

## PREFACE

The muffled, distorted sounds under water always comforted me and brought about peaceful moments where I could feel boundless, with no restraints from the real world trying to mask me—contain me. That's why I always swam through the water instead of on top for easy access to the air I needed to live. In the underworld, I felt air was not necessary and found the softened noises serene and uniquely beautiful, but there was no beauty in her dying that day...

The blue water Whit once loved now looked black because it was claiming her, taking her from me. Crash was unconscious. Blood floated from his wounds, and his shirt remained clutched in her desperate, tiny fist. I swam with a vengeance to save her. At least, that's what I believed until I saw her expression, the message in her eyes. *The ballerina's sacrifice...* I knew Whitney was choosing to die for him, *with* him.

Morning sunrays lit the way, shining a path through the blackness to my best friend, to my—giving me even more determination to reach the girl I loved and not let her succeed.

Her elegant dancer hand floated gracefully above her, following her undeniable descent until her fingers twitched as if life—hope—had somehow ignited. Whitney looked down at Crash's fingers pitifully touching hers, trying to encourage her to fight for her life because there was no beauty in her dying that day, and we both knew it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Façades

Secrets can be harmless, or they can be torturous inner struggles that devour you from the inside out. That is what my secrets did. The thing is, they weren't just mine, they were ours, and they exposed a much bigger, twisted story that unraveled, costing lives—innocent lives.

In the dark, I had been able to fool myself— time and time again. Caught up in the moment, I moaned, “*Whit.*”

“Reether? W-What did you just say to me?”

Everyone wondered why Constance hated my best friend with a vengeance, but this was why. Girlfriends don't take it well when, while kissing them hungrily, you call them the wrong name, especially when it's the name of a girl your girlfriend is constantly accusing you of loving in more than a sisterly or best friend kind of way.

In Connie's feminine, light, blue bedroom, my forehead dropped to her shoulder. “Babe, don't start. I got off the phone with Whit before I got here. It was a slip of the tongue.”

Connie pushed me off her. “A slip of the tongue while your tongue is in my mouth!”

“Shh, your parents will hear you.” I lay on my back instead of on top of my girlfriend, who was clearly shutting down a much-needed sex session.

“Go home, Reether.”

I sat up, sorely disappointed, if you know what I mean, sticking my unused condom back in my front pocket. “What about the movies? The reason I’m here?”

“We both know *why* you’re here, Reether.” Connie put her blouse back on, trying to act strong, but the poor girl had it bad for me, and I used her vulnerability like the asshole I was. That’s probably why God wasn’t allowing me to have the girl I *really* wanted.

Once dressed, Connie faced me. “If I decide I still want to go, I’ll ride with Harlan.”

When I got up from her bed and my toes couldn’t feel her plush carpet, I realized I hadn’t even bothered to take off my sneakers.

Hit and run.

Slowly, while buckling my jeans, I walked to her with shame in every step. Connie wouldn’t look in my eyes as she retreated until her back was up against her bedroom wall. She had every right to feel disrespected and used. She was a victim of sorts.

My hand gently grabbed the nape of her neck to get her to look at me. “I’m sorry.” I kissed her cheek and left her room. I meant it. I was sorry—sorry for loving my best friend in ways I shouldn’t and for not loving Connie like I should. It wasn’t fair to either of them, but I couldn’t control or stop what was in my heart.

As I exited her overly decorated home that announced the quantity of cash rolling through her family’s bank accounts, I was unaware how that night would become sweet revenge for Connie, and that she would use it against me—against my only weakness.

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Unlike Whit's parents, mine were always home and had already retired for the evening. My bedroom smelled of fresh paint. Mom thought white walls were more uplifting than my old brown. She seemed to feel I wasn't cheery enough. Worrying about my well being was her priority. I couldn't understand why she worried; I was fine.

I blinked my lamp light for my "good night" to Whit and got into bed. My down comforter made its familiar paper crackling noises. In the dark, staring at the ceiling, I thought about how Whitney's face had lit up looking at the suspicious guy we'd met at the movie theater—Crash. On his neck, he had a tattoo saying "Life 1982," whatever that meant. Whit seemed infatuated with the tattooed character and seemed to recognize him as the trouble she believed she needed to amp up her life—a life she considered to be lacking excitement.

