

PROLOGUE

I opened the red door of my cottage and peered through the crack into the early morning and at the stranger who approached my door. My home was out of the way of everything. Those who came to visit had to make an effort and almost no one made the effort. I liked it that way.

“Miss Lundy?” The stranger said nervously. “Miss Elizabeth Lundy?”

Like a sniper staring through the scope of a rifle, I assessed the youth, determined the level of threat he posed, and punched out the stats in my head: Male. Twenty-two years. Five-five. One twenty pounds. Thin arms. Wide shoulders, straight back. If he worked out he could turn more than a few heads. Pity he didn't bother.

He smiled a bright smile that exposed a decent set of teeth. Everything about his composure exuded relief and elation once he saw that I hadn't slammed the door in his face.

“Good morning,” he said and it truly was. The sun bathed the deep greens of the forest and hills despite the white clouds that streaked the Irish sky. The stream that cut through the land behind him caught the light and glistened like crystal glass. The rains would be here by evening, but for now, it was a very good morning.

He was American. New England. His hair was sandy, short, and brushed back. Eyes were hazel and clear. Skin, pasty pale. Not a fair Irish pale I had grown used to seeing, but an unhealthy sickly complexion one can only get from living in an office too long. Desk jockey, I concluded. Pencil pusher. Virgin. I could take him. I could teach him a few things. I would break him.

“Dia Duit,” I answered softly and waited for an explanation.

“Miss Lundy. I'm William D. Shaw from the university.” He nervously shuffled his bag then freed and extended a long, slender hand. His fingers were strong, almost pianist quality and I felt my blood rise when I slid my hand into his. Strong shake. Confident. Not feeble or limp. I imagined his hands on me. Sliding up my neck, through my hair. If he knew what he was doing, that is. He didn't look like he would. He was shaking, but doing a decent job keeping it together all things considered.

“We spoke on the phone,” he said. “Well...we didn't speak on the phone so much as I left you a voice message. I...may I come in?”

I released his hand and noted the warmth. His blood pressure was high, but no sweat. That was a plus.

I pulled my cell from my pock and woke the phone. Yep. There was the message I didn't want to listen to yesterday. I hated checking my voicemail. I associate it with matters of importance and nothing ever was. Such a pain. I also hated guests, change, interruptions, and the feeling I got when someone came to my door. Anxiety, terror, then the arousal. I wanted him to leave and afterward I would indulge on a bit of fantasy. The anxiety always won and I rushed them out the door. I never invited them in. Never asked them to sit down. They were not welcome. They needed to know that. But I had promised myself I would do better. I had felt myself regressing again. Two months is too long to go without contact. Even I knew this. I could invite him in or don my coat and go out. I felt sick at the thought of a crowded room.

“Yes. Come in,” I said and pushed the door open, giving him room enough to enter my domicile while granting myself the space for my own comfort.

Mine was a small domicile with one floor, perfect for just me. Aged rich planks made up the wood floor and whitewashed stone formed the walls, which were dressed in moss, roses, and ivy on the outside. The old kitchen that greeted guests, if ever I had any, extended into an eatery that

turned a sharp corner around the only bathroom and into a quaint living room I had converted into a greenhouse years ago.

Aside from a plain, but comfortable sage couch, a rocking chair where a faux fur blanket hung on the back, and a bookshelf containing my most prized possessions, the room was dripping in plants. Floor plants, hanging plants, and floral potted things all strategically positioned to bask in the morning light that poured in through the giant bay window where my tabby cat, Cookie, spent her days watching the birds. That room gave the same feel of an old forest. I loved reading in that room. A Steinway electric piano graced the corner and provided a gracious view of the forest outside when I played. My bedroom was accessible only through the green room.

Mr. Shaw stepped into the small part of my kitchen reserved for dining. He studied the living room I had converted to a greenhouse across from the dining table. Cookie flipped her long, plush tail and stared at the birds through the large bay window where the morning sun seeped in.

He appeared surprised at the simple accommodations and inhaled the scent of Irish stew simmering on the stove. Directly left of the red door was the only fireplace I used to dry the air on the dampest of days and coldest of nights.

“What can I do you for, Mr. Shaw?” I asked.

“Thank you, Miss. Lundy, for seeing me,” he said. “Please, call me William.”

I gave him a disapproving stare.

“I was wondering if you would be willing to do an interview with me? I’m a big fan. Longtime fan, actually, and your work with the Druid Series was astounding. Ian was...”

I said nothing, unimpressed with his compliment, but forced a smile. I was still too annoyed at the interruption.

“I’ve been following you for quite some time and...well, nothing is known about you,” he said. “Nothing, really. It’s all so limited.”

He saw I wasn’t impressed and was eager for him to get to the point.

“Right,” he said. “So I was wondering if you would be willing to do an interview...”

The tension was unbearable. I watched the way he rubbed his thumb on the strap of his back pack.

He was still rambling when I zoned back in and hadn’t heard a word he said. I took great delight in watching him squirm. Maybe if he was as anxious as I, he would get the hint and leave.

“My dear, Mr. Shaw,” I said and raised my chin so that he could see the sunlight graze my neck. “Please, speak plainly,” I said softly.

I felt myself doing it again. Already my defenses were up. If I could coerce him into thinking about sex, I would be safer. I needed to calm down. He was no threat. I had already assessed that. Good God, I missed my swords.

“Beggin’ your pardon ma’am?”

I watched him glance at the slender lines of my neck. It was working. He would calm down soon enough.

“There is something else you wish to ask me,” I gently declared. I watched him relax and I smiled. I knew the light gleamed in my eye and I tipped my head ever so slightly. I had this routine mastered. “Instead of winding your nerves into all sorts of knots, please just ask what you will of me.”

I could feel the smooth coercion in my voice, the way my words rolled off my tongue and soothed him like a charmed snake heeding the words of a succubus. He inhaled and I waited patiently.

“I had hoped to wait until later to ask this, you being a recluse and all. I...” He nervously glanced away. “I wish to do a full biography on you.”

The room fell quiet. The boy was holding his breath as if afraid my answer hinged on whether or not he breathed in the next two minutes. I toyed with the idea of delaying an answer for ten minutes just to watch him squirm.

After three minutes, I put him out of his misery. “You wish to write a biography.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“About me?”

“Yes.”

“So...” I grinned. I could see his jaw line twitch. He still hadn’t breathed. “...you’ve come to descend into the bowels of my psyche, have you?” I took up the coffee pot and poured myself a cup. “And what is it you think you’ll find there, Mr. Shaw?”

“Uh...”

I added a tea spoon of sugar and opened the fridge.

“Why a biography?” I clarified.

“Well, you’ve been strangely quiet about your life,” he said. “Your past. Almost no one knows anything about you prior to your thirties. People want to know. I know some who have started a pool that you’ve killed someone. They think you’re a serial killer hiding from the law.”

I leaned out of the fridge, arching my brow. I permitted a smirk.

“It’s the eyes,” he said. “They...”

He caught the look, my posture. Nothing he was saying impressed me and he knew it. For a moment, there was a hungry flash in his eye and surprising even me, he dumped his bag to the floor.

“Miss Lundy,” he took a step and I straightened my back, my hand went up and before he knew it, I was holding a knife to his throat. He didn’t move.

“Miss Lundy?”

I blinked and realized he hadn’t moved. There was no knife. There was only me and him in my kitchen. The fridge door was wide open. The coffee creamer in my hand. The look in his eyes was enough to know I had my boundaries and he was on them.

I knew where I was. It had been too long. I blinked back the image and tried to clear my head. I had to remember which world I was in. I put the creamer back in the fridge and reached for the Baileys I kept with my whiskeys and wines on the top of the fridge instead.

“This isn’t just about your books, Miss Lundy,” he said. “This is about you, the author. People want to know about you, the woman behind the books, and you’ve told us precious little.”

“That was no accident,” I said, pouring two shots into my coffee. “Do you want coffee?”

“Please. Black.”

My invitation for coffee was enough to urge him to slide off his coat and drop it on the back of the chair nearest the door.

I let the silence settle between us while I poured a second cup then walked to the table beside my guest. I set the coffees down and extended a hand, directing him to sit.

“So,” I sighed, taking my seat as he scrambled eager to take his. “You wish to write my biography.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said. “People want to know who you are. What you are. What made you write the books that you write. They wish to know your schooling, your loves, your struggles. What challenges in your life made you what you are. They want to know your lows, your highs.”

They want to know..." He sighed. "They want to know what struggles shaped you to write the macabre you portray in your books."

I clutched my coffee. I felt sick. The challenges in my life? I held my cup steady against my shaking hands. I didn't trust myself to move. I knew what he asked. The poor whelp didn't. My hands went white.

