

Chapter One

"I don't know how much they paid you but this should be more than enough to keep your mouth shut. If you try to contact me...If I hear one word about this from anyone...It'll be the last thing anybody will ever hear from you."

Slam!

* * *

The echo of the slamming door woke Lynn from her restless sleep. Ten years and it still affected her. Ten years and she recalled every detail as if it were yesterday no matter how she tried to forget. The day she nally faced her high school crush...the day he broke her heart and her world fell apart.

Ten years ago Avalynn Carlisle was the younger of two daughters born to Emerson and Grace Carlisle. Her sister Marilyn was a true beauty queen: tall and condent. Avalynn meanwhile was plain, petite and quiet. She could never network or socialize the way her sister could having only one close friend throughout primary school. There was only one area Avalynn truly shined and that was music.

Since she was ve and had her rst piano lesson her instructors praised her as a rare genius, gifted. When she played the rest of the world ceased to exist. It was just her and the music. She was hailed as a prodigy and every party her parents hosted she played for their guests. Little did she realize this scant attention was enough to stoke her sister's jealousy.

Shortly after graduation Avalynn won a coveted spot at Julliard. Her sister insisted they go out and celebrate despite the fact Avalynn never drank before. She didn't know what alcohol was supposed to be like and she never suspected her sister would drug her or that Marilyn would throw her into bed with an unknown man. But that is exactly what her sister did.

Mercifully the event was blocked by a fog and Ava had no recollection of the act itself. The next morning was traumatic enough. She woke with a pounding headache, intense thirst and incredibly sore. Completely naked with a sticky wetness running between her legs Ava clutched the blanket to her chest trying to piece together the events from the night before.

"Finally awake are you?"

Ava froze at the deep, harsh voice. She recognized it instantly: Silas Prescott. Throughout middle and high school he reigned as the king. A track and eld star he maintained impeccable attendance and perfect grades. He was his parents' pride and sole heir to their business empire.

Girls ocked to him hoping to be noticed. If he said more than two words to any of them they would brag about it for a week. Every dance or social event he appeared with someone new. Even her sister attempted to pursue him for a short time but Silas had no interest in the daughters of his father's rival.

A perpetual wallower Ava watched him from a distance and quietly nursed her crush knowing full well nothing would ever come of it. The last place she expected to see him was in a hotel room as she sat in his bed naked.

"I hope you're satised because what happened last night is never going to happen again... In fact last night didn't happen."

Ava shivered at his rage and disgust unable to look him in the eye. She didn't even dare raise her head. If she explained it was all a misunderstanding, a cruel trick by her sister would he even listen? No. He would only be more disgusted if he knew she was a Carlisle.

"I don't know how much they paid you but this should be more than enough to keep your mouth shut. If you try to contact me...If I hear one word about this from anyone...It'll be the last thing anybody will ever hear from you."

The door slammed with a nality she didn't dare breach. Tears she had been holding in owed freely as she shuddered with sobs while her heart broke into more pieces than she dared count. Ava had always known her love for him was one-sided, that he didn't even know she existed but his utter disgust was not something she expected.

When her tears nally slowed she looked to the bedside table to see he had written a check for a hundred thousand dollars leaving the pay to line blank for her to ll in. The sight brought a fresh wave of tears to her eyes and it was several minutes before she calmed herself enough to get dressed.

Unconcerned with her appearance Ava left in a rush bumping into the maid in the hallway. Muttering an apology Ava hurried away without pause. Somehow she managed to get home where she collapsed into a fresh wave of sobs as she tried to wash away the memory in the shower.

Surely that should have been enough for her sister's revenge but it wasn't. Anonymous photos soon blasted gossip pages with headlines like: Golden Child Disgraced! Music Prodigy Out of Control! Her mother broke down in tears and her father raged. Neither wanted to hear her side of the story and they kicked her out without so much as a suitcase or even a jacket.

With no money she did the only thing she could think of and called her best friend collect. Three hours later Tracy Lamont arrived driving all the way from Yale to rescue her. The drive back to Tracy's off-campus apartment in Connecticut was more than enough to relate the details of her predicament.

Even though Tracy was a year older and a grade above hers in primary school the pair had hit it off immediately. Daughter of two lawyers Tracy was a tall, athletic girl with dirty blonde hair. There had never been any doubt she would follow in her parents' footsteps and actively pursued academics to ensure her predestined future. Throughout high school she was Ava's only condant and the only one she could rely on.

After hearing the details Tracy was ready to return to New York fully prepared to punch Marilyn out. With a purple belt in Tae Kwon Do Ava had every reason to believe her friend was fully capable of carrying out the punishment but she begged her to avoid violence. Instead they bought two tubs of rocky road ice cream and watched romantic comedies until four o'clock in the morning.

Ava thought the worst was over but Julliard rescinded her place claiming she was no longer a good t for their image. A few weeks later she realized her period which had always been like clockwork was late. A quick home test followed by a trip to Planned Parenthood conrmed it. She was pregnant.

Tracy demanded they return to New York to confront Silas but Ava refused. His warning still rang clear in her mind and she didn't have the courage to face him. After a long weekend of soul searching Ava nally made her decision. She would disappear.

Avalynn Carlisle was dead. Lynn Carter was born. With Tracy's help she secured an apartment on the Lower East Side. It was a cramped two-bedroom far from the area's nightlife but it was clean. She found a job at a nearby diner that time had forgot. It looked as if it had been pulled directly from the fties but the owner was kind and willing to work with her when the inevitable happened and she gave birth...to triplets.

