'm afraid I said them aloud. Drew's talking into his phone and Silas scans the horizon. No. Whew. I didn't say them.

Which is good, because I'm already in big trouble as it is.

Silas lets go of my hand and gives me a quick nod, as if to say I'm all good. An unmarked black car appears behind a row of bushes, high up on the hill that overlooks the path. Silas spots it just as I do, and his face softens with recognition.

Guess I'm not running the rest of the way home.

I lurch forward, toward the long, tall set of stairs leading up to the parking lot, and come to a fast halt. My knees are toast. Suppressing a groan, I take another step. Drew and Silas bookend me instantly, hands on my elbows, supporting me.

"I got her," Drew says to Silas, his voice a snap, like the jaws of a large predator closing.

I lean away from him and pretend to fall toward Silas, who catches me beautifully, without pretense, seeking only to help.

Drew's eyes narrow and he gives me a sharp look, then frowns at Silas, who doesn't seem to notice.

"I don't think you're fine, Ms. Bosworth," Silas declares, looking at my ragged knees with concern.

I catch Drew's eyes and tip my chin up, defiant.

"Gentian may have a point," Drew says evenly, eyes narrowing.

I let Silas brace me with an arm around my shoulder and let my weight fall on him, requiring more contact. Drew's jaw tightens.

"Thank you," I say softly to Silas, looking at Drew the entire time. "I really appreciate your help. I'm more injured than I realized."

Drew snorts.

Silas's eyebrows draw down. "I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe we do need to get her to a doctor, Drew."

"What Lindsay needs is to be put to bed and given lots of attention," Drew answers, not looking at me. I feel Silas pause, trying to decide how to read that whopper of a comment. I steel myself on the inside, pushing aside the racing arousal that comment triggers, and give myself a bit of distance from Silas.

"I need to get home," I say simply.

Silas helps me up the achingly long set of stairs, Drew following slowly behind us, talking in a low voice to someone on his phone the entire walk up. Once we get to the car, he turns off the phone and climbs in the driver's seat, leaving Silas to help me get situated in the back.

We're barely buckled into our seat belts as Drew pulls the car out of the parking spot, Silas clearing his throat with meaning. Drew ignores him. I close my eyes and lean my head against the back of the seat, mind spinning.

I can still taste him.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I do that? How could I kiss the guy who betrayed me? But I did.

And I liked it.

"Did you really call Stacia and have her sent to the Grove?" I ask.

Silas gives Drew a confused look.

"I called her off," Drew snaps.

I'm relieved. Then disappointed.

I can't even feel anything in binary. One or the other. Everything is both.

Stacia's offer to be there by phone shoots through my mind as Drew maneuvers the black, unmarked car onto the highway. We speed up. So does my heart. I remember Stacia's office, the muted pastels and beach scenes on pictures designed to calm and never excite. Maybe she was right.

Maybe I'm not ready.

Wait. Wait. It's been a day. I remind myself. One day. One big, big day.

Tomorrow will be calmer.

It has to be, right?

Nothing could be worse than today.

He tastes like cotton candy and campfires, like smoky wood and the sweet ache of a kiss that you want to feel all day, every day, for the rest of your life. By the time the first kiss ends we're breathless, the heat from our exhales turning into a cocoon.

My body craves him, drawing close, arms around his waist and holding him so he can't leave me. Rock solid, with muscles rooted in place, he isn't going anywhere. I relax and tip my chin up for another kiss. I'm rewarded with fire and ice, with the warm wetness of a determined mouth that needs to tell me without words how much I mean to him.

Now we're naked, entwined in silk sheets on an endless, soft bed, the brush of his hair-covered legs against my own smooth calves so different, so refreshing. I touch my nose to his chest and inhale, the deep breath bringing him into me, memorizing his scent like an imprint.

His hot palms cup my breasts, making me moan his name.

The wind swirls outside the open window, and large, jagged rock formations bounce moonlight into the room, like an otherworldly mirror that illuminates the perfection of this ethereal moment. I look into his eyes and frown, puzzled by what I see.

They are empty.

My wrists whip behind me like someone retracted them, like I am a mechanical beast with a button you push to make me move in ways that aren't quite human. My shoulders scream with pain from the sudden change and now I am on my knees on the bed, legs spread by ice-cold fingers that feel like knife blades against my skin.

I scream, but no sound emerges, because my mouth is filled with rope.

And the eyeless man reaches between my lips and pulls the end of the hemp ribbon, tugging as thousands of feet of shiny cloth come out of me, endless, eternal, infinite, like lies lined up in the weave of the fiber, queued for all time.

I can't breathe. Can't gag can't move can't think—

But worse.

I can't die.

SLAP!

"Jesus, Lindsay, wake up!" The voice is high, feminine, a sound I know but haven't heard in so long. My cheek burns with the strike, the edge of her fingernails scraping against my earlobe. My nose fills with a perfume I remember, and I lean forward from instinct, burying my cheek in the soft bosom of a body that I expect will comfort me.

She goes rigid.

A hand pats my hair like one comforts a stranger, like tapping the beat of a song. "It's okay," my mother soothes. "You were just having a nightmare." Her French scent is a mix of rose and cotton, of sugar and covert cigarettes, and as I sniffle into her chest I know she doesn't really want me in her arms, but I am going to take what I can get while I can.

Scraps have to be enough.

"Mama," I say, willing my body to relax, ignoring my throbbing cheekbone. I haven't called her Mama since I was four years old.

"You're awake. Good." She peels me off her and puts two feet of distance between us on the bed. Her eyes meet mine and they're filled with worry. She's wearing no makeup, her face a shiny sheen. A recent chemical peel? A new overnight moisturizer? Who knows. She looks like a baby owl, without her fake eyelashes.

She reminds me of Aunt Karen, her sister. Mom makes fun of Karen for "letting herself go," even though Aunt Karen runs 5Ks and is a defense lawyer in Iowa, Mom's home state. Karen doesn't do Botox or chemical peels or liposuction or any of the other procedures Mom has used to keep herself young.

Young looking, at least.

Right now, she resembles my aunt just enough that I throw my hands over my face and burst into tears.

Mom sighs, her hand on my knee.

"You were screaming about a rope, Lindsay," she says softly, leaning forward. "Were you dreaming about hanging yourself?"

"God, no."

"Because that would be so selfish," she adds.

There's nothing quite like a mother's love.

In her hand, I see a white smartphone, her long, burgundy fingernails gripping it like a weapon. "Should I call Dr. Coulter?" she asks.

"Dr. Who?"

"Dr. Coulter. Your therapist from the island." The expression on her face makes it clear she thinks I'm acting like a petulant teen. I have no idea who this Dr. Coulter is, though.

"Dr. Coulter—oh!" It hits me. "You mean Stacia. No. No! No, Mom. I don't need her." Why does everyone insist on calling Stacia the second I have a problem?

Mom makes an incredulous sound.

I press my hand against my heart. "I'm fine."

"You're anything but fine, Lindsay. I heard those screams. You were still dreaming when I walked in, clawing at your mouth."

"Where's my security detail?" I ask slowly, ignoring her words. If I challenge her, she'll turn it all around and make it my fault, so why bother. I know the drill. Mom cares about Daddy's political career. Until the incident four years ago, she cared about my future.

Now it's all about damage control.

And *I'm* the damage.

"Drew? I told him I'd handle this. It's my first chance to see you." She shakes her head slowly. "It's a shame it has to be like this."

I draw in a shaky breath. My covers feel like handcuffs. "Right." I shudder, trying to slough off the remaining arousal that came from the beginning of the dream, and the horror that ended it.

"I'm glad to see you," I say automatically. Robotically. She gives me a sharp glance but her face

relaxes into something close to a smile. I see she's had her lips done recently. Is that where she was? At a spa for the kind of treatments where you don't want to be in the public eye for a week or two while the swelling goes down?

I've checked off a box with my comment. She leans forward and gives me a kiss on the very same cheek she slapped. "I'm so glad to see you, too. See with my own eyes how you're doing."

"What time is it?" I fight the urge to ask her why she couldn't come yesterday, or visit me at the Island, or—a thousand ors she could have done, but didn't.

I don't ask because I already know the answer.

And it hurts.

"Five thirty in the morning," she says, stroking my hurt cheek. "You need more beauty sleep."

So do you, I think. Like, a thousand years.

Something clicks for me. "You're here because of tomorrow's meeting?"

"You mean *today's* meeting?"

I have to give her that. I give a rueful laugh. "Yeah. Right."

Her eyes cloud with something deeper than worry as she looks me over, searching for something I'm pretty sure isn't there.

"Yes. I'm here for the meeting."

I yawn. "Just another election campaign announcement, I guess."

Her eyes flicker with something worse than I saw a moment ago.

I peer at her. "Mom?"

She gives me a smile that does not reach her eyes. "Something like that, dear. You sleep. You'll learn more in a few hours." And with that she stands, gliding out of the room like she's on wheels, the edges of her long nightgown fluttering behind her like fallen angel wings.

Leaving me wide awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering what the hell that was all about.

Sleep finally claims me just as the birds begin chirping outside my window.

Mercifully, I do not dream about rope again.

addy's office is filled with people who look like they're all attending a funeral.

Drew and Silas, in their black suits and with their blank expressions, could be pallbearers.

"Who died?" I joke, walking in carrying the biggest cup of coffee I could find in the kitchen. Given my weird nightmare and lack of sleep, today caffeine is going to have to be my best friend. This is my third cup already, and it's only 9:30 a.m.

If I could hook up an IV right now, I would.

"Quite the opposite!" Daddy announces, looking around the large conference table on the other side of the room. There's Anya, Mom, Drew and Silas standing at the edge, and three people I've never seen before. Two women. One man.

No smiles.

A prickly feeling starts at the back of my neck, under my breasts, right where my navel brushes against the button on my skirt. Something here is...off. Strange.

Wrong.

"Marshall Josephs, this is my daughter, Lindsay. Lindsay, honey, Marshall's been assigned to work with you on reputation management."

Marshall stands, showing himself to be the height of an NBA player, with hands the size of a turkey platter. He's super blonde and balding, somewhere between my age and Daddy's, with bright honey-colored eyes and the look of a man who is used to talking his way out of messes.

Exactly the kind of man Daddy has on his campaigns.

And he's wearing a black wool suit like Drew and Silas, only his tie has tiny little images of a popular kid's cartoon character on it. I shake his hand and give him a fake smile.

Daddy beams.

Off to a good start.

"Let's get the introductions out of the way, shall we?" Daddy declares.

I walk over to Mom and stick out my hand. "Hi! I'm Lindsay Bosworth. And you are?"

Mom's fury flickers in the twitch of her nostril for three tenths of a second, and then she laughs, eyes glowing with manufactured amusement. "Ah, Lindsay. We've got our old girl back."

That prickly feeling intensifies when Drew shifts his weight and gives me a look that says I need to be prepared for something that's coming.

But I know what's coming.

Daddy's running for senate again. Duh. This isn't some big surprise.

We all stop laughing from my stupid joke and Daddy introduces me to Marcy Boorstein and

Victoria Ahlmann, both part of Marshall's "team" assigned to me. Three handlers for reputation management? Huh.

Four years ago I had zero.

We all take our seats at the massive conference table, Daddy at the head, Anya to his right, Mom across from him. Daddy clears his throat and gives Anya a look that is just close enough to being nervous that my heart stops.

Drew gives me a sharp look that makes my stomach drop.

What the hell is this meeting about?

Daddy doesn't do nervous.

"Lindsay, as you know, I've spent the last ten years in office, representing the state of California in the senate."

I frown. Daddy sounds like he's giving a press conference to me.

"And I've been very satisfied in this role, but it's time for a change."

I go cold and hold my breath. I wasn't expecting this.

"You're not running for senate again?" Relief floods me, filling my veins with heat. Oh, sweetness. I won't be in the spotlight. I can come home and pick up the pieces of my ruined life without being under a microscope.

"No."

I just nod, trying not to show any emotion.

He has two more years in the senate and I know as soon as the press knows I'm home, I'll have to deal with publicity, but this is such good news. I open my mouth to say whatever everyone expects me to say, but Mom cuts me off with a hand across the table, her chilled palm covering the back of my hand.

This morning, she is wearing her eyelashes. Full makeup, no product spared. Mom looks ten years younger than her natural age if you don't get too close. Right now, though, I see every crease and crevice, every makeup line.

"Honey," she says, breathy with excitement. "Your father is about to declare his campaign for President of the United States."

I fall off the edge of the world.

You think the world is round, but it turns out to be covered with unexpected cliffs, sheer drop-offs that appear at the worst possible times, making you fall into outer space, gravity long gone as you scream into a vacuum.

And no one can hear you.

"Huh?" I say, the sound like you make when someone gut punches you. Drew's eyes meet mine, and his eyebrows crease with compassion, his expression saying one thing:

I tried to warn you.

"President," Daddy says, one half of his mouth quirking up in a smile. "I've spent the better part of the last year fundraising, gathering behind-the-scenes support and testing my ideas with various voter sample groups. With the right coalition, good funds, and no major scandals, I've got a strong chance."

Mom's facade cracks for a split second as Daddy says the word *scandal*, her eyes floating to look at me.

Oh, no.

I suddenly understand why Marshall, Marcy and Victoria are here.

They're my new Stacia.

In triplicate. And *I'm* the scandal.

plaster a big, fake smile on my face. "Congratulations, Daddy!" I squeal, jumping up with legs that feel like melting icicles. My arms go around his neck, my nose pressed into his collar, and I smell his aftershave. It hasn't changed. All these years, Daddy's gone from being a district attorney to running for the U.S. House of Representatives to the U.S. Senate and now he's running for President. He hasn't changed his cologne.

I feel like I'm four years old, instantly, as I inhale during the hug. In a way, I am. This announcement makes me feel immature. Like a burden. A child who can't be controlled.

Scandal.

Drew avoids eye contact with me, looking anywhere but at my face. I'm avoiding him, except that my peripheral vision is too good. Mom beams at us. Anya has the same fake smile on her face that I have. Tears fill my eyes even though I fight them.

Suddenly, I get it.

I've been brought home because I am a *prop*. I am nothing but a thing you put on a stage because the performance requires it. Daddy's role is potential president. Mom's role is potential first lady.

My role?

Shut up, smile, look pretty. Show the world that Senator Bosworth is a family man who has his child's respect. Who is the authority. Who has a loving relationship with his daughter. Who is compassionate and kind, as good in real life as he will be leading the nation.

I'm a line in a script.

And I'm going to play the role of my life.

Except there's this horrible little stain in my past. Like a skid mark in a pair of underwear.

I stifle a hysterical laugh at the thought and bury it, making the sound seem like too much emotion. Daddy pulls back and looks at me, searching my face, assessing whether I'm okay. People say I look like a feminine version of him. We have similar hair, and eyes that are the same shape, a little cat-like. My eyes are rounder. His are more guarded. He's analyzing me. It occurs to me that ever since he ran for Senate ten years ago, I've never seen him look at me without trying to figure something out.

Ten years.

That's a long time.

"We have a problem, kiddo," he says gently, holding my shoulders, peering into my eyes. "Your...incident."

My blood runs cold.

"My incident." I don't phrase it like a question. And the emphasis on my is intended.

He nods. I know Daddy. He didn't miss my inflection. Ignoring it meets his needs, so he'll pretend I didn't say it. "We did so much damage control four years ago, sweetie. You weren't here to witness it." He squares his shoulders, as if bracing for a blow. "It's time to talk about it. Strategize. Prepare."

Great. My gang rape is now an incident that requires more strategic management than a war. Maybe even more than Black Friday sales.

"And everything we discuss in here is absolutely confidential," Mom says, her voice smooth but menacing. I'm not sure if her words are aimed only at me.

I look around the room as Daddy steps back to his seat at the head of the table. From the looks on some faces, I'm pretty sure Mom's target was wide. Like buckshot.

And everyone got hit with a little shrapnel.

"Of course," I reply, trying to match her tone. My skin is on fire. There's a coffee machine on a buffet table against the wall. Turning away from the table, I prepare a cup, searching for cream. There is none.

I can tell Anya's watching me, because she stands quickly and announces, "Let me get cream. Sorry. We used it all." Her swift exit involves being watched carefully by Mom, her eyes tracking Daddy's assistant, narrowing as Anya disappears out the door.

What's *that* about? Mom's never had a problem with Anya. The running joke about her being Daddy's work wife was always just a joke.

So much has changed in four years.

President. My very own father is running for President of the United States. Leader of the free world and all that. The enormity of it hits me. My dad wants to be the most powerful person in the world.

But he couldn't stop what happened to me four years ago.

Or seek justice for me after.

I stand in front of the coffee machine, my back to the table still, as Anya comes in with a small carton of light cream and sets it down on the table. Mom's nose wrinkles in distaste. She clearly wants the cream poured into the little silver serving pitcher. Anya doesn't care, long accustomed to work blitzes where the tables become littered with take-out boxes, hours of work interrupted only by coffee, pizza, and deli sandwiches.

And more crises.

"Marshall. You start," Daddy says, nodding to him.

Marshall gives me an evaluative look, then launches into a PowerPoint presentation titled "LB Incident."

My scandal has a *title*. A boring, bland name that conveys none of the pain. The terror. The horror. The clawing, blinding, wretched disgust of it all.

No-LB Incident. That's it.

It's named after me. Not after the crime itself, or the men who did this to me.

"Four years ago, Lindsay appeared on streaming television—and was video recorded—in a compromising position with three males of her acquaintance," Marshall says, clearly reading from a script.

I pour the cream in my coffee. The first drop does nothing, absorbed neatly by the black liquid. Two drops, four, then a thin stream starts to alter the color, eventually changing it completely from a dark void.

Compromising position. The euphemism makes me gag. I stop myself by swallowing scalding coffee, barely feeling the burn.

"Investigations later revealed that no crime had been committed. Interviews with eyewitnesses indicated that Lindsay was intoxicated and consented to the acts depicted on camera."

I feel Drew's eyes on me, sudden and piercing. My throat seizes. Heat and wetness fill my eyes. No. I will not cry. No.

