

CHAPTER 3

A few days after the gala, Jared came home from a long day at work and eased out of his alligator-skin Carminas. He loved those shoes. They were comfortable, expensive, and chosen by Rachael. She had a way of making him look less ordinary.

Eric's other stylists had dressed him in fads and uncomfortable suits, but Rachael considered his comfort as much as his appearance. There was elegance in what she chose and compassion in the fit. It was one more reason he needed her in his life.

He had very few relationships and no close connections. He had no parents. His father had made sure of that when they were kids.

Placing his keys and phone on the side table, he picked up the stereo remote and pressed the power button. Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons: Spring* resonated through the apartment like a concert hall. He closed his eyes and moved his hands as though conducting an orchestra. The harmony of the strings carried him into a world all his own. His breath slowed as he was transported to an imaginary stage. The quickening tempo guided his hands as they danced through the air.

These classical pieces gave him a sense of control he didn't have in his life. For once, he was the conductor—unchallenged.

When the piece ended, the sharp notes of Vivaldi's *Winter* began to play. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his suit jacket, letting the music guide his movements. His eyes opened as he removed his jacket and walked into his bedroom.

He placed his jacket on the bed, removed his tie, and laid it neatly on top. The quickening tempo of the violins followed him to the dresser, where he grabbed a change of leisure clothes. His head swayed to the rhythm of the music.

Inside the bathroom, the shower valve turned, quickly filling the room with a thick wall of steam that softened the sharp notes of the violin strings. Freshly showered and dressed, he stepped back into the bedroom, drying his hair with a towel as the music resonated through the apartment.

In the kitchen, the snap of an opened bottle of sparkling water sliced through the melody. The violins intensified, engrossing his soul with perfection.

The entry closet opened to a shelf neatly arranged with a tool bag, lightbulbs, and a tattered old shoebox. His fingers curled gently around the shoebox as he lifted it. With the towel now around his neck, he sat on the couch and placed the shoebox on the coffee table. He slowly lifted the lid, revealing a stack of old, frayed pictures. Each one held a world that had long since ended.

The first photograph, his most treasured one, came free from the stack. His mother's face stared back at him. Bent corners framed the faded image, which had a slight tear at the top. She was young, wearing a flowered dress and a decorative pink summer hat. Her smile radiated through the old photograph. As he studied her face, her striking beauty rose from the image.

His finger pressed gently against the photo, slowly tracing her face as if he were touching her. His heart softened as the violins slowed, pulling him into quiet reflection.

Tenderly placing the photo onto the coffee table, he reached for the next fragile picture, one showing his mother and father later in life. His heart sank. Neither parent smiled. They held

drinks and cigarettes; their eyes were red and glossy. This version of his parents was not worth remembering. He held the brittle photo tightly as the music's tempo quickened, slightly bending it in the center.

The smell of cigarettes and dirty clothes came back, bringing with it the shame he had felt as a child.

To Eric and Jared, Mr. and Mrs. Stetson, aka Mom and Dad, were horrors of the darkest kind. They were both controlled by addiction. The only emotion the boys ever saw from their father was rage, especially when he drank, which happened almost every night until their mother's murder.

The boys stopped referring to him as dad long ago. Their mom had retained the parental title a little longer than Mr. Stetson.

He was an accountant, and she was his punching bag, his dog to kick, and his enabler. From what the boys had been told, their parents had truly loved each other until Mrs. Stetson became pregnant with Eric. Mr. Stetson changed, and he made damn sure Mrs. Stetson paid heavily for her boy's existence. She had died long before her actual death.

The day after the brothers were taken from their home, they were allowed to go back and pack a few things. Jared was only ten, but he made sure he grabbed the tattered shoebox with all the family photos. He had been keeping this box under his bed, afraid his dad would find it and burn it.

Almost every picture he had saved of his mom from her younger years was of her laughing or smiling. These pictures were proof of a happier time. Unfortunately, this was not the

mom that he remembered. By the time he began forming memories, she had virtually no life in her. These faded images seemed to chronicle his mother's decline.