"Get out," I said darkly.

William stared at me stupid, and I felt the anger surge. He didn't move. Nor did I.

Perhaps I needed to tell my story, to talk, to not be alone. I knew where I was. If I were alone right now I would descend into the bowels of my mind and, this time, I wasn't certain I could come back. There was less and less reason for me to.

I heard William shuffle and take up his bag from the floor. I thought of Jacob and Isaiah. I thought of my Raven. Oh, how much I missed Raven. So much. So...so much.

Don't think about that.

I took a sip of my coffee and felt the tears burn, but that well had dried up long ago. I heard William take up his coat and his bag from the floor. He opened the door and just like that, I didn't want him to go.

"You think this is some love story?" I said.

He stopped at the door.

"The life I've lived, you think it's something to admire, to aspire to? You think I hoard romanticism within my silence?"

He watched me with a look, uncertain if he had offended me or not.

"You hope to hear a fairy tale, Mr. Shaw, a "Hemingway-lost-love" story, but what you will get is a nightmare."

He closed the door.

"There are those whose lives are hell," I said. "Hell barely begins to explain what I have lived. The books I wrote were buried beneath the endless screams. Most days, I can not write or think or breathe over the screaming in my head."

William dumped his bag to the floor. This time, he remained at the door.

"You let me into your home," he said. "You agreed to hear me out. You invited me in and poured me coffee. Part of you wants this story told."

And he wasn't wrong. I did want this story told. I did want to release this poison inside of me. Something longed to put it out there. I ached to be heard. I had tried so many times before. I had written the outlines, drawn up the plans. I knew exactly what parts to tell. I knew which parts needed to be heard. But it felt selfish. It felt wrong.

A part of me ached to do this in the chance that someone, anyone would hear me, just once. Oh, how I longed to be heard just once. Perhaps that was why I always spoke my mind. I was tired of not being heard.

I gazed at the man-boy in front of me. The fire in his eye confirmed his determination.

"It feels selfish," I said. "Talking about myself like this."

"I'm asking you to do this," he said. "I want to know."

"I don't want to," I said.

Something in the boy told him to hold his tongue. Now was the time to listen. For that, I was grateful.

"I want to bury this inside me," I said. "You must understand. There is a part of me that always longs for death. There are days, it hurts too much. I can not get angry. I can never be angry. I won't allow it. I'm afraid of what I will do if ever I get angry."

He stared with that look I've seen so many times. The look everyone gets when they hear pure honesty. People don't hear it often. The inner most thoughts of our psyche. Those are the words we keep secret.

Not I.

I gazed out the south windows across the table. The hills were green and calm as if they had suffered and weathered and aged over a lifetime of ancient wars. And endured it all, they did. Today, nothing more could bother them. Nothing mattered anymore. Endurance teaches us one thing if nothing else, to savor the calm after a storm. To savor the lives of those who survived.

Hadn't I savored long enough? Perhaps it was time to reflect.

"Twenty four hours," I said.

He blinked as if stunned I had agreed.

I took up my coffee, grateful I had added the double shot. This morning, today, I would need it.

"I'll give you until dawn. Whatever you ask of me, I'll answer. Whatever you wish, I'll consent."

He blinked again, this time relief, shock. He didn't smile.

He dropped his coat, slid off his shoes and placed them properly beside the door, toes pointing away from the wall. He grabbed his bag and, in a rush, dropped a notebook and pens on the table.

He pulled out a recorder, checked its batteries, and positioned it between us. I waited until he was settled in before beginning.

"How is your tolerance for swearing, Mr. Shaw?"

"Uh...fine, I guess," he answered.

"If I am to tell this, then I am telling this the only way I know how," I said sternly.

He nodded attentively. "At times, I will be vulgar, crass, and uncouth. I will be graphic and blunt and honest. Understand, that if I attempt to censor myself, then there is a chance—a good chance—I will not finish this. So I ask again, Mr. Shaw, can you handle vile and vulgar?"

He nodded. I knew I made him nervous.

Good. He needed to be. "Let's start," I said.

He settled into the chair and positioned his pen, eager for the lesson.

"I have a fear of relationships," I began. "When I love, I love easy, deep, hard, strong, and long. But I can not marry. I can not live with anyone. I can not accept gifts from anyone or let anyone close enough for intimacy. If we do this..." William looked up from his paper, suddenly aware that I was addressing him directly. "...you are not to touch me," I said. "You are not to comfort me. You are not to approach me."

He stared at me, not sure why I was saying this. But I knew. I had given this disclaimer so many times before. This was the best way.

"Know my intentions now. Know what I am, so when I flirt and smile and play with you, you'll know exactly what my intentions are. We will never be more than friends. If we have sex, it will be nothing more than just sex," I said. "I will cry afterward and you are to let me. If you touch me, I will attack you. I will want to kill you."

He looked stupidly at me now. But when we get into this and I throw myself at him, if I break and lunge at him, he'll know why. He'll need to know why.

"Do not love me. You can not have me. You can not keep me or wife me. I can not be owned or possessed. I will stray. I always stray. If you get close, there will be a day when I will push you away only to pull you close to me to push you away again.

“Do not love me. I will love you hard and long and deep, but to keep you safe from me, I will destroy what little is left between us. I will reject you. Let me save you the time and trouble. Do not love me. You have been warned.”

* * *

I can feel it in me, right now. My hands shake, my breathing is erratic. Fear.

In most people, it provokes a response to run. At times, it evolves, and encourages most to fight. In me, arousal sets in. Right now, I'm scared, but I don't want to fight. I want to lay you down and fuck you. Cold, hard, meaningless sex.

I will ravage you so quickly that you will have no idea what to do with it. That is my plan and I know exactly how you will respond. You'll throw your arms up and let me devour you because I move so fast you won't have time to keep up. After the shock wears off you'll give in and respond. Your mind will be blank and I'll do things to you that you can not imagine.

It will all be about you. I will fuck you and taste you. This isn't love. This isn't sex. This is fear. I will make you cum and then I will run. That is what I was trained to do. My brain is programmed this way. My body is conditioned this way. Fear is my trigger. This is what I am. Fear. This is what I have become. This is my defense. You asked for my story. I will tell you exactly how I came to be like this.

Think of how often we fear. How often we experience it every day. Fear is the core human emotion. We are prey. Prey move on fear, live on fear, they think on fear. Fear makes mothers kill to save babies. It makes men into warriors. It turns hate into prejudice. It turns Hitlers into leaders. Fear is the primary emotion programmed into the center of our brain to command each and every choice to keep us alive long enough to breed. Fear of death spawns religions. Fear of the unknown spawns philosophy. Fear of repercussions spawns lies. Fear of isolation spawns love.

But I don't hate. I don't fight. Not anymore. I don't lie. My fear converts to lust. The stronger the fear the more I pursue. Its honed in me. My body has grown around it, shaped it until I drip sex in my smile, in my eyes, in my posture, in my words. I control the flux in my voice to provoke the most sensual of images from you. Every word I speak is with the intent to relax you, to woo you, to draw you in, to make you love me, so I can weaken you, kill you, and run.

That is what I am.

Even now, I want to fuck you hard. Because I'm scared. I want to pull off my skin with lust and devour you. That is how scared I am. And if I don't...

* * *

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I wanted to cry. I wrung my hand on knee. The desire to lunge across the table and fuck William—Mr. Shaw—right then was unbearable.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I looked up and allowed him to look right through me. I know how my eyes appear to others: honest and completely open. Haunting is what I've been told. My smile forever glows in my eyes and I know it. Too many men have told me this. I'm lethal. Everything about me, I unknowingly

developed to attract and seduce a male. I mastered seduction, but there is venom in my blood. It drips from my thorns.

I watched William's eyes dilate. I watched his breathing increase, his neck flush red. I made him feel things, think things all with a glance. I had this mastered. If I smiled right now he would think I desired him. They always think I want them. I was already working on him. I did it the moment I spoke my words. I had a way with words. It was just one more bit of poison I use to seduce.

"I don't exactly wear my heart on my sleeve," I said. "I wear my soul in my eyes. Everything in my life primed me for the next event good or bad. Every event left me in the mental state I needed to be in to enter and maintain the next stage. If something had altered at any point along the way, then maybe I stood a chance. But it didn't. One train wreck prepared me for the next train wreck, which only prepared me for the next train wreck until I had inevitably become what I am before you.

"The hard part is watching men—good men, decent men—fall for me over and over again. The hard part is not knowing how to shut this off. The hardest part is not being afraid."