"While one of Lindsay's friends, Jane Borokov, found her bruised, beaten, and tied with scarves that caused injuries, the testimony of Mandy Witherspoon, Jenna Marquez, and Tara Holdstrom indicated that enough witnesses present confirmed that although her condition involved significant injury, the injuries were of a sexual nature and that those were administered with her agreement."

With her agreement.

Drew interrupts Marshall's PowerPoint just as the screen clicks over from the words *LB Incident*, with bullet points summarizing his words, and to a new slide, which reads:

Reputation Management and Senate Campaign

I bury my face in my coffee cup and try not to react.

"Was Lindsay interviewed at any point in these investigations?" he asks, the question a challenge. I can't look at him. I feel naked already.

Everyone looks at me. Ah. I see. This is how it's going to be.

"No," I say, most of the word echoing against my hot coffee in the mug. But everyone can hear me. Loud and clear.

"Why not?" Drew is looking at my father. Not Marshall, not me, not Mom.

"That's classified information," Dad says in a tight voice.

"Classified? What the hell does Lindsay's gang rape have to do with government secrets?"

Marshall flinches at the words *gang rape* and goes beet red. Drew stands in place, chin up, earbud with a wire leading under his collar. Silas stares straight ahead.

The room goes fuzzy for me. A tiny part of me cheers Drew on. The truth is refreshing, even if it has to come from the one man who could have stopped the bastards from hurting me.

"I hired you, Drew, because you're good at personal protection. Not because you're an analyst. Now shut up and let the experts do their job," Daddy says, his voice extra calm.

Oh, boy.

Here's what I expect to happen next: Drew says he was there and knows exactly what happened. Daddy says he knows Drew was there, and....

But that doesn't happen.

In fact, it dawns on me that no one has said a single word about Drew's presence that night. Why not?

I'm encased in cotton candy that someone has lit on fire with a flamethrower, but I still manage to walk across the room, carrying my coffee cup. As Drew opens his mouth to answer Daddy, I stand between him and Daddy, breaking their visual field, arch one eyebrow, and say, "May I have a word with you in private?"

"You can say anything you want to me right here, Lindsay," Drew says evenly.

"I'll say what I want in the hallway, Drew."

And with that, I spin around, give Daddy and Mom a look they can't read, and walk out.

Drew better follow.

"hat the hell is wrong with you?" he hisses the second we're in the hallway, body language big and intimidating. I'm backed up against a wall, my only potential weapon a half-filled cup of lukewarm coffee.

"Wrong with *me*? I'm in there being talked about like I *asked* to be tied up, beaten, and violated by those three guys. What do you think is wrong with me, Drew?"

God help me, he smells so good. I look at his mouth. I kissed that mouth. Yesterday. Why am I thinking about kissing him now? No. I can't do this. I can't.

"You know damn well you didn't ask for it." If anger and compassion can blend together and live in a set of eyes, it's happening before me right now, his words biting the air.

"And so do you. Why isn't anyone talking about the fact that you were there, Drew? And why won't anyone say the guys' names? My name gets plastered all over the place. Tara, Mandy and Jenna are talked about. No one mentions you, or Stellan or John or Blaine. What the hell is going on?" I challenge. Our voices are barely above a whisper.

"Because no one ever saw their faces. Or mine," he explains.

"What?"

"I assume you've seen the video, Lindsay." He stares me down.

"Yes." I don't mention the hacking on the island. Too much right now.

"Then you know my face is cut off. And the later part, well..."

"Masks. I know. The fuckers put on *masks* before they raped me. They planned for it."

"And they put one on *you*, too." He looks like he's about to throw up or kill someone. Or both. I sag against the wall. "Right."

"Because they planned this all out. Made it look like some perverted sex game. Got Tara and Jenna and Mandy to go along with their media circus to smear you. Make it all seem like you wanted it."

My gut contracts. Whatever he sees in my face as he searches it makes him frown.

"Your dad really kept you in the dark on everything." His gaze shifts to Daddy's office door. If looks could kill, Daddy would be a pile of ash.

"All of this is new to me," I say, gritting my teeth. "Jane told me about Tara and everyone turning on me when I met her for coffee yesterday."

"And that's why you ran."

"Yes.

He smacks the wall over my head, making me flinch.

This is not working. I am the one in charge. I need to know, before this farce of a meeting continues, why no one in that room knows the truth about what happened four years ago, and most of all, why no one is saying the obvious:

Drew was there that night. He let it happen.

My heart is going to explode. I can't allow it, so I deflect.

"You know what, Drew? I am thinking about creating a new version of Bingo."

"Bingo?" he asks with about as much incredulity as you'd expect.

"Yes. Bingo." I plant my hands on my hips and lecture him. "The squares would include the following phrases/words:

Cone of silence.

Unreliable narrator.

Compromising position.

Damage control.

Bruised and beaten.

Reputation management.

Scapegoat.

Willful denial.

Slut shaming.

Consensual rough play.

Unfortunate choice.

Road to recovery.

Lapse of judgment.

"Get five in a row and you win...well, you win a bag of shit. Except it's not your shit. It's someone else's shit that everyone is willfully denying (B8!) the unreliable narrator (N7!) possesses. And because a massive distortion campaign (I2!) has made it impossible to say anything without becoming the scapegoat (G4!), you're fucked no matter what.

"Sounds like fun, huh? You ever played this game?"

"It sounds like anyone's version of hell, Lindsay." Chairs shuffle against the carpet in Daddy's office. I'm running out of time.

"Welcome to my world, Drew."

"I want to help you escape it." He pinches the bridge of his nose and looks away.

"You helped create it, Drew."

His nostrils flare and he inhales sharply, the gasp cutting off in mid-breath, his self-control reasserting itself. Whatever objection he was about to register gets shut off. Shut down. Shut up, all because of his internal process that regulates him in ways I cannot understand.

"I'm not wrong," I insist.

"No. You're not."

I jolt. That's the first time he's admitted it.

"I brought you out here," I remind him. "You're going to answer my questions, or I'll tell them you're the guy in the video."

He snorts. "You think they don't know that? The government controls more than enough technology to figure that out. Hell, a fifteen-year-old with a basic understanding of programming could identify everyone in that video."

"Then why did Daddy hire *you* to protect me?"

My voice is low and menacing. My heart pounds in my chest, blood smacking against every cell

in my body, including between my legs. I'm repulsed and aroused at the same time. It's not a pleasant feeling. My skin feels like it's covered with live electrical wires everywhere, and I have no idea who I can trust.

I know I can't trust Drew, and yet here I am, relying on him to give me information no one else will. That is how screwed up my life is here back home.

"I have no idea, Lindsay. If I knew, I would tell you."

"Liar."

Heat pours over my front as a very angry wall of Drew comes within inches of my face. "I am many things, Lindsay, but I am not a liar."

"You're just a coward, then. I'll cross liar off my list of words I assign to you, Drew."

He pales. "You think I'm a coward." Eyes narrowing into chocolate triangles, he leans so close I think he's going to kiss me. Or bite me. It's about fifty-fifty which he'll actually do.

I open my mouth to say yes, but something in his eyes makes me stop.

ou really think that?"

His voice cracks, then goes low, right at the end, like a dying twig snapping in an ice storm, burdened too much to hang on and remain where it belongs. The heat from his hushed tones covers my nose and cheekbones, rushing down the rest of my skin like a dry wheat field set ablaze by a lone spark of flint.

Before I can answer—and what would *be* my answer?—Anya appears in the hallway, hurried and a bit horrified, judging from the look on her face.

"What are you two doing?" she hisses, plainly aware that something's gone awry between us.

"Catching up on old times," I say through gritted teeth.

"Your father is a busy man. We have forty-two minutes left for this damage control meeting, and

Daddy's busyness has absolutely nothing to do with why she's here, and we all know it. But this is a ruse. An important one.

"Damage control?" I bark, just as a wall of bright blonde hair comes into hallway. Mom. Great. Everyone's angry. Angry at me, and coming to see what all the fuss is about.

Drew takes a step back and goes stone faced.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mom asks me, her mouth tight with displeasure, thinned-out nostrils trying to flare.

"Drew and I needed a moment to talk," I say smoothly, ignoring the samba beat my heart has taken as its anthem.

"Save the kissy face for later, Drew," Mom says coldly.

He doesn't twitch. Doesn't react. Silas comes through the doorway, brow downturned in a perplexed expression, his body halting comically as the scene registers. Unlike Drew, he hasn't learned to bury his emotions. To make his face resemble a grey granite rock.

He will.

The political security guys always do.

Or they just disappear one day, replaced by another interchangeable part.

A chill runs through me. If people could be cloned, I think Daddy and Mom would find that appealing right now.

Replace me with the "right" Lindsay.

"Lindsay had a question for me about Internet protocol that related to an earlier problem with her smartphone, Mrs. Bosworth. I have answered it." Drew's eyes flick to me for a nanosecond. "We're

done here."

"We sure are," I assure her.

"Good. Get back in there and listen to the consultants. Do what they say." Her cold, dry palm caresses my cheek. Damn me for leaning into it, soaking up the affection. Her eyes harden. "Do exactly what they say, Lindsay."

The *or else* is implied.

I follow her, eyes on the back of one perfectly-arranged wave of hair, ignoring the stare from Drew behind me.

Exactly thirty-eight minutes later, the basics have been covered:

- 1. I was drunk and high and asked three men to have rough sex with me.
 - 2. The videotaping of the event was not my fault.
 - 3. They were never prosecuted because no one can see their faces.
 - 4. My friends went public and claimed I asked for it.
 - 5. Reputation management has been a nightmare, but Daddy won his election four years ago, so:
 - 6. I am to be tightly controlled for the next two years, until he's elected.

Two years.

Anya's sharp intake of breath at that announcement morphs into a fake yawn, the movement so smooth you wouldn't know she's doing it on purpose if you hadn't been coached to do the same. Mom hires a slew of public speaking professionals every year, though fewer as the years have passed. When Daddy decided to run for the U.S. House of Representatives when I was eight, my after-school fun wasn't Brownies or soccer or swimming lessons.

It was etiquette tutoring.

Years of devoting themselves to this passionate desire to serve the public in national office has given me an appreciation for positioning. How people say one thing but mean another. The subtle ways you can make a point without being able to be confronted about it.

Passive-aggressive? Not quite. More like covert aggression, a stealth version of communication that is designed to be understood only by certain parties, and that is never, ever openly discussed.

I never did learn how to build a good campfire or drop kick from the goal, but I can suppress a laugh or an itch, and curtsy in nine different ways to meet cultural norms.

None of this was my fault! I want to shout, imagining the scenario in my beleaguered mind. Shouldn't someone say it? Why isn't anyone saying it? Not Mom. Not Daddy. Not Anya or Drew and certainly not Silas, Marshall, or the two women whose names I can't remember in the haze.

We're so focused on controlling what happened to me four years ago that we're leaving out the most important part:

I didn't do anything wrong.

I realize, as the room feels like we're moving in slow motion, as if we're all actors in a roleplaying video game featuring political intrigue and sexual sadism and assault, that if I don't say this if I don't at least say aloud this simple, obvious fact right now—then I'm complicit.

I am complicit in my own reputation destruction. By saying nothing, I imply that this is all true. That I invited those beasts to do unspeakable damage to me. That I wanted it. That it aroused me.

That my turncoat friends were right.

I didn't do anything wrong.

Slowly, like I'm living inside someone else's body, I stand and face the team of experts and relatives at the table who are assembled here to pick up the charred remains of my scandalous life, a burden they are dealing with. An obstacle to Daddy's and Mom's path to the White House.

There was a time when I thought I'd be better off dead. Stacia convinced me I was wrong. Buried beneath so many layers of pain, a piece of my pure self knew I was wrong, too. Right now, though, as all these faces stare at me like a crazy moon, full and bright, a little pinched and apprehensive about what I was about to say, I wish the world would swallow me whole.

The difference between wishing you were dead and wishing you weren't here isn't that drastic, but it is a difference. Still.

Drew gives me a look that says he knows what I'm about to say. I swear, it's like we can read each other's minds. Silas cocks one eyebrow, while the faces of the team designed to manage my failings remain impassive.

Except for Mom. She can't help herself. Impatience oozes out of her like post-plastic surgery drainage.

"I didn't," I croak out, my throat closing on the words. I clear my throat, my pulse between my legs, like all the blood has retreated to the place in my body where the assault happened. Like it's rallying for me, traveling where it once was needed most, to repair and recover.

Or maybe I just feel that vulnerable. Exposed. Shameful.

"I didn't," I try again, "do this."

All the eyes slowly, discreetly, roll down. Pens become fascinating objects to scrutinize, like ancient artifacts found at a dig.

"I didn't do this," I say again, stronger. Drew's eyelids shut and open slowly, like an owl, giving me support. His slight nod, chin to chest, says, *You got this*.

No. I don't.

But I'm trying.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I finally expel, my voice like glass being swept up with a whisk broom, dumped into a garbage can, the delicate vase mourned but soon forgotten.

"No, of course not," Daddy says, his dulcet tones so programmed. "We know—"

"I didn't do what Tara and those other bitches are saying. I never asked those guys to do that to me. I never asked for it. I never asked for it. I never asked for it."

The chant begins and I can't stop, thrusting my fists against the top of my thighs, the words on autopilot, as if saying them over and over will unravel the past four years and I can reclaim time.

This behavior alarms everyone. Everyone except Drew. I can see why they're freaked out, Mom giving Daddy a grim look as if to say, *I told you so*.

I bite the inside of my cheek to make myself stop. I taste blood. I inhale, a ragged sound like all the glass shards are going into my lungs, and then I add:

"None of what you think happened that night is real other than what they did to my body."

Marshall turns a furious shade of red. The women with him, who have now become The Red Queen and The White Queen in my mind, because of the color of their shoes, put their heads together and whisper, as if we can't hear them.

Silas goes stone faced. Drew does the opposite, his eyes alight with emotion.

"Lindsay, we've done research into this delicate matter," Daddy says, standing. Ah. Meeting over. Lindsay dismissed.

I march over to him as if possessed by someone I'm not quite sure exists, and grab his wrist. He flinches, shocked by the force of my grip. I want him to feel, damn it. Feel something. Surely, all my emotions are spilling over, like the Hoover Damn after an unprecedented rainstorm, a spillway of monumental proportions.

"Delicate?" I rasp. "You think it's *delicate* to sit here and have me listen to you and your strategy team treat my gang rape like it was some college mistake on my part?"

At the words *gang rape*, I see Mom stand up and march over like a bull rushing a red flag. "Don't use those words," she hisses.

Drew's body elongates, as if he's grown a few inches, his muscles rigid and ready. He's priming himself to physically intervene.

My God. Has it come to this?

"It's the truth," I spit out. "I was *gang raped*." I try to catch Marshall's eye, but he won't look at me. No one will look at me.

Except Drew.

"I wasn't drunk. Not by choice, at least. I didn't do any drugs. And those 'friends' who lied to all of you, and to the media, are a bunch of backstabbing assholes who lied for some sick reason," I declare. My chest still feels like a cement truck is parked on it, but the spots in my vision are starting to clear. I'm gaining strength from being free to speak my mind. Speak the truth.

Insist on being heard.

"Tara, Mandy and Jenna are fine, upstanding young women who you placed in a deeply unfair position, Lindsay!" Mom peels my fingers off Daddy's wrist and digs her fingernails into my palm so hard I feel flesh tear. But I don't move a muscle, because my skin has separated from my body and hovers above us, miles away.

"No, Mom. The only people who placed me in an unfair position were the three guys who tied me up and raped every hole I have."

SLAP!

My teeth rattle in my skull, my neck jerking to the side, the painful tear of neck muscles causing a tight, splintering spasm that makes me stagger. I don't fall, but I come damn close, and soon deep voices shout mine and Mom's names, over and over.

I look up, my lip split, Drew holding my mother's elbow, Mom screaming in his face.

addy stands back and watches the room with narrowed eyes.

"You get your fucking hands off me, Andrew Foster. You have no right to touch me like this. I will call security and—"

"I *am* security, Monica. I'm Lindsay's security, and you currently represent a physical threat to her," Drew says, his voice tainted with disgust and a politeness that makes her seethe. Two plainclothes security guys, Daddy's retinue, flood the room. They assess so quickly I don't even see it, and Drew gives a sharp nod, letting go of Mom.

Daddy holds his palm up to them. They retreat, like well-trained dogs.

"Don't you ever harm Lindsay again," Drew instructs my mother, who stretches her head up and holds his gaze like she wishes he would burst into flame.

"You can't tell me what to do, you weak little no-account worm who—"

"He's a decorated war hero who saved my helicopter when it was shot down on a diplomatic visit to Lagos, Monica. For God's sake. Let up on him. Just because he caught you in the wrong doesn't mean you should take it out on him," Daddy says, his commanding voice making everyone freeze in place.

Mom's gaze moves from Drew to Daddy, the anger unwavering. I didn't know about the helicopter mission, or Drew's role in it. So many details I don't know. Pieces of the situation are starting to fit into the framework of a larger puzzle.

My palm presses against my cheek, which feels wet. Gingerly, I investigate and find a small gash under my eye. Mom's ring must have torn the skin. She looks at me, chin up, defiant in that way she has, where she's so convinced she's right that she doesn't care about the emotional consequences.

"You should be more respectful in your language, Lindsay."

This is the moment when I would cower. *Before*. Before, I would do whatever I was told, but I was free to live my life within the confines of whatever Mom and Daddy set out for me.

Mom is about to get a taste of After.

"I'm so sorry," I say, lowering my voice with a plaintive, apologetic tone.

Her shoulders relax, eyes narrowing like a cat that knows its prey has been cornered.

I keep up the ruse, using a vocal inflection that makes me sound a little too much like Mr. Rogers, from that old kid's television show. "I'll be more careful in how I talk about my gang rape from now on. Would you like to approve the medical terminology I can use to describe how the surgeon reconstructed the wall between my vagina and anus? I believe my medical chart uses the words—"

Drew's eyes are wide as saucers. Mom looks like she's about to slap me again.

"Enough!" Daddy roars. "Everyone out. I want to speak with Lindsay alone."