As a child, Eric took the brunt of Mr. Stetson's blows. Eric took the blows because as long as he took them, Jared and Mrs. Stetson didn't. Eric had been a very good brother to Jared. He remembered times when Eric played with him, protected him, and snuck him food when they weren't fed. Eric had a kinder heart back then. Jared loved his brother and found comfort with Eric as a child.

But things would never be the same after one particular night.

Jared remembered that night when Eric's beating was so brutal that Eric begged his mom for help, which wasn't normal. Eric had learned not to ask his mom for help; it was pointless, but this night was different. This night, Mr. Stetson wasn't getting tired quickly, even though he was drunk. Jared could barely recognize Eric's voice as the beating progressed. The screams were so high that he sounded like a young girl. Eric was a fifteen-year-old boy with a deepening voice, but not this night.

As Jared peered out from under his small bed, through his open bedroom door, and into the hallway, he saw his mom slowly walking to her room. But as she passed him, she turned and looked at him while tears ran down Jared's face. She stopped for a moment as Eric's cries for help ravaged the house. Then she slowly turned, walked into her room, and shut the door.

Jared closed his eyes, covered his ears, and slid as far under his bed and against the wall as he could. In his little mind, he prayed and begged for Eric's screams to stop when, finally, they did.

Jared waited for what seemed like an eternity without movement. Then he removed his hands from his ears and opened his eyes. His heart pounded in his chest. Sweat was dripping from his forehead, and his body ached with intensity. He knew what it was like to be beaten by Mr. Stetson, and he wanted so badly for his brother to climb under the bed with him.

The bedroom was getting dark as night set in. He slowly crawled toward the end of the bed to see if he could see anything. The house was silent. His eyes scanned the quickly darkening room and hallway. He didn't dare go any further out from under his bed, fearing that his father would see him. The refrigerator door opened, and he listened as his father pulled out the remaining six-pack and opened one of the cans. He listened to his father swallow an entire beer in an instant, crush the can, and open another.

Then, outside his room, he heard his father clear his throat in the hallway. Suddenly, his father's belt flew across the hall to the other side. It hit the decorative table at the end of the hallway. He knew this had been his father's choice of weapon used on Eric just moments ago.

His body shrank back under his bed with just enough room to see the floor as his father drunkenly stumbled past his room. Looking up as high as he could, he saw his father's bloody hand wrapped around a vodka bottle. Mr. Stetson was too drunk to notice him. The door to Mr. and Mrs. Stetson's room slammed shut. He let out a slight gasp, covered his mouth, and waited.

Time passed, and he hadn't seen his brother. He was only ten, but he wasn't a baby anymore. Eric needed help, he told himself. Keeping as quiet as he could, he crawled out from under his bed and started down the hallway, begging God not to let any floorboards creak. One sound and he was dead. Each step was soft and slow, while his heart raced.

Moving slowly from his room and down the hallway, he entered the family room. Eric lay on the floor, his back to Jared. Blood splattered on the walls, pooled on the floor, and covered his brother. Jared watched and waited for movement. The pounding of his own heart was all he could hear.

Eric moved slightly, and Jared exhaled. He rushed around Eric and knelt in front of him.

Eric's right eye was black and blue, swollen shut. Through the narrow opening of his injured left eye, he searched Jared's face, begging for help. Blood seeped from his mouth. His shirt was torn from his body. Cuts covered his small frame, and dark bruising spread across his skin.

Jared went to the kitchen and got a washrag. He slowly turned on the faucet to wet the rag, but not enough to make the pipes rattle.

With the wet rag gripped tightly in his trembling hand, he began to wipe away the blood. His brother groaned and gently moved the rag away. Eric slowly forced himself up and pushed away from Jared. Hunched over with his hands on his knees, he tried to catch his breath before standing upright. Jared watched his brother struggle. Tears streamed down Jared's face, and his chin quivered. He covered his mouth to muffle his cries.

As Eric fought for breath and balance, he stumbled to the front door. Wrapping an arm around his chest, he made his way outside, the screen door slamming behind him. Jared raced back to his room, praying that his father wouldn't see him. He crawled under his bed just as Mr. and Mrs. Stetson's bedroom door flew open.

"Er—ic!" his father slurred as he staggered down the hallway toward the front door.