* * *

PART I

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING



CHAPTER 1

I guess the best place to start is the beginning. I'm not going to drone on about every tedious event of every year. I'm going to be honest. I remember very little from the first eight years of my life.

I was born in New York. I remember the staircase where my older brother, Charles, and I threw little parachute men off the banister while my father watched the news with his back to us. I remember the toy I played with in the driveway that belonged to my neighbors. I remember the walk we took down the road in the stroller, and my sister's bedroom: a large closet painted pink. I remember my mother crying over a load of ruined clothes because she had washed a black crayon with the laundry. The dryer had melted wax all over the machine and the clothes. That day taught me never to wash children's clothes without checking the pockets first. I think I was four.

Her mother was there. It was the only time I ever saw her mother leave the dump of a trailer where she festered. My mother was Irish and had a sliver of Egyptian in her. O'Lundy and Flannigan were the family names. I don't know much about her family. In fact, I know almost nothing. My mother was—and is—a chronic liar. Don't get me wrong, I love my mother. But I don't believe a word that has ever left her mouth.

My mother was beautiful, but insecure, and she boosted her lack of confidence with boasting and bragging. Every story was embellished. Every truth, exaggerated. The rule with my mother

is simple. Believe nothing. My mother was, to say the least, messed up. From my earliest memories. the signs were there.

Her punishments were random, unpredictable, and, at times, unusually cruel. My half-brother, Shaun, would receive the brunt of those fits and, more times than not, she humiliated him to such a degree that it left him scarred. Most of the time, she exercised the classic discipline from the early 19th century. Bend over and hold the chair while I spank you with a belt. She was the mother who literally washed our mouths out with a bar of laundry soap. I grew up with my mother threatening to spoon feed us castor oil. I think we were the only children in the school who knew what castor oil was.

But it wasn't the punishments she doled out that groomed my siblings and I into what we would become. It was the constant, dedicated lack of support and complete absence of physical touch. My mother made sure we were clean, cared for, and beautiful. My brothers had suits. My sister and I were dressed as porcelain dolls with curls, petticoats, pinafores, and saddle shoes. I don't remember a single hug. Ever. What little I remember in way of affection was too boldly overshadowed by her rage, her anger, her screaming, her reprimands.

My father was a by-the-book kind of guy. According to his religion, he was to go to work and bring home the bacon while the wife cooked, cleaned, and mothered children. The only time my father stepped in is when we deserved an extra hard spanking. We went to church on Sundays, Saturdays, and Wednesdays. Yes, we were well-behaved children. Yes, we were manicured into perfect ladies and gentlemen. My mother would have it no other way at any cost.

I remember very little of my father from those days. I remember when I was four, we were camping and a recent spanking had left a bruise on my leg. My father never spanked me or my sister ever again after that. I remember that camping trip well though. We went to one of the many state parks, and oh...we swam beneath the falls. I loved the forests in New York. The water and gorges...the trails. More on that in a moment. I could talk for hours on the forests of New York.

A few years later, we moved to a larger house that I have no memory of, then, when I turned eight, we moved into the ranch. Town was an isolated village with a population of one thousand and was fifteen minutes away. We had two traffic lights. We lived on a dirt road and the ranch-styled house sat in a clearing. I remember that day very well. Not the house, but the forest, endless stretches of woodland area that went on for days behind the house. All around me were hills and mountains covered in endless forest.

Barefoot, I would run to the trees and play. For hours I would explore the Wood.

The forest was old. So very old. You could tell there were places where no man had walked in centuries, if ever. There was a peace there. A refined, ancient peace preserved from society, electricity, and people. Electricity is loud. Did you know? When we had power outages the peace from the forest would seep in and blanket the house in perfect, beautiful silence.

Those were my happiest of days.

One hundred years ago, there had been a road that cut through the wood. An old wagon trail still remained. Moss and grass had grown over it, streams flowed across it, shaping it into an old path through the wood. I always strayed from the path. I would climb into those woods and find little newts, the beautiful little red ones with black spots. They're endangered. I would love them, carefully pick them up, pat their tiny heads, and return them to their streams and beds of moss. I visited them often. I knew they were precious. I miss them.

I remember little from that time. Only the forest. I remember when the screaming got loud, I would run, barefoot into the wood and find my newts. I named the trees and followed the streams to the gorge. Oh, how I loved the gorge.

If you've ever seen central New York, you'll know it's all hillside. Everything is at a constant forty-five to sixty-five degree slope. Houses and farms were built on the occasional slot of not-so flat land. The wagon trail in the wood was on a rare layout of farmable land flanked by sheer drop offs, massive slopes, and plummeting gorges. This was my playground and oh, did I use it.

I had this one spot in the forest mastered where I could jump on the leaves slide for three feet, snag a branch and slingshot myself around and bolt, hopping and sliding, surfing the hills on leaf litter into the gorge. I would end my dance on a jump into the shallow streams with my skirts hiked up to my thighs. That was my home. That is where I wanted to be more than any place in the world.

The stream continued down to the river below. The Tioughnioga (Tee-off-nee-o-ga) River. Some summers we would swim in that river. It was so, so beautiful. The streams that trickled down the mountains cut through the shale and earth leaving behind massive walls of slate and stone that cradled streams and waterfalls. One stream formed the Gorge.

The Gorge had walls nearly thirty feet high. I would climb them in my skirts, stand at the ledge, and gaze down at the deer with their fawn. Up there with the wind and the trees, I found me. I could slip, so easily into the elements and feel them move through me. It felt like I could really fly and wanted, so badly to jump, to try. Self-preservation and Darwin said otherwise. I could see the rows of waterfalls and, upon, my descent, I would strip off my dress and swim naked in the pools of cool, clear water. I crossed rivers and streams hopping bare foot from stone to stone.

There, in my glen I was home. That is the only happiness I remember.

* * *

Life on the ranch was quite the opposite. Life in the ranch was hell. Together, my parents had four children: Charles, myself, Marie, and Eugene. The year we moved into the ranch, our half-brother, Shaun, moved in. Shaun was my father's son from his first marriage and my mum hated him.

My mum was a screamer. The screaming was relentless. There was always noise. If we fell and got scraped my mother screamed and coldly reassured us that we were fine as if she was annoyed that we bled at all. There was no hug. No kiss. No contact.

At night, we watched TV. My sister sat snuggled into my father's lap while I sat on the floor as far from everyone as I could. No one touched me. I was fine with that. I don't think I would know what to do with it if I did.

I remember seeing Marie, her thumb in her mouth, her head resting on my father's shoulder. I remember wishing. I wanted it. I pined. So I hated. I never said anything. "Children should be seen and not heard" was verbally beaten into us. You didn't speak. You didn't ask. You didn't talk. I turned my thoughts back to the TV.

TV.

That was a memory I had. The TV was precious and when it was on, we were not to speak to our father, and it was on from the moment he came home from work to the moment we sat down to dinner to the time we went to bed. The TV was more important than us. My father loved it

more than me. It was one of the first lessons I learned and I learned this lesson well. I detested the TV. It was a fifth sibling who absorbed all my father's love and attention. I was jealous. I loathed it.

Dinner was the only time we had with our father. Again, we were not to speak, but my father did. Every meal he made his rounds. He'd start with my half-brother, Shaun, and would spend fifteen minutes telling him how worthless he was, how selfish and miserable he was. He moved on to Charles and repeated the lecture. Then it was my turn.

I would slip food in my mouth and I'd hear the words.

"You're selfish, ungrateful, and spoiled."

I'd swallow.

"You only think of yourself."

I spooned my food in my mouth flanked by tears.

"You don't spend any time with the family."

It hurt to swallow. My stomach tightened. I lost my appetite and I stopped eating.

"You only ever think of yourself."

He went onto my sister. She was five at the time. Eugene was two. He got skipped.

The next night, the routine repeated itself. My father would drive in.

"Go to your rooms," my mother would say. "You know your father doesn't want to see you."

We scattered knowing we would be scolded if seen.

I'd steal a peek. He kissed my mother and, after changing out of his work clothes, he turned on the TV and watched. My mother called and we'd sit in silence at the dinner table while my father made his rounds again.

"You're selfish and spoiled."

I'd spoon food into my mouth.

"You care only for yourself and shut everyone out."

I'd swallow and the tears would fall.

"You're ungrateful and spoiled."

My stomach would clamp and I wouldn't eat.

"You're useless and rotten and spoiled."

His words became a recording that play in my head to this day every time I try to eat.

* * *



CHAPTER 2

I don't believe my father is a bad man. I think he is a very good man who had no idea how to parent children. I think he did his best. I think he did love us with all his heart.