Numb. My entire body goes numb. No cold. No hot. No inbreath. No outbreath. I turn into a senseless, touchless, tasteless, sightless, soundless being who is frozen in place as I realize my mistake.

I am human. I have an opinion. I have a soul and feelings and I cannot handle having my integrity so deeply breached that people who are supposed to love and support me actually believe all these lies.

And have never, not once, even asked me if what's been said about me is true.

Mom and Daddy and Drew remain after everyone else filters out. Daddy glares at Mom.

"You too, Monica."

"No," she says calmly, as if she expected to be evicted. "I'm staying."

Daddy laces his fingers around my upper arm and gently guides me out of the room, calling back over his shoulder. "Fine. Have fun."

I wish I could see Mom's face.

"Are you hurt?" Daddy's voice holds a lick of compassion in it, just enough that my shell starts to crack. *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry,* I beg myself. Please don't cry. I can cry in my room in a few minutes. Being Strong Lindsay is more important than feeling.

"My lip is. I'm bleeding a little." He pulls me into a tiny solarium, right off a small sliding door where Mom can't see us. My vision spins for a second and I lean into him. Daddy's a wall of rock, his arm around my shoulders, easing me into a chair.

"Lindsay, that was bad," he says, exhaling with irritability. "You can't do that again."

"Do what? Defend myself?"

"That wasn't a defense."

"You never gave me a chance. You all convicted me four years ago and sent me away to serve a prison sentence. I was the one incarcerated instead of the guys who violated me."

My skin feels an electrical charge that shouldn't be in this warm, humid room. I close my eyes and lick the blood off my lip.

Drew. He's right outside. I can feel him.

"Is that what you really think?" Daddy asks. I can tell he expects me to obey him. To say *no*. To lie.

"Yes."

His eyelids close and he inhales slowly, holding the breath for four beats, then letting it out.

"Why didn't anyone ever ask me to tell my story?" I ask before he can say anything.

"Because you were ruined before you ever got the chance."

Ruined.

Daddy might as well have slapped me. That word hurts more than Mom's blow.

"This isn't about truth," he says, his hoarse voice sending a creepy vibe up my back. "This is about a long, arduous marathon to the White House. Your truth is important to you, of course. It's why we left you on the Island for so long, because you needed to sort everything out and come back whole. Strong. Ready."

Bullshit.

I don't say it, but Daddy looks at me as if I did.

"I am a person," I say, the words slow in forming, like taffy stretched so far it becomes a thread. "I am here. I have been here all along. I'm not a case, or a scandal, or a folder or a strategy you have to contain or mitigate or—"

"I know that." His voice is like a breath that, blown too hard, breaks the thread in half, unmooring the tethered line.

"Then act like it." There is no conviction in my words. As I sit in silence, my nose fills. My hand reaches up to trace the thin scratch from Mom's slap. I've said all I can.

There is no more to say.

If they do not hear me now, I can't change that. I can change me, but I can't change them. The clichéd platitude that Stacia used to stuff down our throats in group therapy turns out to be useful. Helpful.

Painfully true.

"Lindsay."

I close my eyes and pretend he's not there. Surprisingly, this is not an effective strategy.

"Lindsay." His voice is firm. I open my eyes. Daddy has bent down at my eye level and his face is inches from mine. He reaches out and touches my chin with his hand, eventually cupping my jaw into his palm.

"We researched everything. Everything. When you're the head of a major senate committee, you have access to the finest investigators in the world."

He knows. He knows about Drew being there. Then why did he hire Drew to shadow me?

"We know the names of the men who did those barbaric—well, who did that to you. We know your friends turned on you and lied. We know you didn't ask for it." He looks up, over my shoulder, as if he's worried someone will hear him.

So much truth. So, so much truth.

I sag with relief against the wall. "Then why were those people in the meeting saying all that?"

"Because I can't find a viable strategy to go public with the truth and clear your name."

"What?"

"I can't find a way to make the truth more believable than the lies."

"What?" My throat feels like it's been painted with broken glass.

"We kept you hidden away for your own good. Trust me," he says, eyebrows turned down, eyes deeply troubled. "That first year you were in so much pain, just healing from the physical trauma of what those animals did to you. Year Two was a combination of helping your mind to recover from the psychological pain of it all. By Year Three we realized there was no turning back—in the public's mind you were nothing more than a slut who got what she was begging for."

I now know I'm my mother's daughter.

Because suddenly I slap him. My own father.

Hard.

So, so hard.

The lift of my arm, the curve of my elbow, and the fine scrape of my palm against Daddy's perfectly-shaven cheek is poetry. I feel like a principal in a ballet company, the cool smoothness of the center of my palm tickled by friction as my bones align to deliver the hit. And it's a hit. Make no mistake about it.

I just struck a United States Senator across the face.

The future President of the United States.

Not only is he not expecting it, he's clearly horrified by my blow. Within seconds my arms are pinned behind my back, yanked with force and a familiar joint-popping feeling that takes me back four years ago.

And it's Drew, this time, who is delivering the restraint.

"Gentian," Drew barks into his mouth piece as I writhe in his grip, trying to get out of this room, wanting to run and run and run, now thinking the Island was a form of paradise and I was too stupid to realize it. He's calling for Silas, who appears in seconds, eyes cold and at the ready to do whatever Drew orders.

"Let go of me," I argue, my efforts pointless. His grip is steel. I feel the harsh pain of my skin tearing, a rug burn quickly forming, as I try to pry my wrists out from his hands.

"No."

Daddy makes it clear to Drew he should let me go. Obeying, but reluctant, Drew drops my arms. "I deserved that," Daddy says.

"Yes, you did," I grunt, the sound low and mean. "You called me a *slut* for being the victim of a gang rape."

Because Drew is right behind me, his body inches from mine, I feel the shockwave of pure rage that ignites him.

"Sir? You what?" Drew snaps.

"I didn't technically call Lindsay a slut," Daddy says evenly. How he stays so calm, so flat and matter-of-fact in every situation is a wonder to me. "I was explaining the public perception of her."

"And I reacted on impulse."

"I don't blame you," Drew says from the corner of his mouth, like a ventriloquist throwing his voice.

Daddy points to me, but it's not an angry gesture. It is, however, a warning. "Any other security detail on me would have had you on the ground, a knee between your shoulder blades, and cuffs around your wrists."

"A position I know all too well, only I'm used to it naked," I retort.

Daddy blanches.

"Jesus, Lindsay," Drew mutters.

"Fuck off," I say to no one, to everyone, to the world. With my newfound freedom, I sprint down the hallway, bursting through the double French doors into the sunshine, aware of only one thought:

I've blown it.

rew doesn't follow me, but Silas does, hovering at a discreet distance to give me the illusion of privacy. My palm thrums with the expelled energy from slapping Daddy, and my own cheek burns where Mom hit me.

We're a freaking Brady Bunch, aren't we? One big, happy family.

There's a moment when I'm walking around one of the fountains near the shore when it hits me: nothing can be worse. Not a single thing. I came home timid and worried about making sure everyone thought I was a little people pleaser, a go-along-get-along gal who wouldn't rock the boat.

Instead, day two and I find out I've been slut-shamed for a violent sex act I never asked for. The victim has been media-massaged into being the aggressor.

I deserved what happened.

And Daddy and Mom have to make the presidential campaign work in spite of Lindsay the Slut. I almost feel bad for them.

Almost.

I start to shiver. It's eighty degrees outside and the air is still. There is no reason to shiver. The feeling comes from the inside out.

Slut.

For four years I wondered why the guys who raped me were never brought to justice. For four years I thought that I needed an extra-long time to heal from the horrible injustice of being their victim. For four years I thought my friends didn't write or call because they were being blocked by staff at the Island, or for some reason that would make sense when I got home and was able to piece it all together.

I never imagined it would be like this.

Daddy knows. Daddy knows who did this, and yet didn't pursue charges against them. Daddy knows Drew was there, watched the footage where my own boyfriend did nothing to save me—and hasn't said a word. In fact, he hired the man who betrayed me to protect me now.

Daddy knows everything.

And I have to act like all the lies are true, in order to help him achieve his larger goal.

The vomit rises up like a cannon being shot off, the explosion gross and gritty. I lean against a tree trunk for support and puke my guts out until all I have left are dry heaves. A rustle behind me indicates Silas's presence, and as I sit down, dizzy and burning from the effort of vomiting, he offers me a much-appreciated bottled water.

"Thank you."

"I wish it could be more."

I half bark, half laugh at t hat answer. "Silas, when did a stranger like you become the nicest person in my life?"

He sits down next to me, yanking up on the black wool of his trousers before crossing his legs like a kid in kindergarten. "Drew's nice to you."

"Drew is an asshole."

He nods. "Sometimes. When he has to be."

That stops me from saying anything more.

"He cares about you."

I give him a sour look. "He has a funny way of showing it." I start to say more, but stop.

"I know you two had a past. I don't know more than that, Ms. Bosworth, but I've worked for Drew for almost a year now. I did three years in Afghanistan. I've seen some bad people. Drew isn't one of them."

I look up and squint, closing one eye to focus on him. The sun blinds me from over one of his shoulders.

"What if I am?"

"What if you are—what?"

"One of those bad people."

I figure he'll smile, but he doesn't. He just shakes his head. "You're not," he says.

"How do you know?"

He shrugs. "Three years in Afghanistan taught me when to trust my gut."

"And your gut says I'm a good person?" I'm amused by this. I'm not sure why.

"My gut says to trust Drew. He's never wrong. So if Drew says you're good, you're good."

I want to tell him that trusting Drew is a bad, bad idea, but instead I reply with, "And if other people say I'm bad?"

"I don't care what other people say. All you need is one clear-headed person who has good instincts. You find one like that, you hang onto them and follow them anywhere."

He stands and offers me his hand, pulling me up.

I start walking, slowly, down to the beach, where I run six miles before my cheek stops burning.

I'm back at home, grabbing a glass of water, when I hear someone come in behind me.

"I'm sorry." Mom's words make me do a double-take. Daddy's behind her and his face is

"Excuse me?"

stone.

"Don't make me say it again, Lindsay. I said I'm sorry." Her mouth purses, throat shifting with a dry swallow. "I should never have slapped you like that."

Daddy and I share a look. I'm about to apologize to him for the same action when he shakes his head slightly. Ah. Mom doesn't know I slapped him.

"I forgive you," I say.

Mom's face fills with true emotion. She can be an automaton most of the time, but sometimes I think she's that way because it's too hard to feel all her feelings and play the role of senator's wife.

Soon to be *president's* wife.

Her hug feels good. Authentic. We laugh a little and settle into an uneasy peace. By lunchtime, she offers to have me eat with her, a rare invitation. Mom is the queen of the power lunch. We have to take separate cars because she has an event after. That's the old norm. She squeezed in time for me between senator's wife obligations. We drive there in separate cars.

I haven't driven in four years. I narrowly missed being unable to renew my driver's license while living on the Island, but I made it happen. I go super-slow and take main roads that aren't highways. I make it there just fine.

Within five minutes I realize that I'm just another power lunch to her. This meal is not a mother-daughter bonding session.

"Your father told me how upset you are about not feeling heard," she says while she picks at her arugula, apple and gorgonzola salad. I'm eating the same thing, except I've slathered mine in olive oil vinaigrette and parmesan cheese. Mom eyes my loaded fork with envy.

She's determined to drop ten pounds this month before Daddy declares his run for the White House.

I nod. I don't know how to respond.

"We can't change what already happened. And your father and I did what we thought was best at the time."

If I had a dollar for every time one of them said that to me...well, I'd have a hundred bucks or so, I guess.

My phone buzzes as Mom starts to say something else. I ignore it. Must be Jane. She's the only

person who has this number, other than Daddy, Mom, and Drew's security people.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" she asks, a little too casual.

A creepy-crawly sensation stipples my skin.

I pull out the phone to find a text.

From Stacia.

Hi Lindsay. I'd love to talk with you.

I inhale so sharply from shock that a piece of apple gets caught in my throat, making me gag. Hacking, I cough hard, the piece dislodging.

"For goodness sake, Lindsay," Mom says in hushed tones. "Try not to make a spectacle of yourself."

"Right," I rasp. "I'll remember that next time I'm experiencing oxygen deprivation. Priority: don't make waves."

Mom glares.

I glare back. "You gave Stacia my phone number?"

"Anya must have. We decided it was best."

"Who decided?"

She ignores that question. A master at swinging any conversation in the direction of her choosing, Mom says, "Weekly phone sessions with Stacia will be critical for your success during the campaign."

"I can't stand Stacia."

"She's good for you."

"She's good for you."

"You need professional help."

She's right. I hate to admit it, but she's right. "I'll see a psychologist."

Mom looks so satisfied with herself. She resumes eating, jabbing the salad like it's a fencing competition.

"But not her. A different doctor. One I choose."

"You are so stubborn—"

"Just like your father," I say with her, our voices in stereo. We laugh. I think we're both desperate to find a way to bridge from our anger to something better.

That is so hard.

And I have a feeling she expects me to extend the olive branch. No way.

"My choice. I'll pick. And not someone you or Daddy vets."

"That's a tall order. You know we need to make sure any professional you might confide in won't turn around and sell your stories to the tabloids."

"A professional psychologist with a Ph.D. and a license isn't going to do that, Mom."

"Your first one already did. While you were at the Island."

I feel like I am floating in the ocean, thousands of miles from land, and giant swells keep crashing into me, making me sputter, the taste of sea water destroying me from the outside in.

"That happened?" I croak. "Who?"

"One of the rape counselors from the emergency room."

"The what?"

"You were groggy, but able to speak, when you first came in." Mom describes this like she's telling me the storyline for the latest movie she saw. "A rape counselor interviewed you. Later, when Tara, Mandy and Jenna came forward and shared that you'd asked for the kinky foursome, the rape

counselor did, too. Told everyone you told her it was consensual."

My knees turn to rubber bands again.

No wonder no one believes me.

I stare at Mom, who gives me a look that isn't quite sympathy, isn't quite dismissive, but somewhere in between. "Do you see, Lindsay? This is why we kept you safe on the Island all these years. Too many leaks. Too much disinformation. Back then, it was a shitstorm," she hisses. "Harry didn't know who to believe, and controlling his election was the priority. For all we knew, this was deliberate sabotage on someone's part to make sure your father wasn't re-elected."

I'm still blown away by the fact that a rape counselor I don't even remember lied to the media. "Huh?"

"The second six-year term was critical for solidifying power on the important committees in the senate, and to pave the way for the White House," she explains, as if that's what I was questioning.

"No. No. I, uh, I understand that," I say. "I mean—the rape counselor lied and nothing happened to her?"

"Oh, something happened, all right. We learned she made a tidy six figures from the tabloid she shoveled that steaming pile of manure to."

My mind scrambles to connect all of this. Why? Why did someone do this to me? So many someones? Why would person after person lie about who I am and let those bastards get away with this?

"And Tara?" I ask. At the mention of my ex-best-friend's name Mom's face hardens.

"What about her?"

"Did someone pay her and my other friends off, too? Is that why they lied?"

She huffs, one hand going to her hair, primping. "Who knows what those little twits were thinking when they conjured up that little attention-seeking circus." Mom's anger is coming through. Her words hurt, but the feeling underneath them is the first sense I have that she really does understand that I didn't choose any of what happened to me. She understands the truth.

She just won't act on it.

Mom's phone buzzes. She doesn't even look at it. "I have to go now, sweetie." She stands, most of her salad abandoned. "A new playground in Fresno that Daddy got through federal funds. A new community center, too. I'm the guest of honor." Mom did these appearances non-stop, and had for years. When I was still in school and younger, she came to every single one of my school events, every choir performance, every football game where I cheered, every graduation.

And the press ate it up.

We air kiss, and she departs, like a Category 5 tornado that comes and goes in three minutes, doing more damage in that short window than you could ever fathom possible.

I am hollow.

Empty.

I pick at the rest of my salad and finish off the green bottle of sparkling water. Then I signal to the waiter and order a three-scoop hot fudge sundae. Mom would be horrified.

And that's why I do it.

As the waiter departs, I see Drew, sitting discreetly at the restaurant's entrance in a club chair, pretending to be looking at his phone. All the security guys who've been following me since Daddy was elected to national office have this uniformity to them. Clearly trained with the same basic techniques, once you know what they are supposed to do, you can pick them out in a crowd in about two seconds. They're so obvious.

If you know what to look for.

My sundae's delivered and the candied pecans on top are an extra treat. The first bite nearly makes me moan. My appetite comes roaring back and for the first time in two days, I feel a tiny bit normal. People around me are talking about bills and corporate mergers, about someone getting married and a child with autism, the wisps of conversations so average.

No one is discussing slut-shaming. Or group sex. No political sabotage. No gang rape. Given my limited experience since coming home from the Island, I feel like *they're* the weirdos, living sheltered lives where their problems are nothing compared to mine.

"Care for some company?" Drew's voice startles me and I drop my loaded spoon. It hits the edge of the sundae bowl and flies backwards, plopping into my lap, staining my white pants.

"Thanks," I snap. "And no. Can't I stuff my face with ice cream in peace?"

"Not on my watch." He sits down and observes as I pat the ice cream and hot fudge off my pants.

"Quit staring."

"It's my job to look at you."

"You sound more and more like a creepy stalker."

The waiter comes over and asks Drew if he'd like something to drink. Drew orders coffee.

"You can get your own table."

"I have something to say."

"You've said more than enough, Drew. You're my bodyguard. I get that. I have to tolerate it, because for some screwed up reason, Daddy decided to hire you and your company. But I do not have to agree to let you break into my personal space and sit here like we're old friends having a lovely afternoon lunch."

"If this were a normal client relationship, I'd agree."

"I don't need you to agree. Just follow my orders."

He leans back in the chair, unbuttoning his suit jacket. As he stretches his arms along the chair, I see his gun holster on his left. Drew's right-handed.

"That's the first time I've ever seen the resemblance in you to your father, Lindsay." His mouth twitches with amusement. I look at his lips. Those were on mine yesterday. The memory of his heavy, muscled arms around me, my body curled in his lap, makes me warm.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Tormenting me."