Little less than eight months after her sister's betrayal Lynn gave birth to a girl and two boys: Alexis, Sean and Theodore. All were seemingly healthy. When Alexis turned three Lynn noticed she had trouble seeing in the dim light of the apartment. Several check-ups later she was handed down the verdict: retinitis pigmentosa. Her daughter was slowly losing her vision. They didn't know when but eventually Alexis would be completely blind. There was no way to stop it. Maybe they could slow it down, maybe.

It was the rst time Lynn broke down and cried in almost four years but there was no way to help her daughter. Yet if she thought the news would cause Alexis distress she was mistaken. Alexis had a bright mind and an indomitable spirit refusing to give into despair.

Despite Alexis's fortitude there was no beating the disease slowly robbing her of her sight. For a while she wore glasses but eventually her world faded to gray. She claimed she could still tell light from dark but in order to navigate the world Alexis now relied on a cane and her brothers.

The trio had always been close but knowing their sister was losing her sight only made them more protective. They were inseparable now and no one dared pick on Alexis for fear of angering her dedicated guardians not that anyone would think to bully her. The kids attended Anna Silver Public School where the trio quickly made names for themselves.

Their test scores were continually above average. Though some complained they threw off the curve the triplets outgoing personalities made them popular. Both Sean and Theo were active basketball enthusiasts with Sean also having a tech-savvy mind. But Alexis was the real standout.

Like her mother Alexis had rich chestnut hair and green eyes and she was also a musical prodigy. When the kids were younger Lynn used to play piano buying a rather expensive keyboard to practice but gradually she gave it up but not before teaching Alexis how to play. Like her mother before her Alexis drifted into her own world when she played and everyone who heard it couldn't help but be touched.

While her mother had been a wallower Alexis was outgoing and friendly earning her quite a following. Lynn was happy her children were popular and well-adjusted. She couldn't hope for more, didn't dare to hope for more. Now they were in the fth grade and would soon move on to a middle school. Lynn hoped they would adapt to the larger school with their usual ease.

* * *

With a sigh Lynn pushed herself out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. It was ve thirty and the kids would be waking up soon. It was best to get her morning ritual completed before them or else they would be late.

After a shower she dressed in the pastel pink shirt and skirt that made up the diner's uniform. Like the diner itself it was also right out of the fties. Tying her natural wavy hair back in a half-up style Lynn headed for the kitchen microwaving sausage biscuits for breakfast. The boys would have two each while Lexi and her mother would be satised with one.

Reaching for the milk Lynn scanned the scant contents of the fridge. Aside from staples like milk, eggs and butter the majority was stacked in Styrofoam takeout containers from the diner. Gretchen was a kind manager and Lynn felt enormously lucky.

When the triplets were babies and up until they started preschool Gretchen allowed them to accompany Lynn to work when she couldn't nd a babysitter. Gretchen even purchased toys and games to keep them occupied during their mother's long shifts. The older woman hovered over the toddlers like a protective grandma.

Knowing how dicult it was to provide for three growing children Gretchen often gave her the leftover food at the end of the day. She claimed Lynn was doing her a favor as the food would just be thrown out but Lynn occasionally found whole meals: burgers, fries, hashbrowns and others completely untouched. Though Lynn could never bring herself to ask she suspected Gretchen made some meals with the expressed purpose of giving them to her and the kids. It was an incredible act of generosity and charity that only worked as long as both parties willfully ignored it.

Lynn made use of every charity she could making regular trips to food pantries, thrift stores and endured the silent ridicule of Human Services to receive food stamps. To this day no one except Tracy knew the truth about the kids' parentage. Gretchen only knew their father was not in the picture and even their birth certicates listed him as unknown.

People drew their own conclusions. Mostly assumed she was some kind of working girl or extremely promiscuous to not know the triplet's father. Lynn didn't bother correcting them as it would mean revealing the truth. Instead she endured the shame.

"Morning mom," Alexis always the rst to rise greeted.

"Morning, sweetie," Lynn said setting down a plate with her breakfast on it along with a glass of orange juice.

With practice ease Alexis reached the counter and sat down without the need of her cane. In familiar settings she could navigate by memory. As long as the furniture remained in place she didn't have to worry about bumping things accidentally. Picking up her breakfast sandwich Alexis munched contentedly.

The older she got the stronger her resemblance to her mother became. Even now Lynn was certain anyone would recognize her brown hair and green eyes. Luckily they were far from the circles Lynn used to inhabit when she still went by the name Carlisle.

"Morning mom! Morning Lexi!" Theo and Sean yawned as they nally emerged.

Just as their sister resembled their mother the boys looked like miniature versions of their father. If she thought about it too much she sometimes felt pains of regret and loss. Never wanting to burden her children with her own struggles Lynn quickly squashed such thoughts. She would not let her genuine love for her babies be tarnished by the infatuation of her youth.

If anyone from her past saw the boys they would certainly make the connection. Even knowing this she though the chance was remote their paths would ever cross. She was no longer part of society's elite and no one from that circle had reason to explore the dregs of society.

"Morning boys," Lynn chuckled. "Did you get all your homework done?"

"Yep. We're good to go."

"Good. Oh Lexi, we have a doctor's appointment today. Don't forget. I'll pick you up from school."

"Sure thing, mom."

"That means Tracy will get you boys, all right?"

"Yep!"

"No worries." They answered with mouths full of sausage, egg, cheese and biscuit.