

PROLOGUE

The rain fell, soaking us, freezing us, but it didn't matter; nothing did, not anymore. I knew everything was about to change. I knew my world was about to crumble apart.

"There's no turning back now. I can't even look you in the eye."

Desolate tears ran down his face.

How could I have done this to him? His words sank into my soul like knives tearing me open from the inside.

"I don't even know what to say," I said, trying to control the panic that threatened to shatter me. He couldn't leave me. He couldn't, could he?

He looked full of hatred, contempt... It was a look I never thought I'd see from him.

"We're done," he whispered, his voice cracking but firm.

And with those two words, my world sank into darkness, shadows, solitude...a prison designed expressly for me. But I deserved it. This time, I deserved it.

Noah

I was finally eighteen years old.

I still remembered eleven months before that, when I started counting the days until I'd be an adult, able to make my own decisions, able to leave. Obviously, things had changed in those past eleven months. So much so that I could hardly believe it. Not only had I gotten used to living here, but I even struggled to imagine living anywhere else. I'd found a niche at school and in the family I'd ended up with.

All the obstacles I'd needed to get through—not just over those months, but ever since I was born—had made me stronger, or so I thought. Much had happened, not all of it good, but the best thing I'd managed to hold on to was Nicholas. Who'd have ever thought I'd wind up in love with him? And yet I was so madly in love that it made my heart ache. We'd had to get to know each other, to learn to make it as a couple, and that wasn't easy; it was something we had to work on every single day. Our personalities often clashed. Nick wasn't easy to put up with, but I was crazy about him.

That's why I was sad about my upcoming birthday party. Nick wasn't going to be there. I hadn't seen him in two weeks. He'd been spending a lot of time in San Francisco those past few months. He had a year left before he finished his degree and was taking advantage of all the doors his father had opened for him. The Nick who got into trouble was far away now. He was different: he'd matured, improved, even if I was afraid his old self might reemerge when I least expected it.

I glanced at myself in the mirror. I'd pulled my hair back over the crown of my head. It looked nice, perfect for the white dress my mother and Will had given me as a birthday present. My mother had gone overboard organizing the party. She said this would be her last chance to play the mommy role because in a week I'd be graduating from high school, and soon afterward, I'd be headed to college. I'd sent out tons of applications, but in the end, I'd opted for UCLA. I'd had enough of moving around and changes; I didn't want to go to another city, and I certainly didn't want to leave Nick. He was at the same school, and even if he would probably wind up moving to San Francisco to work at his father's new firm, I couldn't worry about that just then. There was still lots of time, and I didn't want to get depressed.

I stood from the makeup table, and before I put on my dress, I looked down at the scar on my stomach. I stroked that place where I would be marked, forever damaged, and I shivered. The sound of the shot that ended my father's life echoed through my head, and I had to take a deep breath to keep from losing my composure. I hadn't told anyone about my nightmares or how scared I was every time I thought about what had happened, how my heart started galloping whenever I heard loud sounds too close by. I didn't want to admit that my father had traumatized me again or that I couldn't stop thinking about him right beside me, dead, or the way his blood had splashed on my face. I kept all that to myself. I didn't want anyone to know I was even more damaged than before, on the edge of insanity, prey to the fears that man had awakened. My mother, on the other hand, was more relaxed than she'd ever been because the fear she'd kept hidden had disappeared. She was happy with her husband: she was free. But I still had a long road to travel.

"You're not dressed yet?" It was that voice, the one that made me crack up almost every single day.

I turned toward Jenna, and a smile spread across my face. My best friend was stunning, as always. She had recently cut her long hair to shoulder-length. She tried to get me to do the same, but I knew Nick loved my hair long, so I'd left it untouched. It reached nearly to my waist by now, but I still liked it.

"Have I told you already how much I admire that pert butt of yours?" she asked, slapping my ass for good measure.

"You're nuts," I said, grabbing my dress and throwing it over my head. Jenna walked over to the safe, just under a shelf of shoes. I didn't have the combination, I'd never used it, but once Jenna learned about it, she started using it herself, hiding all sorts of stuff inside.