He arches one eyebrow. "I'm protecting you."

"You're making my life so much harder."

"Why?"

The tears start in the base of my throat, a tightening I know will turn into a full-blown crying jag if I don't do something. One giant scoop of ice cream later, and at least my mouth is shocked by the cold.

"Need a shovel?" he jokes. I know he's trying to navigate the landmine of this mess. But the comment just makes me swallow and set the spoon aside.

"Take care of the bill for me. I'm leaving." I stand and coldly walk away. Security teams often do handle these details, though I've never acted like this before. Drew's ease and familiarity with me drives me insane.

And then there was that kiss.

A kiss I want more of.

By the time he catches up to me, I'm walking along a side street where the water laps at the shore. Mom loves this part of our sleepy little exclusive town, where it's a crime to be homeless but an even bigger crime to be out of fashion. I'm sure crying and blubbering with hot fudge stains on your white pants is worse than either of those.

Drew stays ten feet behind me.

I ache for him. I ache for answers—real answers—to questions I'm pretty sure I can't ask. And if I ask them, I won't get a straight answer anyway, so why bother? Has it really only been two days since I've been home? How can two days be so jam-packed full of so much horror?

"Mom just told me the rape counselor at the emergency room sold a bunch of lies to a tabloid for six figures," I say, staring at the water. It rises up and catches the sunlight, then glimmers off the hull of a boat docked to the little marina beside the set of shops.

"I know."

"You know everything, don't you?"

"No. I don't. I wish I did."

"I don't! I wish I didn't know any of this. My God, Drew! All these people did this to me." I make a barky laugh, the sound so insane even I know I'm frothing into hysteria. "No one knows who the guys in that video are—except they do. The authorities do. The ones who could bring them to justice."

"Lindsay—"

"My best friends lied to the press, they lied so bad that my parents acted on it. A rape counselor lied, too. My Mom and Dad know I didn't ask for the gang rape, and yet they're choosing to act like they think the lies are true. They're in damage control mode. Do you have any idea how hard it is to know that they know I was a victim but they're acting like I asked for it?"

Pain makes Drew's face change. He takes a step closer. "That's why I wanted to talk to you. I'll leave you alone if that's really what you want. What you need. But I can fill in some of your gaps if it helps you to make sense of everything."

He's a foot away from me, his heat drawing me in. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

And then I hear it.

Voices.

The high-pitched chatter of a gaggle of young women in a pack.

My eyes fly open because I know those voices.

It's Tara, Jenna and Mandy.

rew's nostrils flare and his speckled-brown eyes tighten like a hawk's. My old "friends" don't see us at first, teetering down the cobblestoned walkway on the newest high-heel fashion, their dresses oh, so perfect. They're lunching, an activity we all looked forward to after graduating college. When you're raised in luxury and power, this is what you're taught.

This is what you emulate.

They halt as Tara realizes we're here. Her face goes from her typical cool, fake-friendly L.A. gaze to something more sinister and manipulative. When she thinks no one important is watching, she goes full Queen Bee.

And thinks she can get away with it.

"Lindsay! OMIGOD! Look at you!" Her eyes comb over me with the slow, treacherous look of someone seeking an error. She finds it.

Everywhere.

"You look great!" She comes in for a kiss. Mandy and Jenna stand like Barbie zombies, unsure what to do. Whatever Tara's plan here is, they're not in on it. Mandy gives Drew a contemptuous look.

I sidestep Tara and edge over to the water. Her heel catches between two cobblestones and she wobbles. As she starts to go down she glares at Drew, as if he's supposed to jump in and help her.

He doesn't. He stands there, hands on hips, face a blank sheet of paper, sunglasses on.

He is The Man.

"What, um, what's up, Lindsay?" Jenna asks. Her voice gains more cattiness as the words come out. Jenna is the consummate follower. She does whatever Mandy and Tara tell her to do.

"Oh," I say back, casual as can be, head held high. I cut my gaze to Tara, who magically caught herself before falling, juggling an armload of shopping bags. "You know. The same old same old. Nothing new."

Jenna titters. Tara shoots her an evil glare that shuts her up.

A harmless little plan forms in my mind. I walk closer to Tara, my steps careful, leading her toward the water as casually as I can. I look around the area without bringing attention to myself. Seconds pass before I see what I'm searching for. Aha. There they are. Security cameras on the walls of the mall, all facing the water. And no buildings on the other side past the moored sailboats in this tiny marina.

This might work.

"What about you?" I ask Tara, pretending to be interested, wanting to reach out and slap the saucy

grin off her face now that I know how completely and utterly she destroyed the already-ruined shreds of my old life.

"Just graduated, of course," Tara says, the tip of her tongue peeking out to touch her teeth, her look flirty and vicious. She bounces her eye contact between me and Drew. He's become a marble statue, though. "You know...oh," she sighs, pretended to be sad. "That's right. You don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't know what it's like to graduate."

"I finished my degree."

"I mean with your *master's* degree, Lindsay. I just finished my MBA. Accelerated program at Berkeley." She primps and preens with her eyes, the glee at her perception of my inferiority like an unlimited power source, as if Tara's evil is a sun.

"Congrats! I always knew you'd do well in business. Whichever wealthy man you manage to snag will find your achievement to be great for his arm candy creds." I say the words so smoothly she doesn't realize it's an insult until she's proven she missed it.

My mom may be cold and difficult, but she's really good for one thing.

Learning how to burn someone with words.

Tara's face turns nasty, but as she bites her lower lip and her eyes reflect her on-the-spot calculation for her response, I see how hollow she really is. If she were just an empty, vapid little bitch none of this would matter, but she's not.

She's smart.

And that makes her dangerous, too.

"I'm sure my MBA is better resume material than your degree, Lindsay. Where did you get it again? During your stay at the mental institution? You were there for four years, right? Did they give your daddy a bulk-rate discount?"

Stepping closer, she tries to physically intimidate me in addition to her verbal onslaught. Taller because of her heels, she towers over me.

Come here, my pretty....

Drew steps closer out of protection. Mandy and Jenna just come in to watch what they think is about to be an entertaining catfight.

Drew's slow inhale tells me he's getting pissed on my behalf, but it's fine. Really. She's walking right into my trap, and if I play this just right—

"You would know all about daddies and bulk discounts now, wouldn't you, Tara? Sugar daddies, that is. You're the expert."

I say it low enough that everyone around us can hear, but if there's sound on a video camera, it might not pick my words up.

Mandy shrieks with surprise, tittering in the background as it happens. Tara reaches for me. I step back.

"You slutty little no-good bitch," she growls.

"Whats the matter, Tara? Can't handle it when your victim can actually talk back?"

She reaches out with her fingers, curled like talons, and touches my shirt. Her face is a mask of pure hatred. I have no idea what I did four years ago to deserve what she did to me then, and I've never seen her this angry. The fact that she's reacting like this, and that her rage is bubbling beneath her fake-pretty surface is telling.

I pivot just enough to teeter on my heels, then free fall backwards, letting myself, making sure her back is facing the shop wall.

The distance between us is inches. Her arm is stretched out as if she's pushing. I grab the strap of her purse right at her breastbone and yank her with me.

SPLASH!

I push off from the wall of the pier and get over to the left as fast as possible, the shock of water and swimming all I can think of. Tara's thrashing beside me. She's a strong swimmer, but her purse floats on the surface, makeup and receipts and dollars starting to ripple out of it. Two big shopping bags she had on one arm are half-floating, half-sinking.

I go back under so I don't have to listen to her screaming at me. When I come back up, I surface at the wall and look to see Drew right there, an arm extended to help me up, his palm open.

I take it.

"YOU FUCKING BITCH!" Tara is screaming. "You did that on purpose!"

Wedging one foot on the wall, I use my other knee to climb out, Drew's arm much stronger than I judged. The force of his pull upward has me on land. I don't dare sit down, because I need to be ready to run.

"Lindsay didn't do anything, Tara. *You* did," Drew says evenly to her. He turns to me. "You okay?"

All I can do is nod.

"WHAT!" Tara sputters. Her shopping bags look like the Titanic, unable to maintain buoyancy beyond a certain point. "OMIGOD, Mandy and Jenna, help me!"

They both look like deer caught in headlights.

"What should we do?" Jenna asks.

"Drew! Help me out!"

"I'm assigned to Lindsay. She's my security priority," he snaps.

Tara's swishing and splashing in the water. I have to bite my lips not to laugh. Drew gives me a speculative look, like it's occurring to him that maybe I'm not so innocent after all.

Not in this instance.

Tara's not wearing waterproof mascara. She starts to look like a deranged football linebacker. She's treading water and screaming. Local security officers start to appear, men in their sixties, with grey Santa-like beards and bald heads, friendly and concerned.

"What's going on?" one of them asks no one in particular.

"SHE PUSHED ME IN!" Tara screams, pointing to me. As she lifts her arm, her purse strap floats off and the entire bag starts to sink.

"Quit lying, Tara," Drew says evenly. He looks at the security guard and rolls his eyes, thumbing toward the water. "That one is a little...you know." He twirls his finger around his ear in a universal gesture.

Mandy gives Drew the side-eye. Jenna giggles.

One of the other officers tosses a red flotation device to Tara, who grabs it and screams, "My clothes! My purse! Someone get in here and find everything!"

No one moves.

"You'll pay for this, Lindsay! I'm filing assault charges against you!"

"We have video surveillance of this entire area, ma'am," one of the security guards assures her. "We can review those tapes and provide them to the police so they can make whatever determination they need to make."

"Good!" she crows. "Because this crazy little bitch just got out of the nuthouse and now she's stalking me!"

The guard looks at Drew, who slowly shakes his head and mouths, *Not true*.

Guard #2 pulls the flotation device line in and helps Tara climb out of the water. She's in her full outfit, still, her suede heels gone from a sleek lime green to a dull brown, her tight dress like sausage casing.

"My phone! My purse! My clothes and shoes and oh, *you* did this!" Her screams are blood-curdling, but I'm not reacting at all. Drew's standing over me, hands on hips again, just watching her make a fool of herself.

"And you!" she screams at the guards, who look like Tweedledee and Tweedledum. "Give me your phone! I have to call the police!"

"Not necessary, ma'am," says Guard #1, who has pulled out a smartphone and a stylus. "I can start the process right now. How about you tell me what happened?" The guard looks back at Drew and winks.

Winks.

Oh, this is going to be so good. As long as I got my body positioned just right and no one sees me grabbing her purse, then I might finally have a tiny shred of revenge here. Tara deserves it.

She deserves way more than being dunked in the water, but it's a start.

Drew shrugs out of his coat and puts it around my shoulders, his heat still in the thick wool as it surrounds me. Huffing the cloth would be a social *faux pas*, so I don't. He takes my elbow and starts to guide me away.

"WHERE ARE YOU GOING?" Tara shrieks. "I WANT HER ARRESTED! SHE ASSAULTED ME!"

Drew looks at the guard and makes a gesture that indicates she's cuckoo.

Tara turns into a red demon.

"FUCK YOU, DREW! YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME, TOO!"

The guard looks at us and makes a motion with his eyebrows and neck like, You're not kidding.

Drew jogs over to the guy, says something in a whisper tone, and hands him a card. The guard laughs.

"THIS ISN'T FUNNY!" Tara whips around, leaving a stream of water dripping from her hair. She reaches up and touches it. "I just had a blowout this morning! Lindsay!"

She curses and screams as Drew gently leads me away, taking me to the parking lot where I left my car.

"hat was that about?" he asks when we're far enough away that our eardrums aren't being pierced by Tara's screams.

"You saw the whole thing. You tell me."

"I saw Tara being Tara and a whole new version of Lindsay back there."

"You mean because I stood up for myself?"

"Is that what you call that?"

"What else was it?"

"Revenge."

"Same thing."

His grunt confirms I'm right.

As we walk toward the parking lot, I wonder how he knows where my car is parked. Duh. of course he does. Mom had him here the entire time, so he'd know. I'm sure Drew and Silas and the overnight crew memorized our license plates. If I asked, they probably know my bra size and favorite brand of tampons.

I find my keys and climb in. The car is a tiny little compact, picked with me in mind. I'm terrible in SUVs, and hate to parallel park. The smaller the car, the better. Daddy joked that they almost got me a Smart Car, but settled for this Honda Fit instead. It's a boring silver color that makes me blend in with the masses.

Perfect.

I pull out of the parking spot, my wet ass soaking the upholstered seats, and realize I'm still wearing Drew's suit jacket. As I wait at a stop light, I really sink my nose into the cloth. Oh, it smells like him. Lime and cloves and soap and *Drew*.

My insides tickle and I hear the bones in my neck crackle as my muscles melt. The inviting musk of Drew's natural body plus cologne is so intoxicating I could get drunk on this alone. It overpowers my own wet dog scent, and I'm grateful.

Beep!

Someone behind me lays on the horn. I look up. Green light. Punching the accelerator a little too hard, I lurch forward but get going, stopping the onslaught of copycat honkers. I know Drew is behind me, driving a big, black SUV meant to be an unmarked car. Right. It's about as subtle as Tara is kind.

The speed limit on all the in-town roads is only twenty-five, so it takes a bit to get on the main road. Once we hit the long, straight road that will turn into a winding path up the hills to our oceanside compound, I relax even more. The distractions of traffic make it hard for me to drive. Two

lanes, one in each direction, and a bunch of desert and ocean are easier to handle.

Bruno Mars comes on the radio and I start singing along. Music therapy was mandatory at the Island, so I spent a lot of time listening to "prescribed" music and assigning it emotional meaning. The whole practice was stupid and devoid of any real authenticity. We all told the counselors what we thought they wanted to hear.

Tara's little swim runs through my mind slowly, the image of events rolling like an old filmstrip being manually viewed. Revenge tastes sweet, sure, but what did I gain from all that? She's wet, pissed, and out some clothes and personal items from her purse.

But now she's angry and on the warpath. I'm her target.

I should feel something at that realization, right? I don't.

No cold dread.

No hot fear.

I'm neutral. Warm and boring.

Seriously—what could Tara do to me now that she hasn't already done? How could she hurt me any more?

Humming is good for the soul. As the road stretches out before me, I speed up just a little, careful to stay within five miles of the speed limit. Mom and Daddy have taught me to follow the law. There's nothing worse than a lawmaker's child being caught breaking it.

Hah.

Actually, there is something worse. But let's not go there.

Driving for a few minutes puts me into that mildly hypnotic state you get when you listen to music and travel on a route you know by heart. I'm soaked and feeling gross and I know there will be hell to pay when Mom and Daddy find out what happened with Tara, but I'm strangely feeling mellow.

Maybe it's because I finally got to do something.

The car feels a little out of control as I take a curve, so I press on the brakes. Nothing happens. While it's been four years since I last drove, I do have my foot on the correct pedal, so I push the brake harder.

Nothing.

I pull lightly on the steering wheel and lift up, so that my full weight is grinding in to the brake pedal. Nothing happens. The road dips down slightly and becomes curvier as the oceanside cliffs become steeper.

What the hell is going on?

Forty-seven miles an hour. I'm seven miles over the speed limit now, but gaining speed fast. Pumping over and over, trying to get some kind of brakes to kick in, I start to feel a sense of unreality.

My skin feels like rubber. My mouth goes dry. My stomach roils and that hot fudge sundae is about to come up.

Fifty-six miles an hour.

Bracing myself, I look at the emergency brake. I've never had to use it before, but I remember in driver's ed classes how our instructors told us that in a true emergency, grab and yank. I can't close my eyes and do it, so with every fiber of my being braced for the sudden shock of the car halting, I pull it.

Nothing.

Oh, no.

My phone rings. I take one hand off the steering wheel and fish for the phone in my purse.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Drew says.

I press speakerphone and toss the phone on the passenger seat just as the car swerves horribly to the right. I hit gravel on the shoulder and feel the back of the car start to go off the road. A hard yank left and I careen into the other lane. Thank God no one's driving in the opposite direction, or I'd have just hit them head on.

"My brakes don't work!" I scream. I don't see the phone any more.

"What?" Drew's voice is coming from the floor of the passenger's seat. "What are you doing, Lindsay?"

"MY BRAKES DON'T WORK!" I shriek.

Sixty-two miles an hour.

All I can do is grip the steering wheel, one hand at ten o'clock, one at two o'clock like they taught in driver's ed, and navigate the curling road, trying to stay in the lines. We're pitching down, the incline increasing, and I can't slow down.

My stomach starts to spasm. I'm about to throw up. If I throw up, I'll close my eyes, and if that happens, I'm dead.

"LINDSAY!" Drew's voice pierces the air. The engine is revving high as we accelerate, and it's hard to hear him. "CAN YOU HEAR ME!"

"YES!" I scream back.

"LOOK TO YOUR LEFT."

I turn just enough to see his black SUV next to me. He rolls down the passenger window. He's looking straight ahead, weaving with the road, staying parallel to me.

My bladder fills and feels like a flower about to blossom. I start retching.

"STAY CALM!" He's in stereo now. I can hear him to my left, outside, and from the car floor where my phone must be. "I'M GOING IN FRONT OF YOU. DO AS I SAY. JUST STAY ON THE ROAD AND IN THE LINES. WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT SPEED?"

HOOOOOOONNNNNKKKKKK!!!!!

I look at the road and see a giant semi-trailer coming right at Drew.

Drew's SUV disappears like he's teleported it, the semi coming within inches of my car, my rearview mirror filling with the dark, ominous presence of Drew's windshield. Somehow, he pulled back just in time for the semi to go past.

I start hyperventilating.

"LINDSAY? YOU WITH ME?" he shouts, pulling back next to me again.

I can't breathe. Can't talk. Can't think. Can't anything.

"LINDSAY! I WILL SAVE YOU."

He pulls up, going faster than me. I'm driving at seventy-three miles an hour now on a road meant for forty mph.

"I'M HERE!" I shout.

"GOOD GIRL. STAY WITH ME. YOU'RE GONNA FEEL A BUMP. HOLD ON."

His SUV is in front of me now as we race and twist, the road like that old-fashioned Christmas ribbon candy. All I can do is sway and drive, sway and drive, sway and drive. My butt hurts and my thighs are screaming from pushing the brake over and over, like it'll magically kick in. My head feels like it's on fire and I'm inching up to seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven...

