

CHAPTER

ONE

ALL FOUR WALLS OF MY CELL ARE MIRRORS.

The light on the ceiling flashes red and pinpricks of crimson bounce around the room. *Red, huh?* That's a bit sudden, seeing as the last examination was only a couple of weeks ago. I grin at the light, and my smile is reflected by the endless versions of myself that surround me. The light flashes again.

I drop into a push-up position. The concrete floor is so cold my hands go numb then start to burn. Up, down. Up, down. A strand of mousy-brown hair falls over my eyes. That color will be the first thing they change about me.

If I'm chosen, that is.

If I'm good enough, that is.

On flash nine I jump to my feet. Gritting my teeth, I grab my shirt and pull it up and over my head. The voice of the LIC's events coordinator rings through my mind: *When you're examined, be proud to display the bodies you've worked so hard to create. You're all incredibly beautiful young men and you should relish the chance to show everyone how handsome you are.*

I scrunch the shirt in my hands for a second—just a second—crushing it beneath my grip. Adrenaline pumps through my torso and my arms, making them feel electric. I toss the shirt into the corner of the room, then lower my eyes and force myself to do what they want me to do every morning: look at the boy/man/whatever I've become.

The countless hours I've spent working out have obviously had an impact. Still, I'm far from perfect. I mean, I have abs, which took *forever* to show, and I'm proud of my arms. But my skin is stormtrooper white, I have a mole on my left hip I'm really self-conscious about, and my chest is getting hairy. When did that happen? I touch my now-hairy chest. Oh great, another thing to stress about. I wish I could tell myself that it's nothing, that they'll fix whatever flaws I have if I'm chosen, but I can't. Another boy was once dismissed because they said his nose was unpleasant. If an oddly shaped nose is enough to get rejected, I'm sure my pale, weirdly hairy body isn't far behind.

I don't linger on my face. It's not hideous or anything, it's just kind of boring. Plus, it's destined to be changed. I close my eyes and try to get rid of the depressing thought. To make it through, I need to be positive.

I've worked frigging hard on my body, though. I open my eyes, then flex my biceps and smile. I've definitely bulked up since the last examination, and I hope I'm not too big to be a Nice. All the *superfun* and *superrigorous* personality testing they make us do here has shown that Nice is the disposition for me. But they've made a mistake. Me, a Nice? Yeah, right. Sure, I try to be friendly and I don't like hurting people's feelings, but that doesn't mean I'm a Disney prince.

The light flashes again. I pull my trousers down, leaving me dressed only in sky-blue trunks. As I throw the pants away my door hisses and slides open. I wince and raise a hand, my forearm protecting my eyes from the burning whiteness of the hallway.

I walk outside and stop in front of my door. The others are already standing in front of their cells. The floor of this hallway is white concrete, but the walls and ceiling are long, smooth mirrors.

Dozens of guys are visible, all dressed in the same trunks as I am. Most are busy staring at themselves, either fixing their hair, practicing their smiles, or flexing their biceps, but a few are looking from side to side, sizing up the competition. *Those are the threats.*

We don't talk.

We know better than that.

"Turn," booms a tinny voice.

With a shuffling sound, we turn to the left and stare down the hallway. In front of me is a guy so ridiculously buff I instantly lose all pride I have in my body and seriously wonder why I even try. His back is muscles on muscles on muscles. How does he even work those muscles out? Extremely complicated yoga?

It turns out the back belongs to a not-so-complicated guy named Robert. He says that name was given to him by his birth parents, but that's a huge lie. We aren't the result of loving families: we were taken, probably as infants, from families that couldn't care for us. Some people think our parents were tricked into giving us up, believing we were going to a family that wanted us. Others think they sold us to the LIC. I lean toward the former because the thought is comforting, and to me, that's more important than the truth.

Unlike Robert, all I have is a number: 412.

Robert's a Bad for sure. It's evident in the confidence-killing meatiness of his back and in the uneven tribal tattoo that covers his right shoulder. Even the people in charge here must think he's 100 percent Bad, as someone borderline like me would never get permission to destroy his so-called wholesome image as he's done. He catches me looking and his top lip curls into a snarl.

"You may now proceed to the main hall."

My feet plod on the icy concrete as we walk down the hall. Moving slowly, we pass through a set of frosted-glass doors into a large rectangular room. There are no windows, so the only light comes from the long fluorescent tubes that run along the roof. The light is just a touch too bright; the dial turned a fraction too far.

At the front of the room is a huge screen. Beside it is the events coordinator, a slim man wearing a tailored black shirt tucked into dark-gray slacks. Usually he's the pinnacle of male grooming, but today his short hair is messy, spiking up in uneven tufts, and his pants are slightly creased.

"Hey, guys," he says. "I know you weren't expecting an examination today, and I'm *super* sorry about making you do this, but it's kind of an emergency. A particularly important young woman has shown signs that she's ready to select a partner, so two of you have to be sent in right away. We're looking for a boy-next-door Nice and a mysterious, tortured-soul Bad."

Aren't they always?

"Five Nices and five Bads from this floor have been identified as a potential match, so, obviously, they'll be examined. And guys, I know this test is late notice, but I'm your pal, so you can trust me when I say that if your number is on the screen, it's there for a

reason. It means our complex compatibility algorithm has concluded that she will fall for you if you spend time with her. How cool is that? Now, let's see who made it to the next round."

The screen flashes and the numbers appear. I scan the list, my heart racing. Come on . . .

Yes!

My number is there, in the very middle. Thank you, complex compatibility algorithm! I take back all the times I called you rigged. It's been over a year since my number last appeared, and in that time I've totally committed myself to being the perfect Nice. Now I'll find out if that's enough to succeed, or if I'm destined to die before I'm even given a chance to fight for my life.

"Nices go through the door to the left, Bads to the right. If you're not sure what your disposition is, that's fine, the color of your number will tell you. Nices are blue, Bads are red."

My number is blue, confirming my suspicions: they think I'm a Nice. I quickly glance at the other chosen guys. I ignore the Bads, because they never pick two Love Interests from the same floor, so these Bads will never be anything to me. The Nices all have light hair and boyish faces. *She has a type*. Three of them are about my age, but the one directly in front of me is much younger, probably eleven or twelve. He has no chance of passing this examination, but is going to be forced through it anyway.

I clench my hands into fists. He shouldn't be here. I can't say anything now, because if I do we'll both be punished, but if I fail the examination I'm going to take him aside and make sure he knows I care about him. The boy shuffles toward the doorway. I wait for a second, because Nices don't lead, then I join the line. The glass panes separate, revealing a square room. We enter.

In the doorway I tense. At the back of the room, standing still, is a Stalker. I've seen one in person only a few times, but fleeting encounters have been enough to give me nightmares.

It's a tall robot, standing at around eight feet, with a hulking, all-black body. That's not the worst part, though; that honor goes to its head, which looks like a mannequin's: no eyes, no nostrils, lips pursed. Right now, the body is totally black, which means it's currently dormant. My heartbeat steadies. It can't move unless its lights are on, so this one isn't here to hurt anyone. It's here to keep us in line, and to remind us what will come after us if we disobey.