Do not misunderstand me. If he was to ask me today if I know he loves me, I would say, 'yes.' But a part of me will never believe it. Growing up, I had never seen it. I still don't see it. I think he loves me today because I am a parent and I believe all parents love their children. Okay, not all. Some parents are that horrible, but I think my father simply didn't know how to parent. I think he was clueless, confused, and, at times, completely unaware of the problem. He did his best. He still had no idea what I am. I don't think he ever will.

I remember one movie we watched that made my father tear up.

"I do not know how to love. Please teach me," the actor said.

I watched my father choke up.

"I feel that way," he said.

My father is not good with words. I think it meant a lot for him to finally hear those words. I imagine he had needed to hear them for a long time. I'll say it again, I think my father did his best. I think my father tried. I think my father didn't have a fucking clue back then.

As a mother, I understand and appreciate that conflict, to not know how to love the way a parent should, to be flying blind and have no idea if what you are saying to your children every day is crippling them. As a child, all I saw were the monsters.

In my early life, I had one friend, one solace that wasn't the forest. I had my black short-haired cat with white patches on her feet. Patches. She was old and sweet and would run off into the Wood for days at a time.

Before the situation in the house turned too abysmal, Shaun and I would wander into the forest. He had his stick as all little boys must. As we walked he hacked the flowers. I hated that. If it was beautiful, Shaun destroyed it. That should have been the first clue that there was a problem.

"Don't do that," I'd say.

"Why?" He'd hack at a patch with his stick. "They're just flowers."

"They're beautiful and we're in their home. Stop killing them."

"They're just flowers." He'd hack down another patch.

We arrived at the tree house we had started that summer and never finished. The ladder was gray and had begun to crack under the hot of summer and cold of winter. The floorboards no longer sustained our weight. We hadn't been to the tree house in months.

"See this," Shaun said, tapping a pile of stones beside the tree. "Know what this is?"

"A marker." I said. There were a lot of them around there like you see in here, in Ireland. This one was small. Very small.

"No," he said. "You don't know what this is."

He had a tone that jeered my ignorance. Not friendly or informative at all. Simply boastful. 'I know something you don't know,' he passively said with his smile.

"So what!" I said and he hacked at another flower. "I don't care."

"You will." He hacked at another flower.

"I know what it is!" I said, though I didn't. I didn't care. I was too annoyed at his smugness.

"No, you don't know," he said. He hacked at another flower.

"I don't care!" I stomped off.

"You will!" He hacked at another flower.

"Shut up! I don't care!"

"It's Patches' grave."

I turned and he stood there smiling at me, proud of his power trip.

"You're lying," I said.

"Nope. She's dead." He hacked at another flower.

"You're lying!" I screamed and stomped off blinded by tears.

"What's wrong now, Elizabeth?" my mother screamed through the kitchen window.

"Shaun says Patches is dead!" I cried.

"She is."

I looked up at my mother's cold face in the window.

The annoyance on her face added to the pain of being excluded on top of the pain of losing my friend.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"We didn't want to upset you," she said as if she was telling me my clothes were in the dryer. She was gone, back to her dishes without so much as a hug or encouraging word.

Sobbing, I slumped to the front of the house and dropped into the porch swing. There, I cried and let the hurt wash through me. I cried for an hour, loud and long. And no one ever came.

* * *

After Patches' death, my half-brother developed a new hobby. He collected critters. While I ran to the Wood to escape the screaming, and embrace and nurture my isolation, Shaun diverted his attention to the wildlife.

He gathered up frogs and snakes and stones. One by one, he would throw them into the kiddie pool out back and, one at a time, would pull them out, set them on the back porch, and stone them to death.

My sister and I would scream and cry. "Let them go!"

He'd laugh and I'd watch him smash its hind leg. It would try to hop away on a foot that wasn't there. He'd laugh again and throw another rock. Its stomach would split and it tried to escape, but its skin and blood glued it to the porch hot. Shaun laughed while we screamed for it. He'd smash all its limbs, its back, and its belly. And when it was done breathing, he would pick up the remains and throw them at us.

We'd scream and he'd take up a snake.

"What are you doing?" my mother shouted, annoyed by our sobbing.

"Shaun is killing them!"

"So what!" she screamed. "Boys will be boys! Get away from him if it bothers you!"

Get away? And leave the poor victims to suffer their fate? Alone?

A stone smashed the snake's tail. It slithered leaving behind a trail of blood while making its escape. It made it further than the frog before Shaun stomped it, holding it in place with his foot. Another stone to its back. Blood and guts oozed and my sister and I cried.

"Let it go! Leave it alone!"

Shaun laughed and threw another rock, smashing its body until it was dead. When he was done, he threw the mangled remains at us.

We couldn't leave. We couldn't leave them there alone to their demise. We wanted to help them. But he was too strong to stop. My mother stopped occasionally to tell us to leave Shaun be.

"Boys will be boys! Leave him alone!"

One by one, we watched him mutilate the bodies. We watched the frogs suffer then die. He started to see how long he could keep them alive. He took up the snakes and spun them over his head then slammed their little bodies to the ground. He beat them and broke them and when it was done, he threw the pieces at us.

* * *

I glanced at William across the kitchen table. He massaged his temple with his thumb. When he saw I had paused, he furrowed his brow in question.

“Where was your father in all of this?” he said.

“My father felt this was normal for siblings. He often boasted his own battles with his younger brothers.”

“Yeah. Brothers. Not sisters.” William’s tone dripped with objection. “If I treated my sisters like I did my brother, my father would have whooped me.”

I smiled at William’s innocence.

“I think my father passed off Shaun’s behavior as normal because if he didn’t, he would have to own up to his own behavior.

“Shaun was obstinate. Determined and knew exactly what he wanted. He still does. And when there was something he didn’t want to do, Shaun made sure he didn’t do it. Homework was a constant battle. Every night, Shaun brought homework home. Every night my mother screamed at him to do it until my father stepped in.

“One night, my father stepped in and I watched him pin my step-brother to the floor. He took up the board he used to spank us and he beat my step-brother, Shaun. Shaun squirmed and it struck his back. Shaun screamed and he raised a hand to us, “Mother, please!” he screamed. Mum, Marie, Charles, and I just watched while my father beat him. No one raised a hand. We just stood there and cried for him.”

I felt William’s eyes on me. Remembering revived an old hurt I had packed away and I crunched my brow in pain. I wanted to cry, but couldn’t. The hurt was too old, too stale. I sighed and went on.

“My father knew there were problems with the family. He did try to fix them, but I think he wasn’t sure how. He loved the idea of family vacations and made an effort to implement them. Every summer, we drove down to North Carolina and stayed at a cabin on a lake. The trips did work at first. For one week, we were able to put our lives on hold.”

I fell back into the memory.

* * *

Most of our trips were filled with day long trips to the sea. I do remember once my mother touched me. I was eight and got caught in a rip tide. The undercurrent in the wave knocked the feet out from under me, but I was small. I went right under the water. As I tried to stand, another undercurrent swept my butt out from under me. I needed air, but I couldn’t stand. I felt the ocean carry me. Each time I found the ground beneath me, another rip tide knocked it out from my hands.

I swallowed salt water and thrashed. I could not stand. My mother took my arm and hoisted me up. My head broke the surface and I gasped. I wouldn’t go back to the ocean again. Not until I was old enough to keep my own body above water.

That same trip was accompanied with the worst ride home imaginable. We were on the highway heading back to New York in the station wagon. We had been on the road for about three hours when I found a handful of clear spiders crawling up my shin.

I brushed them off and found more on my calf. I brushed those off and found nearly a dozen on my other leg. By the time I wiped them off, my arm was covered and they were making their way to my neck. I screamed and slapped them away, but they crawled too fast.

“What’s wrong, Elizabeth!” my mother shouted.

I brushed my leg again and more replaced them.

“There are spiders on me!” I screamed.

“So smash it!” my mother screamed back. Always the one to scream and not console.

I swiped at my arm and more came.

“I can’t get them off!” I said. “Pull over!”

“Smash it!” my father said.

I screamed and rubbed them off my neck. I slapped them off my face. “There are hundreds!”

“Stop screaming!” my mother said.

“Pull over!” I screamed.

“We can’t pull over!” my mother said. “We’re on the highway!”

And so I sat, screaming and slapping the spiders away from my legs, my neck, my arms, my chest, and my face.

I won’t lie. I have no idea how long I was in the back of that car. If I were to guess, I would say an hour. I know that isn’t true. It felt like an hour. Felt like a day. It may have been ten...fifteen minutes. It may have been twenty. Regardless, I spent that time arguing with my parents to pull over who were annoyed that I had inconvenienced them at all.