"I'M ABOUT TO LET YOUR BUMPER HIT MINE, LINDSAY."

"WHAT?" I nearly pee my pants. "YOU'RE GOING TO CRASH INTO ME?"

"NO. I'M GOING TO SLOW YOU DOWN. JUST KEEP STEERING. STAY WITH ME. STAY WITH ME, BABY. YOU CAN DO THIS."

Baby.

Baby.

My stomach heaves again, but this time from emotion. Baby. Drew used to call me baby. It was his pet name for me, a word he used when he stroked my face, when he kissed me under the moonlight at the beach, when we cuddled around a bonfire.

And now, when we're racing toward a fiery crash of death.

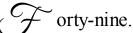
My body whiplashes as the front of my little Honda Fit crashes into the back of his enormous SUV. My hood buckles. I'm wedged under his back bumper.

"YOU OKAY?" he screams.

"I'M HERE."

"ALL RIGHT, BABY. LET'S MAKE THIS WORK. POLICE ARE ON THEIR WAY. LET'S DO IT."

The grind of metal against metal splits my eardrums, the jolt of car against SUV creating a kinetic energy that ripples through me. It's the biggest shockwave you can imagine, followed by a maddeningly itchy vibration. My car groans, and the speedometer changes fast. My head feels like someone snapped it off.



"HOW WE DOING?"

I feel the rear tire do something weird. The car wiggles in the back, and then takes a sharp yank to the right. I'm barely attached to Drew's SUV. The car starts to pitch down, from behind.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING?" Drew shouts.

I look back. The oceanside road has gotten narrower and steeper. The back of the car is hanging off the cliff.

"BACK OF CAR! CLIFF! OH MY GOD!" I can't think straight, can't make a coherent sentence.

Forty-seven miles per hour.

Drew suddenly pulls to the left, just as a car comes in the opposite direction. The screech of tires, loud honking, and the sharp blow of my elbow against the door handle lead to a mixture of sensations that make the world start to spin.

"LINDSAY!" he screams.

I look at the dashboard.

Forty-three miles per hour.

"WE'RE SLOWING!" I say.

"KEEP TALKING, BABY! I NEED TO KNOW YOU'RE SAFE!"

My left arm is numb, the nerves screaming from the blow. I can't close my left hand into a fist, which means I'm down to steering with my right hand and have to lean my left forearm on the steering wheel for support. An already bad situation is now impossibly worse.

Forty-one miles per hour.

Lights flash behind me, red and blue, blinding me. I focus on the back of Drew's SUV.

"THERE'S A TRUCK EMERGENCY RAMP UP AHEAD, LINDSAY. I'M AIMING US FOR IT. THE ROAD IS ABOUT TO DIP DOWN AND WE CAN'T KEEP GOING. THE RAMP GOES UP AND WE STOP FAST. GET READY."

Get ready for what? I want to ask, but my mouth won't make words right now.

Forty miles per hour.

Drew turns the SUV to the right and oh, God, it feels like he's driving us right off the road, but then I see we're on an incline, heading up, spraying gravel everywhere, the sound of brakes like metal shrieking, like the machines are screaming. How can we head *up*? I see blue sky. Nothing but blue. How can this—

BANG! POP!

White balloons smother me and that's all I remember as I lurch forward, the seat belt cutting into my breasts, my neck snapping back and then I am on the pillows and the white fades, the sound fades —it all fades.

I fade.

Someone is throwing rocks around against my skull. They need to stop. The pain is so bad I'm going to throw up. I start to gag, then take in a big breath. I can't. Something's covering my mouth. My throat spasms and I claw at the space in front of me, finding wetness and plastic and pain.

Drew.

Where's Drew?

"MMMMMMmmmmmmuuuhhhh," I say, the sound like a Doppler effect, like the sound of my body dying as it's flung across hundreds of yards. I push on the plastic and the wetness peels away, air filling my mouth like ice turned into open space. Cold needles poke my lungs.

I breathe.

"Lindsay!" Hot breath against my ear. A warm, strong hand on my shoulder. Fingers on my brow. I inhale again and still see nothing but white.

"Dooo?" I can't say his name right.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here." He paws at the white plastic and my eyes start to focus. It's not all white. Smears of dark liquid cover the plastic as he peels it off my neck and chest. The scent of copper fills the air.

It's blood.

My blood.

I breathe through my mouth. My nose won't accept air. Blue and red lights flash in a pattern and suddenly, the air is full of noise. My mouth tastes like metal. The tip of my tongue runs along my top teeth. The end of one canine tooth feels jagged, like I chipped it.

Drew's face spins, white splotches covering my vision and then black spots filling in. He shakes me. The spots fade and I see blue and red lights again.

And then it's all just...gone.

For the next few minutes, I wake up and pass out, wake up and pass out. My body rumbles like it's on a cart, then I'm in the air, doors closing, the distant sound of a siren filling my ears. Someone's holding my hand. Then they're not. The babble of voices and crackle of intercoms makes it hard for me to breathe. To sleep.

To make it all stop.

I feel a pinch in my arm and open my eyes. Everything is white. White curtains behind a doctor wearing white. The lights in the ceiling are bright white. My vision blurs to cotton. Warmth floods through my arm and I look down to find a tube feeding medicine in me.

Not again.

The heat in my arm creeps up to my chest, until my heart relaxes, my chest releasing, and I give in to the white and black.

I just give in.

he next thing I remember are bodies, standing, so many voices in quiet, worried tones. They're not worried about me. I can tell. They're worried about other people and how they relate to me. It's like sitting in on a meeting at Daddy's office.

As I crack my eyelids, I see that's exactly what this is.

A meeting in my hospital. About me.

Spin control with IVs.

A smooth, soft hand holds mine, and I turn my face toward the source of the support. Mom. She's chattering animatedly with Anya, who is scribbling on a clipboard while juggling a smartphone.

"Mom?" I croak out. My hand gets squeezed in response, and I groan. It hurts. She drops it.

"I'm sorry, Lindsay. Did I hurt you? You're so delicate right now."

"Hospital?" I whisper.

"Yes. Yes, you're in the hospital. You gave us quite the scare!" She squeezes my hand again. I want to tell her that it hurts, but I can't. She smells like sweat and coconut. I'll bet I interrupted her tennis lesson.

"I've got the major networks under control. We're feeding them all the easy information," someone says from behind Mom. "We can't do anything about the smaller websites and social media, though." Marshall. That's his name, right? Tall, older blonde guy who doesn't even look at me.

"Any pictures or video from the scene?" That's Daddy's voice.

"So far, no. Thankfully, the accident happened on a quiet stretch of highway. Drew thinks there weren't more than two or three cars that drove past before Lindsay was transported and the tow truck took her car away."

"Thank God."

Accident? Accident? That wasn't an accident. I want to scream the truth at them. My mouth won't open. My blood starts to pump so hard it feels like I'll explode. My head is going to pop like a zit. Didn't Drew tell them the brakes stopped working? Didn't he—

"Let's keep the brake malfunction out of the hands of the media for as long as we can," Daddy says softly behind Mom. My eyes are closed, but I can tell he's off to the side, right by the door. "Is someone checking out the car?"

"Local police tried to claim jurisdiction, but we've got this."

That's Drew.

I make a sound, a groan—anything to get their attention.

It works.

Mom turns to me with a look of consternation, her eyebrows down. This is notable because Botox has made a genuine frown impossible for her. My condition *must* be serious.

"It wasn't an accident," I groan, needing for them to understand. If they think I crashed the car on purpose, it just feeds the frenzy inside me. I'm in a hospital bed, and every part of me hurts. But it would be worse if they thought this was my fault.

I can't let them think this was my fault.

"I know it wasn't an accident, Lindsay," says Drew. His voice is fierce. Protective. There is a steel inside the tone he uses that says, *I've got your back*.

No one has had my back. No one. Tears tingle behind my eyelids. Breathing becomes difficult. Not because I'm injured, but because emotion takes over. Drew believes me.

Someone believes me. Do you know how rare that is?

"We know from Drew what happened," Daddy says to me. His voice is a mixture of assurance and shrewdness. If I open my eyes, I'll find him watching me very carefully. Daddy knows how to tease out the information he needs to assess a situation.

And then act appropriately on that information.

All I am right now is a source. A source first.

Daughter second.

"The brakes stopped working," I hiss. The words don't want to come out of my mouth. They feel like tiny pieces of rock, rolling down a steep cliff over my tongue and teeth and through my lips. "I tried. I kept pushing the pedal, but it wouldn't stop. The car wouldn't stop."

The effort to push air out of my lungs and into my throat to say the words is the hardest thing I've ever done. It reminds me of waking up, tied up, on that horrible night four years ago. I know if I open my eyes, I'll see myself bruised and bloodied in this hospital bed. My joints pulse. My skin feels like rock. And my head—oh, my head. Someone is banging a steel drum with my teeth, and it echoes off of my bones.

I inhale and smell Drew. He must have moved closer to me. The rustle of his jacket against his shirt releases a cloud of sweat and cologne that hovers over me. I should open my eyes. I'm sure everyone is looking at me. They are all waiting for me to tell them what happened. What *really* happened.

I wish I knew more.

I breathe in and out, savoring the scent of Drew. It's hypnotic. Comforting. And all I want to do is make everyone else leave the room and have Drew take me into his arms.

Instead, I get interrogated.

"What do you mean you pushed the pedal, Lindsay?" Daddy's voice is neutral. Too neutral. I know he's trying to figure out what happened underneath the surface.

But here's the thing. There is nothing going on underneath the surface. As far as I know, my brakes failed. Did someone make them fail? I don't know.

It turns out I just said that aloud, because Daddy's eyebrows go up. "What do you mean someone made your brakes fail?"

"Exactly what she said, sir." The clipped way that Drew snaps the sentence makes all the tiny hairs on my exposed skin stand up at attention. I can feel Mom straighten her spine even though my eyes are closed. She must be turning, looking at Drew, who moves in a way that rustles his clothing again.

Now I hear him take one step closer to me.

I feel his warmth. And then I feel his hand resting against the blanket that covers my leg. His touch

is fleeting, but it's there. Drew is sending me a message.

And he's about to send one to Daddy and Mom to.

"When we left the shopping area, Lindsay's brake lights were on and fine. I did not observe any problems, sir. As we accelerated, she began to drive erratically. I called her and she told me her brakes didn't work. We were on a stretch of highway that made it impossible for me to call emergency services and get aid before she would've crashed. I did call 911 to request assistance. I made a judgment call to pull my vehicle in front of hers and use it as a tool to slow her down. If the crash is anyone's fault, it's mine."

"You didn't cause anything." Daddy waves his hand toward Drew. It's a dismissive gesture. "Someone obviously tampered with Lindsay's vehicle. We need to spend our time and resources on figuring out who it was."

I open my eyes. Daddy is giving Drew a hard look. "Get your men on it now."

"Yes, sir." Drew is saying as few words as possible.

"Who would tamper with Lindsay's car?" Mom asks. She's frowning again. Her eyes dart to me. "Do you know, Lindsay?"

If I look at Drew, I'll betray myself. What happened back at the dock has nothing to do with my brakes failing. There's no way any of those ex-friends of mine tampered with my car. They wouldn't know which piece to break. Tara barely knows the difference between an Audi and a Honda. She wouldn't know how to make a set of brakes fail.

I let out a huge sigh. "I have no idea." I swallow my mouth dry and then open my lips again to speak. I close them.

I was about to say that I haven't been home long enough to piss anybody off, but that's not true, is it?

A doctor enters the room and cranes her neck around. I can see her through my barely open eyelids. She's short, and young, but she has a *don't mess with me* look on her face.

"We need to give Lindsay a chance to rest." The doctor's imperial nature makes Daddy cock an eyebrow at her. She doesn't cower. I smile. She reminds me of Stacia, back at the Island.

"Just a few more questions, doctor." He makes it clear that he's the one in charge in this room. The doctor ignores him, walks over to my bed, and picks up my chart. I wish they would all leave.

Everyone except Drew.

"Based on what I'm observing, Senator, you all need to go. I realize that you're her father, but patient care takes precedence over these questions."

Okay, she can stay, too.

"I'm sure that Lindsay's medical care needs have been adequately met at this point," Mom says, glaring at the doctor. "You do understand that her father is running for president. The car crash may very well not have been an accident."

My eyes fly open and I look at Mom. Is she defending me? Or is she defending Daddy, and his right to continue questioning me?

"This can wait." Drew jumps into the argument, taking the doctor's side. Taking my side. Now I have two people who are for me, and two people who want to continue questioning me.

The irony that the two people who want to continue questioning me are my parents does not escape anyone.

"Patient care before investigations." The doctor snaps my chart shut and turns, speaking to Drew. "You're the security detail?"

"Yes."

"Then as far as I'm concerned, you make the decisions about who stays in this room."

"But we're her next of kin!" Mom shouts.

The doctor's eyebrow raises. "According to her chart, Lindsay is twenty-two years old."

"And your point is?" Mom has a way of using condescension as if it were a scent. A weapon. Something tangible that you can taste. If condescension had a flavor, it would be my mother's pheromones.

"My point is that Lindsay is an adult. She can assign power of attorney to whomever she pleases." The doctor gives me a look that manages to be both compassionate and challenging, yet also remaining firm. "Do you want this room emptied?"

"Yes." Both Drew and I say the word at the same time.

"That's all I needed to hear." The doctor looks to Daddy and says, "I'm sure you want to avoid media attention."

"Are you threatening to kick me out of my own daughter's hospital room and then go to the media about it?"

"I wouldn't have to go to the media about anything. They're five feet away, clogging my hallway and compromising my other patients."

"Sir." Drew leans over and whispers something to Daddy, who frowns, then nods.

"Good point." He walks across the room, kisses me on the cheek, and leaves without another word.

"Sweetie," Mom says, playing it up for the crowd. "If it's best to let you rest, then we need to go. I know you wish we could stay, but you need to follow doctor's orders."

She has this way of turning someone else's "no" into my problem, as if I were an errant child disobeying the doctor. But if it means she'll leave, then I'll play along.

She air kisses my cheek and leaves.

My shoulders sag with relief.

"That bad?" Drew asks.

"You know the answer already." I look at the doctor. "Thank you."

"I've dealt with lots of celebrities. Politicians aren't that different, other than having the power to pass laws."

"Tell that to my dad."

"I think she just did, Lindsay." Drew walks out of the room, says a few sentences to someone in the hall as the doctor checks my pupils, and returns.

"I've got Silas outside." He reaches into his jacket pocket. "And here's your phone."

I remember that my phone buzzed with a text, right after the crash. I take it from him and check my texts. One from Mom, one from Stacia, and—

"Drew."

He's assuring the doctor that he'll watch over me. She leaves.

"Drew!"

"What's wrong?"

Shaking so badly I drop the phone on my knee, I try to answer.

But I can't.

"Just look," I finally whisper.

He picks up the phone, reads, and steel pours into his face.

His eyes meet mine.

"Everything just changed, Lindsay. I'm not leaving this room. Not for one second until you're



() elcome back, Lindsay. Ready to play with us again? the text reads.

I don't recognize the number, but then again, how would I? I don't recognize any numbers. I've been gone for four years. I don't think I know my own mother and father's cell numbers by heart.

"Gentian!" Drew snaps. Silas appears instantly. The two huddle, Silas's expression hardening, eyes glancing at me. A toughness takes over in him, a visual change that is stunning.

"Got it," Silas says, answering whatever instructions Drew just gave.

"I have two more men on their way, Lindsay, and we're covering your car now."

"Covering?"

"In case the evidence is tampered with. We need to protect whatever the investigators need in order to find these guys."

"So you think it's..." I don't have to say the words.

Drew goes to my window and pulls the curtains shut. I know he's not doing it to help me sleep. Closing curtains covers the windows and makes me less of a sniper target. Then he grabs a chair and stands on it, checking the sprinkler system, the fire alarm, the duct work, and anything on the ceiling or wall that might conceal a camera.

"Clean," he says into his earpiece.

"Considering I came in through the ER, I can't imagine that someone would—"

"You don't have to imagine. That's my job."

He is so upset. I'm too tired to be upset. Adrenaline can't run through me anymore. It's all gone. If I had any left to give, my body would inject every cell with a flood of emotion and fear. Instead, all I can do is close my eyes and feel everything all at once.

"What are we going to do?" My words echo through the room like a machine with an alert or the *whoosh* of an electronic gadget designed to monitor me. Not the kind my father has used for years as part of his overall strategy, but a medical device. One designed to make sure that I stay as healthy and alive as possible.

Whoever sent me that text is determined. They did the opposite. They want me hurt. They want me unhealthy. They want me unstable.

I've been home for two days.

So far, they're winning.

Drew sits on the edge of my bed, his hand reaching for mine. I open my eyes so slowly. It takes energy. It takes so much energy to open my eyes, but when I do it's worth it. Drew leans forward, his eyes piercing my soul. I want to trust him. I want to think that he can do the job my father hired him to

do. Having Drew protect me from them—from my attackers—feels like a fantasy.

He studies me, his head tilted to the side. He is so serious. I take the luxury of looking back at him. My eyes dart back and forth, capturing his eyes, studying the fine lines that intelligence has etched into his face. Drew has always been smart, but there's something more now. Experience has sharpened him. That's what life does.

You scrape yourself, over and over, against all the hard edges of life so that you become so sharp that people can be wounded by the wrong touch.

What happens when the right touch comes along?

His thumb begins to stroke the soft skin of my hands. My pulse flutters in my throat. As he touches me, all of my pain fades. It doesn't disappear completely. The pain quiets. What has been white noise this entire time turns into a soft chant that matches my heartbeat.

"Lindsay. I swear to you, no one will hurt you again. Those bastards won't get to you. I swear on my own life."

I feel so inadequate. If I weren't trapped in this bed, still reeling from the brake failure and all of the events of less than forty-eight hours that have plagued me, I would spill my heart right now.

"You really think it's them. You're sure?" If I stick to the very safe topic of my very unsafe life, then I won't veer into the dangerous emotional minefield between us.