The door at the back of the room opens, and a short, round man in a striped navy button-down and black slacks enters. *They'd kill me if I looked like that.* A stethoscope hangs over his shoulders.

He hooks the stethoscope into his ears, then walks up to the first boy, who is flexing his biceps. The doctor ignores the show-boating and presses the metal end of the stethoscope against the boy's chest. After a few moments, the doctor switches the stethoscope for a tape measure and measures the boy's torso. I was the last to enter this room, so I'm at the end of the line. Now I feel like that was a mistake. What if they find the perfect Love Interest before they get to me?

As I wait my turn I stand with my back straight and my fists clenched. After what feels like forever, the doctor beckons the boy in front of me forward. The kid takes a tentative step toward the doctor, then raises his hands. He's so small. The doctor narrows his eyes, and the boy lets out a little sob that breaks my heart.

“Runt,” says the doctor. “Get out of here. Next.”

The kid scurries away. I step forward, taking his place, and the doctor presses the end of the stethoscope onto my chest. The metal is freezing, but I keep my face expressionless. Still, I can’t control my heartbeat, so he must know I’m feeling *something*, even if he doesn’t know what it is. He’ll probably put it down to nerves, and that’s partially true, but if I’ve done my job right he’ll never suspect that I’m feeling frustration or maybe even anger at the way they’re treating the kid. A Nice would never feel such unsavory things.

He pulls the stethoscope away. “Arms up.”

I raise my arms over my head. He leans in close and wraps the tape measure around my chest and pulls it tight, pinching my skin. I grit my teeth. He smells like cinnamon candy and body odor.

He takes a step back. “Flex.”

I tilt my arms back, arch my spine, and flex my biceps as hard as I possibly can.

As he wraps the tape around my right bicep I notice there’s a blue line drawn on the measure. It must be to make sure I’m not too big. Bads can be as buff as they want, the bigger the better, actually. For a Nice, the aim of the game is lean. I need to look friendly and cute, but when I take my shirt off I need to be ripped. Just in an approachable way that doesn’t look like I work out much. Like these muscles happened accidentally, the result of playing outside with a golden Labrador or good genes or something like that.

My bicep falls within the acceptable bracket, so he moves across and checks my left.

“Good job,” he says as he drops the tape measure. My mouth falls open an inch before I catch it. I’ve never been complimented by a doctor. Not even once. “Now tense.” He places his palm on my stomach and presses. I feel my own firmness against his skin. He pulls his hand away and nods at the hair that covers my chest. “That’ll need to be fixed. Nices can’t be hairy. But other than that, your body is in excellent condition. Great work.”

I want to jump up and down, or pump my fist, or do something to show how freaking fantastic his words have made me feel, but I remain still.

He turns to the guard. “This one and that one—” He tilts his head toward the boy at the front of the line. In the corner of my vision, I see him turn and look at me, sizing me up. I keep my attention focused on the guards, as if not looking at him will wipe him from existence. “—can advance. The others aren’t ready.”

I crack and turn to face my competition. He’s got hazel eyes, and his nose and shoulders are covered in freckles. He looks like an average nerdy-in-a-hot-way Nice.

For my sake I hope that’s all he is.

“You first,” I say with a gesture toward the door.

When he thinks they aren’t watching, he narrows his eyes at me. “How kind of you.”

I blink, startled. I didn’t even think that he might be offended by the offer. Obviously he thinks I was being a smartass or something, but I really wasn’t, it was just instinct.

“Sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to . . .”

The door opens. He sneers one last time, then steps through.

Suddenly the room is eerily quiet. So this is it. My interrogation, also known as my best shot at getting out of here this

year. I exhale. I know I'm as prepared as it's possible to be, but I can't shake the feeling that my best efforts aren't enough, and that I'm doomed to spend my whole life here. The thought makes me shiver.

After an eternity, the door slides open. I gulp, then step forward. The door whooshes closed behind me.

The room is plain, the walls smooth and featureless. Sitting at a stainless steel table is a trim man with rigidly perfect posture and solid gray hair. Despite his hair color, his eyes are bright and his face is mostly wrinkle-free, so pinning his exact age is difficult. I'd guess late thirties or early forties.

He gestures toward the seat. "Congratulations on making it this far. My name is Rodger Craike, and I'm the manager of the Love Interest Compound. You will call me Mr. Craike or sir, nothing else."

He picks up a tablet and starts scrolling. I sit and peer at the screen. *Huh*. It's filled with reports from my monthly integration exams. Because the LIC is so isolated, we have to take classes to keep up with pop culture, and each month we're quizzed to make sure we're keeping up to date. It's usually about big movies, popular TV shows, and hit songs, which we are required to know by heart in case of karaoke or sing-alongs. For Bads and select Nices, sports are included, but I don't have to learn about that because they decided I'm more of a nerdy-boy-next-door type. Thank goodness. Anyway, we do all this so we can "integrate seamlessly" with the real world when the time comes. Their words, not mine. I know my test scores are good, but he's frowning at them like I failed every single one. *Why?*

"I should thank you, sir," I say, trying to draw his attention

away from whatever is wrong with my scores. He keeps reading. "For giving me the gym equipment and the food. I wouldn't look this way without you."

"We provide the equipment, you do the work." His eyes flick down over my body. "And you've done an exceptional job. You'd be surprised how many Nices ruin their bodies by making themselves too big. But you understand what it means to be Nice, don't you?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I hope so."

He tilts his head back and laughs. Recovering, he leans forward. "Maybe, after all this time, we've found a genuinely nice guy."

Or someone smart enough to know how to play the system.

"Enough pleasantries. As the manager of the LIC, it's my job to make sure every Love Interest is the right man or woman for the job. So I'm going to ask you a few questions to see how well you've applied yourself to your time here. Are you ready to begin?"

I nod.

"What disposition are you?" he asks.

"Nice."

"Why do you think that?"

"All the tests told me that's what I am."

"You think they made a mistake?"

Yes.

"No, it's not that," I say. "It just feels weird to call myself Nice; it seems boastful. I'm not perfect by any means, but I think I'm a nice person. Plus, I'm so obviously not Bad. I'm good at making people laugh, not manipulating or intimidating them."

"Some people would say making someone laugh *is* manipulating them."

"Some people," I say, "would say if laughter is a manipulation

it's the best one there is. It makes people feel good. Who cares how that end is achieved?"

He looks down and starts typing something on his tablet. The room fills with the sound of his fingertips hitting the screen. I breathe in through my nostrils, then exhale slowly.

Finally, he lowers the tablet and rests it on the table. "A lot of Nices have told me they'd give their life to save their rival if they could. Would you be willing to do that?"

I look down at my hands. The true answer to this question is the reason I know I'm not a genuine Nice: I'm not ready to die, and I'm not willing to give up my life for anyone else. I've always known that if I made it out of the LIC I'd fight as hard as I could to make sure I got the girl and survived. It's what I hate about myself the most.

I meet his stare. "I would be willing to do that. Sacrifice myself, I mean. I'd do it in a heartbeat."

He grins. "You know what I think? I think you're a great actor. I know you're lying, yet I find myself believing you. It's truly a rare gift."