They slowed down and stopped the car along the side of the road. I was still slapping baby spiders off my body. I could feel them everywhere. My parents huffed and sighed while they opened the back seat of the wagon and pulled a shaking eight year old out of the blankets. I couldn’t stop shaking. I couldn’t get them off. My mother complained under her breath while she shook the spider nest from the blankets.

Five minutes later, and with a mouthful of complaints about how I overdramatized the situation, my mother shoved me back in the car with the blankets. No hug. No reassurance. No comfort. No sympathy. Just an earful of how much I had troubled them. I climbed back into the wagon sobbing and shaking without a single word of solace.

* * *

“This is all in your eighth year?” William asked, looking up from his writing.

I nodded. “Yes. I was eight. Comfort, compassion, and love were foreign to me. And I didn’t question their lack of sympathy either. Already, I had come to expect nothing from them or anyone.”

William skimmed over his list.

“Locked in a car with spiders, your only friend dead, which you aren’t even told about, and then subjected to...how long did he torture the frogs and snakes?”

“That time?” I asked. “At least two hours.”

“That time?”

“He mutilated all animals he came across,” I said. “In the driveway, in the forest, in the yard. He had a turtle once. The poor thing. He took a rock and smashed its shell. He beat it into powder. It was so beautiful until Shaun got ahold of it. He caught a baby rabbit once. Rabbits scream, did you know? He picked it up by the ears. That sound...that sound...”

I burst into tears.

To this day I can't hear that sound in my head without sobbing. I threw my hands to my head and rocked, squeezing my head, willing the screams to stop. I could hear it all over again. The sharp staccato of shrieking. A frequency that ripped the fabric of sound like the violin score of *Psycho*. I hugged myself to stop the shaking.

When I looked up, I saw William staring at me in horror. Poor virgin boy. He had no idea what he was in for.

"I begged my mother to release it," I said, still rocking. "Shaun wanted its feet. He was talking about cutting off its feet. It was the only good thing my mother ever did. While we were at school, she released it. Shaun was pissed."

I looked at the window. The morning sun was high and now poured in through the south window, streaking the table and my empty cup.

"I don't want to talk about it...I don't..."

I stood from the table and took up my cup and his. A moment later I was rinsing the mugs and pouring ourselves two fresh cups.

"Tell me more about the dinners," William said, in an effort to change the subject while I added the Irish cream. "You said his words play back like a record every time you eat?"

"Every time," I said setting the cups back to the table and sitting myself back down. "I don't eat. I hate food. I loathe it. It's a constant reminder that my father hates me. I don't eat breakfast. I don't eat lunch. I have to wait until starvation cramps my stomach before I can try to eat. If I'm stressed at all or someone yells at me while I'm hungry, my appetite immediately vanishes no matter how hungry I am. If I force myself to eat, I get sick. The longest I've gone without food is one week."

"One week without food," William repeated. He looked my petite frame over, but asked no questions.

"I survive on coffee," I said.

He returned to his notes. "Well you are a writer," he sighed. "How did your siblings take to your father's dinner lectures?"

"Marie was so young, I don't think she even remembers. She quickly found a place in my father's heart. She was sweet and kind. A genuine daddy's girl. While I...wasn't. I think I am a mama's girl, but my mum didn't hold me or touch me. I really don't know what I am.

"My father dumped on Shaun and I, and only Shaun my lot. He developed a similar problem to mine. He was as smart as I, but stronger. Bolder too at that time. I was still too shy and obedient. I hadn't been broken yet. Shaun took up his plate and ate alone in his room. Stirred up a whole lot of hell with my father, but...he escaped for a short time anyway, while I endured it. At one point, Shaun stopped eating completely."

"How long did this go on for?" William asked.

"I don't know when it started. It's something that, in my mind, was always there. I think it was there before I was eight, but I'm speculating. I truly don't know. It ended when Charles stopped eating with us. He was seventeen. I was sixteen. And we stopped holding family dinners." I nodded, remembering more details as I spoke. "Yes. It stopped when our family dinners stopped. Charles refused to eat with us and if he did eat, he ate alone. I hadn't realized he had stopped eating completely until he was twenty and had collapsed in his room. Up to that point, he had accused me of being anorexic."

I caressed the handle of my mug, but could not raise the cup to drink.

“In truth, I think he was. He purposely wore clothes two sizes too big. He had a huge, winter coat he wore all summer to hide his condition, and by convincing my father that I was anorexic, it took the attention off of him. I was enraged. My father insisted I was anorexic when I wasn’t all because my brother said I was. I ate, just not very much or often. And I never, never threw up my food. Nor did I ever think I was ugly or overweight.

“But when Charles fell...” I shook my head and stared at my full cup of coffee. “I was nineteen. By then, I had my own phone. Charles called me. I yelled at him for bothering me, but he cut me off to say he was paralyzed.

I went downstairs to find an ninety pound skeleton laying on the floor. I woke my father who followed me downstairs and he fed Charles orange juice through a straw. Three glasses and thirty minutes later, my father picked my brother up off the floor. Charles had no muscle. That is when I realized...The mental nightmare he must have lived through...

My chest clamped and I burst. I cried right then for my brother in front of William.

“The whole time,” I sobbed. “He was hurting as much as I...the whole time. He was just as torn up and dying on the inside as I had been. No matter what was being done to me, seeing him like that, I understood just how much hell he had endured. I knew because I too had endured it, and I understood. The hate, the hurt, the longing to be loved and never finding it. He had been as alone and as hurt as I all that time. And if we had just...if I had known, then maybe we could have shared our hell and maybe...just maybe...it wouldn’t have been as bad as it was.”

I cried, and William moved to stand from the table.

“Don’t touch me!” I screamed, and he froze.

“You must not touch me,” I said between sobs.

“I was going to get you a tissue,” he said.

“No.” I shook my head. “No pity. No comfort. No tissues.”

He stared at me. I knew the look he was giving me. I didn’t have to see. The look that reminds me how different I am. How broken I am. I had to explain. There would be more crying and he would have to know.

“Don’t you see?” I said. I rocked myself and sobbed. I was so cold, and I held myself to shut out the chill that wasn’t there. “I’ve never seen comfort. I don’t know what it is. I wouldn’t know what to do with it if...” The words caught in my throat. I had to explain. He had to know. “If you tried to soothe me, to comfort me, even so much as say, ‘I’m sorry,’ it would confuse me.”

The look on his face confirmed my suspicion. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t understand. But I had to try. He had to know.

“Your efforts to comfort me would only evoke more fear. I would panic and I would see you as danger. Don’t you get it?”

The shock in his eyes made me desperate.

“The only physical contact I’ve ever known is pain. For the first twenty years of my life, all human contact hurt me. There never was anything else! Approach me and I will run. And if I can’t...I will sleep with you. I would let you hug me. I would bury my face into your neck and slide my mouth over your skin. I would kiss you.”

I felt it. Already, I ached to have sex, to seduce, sate, sedate, and run. I was shaking with want to fuck him.

“I would grind you,” I said. “And when you react, I would ravage you. I would view your attempt to comfort me as a threat and I would respond as if at war. I would seduce you to protect me.”

William slowly sat back down.

“Do not approach me,” I said. “Do not come near me. I say again, you can not comfort me.” Stunned, William watched as I held myself and rocked.

* * *



CHAPTER 3

I stood staring out the window an hour later. William sat waiting as I took in a deep breath. The sun still bathed the green land in gold, but black clouds had rolled in from the Irish sea.

“How often do you have breakdowns like that?” he asked.

I watched the wind rustle the trees, paying no mind to his question before answering.

“Not often,” I said. “I can feel the anxiety long before I get to that point and know how to end the conversation or steer it off topic without others knowing. Most of the time, I don’t talk about myself. And people don’t ask. I never talk about myself. So long as the topic stays off my past, I’m good.”

With a sigh, I left the window and returned to the table. There, I settled myself back down in my chair.

“When I talk about this,” I said. “When I exhume these memories, there is no avoidance or curtailing the topic. The anxiety will arise. It’s why I warned you.”

He peered down at his notes. He looked uncertain of what to say if he should say anything at all.

“Ready to continue?” I asked.

He nodded.

* * *

The next two years passed with a steady amount of problems with my half-brother. Shaun proceeded to torture the snakes and frogs and any other wildlife he could get his hands on. Six months after Patches died, we adopted two cats.

The cats were a whole other nightmare for me. For the first fifteen years of my life, they were the only physical contact I would have. For the first twenty two years of my life, they were the only pleasurable contact I would have. If I cried, I held a cat. If I was lonely, I held a cat. I virtually grew up without any human contact. It was so absent that I didn’t even know it was missing. I thought the lack of physical touch was normal and I wouldn’t question it or even notice it until I was well into my second marriage with three children.