I giggled when she brought out a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

"A toast, to our newly crowned adult," she said, filling the glasses and handing me one. I grinned. If Mom saw me, she'd kill me, but what the hell? It was my birthday; I deserved to celebrate, right?

"To us," I added.

We clinked our glasses and brought them to our lips. It was delicious; it had better be—that bottle of Cristal had cost more than three hundred dollars. But that was just how Jenna was. She did everything big, she was accustomed to luxury, and she'd never had to ask for anything.

"That dress is amazing," she said, gawking.

I smiled and took another look. It really was nice: white, tight-fitting, with delicate lace sleeves descending to my wrists, letting my skin show through its geometric openings. My shoes were fantastic, too, with heels so high, I was almost as tall as Jenna, who had donned a flounced burgundy dress for the occasion.

"There's a ton of people downstairs," she said, setting her glass next to mine. I guess she wasn't in a rush. I needed a drink, though, so I picked mine back up and downed it in one sip, feeling the bubbles pop in my throat.

“You don’t say!” I exclaimed, to conceal my nerves. Suddenly, it felt hard to breathe. That dress was too tight; my lungs couldn’t expand.

Jenna looked at me and smirked.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, envious of her. What I’d have given not to be the center of attention.

“Nothing, I just know how you hate stuff like this. Take it easy, though. I’m here, and I’ll make sure we do it right.”

She kissed me on the cheek, and I smiled at her, thankful. Maybe my boyfriend was missing my birthday, but at least I’d have my best friend by my side.

“Shall we?” she asked, smoothing down her dress.

“I guess we’ve got no choice!”

The yard was completely transformed. Mom had gone all out, renting a white tent full of round pink tables and flashy chairs and balloons. The servers were wearing suit jackets and bow ties. On the far end was a bar and several long tables with trays of every food you could imagine. All this luxury wasn’t like me, but I knew my mother had always wanted to throw me this kind of party. She’d joked about me turning eighteen and going off to college, and we’d talked about what we’d have at the party if we ever won the lottery...and we’d done it! And she had gone totally overboard.

When I went outside, everyone shouted “happy birthday” in unison. I guess they were trying to surprise me. My mother came over and gave me a big hug.

“Happy birthday, Noah,” she said, and as I pulled her close, I was surprised to see so many people lined up behind her. Not only were all my friends from school there, and all the parents Mom had made friends with, but even neighbors and friends of William’s. Uncomfortable, I unconsciously began to scan the garden, looking for Nicholas, the one

person who might have calmed me down. But there wasn't a trace of him... I knew it: of course, he wasn't going to come—he was in a whole different city, and it would be a week till I saw him again, at graduation—and yet...a small part of me still hoped I might find him bustling through the crowd.

It took more than an hour to greet everyone, and afterward, Jenna came over and dragged me to the bar—to the special section cordoned off for those not yet twenty-one.

“There's a fancy cocktail just for you,” she said, bursting out laughing.

“My mother is off her rocker,” I said while the bartender served me. He smiled. It was obvious he could barely suppress his laughter. Great. He probably thought I was your typical rich girl.

I was taken aback when I saw the drink. It was served in a martini glass and was hot pink with a rainbow sugar rim and a strawberry garnish on either side. A ribbon was tied around the stem with an 18 embroidered in tiny white pearls.

“It still needs a little something,” Jenna said, bringing out a flask and pouring its contents into our glasses. I'd have to watch out if I didn't want to be stumbling drunk by midnight.

The DJ was good, the music was varied, and my friends were dancing like they were possessed. The party was a success, no doubt about it.

Jenna hauled me off to dance with her, and we started jumping all over like idiots. The heat was killing me: summer was just around the corner, and you could tell.

From the edge of the dance floor, Lion was watching us, leaning on a pillar and observing as Jenna shook her ass in a frenzy. I laughed and left her with the others. I was exhausted.

“You bored, Lion?” I asked him.

He smiled, but he seemed a little worried and didn't look over at me.

“Yeah, happy birthday,” he said, as though he hadn't heard. It was strange, seeing him there without Nick. Lion wasn't friends with many

people in my grade: he and Nick were five years older than Jenna and me, and the age difference was evident. The kids in my class weren't particularly mature, and our boyfriends never liked hanging out with them.