Chasing Whitney around and trying to control her "need for speed" was like trying to be Superman, stopping a tornado with my bare hands. Maybe because I was without a ridiculous red superhero cape and blue tights, I was shit out of luck.

My cell vibrated on my nightstand. *Let me in.* I groaned. Seeing Connie and hearing more of her bitching was not high on my to-do list, but I went downstairs and opened the door.

"We need to talk," was all she said.

I turned and walked away, silently telling her to follow, and internally cussing my regret for opening the door in the first place. The high heels that annoyed the shit out of Whit clicked on my mother's imported Italian marble flooring. Connie always wore them because I'd told her I liked taller girls, trying to throw her off track of my true feelings for the short redhead who kept me in a constant state of starvation. I was to blame and truly had no right to find the noise irritating, but I did.

Back in bed and staring at the ceiling again, I tried to return to my thoughts of Whit, but it was impossible with Connie crawling into my bed. Next to me, she whispered with disdain, “It hurt to watch you watch them.”

I glared at her, wondering what she was babbling about.

Connie nodded. “Whit was becoming enthralled with another guy—literally under your nose—and watching it bothered you. Knowing you’ve been lying to me makes me sick. That’s why I excused myself to the restroom.” She glanced down then back to me. “And the fact that this guy looked like a shorter version of you tells me Whitney is lying too. That is why I made that rude comment.”

“I don’t look like that guy.”

“I’m not saying you could pass as twins. I’m saying that it is more proof that Whitney *unconsciously* wanted to be with you.”

Not missing the past tense part of her statement—*wanted*—I rolled to face her. “It’s not like that. Whit and I are—”

Her feminine fingers on my lips stopped me from talking. “No more lies. Okay?”

Constance was a good girl, no matter how much she came off as a stuck-up bitch. I knew this because I caused her rude, crude behavior. I was responsible and had jumped her ass at the movie theater for trying to salvage our relationship and chase away the primary threat. So unfair. So I nodded, promising no more lies. “What do you mean ‘wanted’?”

“For whatever reason, Reether, you and Whit are not together, and after what I saw tonight, you never will be.”

Open wound, insert salt.

She leaned closer with tears brimming. “I should walk away from you, Reether Jones.” She appeared so desperate, my guilt tripled. “But I can’t.” She whispered, “So I’m here to commit a pitiful act.”

Not knowing what direction this conversation was headed, I stayed quiet.

She touched my face, getting even closer to my body. “I need you, Reether. I think I need you like—like you need her.”

And came the fourth level of guilt.

“Close your eyes, Reether.”

I squinted, trying to figure Constance’s meaning.

Her shaking lips tried to smile, but it seemed as if she was scared. “Please.”

I had been indirectly cruel to Connie and felt I should try whatever she needed me to. Slowly, my eyes closed.

“Now... think of her.”

My eyes popped back open. “Connie, what the hell are you—”

“I’m helping us both.”

“How will me thinking of—Connie—where—what are you up to?”

Tears slipped from her hazel eyes. “I want you to want me.”

“I do.” And I did, but—

“Not the way you want her. So let’s find a way for us to have both.”

“Connie—”

“Close your eyes.”

“This is not going to work—”

“Use what is obtainable... like I am.”

“How is me using you while thinking of her acceptable to you?”

“To be completely honest, I don’t know.” Connie words were heart-wrenching. “But I can’t stop hoping for this to somehow make you see *I’m* here, willing to love you the way you need.” Her tone changed, telling me how serious she was. “Reether, either do what I ask, or shame me into submission, making me leave without another opportunity for you to come as close as you ever will... to her.”

I was stunned for two reasons.

One: Connie’d come up with a somewhat unsavory plan.

Two: I was desperate enough to agree to it.

Constance took my silence as an answer and began to leave my bed. In horror, I watched my hand as it reached out and grabbed hers, begging her not to take Whitney—the false Whitney—with her. Connie squeezed my hand with an expression that said she felt guilty for using my weakness against me, but not guilty enough to not lie back down with me. “Close your eyes.”

With my eyes slammed shut, I breathed rapidly because I was nervous about the questionable line I was about to cross, yet hopeful that this idiotic plan might work.

Her lips touched mine, and I couldn’t react. I couldn’t get the skin attached to my mouth to move. Connie told me, “See her. Envision her.”