I tense, and it spreads through my entire body, with cold dread creeping down from my cheeks to dwell in the cords of my shoulders. *He knows.*

"Oh, don't look so scared; it's a good thing. You're going to be a spy, after all, so being able to act is one of the most valuable skills you could have. And you clearly are a natural liar. But I'm not interested in an actor who needs to memorize lines; you need to be able to improvise. So answer these questions with the first thought that enters your mind. If you pause, you'll fail. Now, why do you think your Chosen should pick you over your rival?"

"I don't. I just hope she does."

In his eyes, I see him ticking the boxes.

Modest? Check.

Humble? Check.

"Elaborate on that," he says.

"I want her to pick whoever will make her the happiest. And if she's a better fit with him, I'll gladly accept my fate."

A total pushover? Check plus.

I imagine myself standing naked in a massive steel room: the incinerator. Feeling the cold dry air on my skin, the metal beneath my feet. The split second of agony before the roaring orange flames turn me into ash. *Stop thinking about that. Focus!*

"There must be some good things about you," he says. "Tell me about them."

"I'm a good listener. And I can be funny sometimes, I guess."

"If you caught your Chosen kissing your rival, what would you do?"

I lower my eyes and bring on the tears. When I feel them behind my eyelids I look up at him, my entire body radiating hurt. I stare at him for a moment, drop my mouth open a fraction, then turn my head away.

"I'd look at her like that. Then I'd walk away. Next time I saw her she'd probably apologize if I were still in the running, so I'd tell her she doesn't ever have to explain herself to me, and that I only responded in that manner because I love her so damn much. I'd tell her I'm glad it hurts because it proves how much I care."

"Would you fight for her?"

"If I had to, yes."

“When will you first try to kiss her?”

“I won’t. I’ll wait until she kisses me. But I’ll kiss her on the cheek after our first date.”

“What would you do if she texted you in the middle of the night and said she was lonely?”

“I’d drop everything and run to her as fast as possible. I’ll be there for her whenever she needs me. No matter what.”

“Now, I have one last question, and in many ways, it’s the most important one, so think for a second before answering. If you get it wrong, you’ll be dismissed.”

I wipe my sweaty palms on my legs. This is it. One last question.

“I’m ready,” I say.

“Do you think you will fall in love with her?”

I smile, because I know the answer, and that means I’m finally getting out of the LIC. There’s no way I can get it wrong, because the answer to this question has been drilled into me every single day I’ve been here.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “She’s the hero of this story, so how I feel is irrelevant.”

He leans back on his chair and grins.

“Correct.”

CHAPTER

TWO

CRAIKE LEFT AFTER THAT, LEAVING ME ALONE in the room to stew. He never told me explicitly that I made it, so I have no idea if I passed or if I have to go back to my cell to wait until another girl is ready. On one hand, he seemed pleased with my answers, but he also saw right through some of my lies. Does he know how fake I am? He definitely won't send me out if he knows. My interview replays in my mind, with each repeat narrowing in on my more cringeworthy lines. *I had one shot and I screwed it up.*

With a whoosh, the door slides open and a tall girl with straight blond hair enters. She's dressed in an oversized blue flannel shirt, torn black jeans, and white sneakers. In her hands is a white iPhone, which must be showing something fascinating as she's staring at it intently. Under one arm is a pile of neatly folded clothes. Men's clothes.

She places the pile on the table. "Get dressed."

"Thanks." I stand and grab the shirt. It's a white dress shirt

and the material is soft and silky. I put it on. It fits tight against my body, hugging my shoulders and tapering in at my waist.

“It’s not just for you. It’s hard to work when I’m distracted by . . .” She gestures toward me with one hand as her voice trails off. I’m not sure if she’s talking about my abs or my crotch.

“Thank you?” I say as I button up the second button. “It’s nice to know I can be a distraction.” I pull the pants, gray slacks, up over my hips and fasten the silver clasp. Then I sit down. “Maybe it means I have a shot after all.”

She finally looks up from her phone. “Here’s hoping. Now that’s done, I’d like to do this.”

She raises her hand, offering me a high five.

I slap her hand, and she beams.

“Congrats, man!” she says. “You made it through! That’s a big deal. Oh, and I should introduce myself. I’m Kaylee, your coach.”

“My *what?*”

“Your coach. I’m here to give you love advice, if you need it, that is—and trust me, you probably do. I’m your own personal relationship counselor. And, luckily for you, I’m the best at what I do.”

“And that is?”

“Making important young women fall in love with fakes like you. I’ll be with you the entire time, telling you what to say, giving instructions on how to act, that sort of thing. When they transform you, a device like this”—she taps on the table, which creates a hologram of a silver ball about the size of a pea—“will be injected behind your ear. It lets us keep track of you, plus, it’ll allow us to communicate. And don’t worry, this isn’t the

Suicide Squad, it's not a bomb to stop you if you go AWOL. We have Stalkers for that. This little beauty is mainly so I can make sure you don't say the wrong thing. During a lot of the important conversations you'll have with your Chosen, I tell you what to say. On those days, you're just my pretty puppet. Sound good?"

I cross my arms over my chest. Already the silky material feels cold.

"It sounds perfect."

"Great! And it's not like I'm in your head all the time, you will get to have *some* time alone with her. I'm only there for the big moments, first dates, first kisses, that sort of thing. The quiet moments are yours. Also, I'm the person you can talk to if you want a set piece. You know, a dangerous event or something that dramatically flings her into your arms. I've seen a Chosen totally change her mind about a guy because of a well-timed set piece. Now, don't you want to see who you've been assigned to?"

A.K.A. the girl who decides if I live or die.

"I sure do!"

"Great! Isn't this exciting? You're about to see the girl you could spend the rest of your life with."

Well, in that case, I *really* hope she's beautiful. Why is she showing me this? It's not like it changes anything.

She swipes her hand to the right, and the tiny silver device zooms away and is replaced by a blue-tinted hologram of a girl. She's looking up at something in the distance. Her face is nondescript, pretty in a way that doesn't stand out, aside from the cute little freckles on her nose. Her brown hair is tied back into a ponytail.

She's not a supermodel or anything, and for that I'm grateful. She looks like a nice, normal girl.

A girl who would choose a Nice boy.

"Her name is Juliet. She's been marked as important ever since she was five years old, when she aced her Mensa test. We've monitored her ever since. When she was seven, she started inventing, producing things that people with graduate degrees would struggle with. Her brain, it . . . it operates in a way that's so far ahead of everyone else. The world's top universities have been trying for years to get her to enroll with them, but she's rejected them all because she wants to have a normal high school experience. She's one of a tiny handful of people in the entire world who we believe have a higher than ninety-seven percent chance of reaching the top of their chosen field. Her inventions will shape the lives of every single person on earth one day. Or at least that's what the head honchos here think."

I tilt my head to the side and look at the hologram of Juliet again. "Why are you sending us in now?"

"She's only just started being interested in boys, as proved by a series of, well, blunt Google searches. We expect her to make her choice before she leaves for college."

I keep eyeing the shimmering hologram of Juliet. Of the person I must make fall in love with me.

"If you know so much about her, why are you assigning her two guys?" I ask. "Wouldn't it be easier to create the perfect guy for her? Like a scientist or something?"