Jared heard the front door slam and the lock turn. His father stumbled back down the hall. Once more, Mr. Stetson went to his room and slammed the door. Jared curled into a ball and cried quietly with his hands pressed tightly over his mouth as his mother begged for her life.

Her screams slowly faded, leaving only the faint sound of their television. Still cowering under his bed, he wiped his face with his shirt and began to crawl out. Tiptoeing to his door, he peeked down the hallway toward their bedroom. He saw no shadows moving under the door.

Taking a deep breath, he gently set each foot on the hardwood, avoiding any noise as he walked. Pressing his ear against their bedroom door, he listened. Crouching down on all fours, he looked under the large gap between the door and the floor. He saw his father's feet resting below a chair. Then came the sound of snoring.

After a few minutes, believing that his father had passed out, he looked for his mother. He squinted as the television illuminated the room. Scanning the floor, he finally saw her hand covered in blood.

Knowing she needed help, he stood up, reached for the door handle, and slowly turned it. His father always slept deeply after drinking, so he crept into the bedroom. His mother was on the bed, her hand touching the floor. Her face and body were bloody and bruised. He sat next to her as she remained motionless.

The television's glare danced across her face as snoring filled the room. Taking her hand in his, he held it as she tried to speak. He leaned in to hear her final words. Words he never repeated. Time passed, and eventually so did she.

There was loud banging on the front door. Jared was cradling his mother's lifeless body while tears streamed down his face.

The front door crashed open, and he gripped her tighter.

“Clear!” a voice shouted through the home.

He pressed his cheek to hers.

“Clear!” yelled another voice.

The doorway filled with movement.

Jared looked up to see two police officers with guns raised. He looked back down at his mother, kissed her forehead, and let her go.

Jared was removed from the scene and taken immediately to the hospital, where his brother was in serious condition. His injuries were severe: a broken jaw and ribs, and a punctured lung.

Mr. Stetson was charged and convicted of second-degree murder. The conviction came easily. He was an abusive alcoholic who passed out holding the knife after a brutal attack. Eric had no hesitation in testifying against him. The prosecution didn’t make Jared take the stand. Mr. Stetson received a sentence of twenty-five years to life in prison.

Mr. and Mrs. Colby, old friends of the Stetsons, became the boys’ foster parents and raised them as their own. Jared loved and admired them. They were attentive and kind in ways that his parents had never been. Mrs. Stetson had done one good thing in her life: she had taken out a secret life insurance policy that Mr. Stetson didn’t know existed. She gave the paperwork to the Colbys, just in case, and named the boys as beneficiaries.

Maybe she had known Mr. Stetson would kill her one day, and perhaps this was one final act of love. Whatever it was, it was too little, too late; the damage had been done. Her life insurance paid for their cars, college, and Eric's startup.

For a while, Eric had been the brother Jared needed, but eventually, that love seemed to curdle into resentment.

A knock at the door woke Jared from reminiscing as he sat on the couch. Removing the towel from around his neck, he put it on the arm of the couch. He carefully placed the pictures back into the shoebox, put the box in the closet, walked over to the door, and opened it.

A smile spread across his face as her arms wrapped around his neck. She kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tightly.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" Rachael asked, reaching down to take off her high heels.

"Of course." He closed the door behind her.

She set her heels on the carpet next to the door and headed for the bar to make herself a drink.

"Would you like a drink, babe?" she asked, smiling.

"I would love one. Thank you." Leaning against the counter, he watched her make the drinks. The curve of her smile, the softness of her eyes, the glow she exuded held his attention. Loving her had become as natural as breathing.

After making the drinks, she handed him his. "I'm so glad tonight is over." She sighed. "So many egos, I can hardly stand it. Thank God I have you!" Lifting her glass, she touched it to his in a toast.

“Even though we have to keep it a secret?” he asked.

“Even though we have to keep it secret.” She took a step forward until they were nearly touching. Without her heels, she had to stand on tiptoes to meet his eyes. “What we have is far too special to share with the rest of the world. Besides, your brother would make our lives hell.”

“I love you.” He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her passionately. “I’ll take you any way I can have you. Even in secret.”