*That* was easy. Whit was always on my mind, so her smiling green eyes popped into my blind sight in an instant. Lips touched mine again, and I tried so diligently to pretend they were Whit’s, but her smell was off. I smelled hair product, not the lake or fresh, hard-earned feminine sweat that Whit always exuded after a dance practice. Thinking of what I *didn’t* smell had me

*smelling* Whitney. That's how much I yearned for her. In my mind, Whit was soaking wet, running down my dock toward my backyard— toward me.

Connie moaned as my mouth opened to hers, and that moan distracted me from the precious image in my head. The visual of Whitney in my arms, kissing me, started to fade until I heard, "Link." Whether it was in Connie's voice or not didn't matter. The only one to call me Link was my Whit. Next thing I knew, I was on top of Connie, with my eyes closed, captivated by the closest I could get to *Whitney Summers*.

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Maybe one would have thought that having a pretend Whitney would ease my continuous aching for the real thing, but it only increased my need. My body was not fooled, and it longed to feel Whit intimately. The next morning, simply being in the school parking lot made me want her even more. I knew Connie could sense my stress because she leaned back against my car. "Whenever you need to imagine, I'm right here, Reether."

My body moved of its own accord, and I dove in. My eyes closed, and I was crushing Connie up against my car with my own body, my own lies...

"Really? It does nothing violent to your stomach?"

Hearing the real voice that rules my world, my body jerked away from Connie's. Constance was heartbroken. She pushed me away and took off running in tears. I should've chased her. I should've tried to right my wrongs, but instead, I found myself leaning against the back of my car, watching perfection as one of her dancer friends told Whit what I already knew.

I smiled, so proud of my little dancer chasing the dream her parents despised. Whit's red hair blew in the wind as her eyes searched for me. The relief on her face, when she found me, gave me an inner peace that no substitute Whit could ever have me experience.

Even with this knowledge, when Constance came back, I tried to use poor her to fill the void again. There seemed to be no other choice. Crash, the ass, drove his yellow Lotus into the skating rink's parking lot. Whit beamed, talking to him. In my car, I dove into Constance's mouth trying to find shelter, solace from the truth in Whit's gleaming smile. I believed her smile belonged to me—the way it did when she found me—needed me at school to reassure her that her dreams were justified.

Well-fed jealousy had me abandoning my substitute, leaping from my car, and banging on Crash's passenger window just in time to stop their first kiss. I almost puked. I found myself mentally concocting a ludicrous plan to follow Whit and Crash everywhere, preventing any possible contact. My shit-eating grin was the outward proof of me not being of sound mind. And that same grin seemed to rub Whit in all the wrong places. As she marched away, I yelled, "Ahhh, all right. I pissed you off. I'm sorry. Come back, baby!" but was pleased the kiss had been stalled.

Crash the—the, okay, so Whit was the one with name-calling talents. Anyway, Crash the ass chased after Whit, said something to her, and did some sort of epilepsy dance that I was sure would have her running for the hills. But it didn't. My girl smiled at Crash like he was her savior, and I was back to wanting to puke.

Inside the rink, things were even worse. It was like witnessing Whit fall in love right before my bulging eyes. She even shared her popcorn! That had me trembling like a pansy walking barefooted across hot coals. And even though Crash appeared shady, he treated Whit

with the utmost respect, so I couldn't even dislike the guy—besides hating him for reasons that were not his fault—if that makes any sense at all.

Their wheels rolled around the rink to “True Colors,” a couple’s skate song. I was tempted to take the empty bag of popcorn they had shared and shove it down the DJ’s throat for causing this obvious connection. Sending Cyndi Lauper hate mail climbed to the number-one slot on my to-do list for writing a song that was perfectly worded for lost souls needing guidance. What? Cyndi couldn’t have written a song about a perfect girl falling in love with her adorable best friend because she finally saw the light?

With her own shoes back on, Whitney seemed to be hesitant as she walked to me. Her eyes were on the floor as if she were doing something wrong. I was already in my regular shoes because rolling around with newfound lovebirds was as much fun as poking my fingernail beds with rusty needles, over and over.

Thankfully, Ford was entertaining Constance, playfully spinning her around the rink, so I could focus on my current meltdown and observe and monitor Whitney.

Standing in front of me, saying nothing.

My finger tilted her face up. “What’s wrong?” I asked with hope for a miracle lingering in my voice. When she didn’t answer, I pushed a red curl behind her ear so I could see her pixie face. “Whit, talk to me.”