Kaylee's smile falters. "I want you to promise me something, okay? Don't talk like that in front of Mr. Craike. He straight up doesn't like people who ask questions, and trust me, if he doesn't

like you you're screwed. But it's a legitimate question, so I'll answer it. Sending in two guys is much more effective than sending a guy on his own. One of the reasons is that it forces her to make her choice sooner; being in demand has that consequence. The second reason is that they tried sending in Solos and, well, it didn't work that well. They made one perfect guy for each girl, like a science whiz for Juliet, and you know what happened?"

"No idea."

"The Chosen ignored the Love Interest and fell for some random person in her class. This baffled the scientists, but it made perfect sense to me. I never fall for anyone predictable; it surprises me every single time. Seriously, I fall for the *worst* guys. So having two guys in the running as opposed to one makes sense because it increases our odds. Now, do you have any more questions? After the surgery our conversations will be monitored, so I won't be able to be as honest with you as I can be right now."

I pause for a second, thinking it over. This isn't an opportunity I can afford to waste.

"Do you think she'll pick me?"

Kaylee shrugs. "It's possible. For you to win this you need to present yourself as a man she can depend on. Her life is going to get crazy, and she knows it. Someone nice, secure, and stable will be a good thing for her. She's probably looking for someone who she can come home to after a big day who'll remind her of simpler times. Someone who'll cook her dinner and care for her children. But there's a problem."

My heart thunders.

"Juliet is, let's put it simply, not your typical Chosen. She likes to shake things up. It's part of the reason my bosses are so

interested in her. Any sane person in her position would pick a Nice, but Juliet is daring. The innovative mind that makes her worth monitoring is what makes her so unpredictable. She might not even care about things that appeal to most people, or the pressures of society. Don't let her appearance or her dreams fool you—making Juliet choose you is going to be tough."

"That depends on my rival. Do you know who he is?"

She nods.

"You'll meet him pretty soon. He's good, man. Like, real good. When I met him he turned on the charm so hard I nearly fell apart on the spot. He's much more charming than you. You should be careful. He's a killer, that one."

"Maybe I'm saving the charm for the real deal."

She rolls her eyes. "Let's hope so. Well, I'm out of time, so I have to go. This will be the last time I see you while you look like this! And don't worry too much about the procedure. You're lucky—I think they're only going to make superficial changes, so it shouldn't hurt that much." She taps the spot behind her ear. "Talk soon!"

She skips out of the room, leaving me, once again, alone. I sit for a few minutes, my fingers drumming on the table, my legs bouncing up and down, my posture reverting to its natural hunch.

Whoosh.

I look up. Standing in the doorway is a boy. He's a Bad, that's obvious, but he's unlike any Bad that I've ever seen. He's slim, maybe even skinnier than me, but his biceps fill the black leather jacket he's wearing. The collar of his gray T-shirt dips low, showing a small stretch of smooth skin. Unlike most Bads, who seem to favor military-style buzz cuts, his hair is long and stylishly

messy. It screams, *I'm the lead guitarist in a punk band you're not cool enough to know about.* It's jet black, though. Of course it is.

A grid of red light appears in the middle of the room, separating us. The air hums with static.

He steps forward and raises his hand so his fingertips hover an inch away from the light. "It must be to stop me from killing you."

"Or me from killing *you*."

"You wouldn't do that, would you? You're my rival, which means you're a Nice guy, and Nice guys don't kill people. It's a pleasure to meet you."

THIS BOY WILL KILL YOU.

The door whooshes closed behind him.

He scratches the back of his neck with one hand. "I guess they wanted us to meet before it all starts."

"I guess so."

"And, well, before they change us. Apparently all this"—he waves a hand in front of his face—"is about to get seriously shifted."

"I don't know what you want me to say to that."

"You could say you're sorry? You know, offer me some of that classic Nice guy sympathy?"

I shake my head. "Yeah, that's not really my style."

He leans back, inspecting me. "For a Nice, you're not very nice, are you?"

I smile. "Nope!"

He laughs. "I'm not that Bad either. But hey, what can you do? Maybe we could ask them to swap our dispositions?"

"Um, I'm going to go ahead and respectfully pass. The only

reason you'd want to switch this late in the game is because you know she's going to pick the Nice."

His face falls, and my smile falters, then fades. All I can think about now is him standing alone in the middle of the incinerator.

I breathe in deep, then exhale. I can't think of him like that. I've always known whoever I went up against must die, so I can't start feeling bad about it now. Not when the guilt could distract me from my goal. "Listen, man, I want to say I'm sorry. I wish it didn't have to be like this. I don't want you to die."

That's a lie.

He's staring at me with one eyebrow slightly raised, but the corner of his mouth keeps twitching up, so very close to a smile. "Maybe you are Nice after all. Maybe I should be worried."

He grabs the chair and swings it around so the high back faces me. The legs screech against the concrete. Then he sits down, with his chest pressed against the chair's backrest and his hands propping up his chin, which is covered in a few days' worth of black scruff. A large patch on his right cheek is totally hairless.

He looks me in the eye. His eyes are a rich, earthy brown, so startlingly normal that they'll probably be changed. Brown is too boring for a Bad. I hope I'm wrong, because he's incredibly handsome already. Any improvements would just increase the chances of her falling for him at first sight.

"I realized something," he says. "This is the last moment we have to be ourselves. As soon as they call us, we'll stop being us and we'll start being Love Interests, with our whole identities changed to fit what she wants. So I want to take this moment, the last moment of being me, and avoid all that competitive bullshit and spend a second saying what I truly think. And seeing as

you're here, I want to have, like, an actual conversation with you. My—no, our—last one. So what do you say? Would you like to talk, properly talk, with me?"

I'm a bit weirded out by his friendliness, but I definitely don't want to hurt his feelings, so I just nod.

"Great. So, what makes you tick? Like, seriously. Not the answer you'll give Juliet. What do you really feel? About yourself, about this place? About anything?"

He can use this against you.

"You first."

He nods. "Fine. If I had a choice of anything to do with the rest of my life, I'd want to be a paramedic. I like the idea of the adrenaline, but also that I'd be able to help people. I'm really bummed that it's too Nice a profession for a Bad. I like comic book movies but I can't be bothered to read the books themselves. I spend an embarrassing amount of time thinking about my parents. Actually, the amount of time I spend thinking about them isn't embarrassing, but what I think is. I've convinced myself that I was stolen from them and that they're out there right now, desperately hunting for me. I know it's optimistic bullshit, but no matter how hard I try I can't shake that image of them. Lastly, the thing that scares me the most about this whole thing is that for me to survive, you have to be destroyed. Like, best-case scenario for you if you lose is mind-wiping, and even that's unlikely—so I'd probably be sending you to your death. The fact that I want you to go through that so I don't have to terrifies me, man. So . . . what about you?"

The rational side of me is telling me to keep my mouth shut, to use the information he gave me to derail his efforts to make

Juliet fall for him. It's also possible everything he said was a lie, a way to get a head start before the game has truly begun. I shouldn't trust him. Yet this other, louder part of me is looking at the guy in front of me and seeing something other than competition. Someone who knows how I feel. Someone who's been through everything I've been through. Someone I don't have to lie to because we both know what we are.