The cats had their rabies shots, but the distemper shots and any spaying and neutering were considered financial luxuries we couldn’t afford. Nearly every kitten that was born into that house contracted distemper. Mucus builds up in their sinus cavity and respiratory system until the kitten suffocates on their own discharge. My cat would bear kittens and, one by one, I watched them die. More kittens were born and I too, watched them die.

When I found them, I couldn't leave them, after all that they had done for me, holding them until they took their last breath was the least I could do for them. Alone, I grieved and alone I cried. Death and I became very close acquaintances.

Dinners continued as expected. I was carefully taught that I was selfish and worthless. By the time I associated food with rejection, my father added another layer to my value.

Back then, my father was a penny counter. Every spec of food, every drop of milk consumed launched a breakdown of how much we cost him. The financial expense didn't end there. Every Christmas, every birthday, every article of clothing, everything we needed—school supplies and toiletries—was tallied up and the breakdown thrown back at us. By my fifteenth birthday, I had concluded that I was worth one dollar.

My half-brother had developed an odd sense of humor at the expense of others. Within those two years, he threw the cat down the stairs. She landed on me and shredded my back. He blew ground pepper in my eyes. He insisted he was trying to make me sneeze. Maybe he was, but Shaun was apathetic and held himself above the law. If it was an honest mistake, there was too much in question to believe him. My mother reinforced Shaun's behavior with her incessant reassurance that "boys will be boys." And so life went on until the thirteenth day of September in 1990. I was ten years old.

The phone had rung at six o'clock that morning. I remember laying there thinking how odd it was to hear the phone ring so early. It was raining so I lay awake and listened to the rain. Seven o'clock came and went. We should have been up an hour ago. That morning, my mother did not come in to wake us. I climbed out of bed and made my way down the hall. She was in the kitchen crying. The school bus would be there soon.

"What's wrong?" Charles asked.

My mother said nothing.

Eugene, Shaun, and Marie entered the kitchen. We stood there around my mother and waited.

"Mum," I said. "What's wrong?"

She sniffled and quietly sobbed into a tissue. After several moments where we all stood about pondering, she spoke.

"There's been an accident," she managed to say.

A sick feeling came over me. Something bad had happened and we stood waiting for the news.

"Last night..." My mother gulped down a mouthful of tears. "Your uncle was driving home from church when they were hit head-on by a semi-truck."

* * *

I stared at my folded hands resting on the kitchen table.

"Why stop there?" William said. "What happened?"

I shook my head.

"I can not do this justice. That story belongs to my aunt and she needs to be the one to tell it."

I stood and cleared the mugs from the table. When that was done, I took up a dish cloth and absentmindedly wiped down the counter.

"My aunt has a strength in her that I have seen in no other," I said and threw the rag in the sink. "She wasn't in that car accident...because she was home with son. My aunt buried three of her children and her husband while nursing her one week-old."

William stared as I shook my head.

“I have no right to tell her story,” I said. I could feel another wave of tears building and I shoved them back down. “The grief and the hurt I felt was a fraction of the loss she suffered. I will not go on for hours reliving the agony and the grief of my loss when hers far outstrips mine.”

I sighed and ran my hands over my face before continuing.

“You need to know, aside from the cats, that this was my first real introduction to death. You need to know that we spent the next year in Pennsylvania. The lone survivor of that accident was my nine-year old cousin, Hannah.”

I sighed and, settling myself back to the table, I threw my head back and gazed out the window at the black clouds.

“Hannah walked away with brain damage and a broken leg that would never grow again. Her mind had been reset. She had to relearn how to walk, how to talk, how to read, how to write all at age nine. Today, she has a child of her own and to look at her, to talk to her...you can’t tell she ever had to start life over.

“My mother told me that the adults—my aunt, my grandparents, nurses, and doctors—hoped my exposure to Hannah would help her recovery because she and I had been close. This came from my mother. I don’t know if it’s true. I do know that I spent the next year at Hannah’s bedside.”

William scribbled his notes while I thought back to that year.

“Some things are harder to remember more than others,” I muttered. William looked up from his notes. “But that year, some memories are very clear.”

I sighed and turned my attention to William.

“I do not wish to overshadow my aunt’s suffering with my own,” I said. “So I will be brief. I walked away from my tenth year detesting the taste of Death’s bitter hand and I suffered it alone. After my mother told us that my cousins and uncle had died, my siblings and I stood in the kitchen and cried. Not one hug was exchanged among us. Not. One.”

* * *



CHAPTER 4

Until the Accident, my mother had run a strict Baptist home. We had been dedicated church goers and attended a Christian private school through the church. To help pay for our schooling, my family spent Saturdays working in the church. We set up and took down tables, chairs, and faux walls. My mother vacuumed, we cleaned, my father mopped. We were a family of janitors working on Saturdays to pay for our education, attending the church on Sundays and Wednesdays, and attending the school from Monday through Friday.

I said school. It wasn’t a school. It was a one-room school house that accumulated children from second to fifth grade in one room and sixth grade to twelfth grade in another room. Kindergarten and first grade were paired up in a separate room.

The “teachers” were a handful of women ranging from thirty to sixty years old—widows or old maids—members of the congregation who volunteered for the position to get themselves out of the house. The work books were a Christian based magazine-like book that required a full day of independent reading and fill in the blank. No teacher, no lecture, no science, and no socialization. It was a home-schooling program for Christians that taught me to read to find answers.

I learned like this until I was twelve years old. The Bible was our primary text book and the only “real” book I was allowed was the allegorical classic *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. I must have read that book fourteen times. I adore Classical Literature like none other. Looking back, it is no wonder I devoured that book like I did. We had other books in the classroom. Children’s Christian literature and nothing more. I hated them. After reading *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the children’s books bored me. Within the church, the rule with books was simple, if God was not mentioned, it was not allowed. I should have asked about Dante or Milton. If only I had known they existed.

At home, my mother listened only to Christian radio and traditional Irish folk, mostly the Clancy Brothers. She collected Bibles and had a few children’s books...again, Christian Literature.

She splurged once and bought a dozen classics by Reader’s Digest, which Mum thought were pure gold. When I saw that we owned *Little Women* and *Tom Sawyer*, I tried to read them. I stopped once I learned that “Reader’s Digest” meant “abridged.”

You don’t chop the genitalia off a Michelangelo. You don’t burn a Rembrandt. You don’t cut the words out of Dickens, Dumas, or Hugo. Needless to say, I refuse to read abridged classics.

* * *

“You attended a school house?” William asked, peering up from his notes.

“Yes,” I answered. “In very much the same style as practiced in the nineteenth century.”

“And all you did was read?” he asked.

“Independent reading,” I said. “Sit down-silent read. That is how I learned. That system engrained what would become the center of my existence. Everything that I am, everything that I would become I learned from that one-room-school-house. I learned my most priceless lesson of all from that place. I learned how to teach myself.

“I need no teachers, no classrooms, no lectures, no people. I only need a book. Eventually, I learned how to get sources. Later, I would learn how to determined good sources from bad. When I got my hands on the internet...” I shook my head, smiling. “A mountain of gold had been dumped into my lap and I would need no people ever again. Hand me a book and I could do anything. That school didn’t teach me how to read. It taught me how to teach myself. Ironically, it isolated me further.

“If you think about it, every opportunity I may have had to be socially exposed was systematically removed from my early life. The church was terrified of sex and had one steadfast rule above all others: all physical contact was strictly banned. I remember in jest, one day, I pretended to dance with one of my girlfriends. We were reprimanded and broken up as if we had started dry humping each other right there in the auditorium. The look of horror on the deacon’s face...”

“What did you do?” William asked.

I shrugged.

“We mimicked ball room dancing.”

There was a moment. William and I exchanged glances and together we laughed, just laughed at the sheer idiocy of that situation.

We calmed down after a moment and I continued with a smile on my face.

“I’m sure the other students were getting physical attention from their parents and siblings so the ‘no touching’ rule had little to no effect on them. Even my own siblings had something in their lives that drastically altered their experience from mine. Every night, my sister, Marie, snuggled with my father on the couch. My brothers would go on to have relationships that didn’t abuse them. Now that I think about, went through a stage where he clung to everyone for hugs. He couldn’t see one of our aunts without him hanging on them. I didn’t see it until now. He was starved for physical contact.

“Around this time, my father brought home a rare treat. Someone at the church had thrown out an encyclopedia set. I don’t know why my father wanted it. Perhaps because it was a two thousand dollar set he was getting for free, but he brought those books home and I devoured them.