He nods, intense and protective. I can't keep my eyes open now because if he keeps looking at me like that, I'm going to start crying.

One of the muscles in my arms starts to spasm. I cry out, the charlie horse making my position impossible. Drew stands up quickly, and helps lift my arm as I turn on my side. He steps back, watching me, his hands on his hips, as I settle into a new position that hurts less.

His very presence is the best medicine. While the doctors can help heal my body, only Drew can help heal my heart.

"I mean it," Drew insists. "I've got a team of professional hackers working on your phone right now. The car is being analyzed for evidence. Within hours we will know exactly what happened to you. And once we know more information, we can act."

"Is that what Daddy wants?" I don't actually care what my father wants. But I know if I start to ask questions that aren't related to the accident, that we will quickly slip into dangerous emotional territory.

"I don't give a shit with what your father wants," Drew growls. His words are provocative. Daddy hired him. Daddy's goal was to be the most powerful political person in the world. You don't go against a man like Senator Bosworth without having an agenda.

What's Drew's true agenda?

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why don't you give a shit?"

"Because four years ago, nobody bothered to investigate. Nobody bothered to ask you what happened. It was all covered up. Hushed up. Someone has to right that wrong. Your mother and father thought that they were doing the right thing for years. Your best friends turned on you. I shipped off to Afghanistan and tried to forget everything that happened." His eyes bore into mine and he leans toward me, his fingers light on my hand.

"I won't make that mistake again. And besides, forgetting you was impossible." He shakes his head slowly. "I failed."

"Failed at what?"

"Failed at forgetting you."

My skin buzzes. My heart cries out his name in the rhythm that pumps my blood through my body. His fingers flutter against my knuckles and all I can think about is having him touch me. As if he reads my mind, he reaches down and wipes one finger against the corner of my eye, down my cheek almost to the edge of my lips.

"You're crying."

"I am?"

Without asking, and without saying another word, he lets go of my hand and walks around to the other side of the bed. I feel the weight of the mattress shift, and my hips groan in protest, but then an enormous wall of heat is behind me.

Drew's aftershave and sweat and the sweet scent of him envelop me, pulling me back to a better time. One of his arms wraps around my waist, careful to navigate tubes and sensors. Suddenly, this insanely dangerous development becomes an afterthought. I relax. Drew does that. He knows exactly what I need.

Curled up behind me in this tiny hospital bed, his mouth inches from my ear, he holds me. I could live in his arms forever. I'm so tired, though. I want to say so much to him. The pain comes back, and I can't think. My head hurts. A painful pulse takes over the left side of my head, and I want to explain, but I can't. I want to tell Drew all of the thoughts and feelings and reactions and all of the everything that I feel for him.

"Shhhhh," he says. "You sleep. Later, we can talk." The hand that surrounds my waist comes up and gently brushes a few stray strands of hair away from my cheek. It's a soft touch. It's a caring touch. Drew cares. I don't know what any of this means, but I do know this.

Drew cares about me.

And not just as a client.

In the quiet, amidst the beeps and background noise, the shuffle of feet in the hallway and murmured voices in this building filled with injured people like me, I melt. I relent. Every muscle that has spent the past four years on alert, tense and ready to fight or flee, gives in.

I give in to Drew's touch. I give in to the idea that I have held for so long, deep inside my core, that this moment, this truth, is greater than my fear.

All these years, I've held on to the fear that Drew did nothing. As I fade off to sleep his warm breath tickling my neck, his hands secure around my ribs, his chest steady against my back, a new truth emerges. And truth always defeats fear.

But on its own timeline.

wake up to an empty hospital bed and a thermometer.

"Lindsay?" Someone wearing scrubs is holding a plastic-covered thermometer over my mouth. "We need to take your temp."

I open my mouth like a good girl, let her slide the thermometer under my tongue, and close my lips. A tooth aches in my mouth.

Where's Drew?

The medical assistant finishes taking my temperature, blood pressure, and checking my oxygen. All normal.

"When can I go home?" I ask.

"The doctor will be in later to talk to you," she replies, leaving quickly.

Sunlight peeks in around the edges of the curtains. The door closes behind her. I hear men's voices in the hallway, and then the door opens.

Drew.

And he's carrying to-go cups of coffee.

"I hope one of those is for me," I say.

He laughs.

"I don't ever joke about coffee."

He goes serious and looks down. He shrugs. "Here. Have mine."

I grimace. He didn't bring me any. My lip hurts. I must have split it. "You drink yours black. I hate black coffee."

"Someone's feeling feisty today."

Our eyes meet and we grin like idiots at each other.

Drew walks to me and hands me a coffee. "Just kidding. I got you one in case."

"You're a god."

"You finally noticed."

Something between us has changed. Shifted. Morphed. Was it the cuddling last night? I fell asleep in his arms and slept for the first time in ages. Real sleep. Dreamless sleep.

Healing sleep. A part of me wants to call Stacia and tell her that four years of medications, yoga, group therapy, one-on-one therapy, that one electroshock treatment, and all the meditation doesn't compare to one solid night in Drew's arms.

But I can't.

I lick my lip. Yep. Split. Gingerly, I navigate the coffee cup to my mouth and take a small sip.

"Thank you," I whisper. I let out a shaky sigh. The fluorescent lights in the tiny room filled with machines and plastic gives me a mild case of claustrophobia.

"You're more than welcome. It's good to see you smile, Lindsay."

"It feels good."

Drew sits on the edge of my bed, near my feet, and drinks his coffee. I take a good look at him. He's wearing a different suit. There's a small bandage on his eyebrow.

"You okay?" I tip my chin up.

"This? It's nothing."

"Having my car crash into the back of yours must have hurt."

He stands and stretches. "Nothing a little blood in the muscles can't fix." I watch as he reaches up, powerful arm muscles pushing against the fine fabric of his suit. His shirt tail pulls out from his waistband, giving me glimpse of his belly.

My mouth goes dry. My pulse speeds up. I feel my face light on fire and I feel a flimmering, like a butterfly trapped in my stomach.

Except much lower.

Wet heat fills my body below my belly.

I cannot be feeling this.

Not now.

Not-

Drew captures my eyes.

Oh, God.

He's feeling it, too.

Every beat of my heart matches his. I can't look away. Some wound inside me begins to recover.

A part of me that was broken is now unbroken.

I know that a few hours in Drew's arms can't solve all my pain.

But it certainly made a difference.

He's drawn to me. I feel it. We can't stop looking at each other. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out, those eyes captivating me. As he sits next to me, I can't help myself. I reach for his hand.

Just like old times.

The kiss is expected and so, so wanted. His lips are soft and warm, his hand reaching up to hold my shoulder, his other hand on my waist. I have so many tubes and wires coming out of me that I'm afraid to move any part of me but my lips. Then tongue.

And then I just disappear in the sweet luxury of being kissed well.

Our first reunion kiss feels like a lifetime ago. Four years of yearning was poured into that kiss, and now there's less of the yearning and more of the future. Each time Drew touches me, it's a bridge between the terrifying past and the uncertain tomorrow. I want his touches to mean more than *I'm sorry*. I want his kisses to stand for more than regret. I want to be wanted because I am Lindsay.

Not because I represent a loss.

But because we have something left to gain.

"You taste like coffee," I whisper, our foreheads touching, breath joining.

"You taste like Lindsay."

"What does Lindsay taste like?" I ask, laughter in my throat.

"Like everything." He kisses me again, this time with more urgency. "Everything."

Tap tap tap.

Drew's on his feet in a nanosecond, wiping his mouth, glaring at the door as if it's done something

wrong. "Damn it," he mutters to me. "I'm sorry. I need to be more careful." "It's fine," I urge. A terse shake of his head tells me it's not fine. But oh, that kiss sure was fine. "If we're caught, I'll be kicked off your case." Case. I'm a case. "You kiss all your cases?" He glowers. "Only the really hot ones." "Hello?" The door opens, and Jane appears. I need a fan to cool myself down. "Jane," Drew says with a head nod. "Just don't open the curtains, and I'll be in the hall if you need anything." Without looking at me, Drew leaves. How can he leave me hanging like that? "Oh, Lindsay," Jane says. When I don't answer, she looks at me closely, then back at the door. "Oh, Lindsay," she says again, only in a very different tone. "Did I interrupt something?" She always was perceptive. "Just, you know..." I pick the first word that comes to mind. "Debriefing." "Whose briefs came off first?" "Jane!" She smothers her smile with a palm. "He still loves you." "Not that again. You know how it all, well..." She pulls a chair over to the bed and hands me a gold foil box. "What's this?" "Chocolate. Your favorite." I open the box and smell maple. "You remembered?" Jane has the decency to look slightly embarrassed. "My mom told me. She has a file about you." "A file?" "All your favorites. She said your father made her create one for presents." Daddy's got the personal touch down. "I don't care. Just—yum! Maple creams! Come pig out with me." Jane giggles. "I feel bad. They're for you." "If you don't help me eat them, who will? My mom?" She laughs even harder. "Fine." Plucking one, she chomps on it. "So spill. I hear someone cut your brakes?" I give a quick version of the story. Jane is suitably horrified. "And that was after running into Tara, Jenna and Mandy at the docks?" "Yes." "Any chance they did it?" "Can you picture Tara or Mandy on the ground, cutting brake lines?" "Definitely not. Never. Never ever in a million years." "Right." "Then who?" I shouldn't tell her. I know I shouldn't. But you reach a point where the need to share yourself with someone is so important. I'm tired of being isolated. Alone.

Lonely. "Someone texted me a very threatening message last night." "What did it say?" "Welcome back, Lindsay. Ready to play with us again?" I say the words like a robot. The text feels like there's an evil machine after me. Like the text comes from The Terminator and I'm Sara Connor. "Oh, God. No, Lindsay. Does your dad know?" "Drew does, so I assume Daddy knows." "What does Drew think?" "He thinks it's them." "Them?" Her eyes go wide. "You mean..." "Yes." I don't even have to say John, Stellan and Blaine's names. "You have to go to the police!" "Why? So they can just smear me again and not believe me, like last time? No. Drew's handling it." "How?" "By staying with me at all times." "I don't think that's a hardship for him." "He's protecting me!" "In more ways than one." Her lips twitch with a smile. "This is serious, Jane." "I know. I'm sorry for making light of it, but it's good to see you smile." Funny. Drew said that, too. "Did you really push Tara into the water at the docks?" Jane asks with a sly smile. "She pushed me." "That was the other rumor I heard. So which was it?" "She pushed me." I repeat, blinking innocently. Her eyebrows go up. "That's your story?" "And I'm sticking to it." "Either way, it's a great story." "I wasn't the one dressed to the nines, carrying a day's worth of shopping bags that ended up

soaked."

"Poor Tara." Jane's lips go into a fake pout of sympathy.

"I know. All that hard work. Drowned. Doesn't anyone understand how hahhhrd it is to shop all day?"

We burst into laughter just as a doctor walks into the room.

"Good to see your spirits are improving, Ms. Bosworth." It's the same doctor who almost kicked Mom and Daddy out last night. "I'm ninety-five percent sure we're sending you home in the next few hours."

I sigh with gratitude. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me. You're young. You heal fast. And the accident wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been." She scribbles notes. "Follow up with your primary care physician. Any new pain requires an emergency room visit." A few more sentences of medical details and she finishes.

"I can go?"

"We're waiting on one more test. Then yes."

"Should I leave?" Jane asks. Her phone buzzes.

"No. Stay." I offer the doctor a maple cream. "Want one?"

She pats her hip. "I shouldn't."

"Maple cream," I tease. "Who can resist one?"

"You're evil." The doctor takes one and pops it into her mouth, rolling her eyes with pleasure.

"These are so good."

"Blame her," I say, pointing to Jane.

"The calories are all your fault." She winks at Jane and leaves.

Drew comes right in.

"I heard you have candy."

"How did you know?"

"When three women are in the same room moaning, it has to be from chocolate."

Jane punches him.

"And I saw the gold foil box. Let me guess. Maple creams?"

He remembers.

I offer him the box. He takes one and grins. "These were always your favorite."

"Still are. Haven't had any in four years."

Guilt covers Jane and Drew's faces like a dark blanket.

"It's okay. I can talk about it. It's not your fault."

Before either one of them can answer, a new nurse comes in.

"Your paperwork's been processed faster than expected, Lindsay."

Bzzz.

Drew's phone. He answers it, eyes going cold.

Uh oh.

I listen to the nurse prattle on, my body on alert for Drew. He gets off the phone just as the nurse hands me a bunch of papers and says, "Recover well."

She leaves. I look at Drew.

"Who was that?"

"Your dad and mother. They're on a helicopter to a plane back to D.C. Some big meeting."

"Right." D.C. before dear daughter. I'm used to it.

"You can't be alone, Lindsay," Jane says.

"Have you seen my house?' I joke. "There are a bazillion workers there. I'm hardly alone."

"And I'll be with you," Drew adds.

Something has changed, though. He keeps giving me these side-eye glances. It's creeping me out. Who was on the other end of that phone call? I don't think it was just about Mom and Daddy.

I move the covers so I can crawl out of bed. Jane picks a small bag and holds it, while Drew helps me up.

"I'm fine."

"You want to shower before we go?" he asks.

"No. I don't care. I just want to go home and get away from here."

He nods. "Safer at the Grove, too."

I give him a sharp look. My knees hurt, and I can tell I have bruises everywhere, especially on my head. But step by step, I shuffle into the bathroom, wearing only a hospital gown. Someone undressed me, washed my wounds, and put me in that bed.

My fingers shake as I untie the hospital gown, but I manage. I'm wearing my bra and panties. With

stiff legs, I get my feet in my pants and pull them up. Putting on my shirt is harder, but I do it, even when my neck pinches and my head throbs. I get myself presentable, consciously avoiding looking in the mirror.

Why torture myself?

Fully dressed, I shuffle out. Instantly, Drew's at my side, holding my elbow like I'm some ninety-year-old lady crossing the street and he's a Cub Scout helping me.

"I can walk without help."

"I can protect you better if you let me."

I shut up.

Because he has a point.

fter going home, showering, letting Connie fuss over me and make me a healthy, protein-packed salad, I'm sitting at the granite counter in the kitchen, picking at the pecans and unsweetened tart cherries at the bottom of my salad bowl, musing over my phone.

Jane left with a promise to check in tomorrow. Daddy and Mom texted me from D.C., telling me they loved me. And then there's a cryptic text from someone at the Island.

It's a text about joining a famous soft drink manufacturer's contest, but that's code. Our secret code. My hacker contact has learned something from the dark net, and he needs to get in touch with me to tell me. No one who reads that text will know that it's anything more than a spam text.

But I know.

And suddenly, everything has changed yet again.

I need to get out of the Grove, out from under all this scrutiny, and somehow get the information my contact has. He's learned important details about my attackers, and if I can get that information, I can act. I can exact my revenge.

And revenge has taken on a new importance, given their attempt to kill me.

Or—worse.

That damn text. Welcome back, Lindsay. Ready to play with us again?

I refuse to play their game.

Soon they will have no choice but to play mine.

I'm alone now.

Except Drew and Silas and five other security guys are guarding the house, and about nine other servants are working.

Which makes me almost alone.

"Three days," I say under my breath.

"Excuse me?" Connie asks, her eyes perky and concerned.

"I've been home for three days."

"You sure do know how to make an entrance," she says, giving me an inscrutable look. "Any news on the car malfunction?"

I don't know how much I can tell her, so I say as little as possible. "We're waiting for some investigators to finish going over it."

"Thank goodness no one was severely injured. Your head wound is bad enough, but without Drew's quick thinking, this could have been much worse." Her breathless comment makes me think she's just a nice woman.

Those little calculated looks, though...

"Finished?" She asks, pointing to my bowl.

I nod. She takes it away, rinses it, puts it in the dishwasher, and starts the machine. I look at the clock. It's only one o'clock. Maybe she works different hours than I thought?

"I've made dinner in advance," she explains, as if she knew what I was afraid to ask. "You can heat it up. Directions are taped on top. When your parents are out of town, they ask me not to come." Connie has a pained look on her face. "And your mother said to just make you something simple for your evening meal. Salmon and spinach and cauliflower."

"No chocolate ganache?" I joke

Connie looks self-righteously incensed. "I offered! But she—"

"Let me guess. She said I didn't need the calories."

Connie winces.

"It's fine. Not your fault. I know how Mom works."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"I have seven ex-Special Ops men guarding me, Connie. If anyone in the world is safe, it's me." I give her an impish grin.

Truth be told, I don't want anyone hovering over me.

Except, maybe, Drew.

"Stay safe. Be careful." Her frown deepens. "Nothing is ever what it seems like on the surface."

Everyone keeps saying that. Before I can ask her what she means, Connie skitters off.

I'm finally alone.

My stomach's full, my head is ready to explode, all I can think about is having Drew touch me, and someone's trying to kill me.

Not just someone.

Them.

What's a presidential candidate's daughter supposed to do in a moment like this?

Nap.

My own bed has become my best friend. I guess Jane is second. Drew's third? At this point I can't be choosy.

Bed it is.

Within seconds of settling my cheek on the pillow, I'm out.

* * *

CAN'T BREATHE. Can't think. Can't move can't escape can't anything help help.

I'm in the darkness Daddy help me come get me oh oh oh stop the pain stop it stop it stop it nooooooo.

Something wet covers my face. It's sticky and tangy, like blood but thicker. Someone yanks my hair up, so hard each strand tingles, pulled tight until it snaps, making my neck muscles spasm. I crawl into the soft spot inside my mind where none of this happens but they won't stop touching me, filling me, opening me, making me scream and grunt and cry until I can't make sound.

And then darkness.

Not enough darkness.

My shoulders can't move, the bones grinding so hard. It's a different pain than what they do to me elsewhere. Grind my bones for a thousand years, but please don't do that any more.

Please.

I open my eyes. Can't talk, but maybe if they see my eyes they'll stop. If I say please with my eyes.

But my eyes are covered with one of my scarves.

I don't exist. They covered my eyes so I can't see them.

And so they can't see me beg them no.

No.

No.