I look down at the table. "Most people think I'm a kind person, a genuine Nice, but I know I'm not."

"Why is that?"

"I . . . I know the cost of my survival and I still really want to live. So I guess all you need to know about me is that I'm capable of hurting you to ensure I win. I'm dangerous, I know I am." I catch his stare and hold it. "You should be afraid of me."

"If you're not a nice person, why are you a Nice?"

"They think I'm Nice, and I'm not in a position to correct them. Do you think they'd let you switch if you wanted to become a Nice? They have plans and expectations for all of us, and I want to survive, so I've learned to act like I am the boy they want me to be. So far it's worked out pretty well."

The light on the ceiling flashes.

He points at it. "Well, that's us. I guess this is it for now. So say goodbye to this face, Nice guy, and I'll see you out there, I suppose. And don't feel bad about trying to win. I think that's the only way we'll make it through this with our sanity intact. Let's give it our all and let her decide. That way she kills one of us, and neither of us has to feel guilty. Because I wouldn't be able to cope if I had played any part in killing you, even if you wouldn't feel bad about killing me. So do we have a deal? We'll both give it

everything we have? No regrets, no backing down, and no guilt when she makes her choice.”

I wish my brain worked like that, like I could just say no regrets or guilt and then not feel it. But I know myself, and I know the guilt will crush me if I win and he dies. Still, he wants to pretend it's that simple, that our emotions can be contained by a spoken contract, and I'm willing to entertain him. Plus, if I'm being totally honest with myself, I want to keep pretending for as long as possible that I don't care at all that he could die because of me.

So I accept his offer, and it feels like the contest has truly begun.

CHAPTER THREE

I'M NAKED ON A STEEL SLAB. I'M NOTHING MORE than a chunk of beef. Meat, to be sliced and chopped and turned into something usable. All offcuts will be discarded.

My arms and legs are bound to the table, encircled by freezing stainless steel bands. The bands pinch at my wrists and ankles, pulling at the strands of hair they trapped when they snapped shut. Above me are two circles of white light. A man wearing a surgeon's mask advances toward me holding a black marker. He places the tip of the pen right on my hairline, then scrapes it across my skin, all the way down to the middle of my eyebrows. I close my eyes slowly and lick my dry lips.

He tilts his head to the side, inspecting my face. He reaches forward and grabs my bangs. "We'll change his hair. And his eyes. Get the needle."

I strain my eyes to keep watching him. *Like looking at him is going to stop him.*

A nurse swings a boxlike metal contraption around so that it hangs above my face. It's attached to a long metal arm that

connects to a white machine that stands beside the table. I stare right into the pointy ends of two shiny silver needles. I exhale and try, unsuccessfully, to make my body stop shaking.

“How blue do you want?” asks the nurse.

The doctor peers into my right eye. Even though he’s wearing a blue surgeon’s mask, I can smell his breath, which reeks like the bottom of a garbage bin. He moves across and looks at my other eye.

“As blue as the ocean. I want her to think of water when she looks him in the eye.”

“What about his jaw?”

He moves his gloved hand up and grabs my chin. He yanks my head to the side, and his cold fingers run along my jawbone. His grip tightens and he slowly turns my head in the other direction, so that I’m looking at the wall with the door. It’s white and has no door handle, like every door in the LIC. His fingers jab in harder, like he’s trying to separate my jawbone from my skin.

The grip fades, and my head lulls back into position.

“It needs to be stronger.” He jabs the pen into the tip of my chin. “We’ll need to cleft this a little bit.”

“And his body?”

“I can hear you, you know,” I say. “And can I suggest something? I always wanted my ears to be level. They’re a bit lopsided, as you can probably tell. So maybe you could, you know, fix that?”

“Be quiet,” snaps the doctor. “Speak again and I’ll do everything without painkillers.”

I close my mouth, instantly regretting my decision to speak.

What was I thinking? Nices don't challenge authority. Ever. I'm nervous, so I hope he'll let it slide, but I have to be better. Mistakes like that in the real world will get me killed.

He huffs, then places his hand on my chest and pinches some of the hair that's growing there.

"This," he says as he makes a fist, gripping a few small strands. His hand lifts up, and my chest rises up with him until my bonds stop me. He keeps pulling until the hair rips out. I drop back down, squirming in agony. "Needs to go." He jabs me in the gut. My body bends forward, but the bonds catch me and snap me back into place. "Other than that, he's in fine physical condition. His muscles are of adequate definition to create arousal."

"What about his . . ." The nurse looks down at my crotch.

No no no.

"Are you a child? Are you talking about his penis?"

She nods.

"Well," he says. "It's not very impressive as it is, is it?"

My flight instinct kicks in, and suddenly all I can think about is getting out of this fucking room. Ignoring the pain in my wrists, I pull as hard as I can, trying to free my hands. All I end up doing is flailing. What can I do? I can't just lie here and let them do this to me. I start to buck and kick, hoping desperately that a miracle will happen and something will break and I'll be free.

The doctor places his gloved hand on my chest and presses down hard, stilling me. My rabbitlike heartbeat thuds against his palm.

He leans in close. "That's what you get for snark. Now, team, are you ready to begin?"

"Yes sir," they answer in unison.

“Good. Then let’s start with his eyes.”

The doctor grabs the big white machine with both hands and pushes it into position above my right eye. Then, with his smile obvious in the pinch of his mask and the twinkle in his eyes, he places a mask over my nose and mouth.

Blackness swirls.

I splay my palms.

Kick my feet.

Finally, the black takes over.

I SIT UP, SCREAMING. BUT THERE’S NO PAIN. I raise my hands to my face and marvel at the freedom of my wrists. The room I’m in is like my old room, but the walls are plaster, not mirrors, and the bed is soft. A bunch of clothes are in a messy pile on the floor. I must’ve kicked them off mid-nightmare.

I lift up the fluffy blanket. I’m totally naked, and everything down *there* looks exactly the same as it used to. My manhood is still *my* manhood. I smile, then bite my lip. My chest looks funny. Every single hair is gone, leaving me feeling cold and slightly tingly. I run my hand along my chest. It feels slippery. My skin is also a few fractions darker than before, now a nice, even farm-boy tan, and the mole that used to sit on my hip is gone.

I slide out of bed and pull on a pair of blue boxers, then a pair of chinos. As I’m deciding between navy and green shirts the door opens.

It’s Kaylee. She’s dressed in a red-and-black flannel shirt and tight white pants.

“Hi,” she says, pulling a white earbud from her ear. She

covers her eyes until I pull a shirt, the green one, over my head. As I tug it down she drops her hand and takes a step forward. “Wow. Dude, you should look at yourself. They haven’t changed much, but seriously, what they did makes you look so much cooler. You’re stunning!” She looks behind her, checking to see if the coast is clear, then reaches into her pocket.

“We aren’t supposed to show you mirrors so soon after your operation, but this isn’t a mirror so it should be fine. Man, I love technicalities.”

She passes me a white iPhone. I stare at the dark reflection that appears on the screen.

The boy looking back at me isn’t me. His hair is golden blond, his eyes are vivid blue, and his nose is perfectly straight. Also, his chin is noticeably more pronounced. In fact, the first thing someone might notice would be his strong jaw. He’s an idealized version of myself, what I wished for whenever I felt ugly or unlovable. It’s myself through the lens of someone who loves me.