“I read every article on religion, mythology, Rome, Greece, Europe, philosophy, art and the artists, music and the musicians, and Ireland. Oh, how I fell in love with Ireland. I saw pictures of her...She reminded me so much of the forest in New York. I could look out my bedroom window and see such similarities. The rivers and streams I played in, I saw gazing back at me through pictures of Eire.”

William gazed at me over his notes. “If you saw so much of Ireland in the mountains and forests of New York, then why did you leave New York?”

“The people,” I said. “New Yorkers are New Yorkers. The Irish are the Irish. And the culture, this culture is only found in Ireland. If ever there is still magic in this world, it is in Ireland. She calls to me and I listen. I can’t help but love her. Even the lilt in their brogue is like music.”

I sighed and knew a shameless smile spanned my face.

“I don’t know how long ago my family sailed to the States, but through the blood line, my Irish roots carried over to me. I grew up forever homesick for a land I had never seen. I felt out of place in the States, a black sheep that never quite belonged anywhere. I ached for the land of my ancestors and didn’t even know it. When I found Ireland, I found something that felt so right. I found where I belong.

“My mother was Irish and on occasion, would trade up her stale, synthesized music for Irish folk. Oh, but to be carried away on the strings of the fiddle and the winds of the flute while dancing away on a gig of my own making. I lived for those moments of Irish folk and dance. I breathed freely when I heard *Danny Boy* and *Lannigan’s Ball*. I named my son for *Danny Boy*. When Ireland called, I answered. Every time.

“My mother would smile and dance. It was the rare occasion when she was happy and exclaim with such pride, ‘we’re Irish.’”

I gazed down at my hands.

“My mum,” I said. “She played the piano every day for hours. I think on those rare occasions when my mother danced—through the piano playing and the Irish music—she could forget what had happened to her. I think for a short moment, despite all that she had become, Mum could remember who she was and found herself again. In a way, Ireland gave me back my mum as she was meant to be.

“Watching her for the next five years was like watching a time bomb slowly count down to its own demise and we didn’t know it.”

Tears swelled up and I wiped them away before they could fall.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to cry over this.”

“What happened to your mother?” William asked.

I paused in thought while I recalled the years of data I had collected. Some of which required phone calls to distant relatives.

“All I have are my own hypothesis based on evidence I accrued over the years. My mother grew up in a chain of foster homes. This I confirmed with three of her family members. The following is information I gathered from my own observation.

“She had a severe fear of closed doors. She removed the bathroom door from her private bath. When I went around the house closing the doors, something I did often, my mother would panic. She would scream like a banshee and go around opening them again. She refused to close her own door even to get dressed.

“My mother never touched, never comforted, never consoled. She never spoke of her problems, her father, or her past. If questioned about her youth, she would slip into a catatonic state and stay there hours after the questions ended. I met her father once and on that day, she pulled my sister and I aside and said, ‘under no circumstances are you to be alone with that man. Ever.’ I never saw him again. I do not know his name.

“To this day she is a chronic liar who flies into a tirade at the mere mention of a therapist. I was the child who got to walk in and see my parents having sex. I remember the blank look on my mother’s face as if she was battling back a lifetime of nightmares willing for it to be over. What do you think happened to my mother?”

I watched William nod quietly and I knew, he was drawing the same conclusions that I had years ago.

“Despite everything my mother did, I am the only one of her children who has forgiven her. I am the only one who understood her reasons. I am the only one to really know the extent of her mental problems.”

“The year after the Accident, family politics picked up and, through the lines of gossip and my mother, information not meant for children, was provided. My late uncle had been a minister of his own church. With his death and that of his children, it was believed among the congregation that he had sinned, and the Accident was punishment from God. Seeing as how this information came from my mother, I strongly question the truth of it. Nevertheless, this was the reason we were given as to why my parents switched us to the public school the following year.

“In fall of ’91, I began sixth grade. I will be the first to tell you, I was sheltered when it came to sex, music, and the world. The only physical contact I can recall by age eleven was my ass being groped by a boy.”

“Groped?” William said.

I nodded.

“I was eight or nine. I was on the bus and one of the boys about five years older than me grabbed my ass. I was mortified and sat there listening to the girl next to him giggle that he had grabbed my ass. Eh. I would get used to it.”

“Used to it?”

I raised a darkened stare to William.

“Yes,” I said. “Used to it.”

“The males I have been around help themselves when they see something they like. Ass, breasts, legs, thighs, doesn’t matter. Dating five minutes...first kiss...doesn’t matter. If they like it, they’ll grab it. If they want it, they take it from you. If they had plans to rape me, they didn’t hold back the details. Going into a bar is a nightmare in itself. Drunk men don’t hold back. In a crowded room, they could grab a feel and slip away without being seen. I was often mortified, humiliated, violated, and would get used to it.

“Walking into the public school was like stepping from a sanctuary into the gates of hell. As a mother, I see the appeal of a Christian home. I had never heard a swear word in my life up until then. I had never heard anything sexual, and I certainly had never been around anyone who would show such disregard to others.

“In the Christian school, people were polite. Manners began and ended every sentence, and we were oblivious to our sexual development. It was something that lurked behind the walls of innocence and our parents had safely secured it there. Nothing had prepared me for the filth and vulgarity of the public school.

“Looking back, I can honestly say I experienced a severe culture shock. Girls openly spoke of sex. I watched twelve year old girls grope males who did their best to block the grab while both laughed at their game. There was a collection of trees on the playground where children learned they could indulge during recess. Within the first week, I was asked if I was a virgin. Aside from the Virgin Mary, I had never heard such a word and certainly had no idea what it meant. When I said yes, they laughed at me. When I said no, they guffawed and giggled like a gaggle of lascivious snakes basking in the filth of Babylon’s whores.”

I looked at William.

“There may be some venom in that statement,” I said.

He laughed. “You think?”

“I was scared and lost, new and alone. I hated them all. The males were different. Very different. They looked at me like I was an exotic jewel. They made me feel like an exotic jewel. Where the girls were vindictive and cruel, the boys were sweet and kind. They approached me with caution as if they knew I preferred the quiet and gentle touch.

“I remember my first kiss so well. I said nothing. I did nothing. I froze up and waited for the moment to pass. I hated it. Loathed it. He treated me well, moved in, massaged the breasts I had just started developing. He felt me up, sliding his hands over every part of me. I said nothing. I shut down as my mother did, and I let him have his way with me.

“He approached me as if I was a wild horse. He didn’t speak my language, but knew if he moved too quickly he would spook me and I would run. After three days, he knew I wasn’t happy. He tried talking to me. I didn’t dare speak. I couldn’t open up. I simply had no idea what to do with human contact. I knew I didn’t want it and that I hated it. I dreaded when he was around. Up until then, the only physical contact I had was my cat and the ass grab. I had no idea what to do with his eager affections.

“I do remember the moments between our one-sided make-out sessions, where I reveled in his absence. Those moments filled me with such relief. It felt good being independent and I loved it. Space. That was something familiar to me. That was something I could understand. Before my first kiss, I prized my solitude and had learned to associate safety and security in isolation.

“We broke it off after three days. He understood through a series of questions and my mute head nods that I wasn’t okay with the relationship.

“The situation at home was moving from bad to worse. Shaun had moved on from the frogs and snakes to the cats. He would pull their tails and bite their ears. I would come running and do

my best to take the cats from his grip without hurting them. He'd hold them, bite the ends of their tails. When they screamed, he'd hold them tighter and slapped them if they scratched him.

"One day, I walked into the kitchen to find my cat with a sandwich bag around her head. His hands were clamped around her neck to hold the bag in place. Her tongue was out. She was panting while he sat there, slowly watching her suffocate. I ripped the plastic from her head and as she ran, he called me a bitch and chased her down.

But I was changing. I was starting to fight back.

* * *



CHAPTER 5

I gazed out the window. Storm clouds blocked the afternoon sun. A gray shadow had fallen over the forest and the wind had picked up.

"Suddenly so quiet?" William asked and a smile pulled my mouth.

"As miserable as sixth grade was, it was the year I met Isaiah," I said.

"Isaiah?" Williams whispered and I listened to him take up his bag from the floor and shuffle through the contents.

"Yes," I said before he could find one of my books and pull it from his bag to check the dedication. "That Isaiah. Sweet Isaiah. I remember no other in sixth grade as I remembered Isaiah. He was shy and quiet. He said not a word. His eyes were warm and, thinking back, the day I saw him watching me from across the room, I think that was the moment he fell in love with me."

I sighed and abandoned the memory.

"You want something to eat?" I asked.