"Thanks," I said. "You heard from Nick?" I felt a pang in my stomach. He still hadn't called or texted.

"He told me yesterday he was up to his neck in work. At the office, they barely even give him time to eat lunch. He did manage to find the time to tell me to keep my eye on you."

"Seems like you're keeping it on someone else," I said, noticing he was still staring at Jenna. She turned and smiled at us both, looking completely, genuinely happy. She loved Lion, was in love with him, couldn't stop talking about him on the nights when she'd stay over: about how lucky we were, being with two guys who were such close friends. I knew Jenna was incapable of falling for anybody else, and I was glad to know Lion felt the same about her. I couldn't get enough of Jenna; she was a true best friend, and I loved her. She had always been there when I'd needed her and had helped me understand what a real friend was. She wasn't jealous, manipulative, or resentful like Beth back in Canada, and she was incapable of hurting me, at least on purpose.

She came over and kissed Lion with a loud pop. He lifted her, and I turned away, dispirited. I missed Nick; I wanted him there; I needed him. I looked back at my phone. Nothing. No missed calls, no texts, no emails. That was starting to piss me off. All he needed were a few seconds to write. What the hell was going on with him?

I walked over to the bar for the twenty-one-and-overs. The crowd there had thinned out, and the guy who'd served me my birthday drink was working with the help of a young woman. I sat down and tried to figure out my approach, hoping I could flirt with him and get an actual drink.

"Any chance you could make me something not pink, but with a bit of kick to it?" I asked, thinking he'd tell me to piss off. But to my surprise, he

glanced around, and when he saw no one was looking, he filled a shot glass with clear liquid.

“Tequila?” I asked.

“If anyone asks you, it wasn’t me,” he said, glancing away.

I laughed and drank it down. It burned my throat, but it was good.

When I turned, I saw Jenna dragging Lion off to a dark corner. It depressed me, seeing all my friends hugging and kissing.

Damn you, Nicholas Leister, why can't I get you out of my head for at least one second a day?

“Another?” the bartender asked. I knew I was overdoing it, but it was my party. I could have what I wanted, right?

Just as I was about to knock it back, a hand appeared out of nowhere to snatch it from me.

“I think you’ve had enough.”

That voice.

I looked up, and there he was: Nick. Nick in a button-down and slacks, his dark hair starting to fall out of place, beaming with suppressed excitement, joyful.

“Oh my God!” I shouted, bringing my hands to my mouth. A smile appeared on his face. *My smile*, the one he reserved just for me. I jumped into his arms.

“You came!” I shouted, pressing my cheek into his, squeezing him, smelling him, feeling once again whole. He squeezed me back. At last, I could breathe. He was there. Thank God! He was there with me.

“I missed you, Freckles,” he whispered in my ear before pulling my head back and kissing me on the lips.

I felt my nerve endings awaken. It had been fourteen days since I’d felt his lips on mine, his hands on my body.

He pushed me back and looked me up and down.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said hoarsely, grabbing my waist and pulling me close.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, trying to keep myself from kissing him again. I knew we needed to restrain ourselves: there were people everywhere, our parents were there, and their presence unnerved me.

“I wasn’t about to miss your birthday,” he said. I could feel the electricity between us. We’d never been apart for so long, at least not since we’d started going out, and I was used to having him all to myself every day.

“How’d you get away?” I asked, not wanting to let him go.

“Don’t ask,” he said, kissing the top of my head. I closed my eyes in ecstasy, smelling his cologne.

“Lovely party.” He laughed.

I scowled at him. “It wasn’t my idea.”

“I know,” he assured me.

I felt my heart swell with happiness and relief. How I’d missed his smile.

“You want to try the Noah special?” I asked, winking to the bartender, who got straight to work.

“You’ve got your own cocktail, Freckles?” he asked, raising an eyebrow when he saw the pink liquid with its strawberry garnish. His expression was hilarious. “I guess I have to try it...”

The poor thing drank the whole glass without complaining, even though it tasted like melted gumdrops.

I grinned from ear to ear, and he couldn’t resist doing the same. His hand reached out and pulled me in, and he brought his lips to my ear, just brushing the sensitive skin there, and that scant contact was enough to make me feel like I was about to die.

“I need to be inside you,” he said.