I practice my smile. Oh God. It’s now crooked—nice touch. I peer closer, turning my head to the side, paying particular attention to my cheeks. No freaking way. They’re faint, and only visible when I’m smiling, but this fact is unavoidable: they gave me dimples.

“Are you impressed?” asks Kaylee.

I pass the phone back to her. “Yeah, I look great. They did an exceptional job.”

I mustn’t have put enough effort into my tone, as she crosses her arms. “You’re still recovering, so I’m going to let that one slide. Oh, and you’ve officially been given a name. It’s Caden, C-A-D-E-N. Get used to responding when people call you that.”

A name.

I have a freaking name.

Caden.

I think it over and over in my mind until it starts to sound odd.

My name is Caden.

“First things first. I’ve already set up your home and selected your outfits, so that’s all taken care of. I’m still working on your scripts, but I’ve printed out the first few and have them ready for you. All that’s left is one last meeting with Mr. Craike. Then we’ll take a plane to your new place. Isn’t this exciting? You’re finally getting out of here, Caden.” She claps her hands together, which makes her bracelets chime, then she pouts. “Aww, I’m kinda jealous. Now, do you have any last questions before you go? You can ask me anything—just remember that whatever you say from now on will be monitored.”

“There *is* one thing that’s always bugged me,” I say. “I’d like to know why the LIC is so focused on pairing us in high school. Like, wouldn’t it be better to send us in when we’re a bit older? No one finds the love of their life while they’re a teenager.”

“You haven’t read any YA novels recently, have you?”

I shake my head. “I prefer sci-fi. Why? What does that have to do with anything?”

She looks up at the camera that’s attached to the ceiling and shrugs.

I want to ask her why she’s acting so weird, but the door opens and Craike appears so I clamp my mouth shut. The shoes he’s wearing are so polished they shine, reflecting the harsh white light.

“Kaylee,” he says, offering a wide smile. “What a pleasure it is to see you.”

“The pleasure is mine, sir. But don’t scare my boy too much, okay? I need him in fighting condition. He’s going to meet Juliet later on today.”

“I won’t,” Craike says. “I promise.”

He winks at me and I tense, because if his tone didn’t give away that he was lying, the wink definitely did. Which means whatever he’s about to show me could be absolutely horrific.

CHAPTER

FOUR

KAYLEE WAVES AT ME, THEN WALKS OUT OF THE room. When the door closes behind her, Mr. Craike steps forward and touches the table. Blue light erupts from the surface.

“Caden,” he says, his tone flat. “You look much better.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He taps the screen and a grainy hologram appears. The video is dark and kind of blurry, and the brightness ratio is skewed. Night vision, I presume. He presses *pause*, then walks around the desk to stand behind me. His hands slide upward, then clamp down on my shoulders. His icy cologne fills my nostrils. I want to shrug him off, to get his awful, cold hands off me, but I keep my shoulders slack.

He pushes me forward and I stumble closer to the projection. My eyes focus, and I realize I’m looking at a quiet alley.

“The thing about actors, Caden, is that they can never be trusted. So let me be very clear—I don’t trust you. I was once a seventeen-year-old boy, and I can recall the fire you have in your chest, the drive that pushes you to defy authority. So know that

those feelings aren't even remotely original, and that fighting against me, no, against *us*, is a losing battle."

He taps the screen and the hologram unfreezes. A man, handsome, with a slender body and glasses, runs down the alleyway. He reaches a door and slaps his hand against it once, twice, three times before he gives up, turns around, and raises his hands above his head. I guess he's a Nice, because he's wearing a bulky knitted sweater and he just gives off that kind of vibe.

"Don't worry," whispers Craike. "His rival was chosen. He was going to be killed anyway. We decided his passing could serve, well, demonstrative purposes. We were kind to him in that way. His death has saved many lives."

"Please," cries the man. "Let me try again with another girl. I'm so much better now; I know I'll win if you give me the chance. Please. Please!"

A hulking, all-black figure walks past the camera and advances toward him. The guy's expression turns terrified—he's realized that he's been trapped by a Stalker. The man screams, then the figure moves impossibly fast—a dark blur—and grabs him by the throat. The Nice's eyes go wide, then wider still, so they're bulging from their sockets.

I need to watch this, even though I know how it's going to end. It's awful, and it's going to haunt me for the rest of my life, but I can't look away. And that's not just because Craike is here and I can't disobey him. I need to watch so that I know, precisely, what will happen to me if I'm not convincing enough as a Nice. *This is why*, I think. This is why I've worked so hard, to make sure that what is happening to this Nice will never happen to me.

I blink and keep watching.

The Stalker's hand grips tighter. The skin of the man's neck flows out and covers the hand. The Nice coughs and gags, choking. His body is still fighting for life, even though he must know he's done for. Blood spurts as the fingers sink right through the skin. The Nice's eyes roll back into his skull. The monster's fingers and thumb touch, crushing the spine. And that's it: the Nice's body crumples and lands on the ground in front of the sleek black feet. His head remains in place, gushing blood, supported only by the cold metal hand.

"Turn around, Caden."

I spin and stare right into a muscular black chest. It's smooth and nearly featureless, missing both nipples and a belly button, like a child's doll. Little rivers of pulsing white light ripple through the skin, shimmering almost like starlight. My blood chills, and I tilt my head up. A still, black metal head is glaring at me. I gaze into the flat panes where the eyes should be and it seems that *something* is looking at me.

"Now," says Craike.

The Stalker's hand shoots out and grabs me by the neck. The fingers are freezing cold. My face starts to burn. I kick my feet and dig my fingernails into the smooth metal, but its grip holds firm.

Craike grins. His bottom teeth are yellow and crowded, all the little teeth at odd angles mashed up against one another. "This is a Stalker. It's the most advanced robot ever created, the perfect killing machine. If you ever stray from the script or try to run, we will send him after you. And he will rip you apart."

The flat black panes glare at me.

"Enough," says Craike.

The Stalker releases me and takes a step backward. Little

pulses of light run from the tips of its fingers all the way to the middle of its chest, where a cluster of light glows.

“We are not releasing you. We are sending you out for a purpose, and you will always be ours. Even if you win the contest you’ll work for us, giving us all the information about your Chosen that we require. Is that very clear?”

How could he be clearer? He might as well have told me the rest of my life will be awful no matter what. Death by incineration is a thing of nightmares, but life for a successful Love Interest isn’t exactly a happily ever after. After winning, the Love Interest needs to be a perfect partner to prevent his Chosen from ever moving on.

Also, he must betray a person who loves him every single day. I force the thought down, trying to keep it from showing in my eyes.

“Crystal.”

“All right. Now, sit. There is one last thing we must discuss now that I know I can trust you.”

Rubbing my burning neck, I sit down. The hologram fades away.

Craike sits too. “I want you to tell me what you think the LIC trains Love Interests for. I’m sure a smart boy like you has some theories. Answer truthfully or you’ll be punished.”

My first instinct is to ignore his threat and lie anyway, to make him think I haven’t thought about this as much as I have. But he’s already shown that he has an excellent bullshit detector, so I have to tell the truth.