William stretched his arms and checked his watch. "I could eat."

"Of course you could." I made my way to the stove and took off the lid then dished some stew into a bowl.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Irish stew," I said, ladling out a bowl. "I was raised on it."

I set the bowl in front of him and pulled out a loaf of peasant bread, slid him a bowl of butter, and pulled down a clean mug.

"You're not eating." He observed.

"Not when I talk of this, I won't."

He stared into his stew.

"Eat," I said. "I'm too stressed to eat. If I try, I'll feel sick and throw up."

He hesitated, but finally wolfed it down as I poured myself a fresh cup of coffee with Baileys.

His bowl was empty when he spoke again. "So, up to this point you had no comfort. No human contact."

"I had already adapted to living without touch of any kind," I said. "Don't get me wrong. I wanted it. I could feel myself wanting it. But I wasn't getting it. If I wanted physical contact, I

sought out my cats. I fought a daily war for my cats. I would come home from school and, at once, go to war.

“I remember the walk from the bus to the front door. It felt like I was walking from a bunker into the jungles of Vietnam armed with nothing, but my determination and good will. My mission was simple. Save the cats. I collected them before Shaun could get to them. He’d hunt one down and torture it. I would come to its rescue and he would fight with me.

“There was one fight, I wish I could remember the subject. We wrestled, and it landed me a black eye.”

“He hit you?”

I chuckled. “He punched me.”

William looked stunned.

“Oh, yes,” I nodded. “Yes, he hit me. Would not be the last time either. My face swelled and before Mum and Dad could get home, I had a shiner that fit my face like a mask.”

“What did your parents do?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said, “I lied and said I fell down the stairs.”

“You lied?” William straightened himself in the chair. “For him? And they bought it?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you protect him?”

“Protect him?” I scoffed. “I didn’t protect him.” I rolled my eyes and nodded. “Okay, I protected him. I was scared for him. We kept the ruse going for two weeks. When my aunt asked who hit me, I told her the truth. My mother scolded me for lying.”

“And Shaun?”

“What about him?” I asked.

“Did he get in trouble for hitting you?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “He was a boy. That’s what boys do. That’s what my mother said. I learned the lesson well.”

“That’s what boys do?” William repeated my mother’s words back to me.

“Yes. ‘Boy’s will be boy’s,’ she said. Every man has his breaking point. Every man will hit a woman if he’s pushed hard enough. Even you. You just need to know where it is. No. Shaun was never punished for hitting me. He was allowed to. I got more of a reaction out of the boys at school than I did my parents. I went to school the next day with a shiner, and those boys, who saw that someone had smashed their exotic jewel, bombarded me.

“Who hit you?”

‘My step-brother.’ I referred to him as a step-brother to classmates because most had never heard of a half-sibling before. I didn’t feel like explaining it either.

‘Your step-brother hit you? What’d your parents do?’

‘Nothing?’

‘Your step-brother hit you and your parents did nothing? If I hit my sister, my parents would beat my ass.’

‘Hey, who hit you?’

‘My step-brother?’

‘Your step-brother did this to you?’

“I wanted to die,” I said to William. “I was mortified. I was confused. Why was it such a big deal?”

“Because men don’t hit girls,” William said.

“They do in my world,” I said. “It’s what they do.”

“No! They don’t!”

I flinched at William’s raised voice and started stupidly across the table. Like so many before him, he was adamant. And, as always, I couldn’t believe him.

“Every man hits,” I said. “Every man has his breaking point. Some just have a higher breaking point than others. I prayed every day that I wouldn’t find it. I still do.”

William seemed to calm himself down and he returned to his paper.

“That event brought Isaiah and I close,” I said. “It opened us up. I’m not sure if he sought out my friendship to protect me...I think he did. I think he saw what my half-brother did and he felt he could protect me if he were closer.

“Isaiah provoked me. Purposely pushed my buttons. I was quiet, soft spoken, and shy. I was small. Still am.”

“How tall are you?” William asked.

“Four-eleven.”

“And weigh what? Fifty pounds?”

I smiled. “One fifteen to one twenty depending on the day. I stopped growing that year. I had a passion inside of me and I think Isaiah saw that it was suppressed. He probed and picked my brain. Selected a plethora of topics until he zeroed in on the one that would ignite my spirit and did.”

“What did he say?” William asked.

“He said women were weak.” I sighed. “After my black eye...”

I shook my head, feeling the anger rise.

* * *

After my black eye, things changed. Shaun too had learned an invaluable lesson: he could beat me without repercussion. My half-brother stopped torturing the cats and came after me. He was careful to never hit my face again, but everything else was fair game. He’d come to my room to beat me. Some days he would get a punch, maybe two in before I closed the door on him. He started wearing shoes all the time. I would slam the door as he dropped his foot in the way. Eventually, I stopped opening the door. And he started picking the lock.

Weak? Those beatings aroused a strength in me that I would embrace. There was Isaiah standing over me, smiling, telling me that women were weak while every day I was single-handedly fighting a man’s war.

“You’re weak!” he said. “Your bodies were designed to have babies and so nature softened them and made them pliable because you couldn’t handle it.”

I had a point to prove.

I slapped him.

Hard.

The five foot eleven mass of Isaiah fell back. The room went silent. I could see my handprint on his left cheek. It burned. Oh, I knew it burned. Tell me I was weak.

He straightened his spine, threw back his shoulders. I threw out my chest and raised my face, bracing for the slap back. Daring him, wanting him to hit me.

Hit me. I thought. Hit me. I’ll show you how weak I am.

He stared at me.

Hit me. Hit me...or kiss me. Oh, please kiss me.

You could cut the sexual tension in that room with a blunt blade.

No one in that room breathed. Eyes shifted from him to me to him. We all waited, not sure if he would hit me or kiss me.

He stepped in, took a deep breath and said, "You're lucky you're a girl."

That slap ignited a series of electrical charges that would not stop until we had sex. That slap became immortalized in our class and was talked about until Graduation Day in '98.

"Hey remember when Beth hit Isaiah in sixth grade?"

"Epic!"

That slap launched the hopes and dreams of every pubescent female in school.

"Are you guys going out?"

"No."

Every year, since the Slap of '91, someone asked us that question. And we purposely did nothing just to piss them off.

* * *

I listened to William's sweet chuckle.

"I have very few simple stories to tell. When I have one, I share it." I smiled and watched the strand of hair fall over his eyes. I had an urge to brush it back.

"You have a warm laugh, did you know?" He stopped chuckling at once and blushed. "It's wonderful to listen to."

He looked down at his papers.

I sighed and looked to the window.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Why do you say things like that?"

I shrugged. "My words come easily, but they are sincere."

"Is that more of your sex charm?" he asked.

"Partly," I said. "I hate how hard it is for people to offer a compliment while most are quick to offend and trash talk. Gossiping comes too easy for most. But when compliments are extended, people blush and cower. I know too many who are eager to hear an insult where there isn't one intended and slow to accept a compliment. We are too hesitant to be kind and are too careless with our insults. I hope to change that about this world. And I do my part to change that."

I sighed and looked back to the forest through the window.

"I love you. You're beautiful. You're kind. I like you. These are things we should never hesitate to say."

"I love you," William repeated. "You don't think those words should be reserved for... appropriate occasions?"

"No," I said. "Life is too short to waste on hesitation. Be brave. Be bold. Be blunt. Be kind."

I stood and took up his empty bowl from the table and William took up his bag and pulled out a fresh supply of paper then settled back in again. I set it in the sink and rested my hands on the counter. I bowed my head and waited.

"You alright?" William asked.

I didn't move. I knew what part of the story was to come next. I needed a moment.

Are you? I heard Ian say and I looked to the six foot two Nordic prince standing to the right of me in my kitchen. His longsword was unsheathed. The point on the ground. His palms rested lazily on the pommel.

"Must you be in every book I write?" I asked him.

Ian shrugged and flashed that smile he always gives me.

Only a little.

"Elizabeth?" William said.

Ian nodded toward William still seated at the table. *He's worried about you.*

"With good reason," I answered. "I'm standing here talking to a elven prince in my kitchen. Somehow, you keep forgetting that you are a figment of my imagination."

He smiled. *I know that.*

I swooned and he knew that too.

"Do you?" I asked him.

You know that, Ian said.

"Do I?"

He doesn't know that.

"Elizabeth?"

Go on, Ian said. *He's waiting.*

"Miss Lundy?" I heard William's chair scraped the floor.

"Yes, William," I said, straightening my back and turning to him with a smile.

I saw him glance behind me where Ian was still standing, and I watched William gaze at the empty void that was Ian.

Outside, the rains had started to fall.