"Noooooooooooo!" My own scream shatters the solitude in the house, my voice at the ready, the feeling like a sneeze that won't execute, an anti-orgasm that won't release.

I can speak.

"Lindsay, damn it," Drew says, running into the room, his hands on my arms. I'm aware enough to realize I've done it again. Another damn dream.

"Where are they?" I beg Drew. "Do we know where they are?"

"Yes."

I'm panting, covered in sweat, and my head wound aches like I've been banging my head with a brick. "You're sure?"

"I have someone tailing them at all times."

"All three of them?"

He nods.

"Where are they?"

His hands don't leave my shoulders. "God, Lindsay, you're covered in sweat but ice cold." He pulls me to him and lifts the coverlet off my bed to cocoon us both. He's wearing sweat pants, a tight green t-shirt with a West Point logo on it, and as he hugs me, I feel his gun cut into my hip.

His warmth makes me start to shiver, paradoxically.

"Drew." Why won't he answer me?

"You don't know where they are?" His voice is tight as he asks.

"No. Why would I?"

"Why, indeed, would you?"

What the hell is this?

I'm in his arms. We're wrapped intimately in a bed cover, but his body is tight with tension. This is not the same caring Drew from last night. Not even from this morning. Some part of him changed after he received that phone call.

"Spill it."

"Spill what?" he asks through gritted teeth.

"Why are you acting like I'm suspicious? Like you're watching me."

"It's my job to watch you."

"No. It's your job to *protect* me. Not to give me covert glances like you think I'm about to steal all the cookies in the cookie jar."

He's a steel drum.

"This has to with that phone call you got."

He holds his breath.

"Say it, or get away from me. I can't play this game, Drew." Especially when you smell like all the relief in the world. "Not playing games, Lindsay." "Then get your hot, strong, incredibly enticing arms off of me and leave." He doesn't budge. "Enticing?" His voice morphs into sensual territory. "Leave." "Yes, ma'am." I want to cry when he actually listens to me and walks away. What am I doing? "Wait!" He stops in the doorway, the light from the hallway illuminating his body. Broad shoulders, thick with rolling muscles, taper down to a narrow waist, strong thighs in his sweat pants and his ass— "Yes?" "We're not getting anywhere without talking." "Then talk." "I meant you, Drew, and you know it." "I have nothing to say." "How's the investigation going?" His jaw clenches. "Damn it. Someone's trying to kill me. We think it's those bastards." Silence. "It's John, Stellan and Blaine." Saying their names makes him reach up and grab the doorway with both hands, his arms up high, his lats pulsing. "Do you have any idea who they've become, Lindsay?" "They've becomes soulless—" "I don't mean that. I mean who they are." "We know who they are." He whips around and gives me a look so hard it could crack open a walnut. "John Gainsborough is now a major league baseball player. Stellen Asgarth is a television celebrity. And Blaine Maisri—fuck, Lindsay. Blaine is running for your father's old seat." I blink slowly, like an owl. "Don't you see? They're not just a bunch of frat boys I need to tail." "How?" I gasp. "How." He barks out the word, walking back into the room, rubbing his neck in frustration, his jaw grinding. "I've asked myself that question since I came back from deployment. How. How the hell did those little pricks find their way to so much success?" "I don't understand." "And why, Lindsay, would they risk it all to text you a simple taunt?" "What?" He moves his head, pursing his mouth, his actions adding up to a pile of nonverbal anger that

finally becomes words. "I got the trace report on the phone that texted that message to you, Lindsay.

And the fingerprints came back on your brake line."

I sit up, heart racing.

"And?"

"The phone was traced back to one *you* bought with your credit card yesterday morning." "What?"

"And your fingerprints are the only ones on the cut brake lines on your car."

T've never had someone look at me like Drew is looking at me.

"What? What are you saying?" I cry out. "It wasn't me! You were with me all day!"

"I know." He looks back at my bedroom door and slowly closes it.

Then he *locks* it.

"We've swept the rest of your house. It's clean." He sits on my bed, his body pulsating with heat. I can feel his questions, his anxious need for me to give him whatever information he requires to solve this problem.

"You don't actually think I would cut my own brake lines and then text myself a fake text to make it look like—*Drew*!" Hysteria rises up. His eyes pierce the clawing, desperate need for him to believe me.

"I know you didn't do it."

I'm in his arms, throwing myself at him, bandages and bruises be damned. He's hugging me and caressing my back, making small sounds of comfort. I sob with relief.

My mind races. Not only did they try to kill me, they taunted me. Worse—they set it up to look like I'm utterly unhinged, and sabotaging myself for attention.

What's their end game? Where does this all lead? And how will my parents ever believe me in the face of this madness that John, Stellan and Blaine have unleashed?

A politician.

A major league baseball player.

A television personality.

No one will believe me. Ever. Their word against mine?

I am so screwed.

"I know you didn't, Lindsay. I've had someone tailing you the entire time. That means this is some kind of inside job."

"Inside job?"

"Someone who works for your father is setting you up. Probably has been all along."

"No! Who?"

"I have no idea. I had my suspicions—have had them all these years." His hand touches my jaw, fingers stopping at my lips. "I've gone over this a thousand times in my mind. The pieces don't fit together. They never did. Nothing about four years ago makes sense, and this new turn of events is even more crazymaking."

There's that word. Crazy.

Except Drew's not calling *me* crazy. "What do we do?"

"We? We do nothing. I have to get my team to figure this mess out, all while protecting you."

"From John, Stellan and Blaine."

"And your father and mother. And the press."

"Daddy and Mom? Why? Oh....."

The full implication of his words hits me, hard. I get it. They'll think I did this to myself.

They'll think I'm that unhinged.

"I can't go back to the Island. I can't."

"That won't happen."

"But—"

"Do you trust me?"

"I—"

The room closes in on me.

His face hardens. Drew's eyes narrow. In the dark room, he looks menacing.

"Four years ago, I couldn't stop it."

"You wouldn't—"

"Couldn't. Could not. I could not stop it, Lindsay."

"But I saw the tapes—"

"You saw what they wanted you to see!" he whisper-shouts. "Just like they want your parents and the media to think you sabotaged your own car and set yourself up for that threatening text, damn it!"

I stop breathing.

The world stops turning.

Everything just...pauses.

And all that exists is Drew.

"Oh, my God." My stomach flips, a full three hundred and sixty degree spin. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God." I can't say anything else. Can't think anything else. My mind races over and over, my mouth saying it in a chant.

If what Drew is saying is true, then I have spent four years living an even bigger lie than I ever imagined.

"You mean you—I d-d-don't understand." My words come out halting, like I stutter. "What do you mean you couldn't stop them from raping me? From doing that to me."

He grabs my arms, hard, so hard I want to yell at him to stop. The pain is the only thing holding me in place, though.

"I *couldn't* stop them. What you don't see in that video is the gun one of them is holding to my head. And the gun that the third is holding to yours. Both are off camera."

I go numb.

And yet, even then, I wince. Because how could he just watch me being violated like that and not try to stop it all?

"There's more."

Of course there is.

"Blood tests later showed some kind of drug in me."

"Drug?" I gasp. "Like the roofies they slipped in my drink?"

"No," he says slowly, transfixed on a spot behind my shoulder. "Something different."

"Different?"

"An immobilizer. Meant to keep me awake but unable to move."

"What? I don't understand." But his words slowly make a horrific kind of sense. "They *paralyzed* you?"

"Something like that." His face closes off. I can tell there's more to this, but frankly, what he's told me is already too much to handle.

"Drew, this is all crazy!" I say, a sick form of laughter bubbling up from my gut. "You expect me to believe that?"

"You expect me to believe you didn't tamper with your own brakes even though your fingerprints are all over the hoses?"

We stare at each other.

A standoff.

All I can do is blink, my head a roaring freight train.

"You—you didn't just sit there and watch it—a-a-a-and let it happen?"

"I can't believe you thought that. I can't fucking *believe* that you would think that I would ever, EVER let someone do that to you! Defile and debase you in front of my own fucking eyes while I couldn't—"

"WHAT ELSE WAS I SUPPOSED TO THINK?" I roar.

"They said they would blow your head off if I moved. Not that I could move if I wanted to," he huffs. "I didn't care if they killed me, Lindsay. I've spent years wondering if I'd have been better off if they had."

"Me, too. I wish they had killed me."

"Don't say that! Don't you dare say that!" he says savagely, shaking me slightly.

"Why now?" I whimper. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because they're doing it again. This time, you're the target *again*. And I don't know why. Just like last time, I don't know why." His eyes are brooding and intense. "But unlike four years ago, this time I have tools. Weapons. Skills. And a network of people who have been carefully cultivated to make sure that what happened before never, ever happens again."

"You didn't just let them." I can't stop saying it.

"No, I didn't."

I close my eyes.

"They got away with it."

"Yes."

"They'll get away with it again."

"Fuck no, they won't."

"You said they're famous. A baseball player, a celebrity, and a politician. How did that happen? How deep does this go?" I pluck one of Daddy's favorite phrases from my memory. "How high up the chain of command does this penetrate?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you."

"Liar."

His eyes widen with shock, then narrow, his head tilting down, hands still burning his fury into me. "I don't lie to you, Lindsay. I might not always tell the full truth, but I don't lie. I don't do that to you."

"Then what *do* you do to me, Drew?" My breath quickens. Suddenly, every inch of my skin is extra-aware of his body, so close to mine.

"You tell me."

Free. I feel free. Not one hundred percent free, but when you're trapped, any amount of freedom feels expansive. Freed from the shadows of the past, freed from truth that never made sense, and now I know was a lie. Drew didn't let them hurt me. He wanted to stop them. He couldn't.

And if you can't stop someone from hurting someone else, it's not your fault.

"It's not your fault," I whisper, reaching up to touch his brow. "It wasn't my fault. We're just victims."

He flinches at that word. "We're survivors," he corrects. "Survivors."

"Fighters," I say, stretching up to plant a gentle kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

I feel him recoil. "Thank you? For what? I didn't do anything." His nostril's flare, his jaw clicking. "Couldn't do a damn thing."

"You told the truth. That's more than I've had for four years."

I feel his restraint. He's trying so hard to contain his emotion. His skin shimmers with movement in the night, the waves of warmth radiating off him moving me.

And then his mouth is on mine.

We're completely alone in my bedroom, the soft bed under my back in seconds, his body hot and pressing, his desire for me evident.

A little too evident.

"Ow," I gasp. "That, um, is really digging into my hip."

He frowns, then looks down. "That's my gun."

"Interesting nickname for it."

He chuckles, removing the gun belt and placing it on my nightstand. On his knees and hovering over me, he never breaks eye contact.

"I've missed you," I say, watching him.

"God, I've missed you, too."

"More than that, I've missed knowing that my friend really was there all along."

His face breaks as I say the words, emotion sweeping through his features. Tenderly, he moves to my side, propping himself up on one elbow, his other hand tracing the line of my nose, my cheek, my jaw.

"I've been here the whole time, trapped behind too many walls. Truths I wasn't allowed to reveal. I've missed talking to you. Four years without you feels like a lifetime in hell."

"Strong words coming from a guy who served two tours in Afghanistan."

"I know whereof I speak."

Four years weigh on me like the burden that they are. We're suspended between the breakthrough of the truth, and the horror of all this unresolved history.

And then there's the fact that we're alone in my bedroom. No rules. No interruptions. No limits.

We can do whatever we want.

So what *do* we want?

Drew answers my unspoken question with a kiss. His mouth says *I'm sorry*.

His hands say I'm hungry.

Hungry for you.

No one has touched me intimately in so long. Our kiss the other day was nothing compared to this. We have the luxury of laying on a bed, stretched out, his body unfolding for me to touch and stroke, explore and forgive.

Forgive.

"I forgive," I whisper between kisses. "I forgive myself."

"And me?" The anguish in his voice makes me halt.

"I want to forgive you." He needs to hear the words. I know he does. You can't erase four years of worrying and looping with a single sentence. A handful of kisses. A conversation.

You just can't.

I can't.

"I understand," he says, "because you're ahead of me."

"Ahead?"

"I can't forgive myself. I can't. You should forgive yourself, because not one drop of it was your fault. But I keep going over that night, wondering how I could have outsmarted them. Overpowered them. Done something more."

"You couldn't."

"I could now."

I am tracing the edge of his cheekbone as he says that. I stop, my finger perched on the hollow bone beneath his right eye. "You could?"

"I know how. Took years of training. But yes."

Some muscle in my chest releases. "Really?"

"That has been my single goal these four years. To learn how to win. How to win in any battle. Make no mistake, Lindsay. When I say they will never hurt you again, I mean it."

Drew's eyes telescope, like a sniper's sight.

"I believe you," I blurt out. Because damn.

He's hard core. There is no ambiguity here.

His hand rests on my ribs, right where my waistline meets my bones. Fingertips slip under my t-shirt, stopping. The feel of his callused palm against my bare skin sends a full-body shiver through me.

"Can we stop talking about the past, Lindsay?" he says, eyes on mine. "And talk about what's happening right now?"

My mouth goes dry. My V becomes hot and swollen, wet and aroused, my pulse migrating between my legs. When I was at the Island, I was encouraged to explore my emotions connected to sexuality. Told it was healthy to take care of things myself. Asked to report on my masturbation habits.

It was sooooo sexy.

For years, any sexual touch—and the only sexual touch has been my own—brought forth horror movie images of what was done to me. Only in the last year have I been able to sate myself without experiencing flashbacks.

This feeling is old and new. It's how sex with Drew felt before.

Before.

He'd respected me, back then. Knew I wanted to wait for intercourse. Foreplay had been enough, endless hours of kisses and caresses, of mouths and tongues, of fingertips and strokes.

We'd been so close to making love all the way.

And then it was ripped away from us.

Drew's watching me, his thumb moving in slow circles against my belly, but he's waiting.

The next move is mine.

All this new knowledge about the past should take longer to percolate. I should wait, right? Analyze and dissect, think and absorb.

Instead, I lunge, reaching up to kiss him, my fingers in his hair, pressing the back of his head to me, my hips grinding into him.

He is freedom.

In his arms, I am safe.

In his arms, I can feel pleasure.

I wasn't sure whether this was the right way to proceed, but I am now. Every cell in my body screams for his touch. The way the moonlight flutters against his cheek makes me think of butterflies in spring, free and happy on the wind, landing on colored flowers and blending in. Just being.

I watch Drew with eyes that want to be free.

I sense his hesitation. I need to stop it. A kiss seems to be the only way to convince him. The connection of our lips feels so heavenly. I've missed this.

As he deepens the kiss, his hands going to my shoulders, then sliding down to my elbows, the warm press of his body against mine showing how much he wants this, I drift. I don't disconnect.

It's more like finding a new layer inside myself where all the worry and pain, the fear and regret, just doesn't live. It's a place where I can find a new self and study it under the lens of Drew's body.

His heat opens me, making my tongue curious, my hands given permission to stroke his muscled back. He groans, and I startle, the sound vibrating through me. He stops, breaking the kiss.

A part of me aches.

"What's wrong?" he asks, worried, his frown a validation that everything I feel is ok.

"Nothing," I rasp. "Nothing at all."

"If this is too much," he says, his voice firm. "You tell me."

"I will."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"You need to be open with me, Lindsay. No games. No *nothing* when it comes to being together like this. We're different now."

Oh, boy, are we.

His face is relaxed, the troubled tension gone, replaced by a different kind of pensiveness. I can tell he wants to make sure that I am fine, and that's good, right? It's not like four years ago.

Nothing is like four years ago.

Not one damn thing.

He is comfort and passion, the brush of bunched-up cotton from his shirt tickling my navel. My hands become bold, reaching for the hot skin at his waist band, fingertips tentative but in control. I want to touch him. I want to feel his hardness. I want to wrap my hand around his shaft and give him pleasure.

I want to take, too, because there is power in holding a man by his center. There is power and goodness and a purity to it all.

Maybe I can be pure again by being naked with Drew. By letting him make love to me.

Perhaps that's what this is.

A cleansing ritual.

A baptism.

I reach down and touch the outline of his erection through his pants, cupping my pal, letting my fingers gently touch the tip. His groan is almost a growl, the sound fiery and masculine.

It makes me feel good.

It makes me feel alive.

"Look, I know you haven't been intimate with anyone for four years," he says softly. His arms go tense. "At least, I assume that's true."

"It is."

He nods. "I don't need anything you can't give."

I begin to tremble.

"See? You're shaking. Maybe this is too much." He moves his elbow and slides his hip along the bed cover, the weight change rolling me slightly closer to him.

"I'm shaking because it's hard to restrain myself."

"Oh?" His voice is so low. Low and smoky and full of deep, dark promises. Promises that whisper to the longing in me.

"I don't know how I'm going to respond. I might freeze. I might cry. Scratch that – I'm definitely going to cry at least once. And quit looking at me like that," I chide, sticking a finger in his face.

He bites it. Oh, God, that warm, wet mouth on my finger.

I pull it back and laugh in spite of myself. "I want to trust you."

"You can trust me, Lindsay."

"How do you know you can trust me?"

His eyebrows go up, and in the strange moonlight he looks like a man from the 1940s, all greys and shadows, smoke and mirrors. The room seems huge and tiny at the same time, all the color gone, replaced by the intensity of us.

Just us.

Nothing else is real.

"Because you're the same woman I knew four years ago, even if you've changed. What's underneath is the same. The outside," he says with an appreciative, almost wolfish, grin, "is most definitely still fine. Possibly even better."

I squirm, embarrassed yet pleased by his words. He smells so good, his bare arms radiating musk and sweat. He's so warm, so close, and I lose myself in the simple act of breathing him in.

"But more than anything, I trust you because I don't have a choice."

"Everyone has a choice," I say automatically, like a robot. It was one of Stacia's favorite catchphrases at the Island.

"Not when it comes to you. I'm a goner."

And then we stop talking.

The press of my loose breasts against his chest feels like a wild ride, my nipples hard and rubbing against his thick pees. His arms feel like bands of steel encased in hot velvet. His mouth moves on my jaw, planting little kisses as he makes his way to my mouth.

This feels so good.

That must mean you wanted it four years ago, cackles a nasty voice in my head.