“I think this is all about surveillance,” I say. “Only super-important people are assigned Love Interests, right? I think you

want our Chosen to fall for one of us so that she'll tell us all her secrets. And then we'll tell those secrets to you."

He smiles, but his eyes remain cold. "You know more than most. Do you have any questions about our motives? Most do, and we have nothing to hide here. An informed Love Interest is an effective Love Interest."

I'm shocked, but I don't let it show. I've spent a huge portion of my life trying to figure out what the LIC is training me for. I've known for a long time that they're teaching me to be some sort of spy—that's obvious from some of the classes they make us take—but I've never known *why*. I sort of figured I'd always be kept in the dark about most of the ins and outs of their operations. That's just the way they are.

"The only thing I don't understand," I say, "is why the LIC values secrets so highly. I mean, you've gone to all this effort"—I gesture to the Stalker—"to create this place and train Love Interests, just to spy?"

Craike places his hands on the table. "Let me put it this way: how much do you think people are willing to pay for a piece of information that could end a presidency or destroy a rival company?"

"A lot?"

"A lot is correct. Love Interests acquire information for us, and then we sell that knowledge for more money than most people earn their entire lives. You were incorrect, though, in assuming we deal in secrets, because we don't. We didn't train you to tell us *gossip*." He spits the word out like it's dirty. "We deal in information. The right piece of information can be truly devastating if it's precisely aimed. You'll be surprised by how willing

people are to hand over information that could ruin them to the people they love. The LIC has been profiting from people's affection for centuries."

"Centuries?" I ask. I'd guessed because the LIC is so high-tech that it was a fairly new organization.

He nods. "Yes, the LIC has existed for hundreds of years, and we have Compounds in eleven countries. Almost everyone you think of as important or influential had, or has, a Love Interest beside them, hiding in plain sight."

He touches the screen. The hologram appears again. He swipes, and a black-and-white photograph appears. It's of an old president whose name I can't remember. He's standing on the steps of the White House, waving at a group of people. Beside him is his wife. She's waving at the crowd with one hand. I'm sure most people wouldn't notice anything abnormal about her, but now that I know what she is, there's something about her frozen smile that's horrific. She isn't there to support the man she loves on a monumental day in his life.

She's a spy.

The photo vanishes and is replaced by a wall of images. Each one is similar to the one of the president; someone important, from athletes to movie stars, is standing in the limelight. But they aren't the ones I focus on. I'm focusing on their partners, the monsters hidden in plain sight.

"I hope," says Craike, "the knowledge that you are now a member of the world's most covert and most powerful spy organization inspires you to make the right decisions when you enter the real world. You're going to do good work out there, Caden, I can tell. I don't mean just for us, but for the world: you'll help us

keep everyone safe from the tiny few who have real, terrifying power. If she picks you, that is.” He taps the screen once, and the hologram disappears. “Now, come on, it’s time to go.”

Leaving the Stalker in the room, we make our way into a long hallway lined with empty cells. We walk through a set of double doors to a small courtyard. The grass is plastic and neon green. There’s one palm tree, and a small fountain filled with white-and-orange koi fish. Four huge decorative mirror shards, each easily double my height, have been stabbed into the grass.

In the shade of the tree, a bunch of rejected guys are standing, chatting. Their disappointment shows in the sag of their shoulders. We’re sort of friends—well, as close to friends as we can be given that one day we could become mortal enemies.

Still, their faces bring up some of the best memories I have: watching movies in the rec room with 105, lifting weights with 304, and goofing off in behavioral psych classes with 63.

I’ve lived with most of these guys since I was eleven, which is when I was moved from my foster home to the LIC. I might not be friends with all of them but they’re the closest thing to family I have. I spot 413 in the group. We aren’t friends but he came to the LIC the same week I did, so we’ll always have that binding us, even if I do find him kind of annoying.

In his defense, he *did* introduce me to Nicki Minaj, and he’ll always get points for that. Sure, he only showed me the “Anaconda” video because, well, Nicki and those dancers. But the song stuck in my head, and afterward I listened to it on repeat until I’d memorized each of the verses. Now she’s my favorite musician by a huge margin.

413 waves at me. Should I say goodbye to him? What do I say

to someone I'm probably never going to see again? I can't say what I want to say, which is: thanks for introducing me to Nicki, but I still think you're a tool.

"If you'd like," says Craike, "you can say goodbye to them."

"Thank you, sir."

I walk away from Craike and approach 413. He offers his hand.

"You made it?" he asks.

I nod as I shake his hand. This is . . . odd. He's usually such a bro, and as such, I didn't think he was capable of just a handshake. Usually he likes elaborate greetings with knuckle bumping and back tapping. Now, though, shaking his hand, he seems softer, and I'm worried that I've judged him too harshly.

"Yep, I did," I say. "Looks like I'm getting out of here."

He must hate me for leaving while he's still stuck here. He must think I'm rubbing his face in it.

He pulls me into a hug. "Go crush it out there, man. And who knows, maybe in a couple years we'll both be out and I can have you over for dinner or something. You know, like normal people."

"Yeah, definitely."

I force the statistical improbability of that happening out of my mind, then return to Craike.

"They hate you," he says.

I nod. "They're just scared. They're almost eighteen so they know they have limited time, because everyone knows the adult Compound is more selective than ours. No one wants to stay at the LIC forever." He narrows his eyes, which makes me blush. "I mean, no one wants to grow old without being assigned."

We both know this doesn't happen. Either you're chosen

while you're desirable or you vanish, either to be incinerated or, in rare cases, mind-wiped and repurposed into some other role, like a parent or older brother or something. Being repurposed is far from ideal, though, as they say it strips you of all personality, leaving you a shell of the person you used to be. We both know that winning is the only way to live a life somewhat worth living.

"The fact that I was chosen," I continue, "means they have one less shot at being assigned while they're still young adults. Some of them already have their transfer forms. It makes sense that they're afraid."

"Fear is useless. If they want to get out they need to work hard. It's the only way through."

Easy for you to say.

At the end of another long, mirrored hallway is an elevator. Craike presses a plastic card onto the wall to the left of it. A square panel illuminates, showing a photo of Craike above the words ACCESS GRANTED. The sound of machines whirring fills the air.

He turns to me. "Did you enjoy your time at the LIC, Caden? Sometimes I can't wait to get away from a place, only to leave and discover I was happier than I thought."

I look down the pristine reflective hallway. Will I miss this place? *No freaking way.* But he's staring at me, so I smile and say: "Sure, I mean, I'm sad about leaving my friends, but I'm excited to finally live the life I was born to live. To become the real me, you know?"

The doors slide apart. We walk inside. He taps his card onto a screen beside the buttons, then presses the button marked 1. The elevator rises.

“Caden, the only person a liar can’t fool is a better liar. And boy, I can see right through you.”

I turn away, my cheeks reddening.

He keeps looking at me. “So let’s hope Juliet isn’t a very good liar.”

“Yes, let’s.”

The door opens, revealing a massive hangar. Sitting in the middle of the room is a gleaming white jet. Two workers in gray overalls are pulling at chains at the back of the room, slowly opening the door to reveal a long gravel runway.

And the sky.