“I don’t know.” She reached out and unconsciously tugged on the hem of my T-shirt. “This feels weird, but... Crash and I are going to leave and, uh, you know.”

My body’s organs rearranged themselves as my imagination soared to unwanted visions unmercifully taunting my brain. “*What?*” I screeched as if I no longer owned a pair. “You want to go and do—*what?*”

“Not *that* Link!” She smacked my chest. “Not giving up my V status ’cause of a successful couple skate. Geez. To dinner, dummy. I—I think I want to get to know him.” She went back to playing with my shirt. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Whitney Summers asking me this should have told me about her insecurities—should have explained so much. Her pulling on my shirt, trying to get me closer, should have been a tell-all sign, but I had much to learn, the hard way apparently.

I wanted to throw a tantrum and scream, “*Hell, no! I don’t think it’s a good idea! Because I want you!*” But she had been through so much. Who was I to take away her true smiles—not fake smiles that were a façade to hide her pain. I don’t know. I guess when you truly love someone, selfishness somehow steps aside so you can do what’s right for the one you adore even if it shreds you apart, one heartstring at a time.

I peered past her and saw Crash observing us. Strobe lights flashed, but I saw his expression wasn’t one of possession over Whit. It was one of hope. I don’t know exactly how I understood it, but I then knew his tough-guy persona wasn’t real, and I knew he really liked Whit.

As much as I wanted her, she didn’t think she wanted me in that way, so my jealous mouth opened. “Yeah, I think it’s a real good idea to get to know him since you seem to... you seem, you know, to kind of like the guy.”

Complete overload caused shortages in my brain while Whit happily held Crash’s hand, and they left for alone time.

“You still breathing?” asked Harlan as he approached.

“What?”

He patted my shoulder. “Someday, the two of you will see the light and marry. I swear it, friend. Just keep breathing ’til then.”

*Does everybody know I’m in love with Whitney? Wait—*

I was about to ask Harlan what he meant, if he thought Whit cared for me in that manner, but was interrupted by an acquaintance from school. Chuckling, Terry said, “I didn’t know your girl was so much like her brother.”

One: This guy’s attitude rubbed me wrong—as did everything else that evening.

Two: He spoke of Timothy—my girl’s dead brother—and was smiling about it. Not sitting well with me.

Three: He was talking about my Whit, and his tone told me it was in a disrespectful way.

I glared at Terry and growled. “You have three seconds to clarify yourself.”

“Easy, Reeth,” Harlan attempted, putting down his water bottle on a nearby table.

Terry quickly realized he was stepping on raw toes. “Whoa, Reether, I didn’t know you’d let Whit do drugs.” He gestured me. “I thought that protective vibe you had going with her would be all over that shit. Didn’t mean to offend. To each her own.”

My head tilted as my irritation grew. “Drugs?”

The punk had the nerve to smirk again. “Lay with dogs, ya get fleas. Am I right?”

I inhaled deeply, trying not to punch first. “Are you referring to Whit as a dog?”

Terry rolled his eyes. “Jesus, you’re touchy tonight. No. It’s a metaphor. Hang with a dope dealer, you get drugs. *Comprende?*”

After Harlan pulled me off the asshole—who was now bent over, holding his bleeding nose, Terry yelled Crash’s real name. “Harold fucking Thompson? Crash’s father? Drug trafficker extraordinaire? Ring any bells, you dickwad?”

“What?” I numbly said, thinking that was the last thing I expected to hear.

There was a known source, who had been said to be a local sizeable dealer, but I didn't do drugs. No one I hung with did drugs, so I hadn't put the two names together. I had no reason to. “H-How do you know?” I was worried my Whit was alone with a possible danger, and I had advised her to go.

“Because I see him selling at *MP* all the time.” Holding a napkin to his gushing nose, his eyes involuntarily closed and watered. “God, this hurts! Your dad is getting this doctor bill...”

*Mug and Pour* was a shady bar that lacked everything except for disturbing clientele.

“You don't have to be twenty-one to get into *MP*. That's who I buy my weed from, Link. Where do you think his nickname comes from? When a druggy *crashes* from their high they go to...” He waited for me to make the connection.

“Crash,” I mumbled in complete disbelief.

Whitney Summers was falling for the son of the man who'd killed her brother.