My face twists with agony, Drew's tongue turning cold in my mouth, my body getting smaller and smaller as I panic, a thousand images of blood and pain and degradation swirling with the feel of his affection.

He breaks the kiss "What's wrong?"

I whimper.

"Too much?"

I nod.

He pulls me in, tucking my head against his shoulder. He strokes my hair, gentling me. "It's okay. It's fine. You're fine. We stopped. We'll always stop when you want to stop. You're in charge, Lindsay."

I open my mouth to make a sarcastic comment but nothing comes out.

Because a part of me really believes him.

I look up and my knee digs into the bed, propelling me, and I'm kissing him again. Lost in the lush feel of everything, that insidious voice can't be heard. I refuse to hear it. I have power now. I decide what my body does. I decide what my mind tries to tell me.

Drew's right.

I have a choice.

I can't control the horrors that are stored within, but I can battle them, by God.

His slow inhale turns to a low groan as the kiss keeps going, my hands hungry, my mind fighting me for control. I won't surrender.

To anyone but Drew.

All the secrets are gone, and yesteryear's confusion cleared up. He's breathing hard against me, his hands roaming up my back, covering my ribs, asking an unspoken question.

"Please touch me," I beg. "Please." He cups one breast and my entire body heats up, skin tingling. "Yes, ma'am," he whispers, the rush of air against my ear making me shudder. One thumb strums my nipple until it's rock hard, and I press my belly against his, wanting to feel his hardness. It's there, a long outline against his trousers, straining for release.

It has been so, so long since I felt pleasure with a man. With Drew.

Like this.

Maybe this is how I truly heal.

Suddenly, there is not enough Drew in the world for me. I want his hands everywhere, his eyes on me, his tongue along my teeth, his hands on my heated flesh, his fingers making me warm and wet and exploding. Frantic, I tighten my grip, and he roars in response, unleashing the politeness he's kept in place since I came home.

He hovers over me, all bone and muscle, hard against my curves, his sounds the music of passion and need.

"What do you want, Lindsay," he rasps against my neck, one hand cupping my breast up, pushing with the firm touch of a man. No tentative college guy, this version of Drew: he knows what he wants but is deferring to me because of my past.

Fuck that.

"I want it all. Erase everything I know and give me everything new, Drew," I plead.

"I'll do my damnedest. God, I've missed you so much," His fingers thread through my hair, one hand on my ribcage, fingers tickling my breast. His hands slide to my waistband as he ravages my mouth with a kiss that makes me dizzy.

It feels so good to feel.

I've imagined this moment a million times over the last four years, all of it filled with self-hatred for wanting Drew so much. Before, when I thought he'd betrayed me, desiring him seemed like a curse.

Now that I know the truth, though, the fire between us is a revelation. He's transporting me. His fingers on my belly make me smile. His hand on my breast makes me gasp. The pull of my hair in his fingers makes me kiss him even harder and strum my fingers along his erection.

He damn near chokes.

"That feels so good," he growls, nipping at my earlobe, his hand gliding over my ass and squeezing. We grind into each other, my legs scissoring, his thick shaft a source of delicious friction against my V.

I giggle. I can't help it. I'm reminded of making out my senior year of high school, stuck in a

hidden, empty car on the Grove's grounds, and how we dry humped until I had chafe marks on my thighs.

"What's so funny?" he asks, dazed and out of it.

"Remember when we made out in the old service car?"

His deep rumble joins my higher laugh. Even his voice seems bigger. Richer. Smoother and more sophisticated than four years ago. He nudges his hips against mine. "Is this reminding you of that?"

"A little."

"This time you won't get red marks," he promises.

"How do you know?"

"Because now I know we just need to take our pants off." He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses my knuckles, looking up at me under his eyelashes. "For safety."

"For safety, huh?" I say skeptically.

We're aroused. I'm throbbing. If Drew doesn't touch me soon, I'm going to explode. I don't care if this makes me seem desperate. I *am* desperate.

I take his hands and push his fingertips under my waistband.

He raises one eyebrow and says, "You sure?"

"Are you not?" I freeze. Maybe I've gone too far. Maybe this was all a mistake. Maybe he doesn't really --

My mouth is *devoured* by Drew.

"I want to be naked with you," I say breathlessly, coming up for air between kisses, the inch-by-inch exploration of my body too tentative, too slow. If I'm going to go swimming, I need to just jump in. None of this toe-in-the-water business.

I want to be hot and sweaty, naked and clenching, overwhelmed and catapulted to a sexual frenzy that makes me forget who I am.

And Drew tastes like he's right there with me.

"You call the shots."

"That's an order."

I shimmy out of my pants, on my bedspread wearing just a shirt and panties. He does the same, except he pulls off his shirt, stretched out next to me in boxer briefs. It occurs to me that if there were an emergency, Drew would be in serious trouble. Daddy would go stratospheric if he found the head of my security team naked in my bed with me.

I grin.

All the more reason to keep going.

My breathing changes as his hands slip under my hoodie. I sit up and peel it off, tangling his hands along my chest for a moment. He makes a small sound of amusement, and then a deeper one.

Of hunger.

I'm wearing a thin black tank and in a rush of quick decision peel it off, too.

Cold air rushes to tweak my nipples, making them hard, the skin around them pebbling with gooseflesh.

Drew rises up and suddenly, I'm under him. All that's between us is underwear.

It's too much.

"You stop any time," he whispers.

"You keep saying that."

"I want to make sure you really get it, Lindsay."

"Then give it to me, Drew." I kiss him and we stop talking, the blissful sound of sighs and groans

mixing with touch. This feels so good. My smooth legs rub against his muscled calves, light hair covering them, the different textures alluring. He tastes so fine, a world inside his scent and flavor, and soon we create something separate, his fingers stroking me, my body all rush and thrum, all his.

I come so quickly I can't even warn him, my throat spasming, my eyes wide with surprise, the clench and release taking over my body as if it's drawn to his touch, as if it's been waiting for this opportunity. I bite his shoulder lightly, my fingers digging into his back, my belly pressing against his, hips riding his fingers.

I feel him smile against my cheek.

"I didn't – I don't know where that came from," I gasp, overwhelmed and shocked, pleased and a little embarrassed.

"Let's go find it, then, so we know where it is again," he whispers, intense and casual at the same time, a paradox of a man watching every signal to know how to proceed.

I'm dizzy. The room spins. He's an inch from me, so little space between us that we might as well be fused. My panties are soaked and his thumb strokes my hipbone. The air between us smells like me, like his mouth, like our breath.

Like passion.

I shiver.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"No need." He moves me so he can lift the bedcover up, and we're soon burrowing under it, warming. Our body heat joins and makes a cocoon.

I reach for him, knowing he must be aching. He's hard as a rock, and he sucks in air between his back teeth as I fold my palm over the length of him, my fingers too short to reach the tip.

"Your turn," I say, wiggling under the covers, knowing what I want to do.

"Lindsay, I -- " But I'm too fast, my hands pulling his waistband down, mouth on his tip before he can say anything but groan my name.

Now this is true power.

Right here.

I've spent years wanting to do this, and as my tongue teases him, Drew rewards me by sinking his fingers in my hair, moving on the bed to spread out, giving me more access to his ripped, strong body. I'm in the dark, but I can breathe him in, my palm caressing his inner thigh, his muscles jerking in response, primed and ready.

A warm infusion rushes through my bloodstream, the high from endorphins making me smile. I want to give him pleasure like he gave me. I have no idea how this night will end, but I do know one thing.

It will be full of surprises.

Curious, I push as much of his shaft in my mouth while one hand grabs the base of him, the other sliding up the rolling hills of his abs, my hand smooth and searching. Three strokes and his hips rise up, creating a gentle rhythm that intensifies, until his fingers tug at my hair with more force, and I find myself starting to sweat.

"Lindsay," he groans. "You need to stop. I'm going to -- "

I keep going.

He explodes in my mouth, tension in his body leaping forward at the last second as he clearly struggles with letting go like this. It's as if he thinks he shouldn't come in my mouth.

But I'm in charge.

I decide.

Right?

As I swallow, I let out a small laugh through my nose. He tastes sweet and salty. Tangy. Weird.

"Oh, my God," Drew groans, his body going limp. "What the hell did you just do?"

"What did we just do?" I correct him.

His long, slow inhale takes an eternity. In those seconds, four years go by. Four years of pain. Suffering. Misunderstandings. Anger. Grief. Plans for revenge. Plans for mourning.

Funny how I never had a plan for this.

In all those years, I had ideas for what I would do if I came back home to find Drew. In some of those fantasies, I slapped him, screamed at him, punched him – and in some, I kissed him. Hugged him. Cried in his arms and made love with him.

I never imagined I'd do both somehow.

I certainly never thought I'd learn that he'd been a victim, too.

Drew's exhale comes out, loud like a train approaching, and he sits up, the sheets spilling over, showing off his now-nude body in the moonlight.

He's a museum piece.

With a long, ragged scar that cuts down his left side and over the ribs, wrapping back toward the kidneys.

I look, and realize there are more.

So many more scars.

I open my mouth to ask about them, eyes on him like a laser, but his fingers cover my lips. My own scent overwhelms me. He cradles my jaw in his hand and moves closer, on his knees now like a lion in charge.

"Someday," he says. "I'll tell you about every scar." His kiss is so sweet I almost laugh. We're naked, covered in each other's musk, and he's giving me a kiss like our first one, back in high school, back when a French kiss and a sideboob grab was the height of intimacy.

Oh, how far we've come.

Literally.

A sound outside the window makes Drew jump up, his gun in his hand, his naked body taut and tense as he sprints to the side of the window, senses sharp and heightened. He puts one finger over his mouth to tell me to be quiet.

I freeze. I'm on my knees on my bed, completely exposed except for my wet panties, and all I can think is:

I can't die a virgin.

And I am a virgin. Truly. In all the ways that count.

"Jesus," Drew says, lowering the gun, walking back to the bed. "It's Gentian. Just made some noise out there."

I eat him up, pulse pounding from fear and arousal, his body like watching pure strength in action. Broad shoulders covered in steel, slices of pale scars highlighted by the moonlight. An eight pack of abs I just stroked with my finger tips. The narrow waist covered in deep grooves of marble, veins popping out at random intervals, leading to the swell of a tight ass, and thighs that thin and thicken as he walks.

Drew sets the gun back in his gun belt, and then --

He leaps.

He leaps onto the bed and takes my mouth and we're rolling and mired in each other, a current charged by happiness passing between us, the slick and roar of our bodies making the electricity gain

power. He's hard again against my leg and I want him in me so badly.

So much.

"Look," Drew says, as if reading my mind. He yawns. I reach up with my fingertips and tap his lips, making his mouth generate a little whooping sound. It's an old joke.

His eyes are so full of love and lust as he looks at me.

"Let's sleep."

"What?"

"Let's get dressed and sleep. Lindsay, baby, this was fucking amazing." He pushes a lock of hair off my forehead, eyes roaming over my face with a tenderness and passion that shouldn't exist. "But this isn't where I want to make love to you for the first time."

"You've – you've thought about this?" I choke out.

"Nearly every day for four fucking years," he confesses, his voice hitching at the end, deep and intense.

"Wow."

"And I never imagined being in your childhood bed, with my security team on watch in your dad's home, if you know what I mean."

Ah.

"So, where did you envision this?"

He smiles and stands, searching the room for his clothes. I fish under the bedcovers and find his underwear, flinging them at his head. The cloth catches his cheek and he laughs, giving me a tsk tsk tsk look.

"A cabin on Lake Tahoe. Or a house on the ocean up in Big Sur. Something romantic, with lots of time."

"How much time?"

"Multiple times." He gives me a sultry grin and a half-smile that makes wild heat pool between my legs again.

"Oh," I gasp.

I throw on my tank top. I should change my panties, but I don't. The cold wetness reminds me of how hot things were between us. I need to know that really happened. That this isn't just a dream.

We dress, then Drew pulls the covers back, straightening everything with military precision, until we're clothed and snuggled in bed, spooning. He begins whispering.

"You are the only woman I've ever loved, Lindsay."

I stiffen. "I find that hard to believe."

"It's true."

"But you dated...you slept with...it's been four years, Drew! You weren't hidden away in a mental institution like some people."

"Love, Lindsay. You're the only one I've ever *loved*."

My breath halts. I want to turn over. I want to curl into his arms and say the words. I want to turn the clock back and be the unbroken Lindsay who deserves every word he says, every touch he's given tonight, every drop of pleasure we've found with each other.

But I can't.

Instead, I freeze.

Drew senses it.

"You don't have to say anything. This is so much to deal with. Just know that it's not casual for me. It's anything but. And I'm here for you. I'm here for whatever you need, whenever you need,

because you're my best friend and my true love and I've missed you. Not having you in my life has been like losing a limb that no one can see is missing."

That makes me break my paralysis and turn over.

I touch his face and search his eyes for lies.

There are none.

And then I weep.

He holds me in his arms until I fade away into the bliss of nothingness.

wake up in a cold sweat.

Only this time, Drew's right here with me, arms already around my waist, his chest warming my back. His thighs press into the curve of my ass and I breathe, slowing my tempo, willing myself back to calm.

The dream was nothing like the one that woke me up earlier.

This one was full-on reality.

John, Stellan and Blaine were there. I was tied down. Drew was tied up, hanging from the ceiling, arms at an impossible angle, his naked body hanging like Jesus on the cross. Guns and ropes and scarves and a burning car and something more sinister wait, right out of my line of sight.

And they all laughed while I writhed in pain.

No masks.

I'm wide awake now.

Even Drew's arms can't help me to settle. I blink. I blink again. The images from my dream won't leave.

Maybe they're not dreams.

Maybe they're predictions.

Drew couldn't protect me four years ago.

He wants to protect me now.

I'm not the same Lindsay.

And he's not the same Drew.

His breath settles, tickling the back of my neck with a steady hush that makes me want to live in his arms forever.

But I can't.

I have demons trying to slay me.

And the only way to kill a demon is to face it head-on and slay it first.

As I carefully peel Drew's arm off me, I roll out of the bed. He stirs.

I freeze.

One skill I learned at the island: how to be so quiet that you're undetected. When people underestimate you, it's incredibly easier.

Easier than it should be.

I wait until Drew's breathing goes back to the long, slow, deep breaths of childlike slumber. I watch him, the ache inside me too much to bear. His gentle, slow intimacy last night filled a cup

inside me that had been empty for far, far too long. Parts of me that were parched are now quenched. Pieces of Lindsay that were shattered are now reassembled.

He healed me, kiss by kiss, caress by caress, and that is just the beginning.

As I watch him, my face radiates with a smile that traverses years. I follow his breath and watch his face, his muscles relaxed, the corners of his mouth turned up just enough. He is gorgeous. He is sublime.

He is mine.

Again.

My phone is on the bed. How did that get there? Maybe it fell out of my pocket while we wiggled out of my clothes. I reach for it, accidentally pushing the On button. The screen illuminates, a notification lighting up the night.

Come play with us, the text says.

And then a second one:

AGAIN

All of the blood in my body drains into the ground.

I should wake Drew. I should cry. I should gasp. I should scream.

I don't do any of those things.

Instead, I stare at the words.

This will never end, will it? They're relentless. They're not going to back off. In fact, they're emboldened now.

They should be.

They're succeeding.

It only stops when I'm dead.

Or when they are.

I find the text from my hacker contact and reply with the pre-determined code. A picture appears on the screen. It's Blaine Maisri, shaking hands with my dad, Anya in the background, beaming.

A second picture appears. It's Drew, on his side, naked, the top half of him exposed, his body limp with sleep. In the upper right-hand corner, the tiniest hint of red cloth appears. His face is bruised, his hip a deep red.

I go cold.

I know that red cloth.

It's one of the scarves. One of my scarves.

You have a choice. Drew's words chill me now, a premonition he didn't realize he was making. He meant I had a choice about touch and sound and feel and goodness, but I also have a choice about stopping those bastards once and for all.

Or do I? Maybe I have no free will.

Maybe I can't control what needs to be done.

Moonlight shines through the slit in my curtains, drawing my attention to steel and leather.

Drew's gun.

An idea pours into my mind, like concrete into a mold, injected and fully formed. I can't fight it, though my rational mind tries. It flails and objects, but impulse overrides it, pinning logic in place, smothering it.

I look at the gun.

I stare at Drew, his steady breath so vulnerable and strong at the same time. He trusts me. He gave himself to me. What does that picture of him mean? And why would my darknet contact from the

Island send *that*?

A third picture appears.

It's Blaine.

Making a kissy face at me.

Can your heart start and stop in the same second?

I look at the gun again.

I know what to do next.

I know how to protect myself.

Revenge is finally mine.

Read the next book in the series, from Drew's perspective, A Harmless Little Ruse:

SHE HAS no idea what she's doing. Loose cannons never hit their targets.

And they take out plenty of collateral damage.

Four years ago Lindsay experienced the unspeakable right before me, and I couldn't stop them.

But that's all changed now.

When her father, Senator Bosworth, contacted me two months ago to ask — *demand* — that I protect her, it was a second chance. A shot at redemption.

An opportunity to right an unfathomable wrong.

Controlling Lindsay as she seeks her revenge on the monsters who hurt her won't be hard.

Containing my own out-of-control feelings for Lindsay and keeping up this ruse of cold-blooded distance will be.

Even harder than admitting to her what really happened that night four years ago.

It turns out I don't have to, though.

Someone else did it for me.

And I'll make sure they regret it.

Here's how the next book starts:

I WAKE up to an empty bed.

It's not mine.

Lindsay's gone.

I can feel a change in the air. I jump to my feet, instantly alert, blood pumping to arms and legs that are battle-ready.

I grab my gun belt and --

What the hell?

My gun is missing.

Gun's gone.

Lindsay's gone.

Oh, shit.

She didn't? *She did.*

CLICK here to read Book 2 in the Harmless series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meli Raine writes romantic suspense with hot bikers, intense undercover DEA agents, bad boys turned good, and Special Ops heroes -- and the women who love them.

Meli rode her first motorcycle when she was five years old, but she played in the ocean long before that. She lives in New England with her family.

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