It stretches on and on and on. It’s bloody endless.

“We can’t be disturbed as we transport Love Interests,” says Craike. “And a private jet is the most efficient manner of discreet transport.”

In front of the steps that lead to the door of the jet is Kaylee. She sees me and starts jumping up and down, waving ecstatically.

Hey, Caden!

Her voice rings through my mind, clear as day. Startled, I take a step back. She laughs, then taps the spot behind her ear.

Don’t freak out in front of Craike, all right? It’s bad form.

Can you hear me?

Of course I can. This is good, we need to practice talking telepathically. And no, I can’t always read your mind. Only little bursts. Now, I’m going to hug you.

She sprints toward me and grabs me in a hug. My arms go slack as she squeezes, but my obvious awkwardness only makes her grip me tighter. “It’s time. Come on, man, smile! You’re finally getting out of here. You’re going to a small country town in Virginia

called Mapleton. It's got all these little bookstores and coffee places and ugh, it's so cute. You'll love it there."

Craike's warning rings in my ears. *You'll always be ours.*

"I'm sure I will!"

"You *have* to see the inside of the plane. It's decked out to the absolute max. I'm talking leather seats, wide-screen TVs, the newest gaming consoles, and, best of all, a full bar." She flings her arm around my shoulders. "Maybe a drink or two will settle those nerves before you meet Juliet? God knows alcohol was probably invented to help hapless Romeos like you. So come on, let's go!"

I climb up the steps, bouncing up and down, trying to make myself appear almost as giddily excited as Kaylee. I figure it's what a Nice would do. At the very top, I turn and look back. Craike is staring at me with his arms tight across his chest. His eyes are cold and his mouth is set in a sneer. "Don't forget what I said, Caden."

Step out of line and you will die.

"I never will."

Then I walk through the doorway into the plane.

CHAPTER FIVE

KAYLEE WASN'T KIDDING, THE INSIDE OF THE plane is stunning. The carpet is the color of cream, and there are only four seats: massive, soft leather things that recline fully. At the back of the plane is a small bar, and behind it is a glass shelf stocked with every type of alcohol imaginable. Alcohol wasn't allowed at the LIC, but I've seen enough TV to know it's supposed to be delicious. My mouth waters.

Two of the seats are occupied. A prim-and-proper-looking girl with her red hair pulled back in a tight bun sits in one. She catches me looking and her eyebrows furrow, making her square glasses slip down her pointy nose.

In the other is my rival.

But it's not him anymore.

His eyes are now a shining, emerald green. His face has been restructured so now his jawline is stronger and his nose is slightly bigger and dead straight. His cheekbones are high points beneath his eyes and his teeth have been bleached so that they're impossibly white. Even the little hairless patch on his cheek is gone, and

now the bristle on his cheeks looks almost like a full-on beard. I thought he was handsome before, but now he's in a whole new league. Like, before he was the lead guitarist of a punk band I'm not cool enough to know about, but now he's the dreamy lead singer of a mainstream pop-punk band who is going to ride the line between cute and sexy all the way to the bank. It's just . . . his eyes are so vibrant, and his hair is so perfectly messy. I can't look away.

"Judy," Kaylee says with a stern nod to the prim girl.

Judy moves her head lazily upward and blinks slowly. "Kaylee. It's so nice to see you. How was the funeral of your last boy? I heard the flowers were beautiful."

He and I keep looking at each other.

"I need a drink," I say, and I head toward the bar. I pass him, and as soon as I do I sense movement; he's slid out of his chair to follow me.

I grab the fanciest bottle of scotch I can find, a squarish bottle with a blue label, and start pouring it into a small square glass. The amber liquid sloshes against the bottom of the cup.

My rival is behind me. "So," he says. His hands are in his pockets and his shoulders are slightly hunched. "I was given a name. They want me to go by Dylan, but you can call me Dyl, if you'd like. I prefer it. It feels more like my choice, not theirs, you know?"

I turn away from him and spin the lid back onto the bottle. My grip on it tightens, forming a tight seal. Of the two of us, he's better-looking. By a wide margin. After everything I've done to turn myself into the perfect Nice, he could win because of his pretty eyes and stupidly cute smile. It's bullshit.

He could star in a CW show, for crying out loud! He's a scruffy Abercrombie model! He's . . .

He's looking at me.

"Dude," says Dyl. "What's the deal?"

I place the bottle down and turn to face him. The glass of the bottle clatters against the granite of the bar.

"You've changed. A lot."

His mouth drops open slightly. "Is it bad?"

I shake my head. "No. But you don't look like a real person anymore. I mean, seriously, who the fuck has bright-green eyes?"

He laughs. "I do, apparently. Now pass me a scotch, Nice guy. I've always wanted to try it."

I pause. Should I do this? The LIC wouldn't want me to. I peer past him and see that both Kaylee and Judy are distracted by their phones, so I pour a drink and pass it to him. They want me to hate him, and if I can do something that goes against their wishes but doesn't get me in trouble, I'm absolutely going to do it.

He's staring at me, grinning like he noticed that I hesitated but poured him the drink anyway. *Damn it*. He raises his drink to his lips and winces. "This doesn't smell how I'd imagined."

I smell my own, which stinks like burning acid. I thought it'd be sweet and woody.

"Well," he says. "It's too late to back out now. Cheers!"

Our glasses clink together, then, at the same time, we take big gulps. The liquid sets my mouth on fire. Coughing, I slam the glass back down onto the bar. Through watery eyes I see Dyl. He's doubled over, spluttering his lungs out. He looks ridiculous.

I laugh. Like, genuinely laugh.

I can't remember the last time I laughed like this.

He starts to laugh too, and somehow, that makes everything better.

I recover, and take a deep breath. My mouth and my windpipe are numb and sort of cold. It feels funny yet kind of nice. *Is this what being drunk feels like?* Dyl straightens up, beaming, his smile showing off those goddamn perfect teeth.

He wipes his eyes. "I owe you, man. Imagine that, Juliet and me at a party, me a Bad, and then I can't even handle a sip of scotch. I'd be a joke!"

My smile fades as I remember why I'm on this plane. Why I exist. The only thing I should laugh at is one of Juliet's jokes. Without her around, I don't matter, so feeling anything when I'm not near her is a waste of energy. Also: I helped Dyl, which is something I can't afford to do. He's right, if he'd spluttered like that in front of Juliet it would've cracked apart his tough-guy persona. Giving him that drink was a mistake. All I can do now is hope that it wasn't a big, life-ruining mistake.

Caden, what are you doing? says Kaylee's voice in my mind. *I told you, that boy is dangerous. He's not your friend. I repeat, he is not your friend. Come back to your seat right now!*

I slide past him and make my way back down the aisle. When I reach my seat I sit down and clasp the buckle of the seat belt over my waist.

At the other side of the plane, Kaylee glowers at me. A strand of golden hair has fallen out of place, and now it dangles in front of her eyes, which are brimming with rage. The intensity of her stare shocks me, and I look down at my seat belt.

Don't be an idiot, Caden. I want to win, to show Judy I'm better than her. Don't let him destroy you before we've even begun.

So that's all she cares about? Great. I turn in my seat so my back is to Kaylee. The plane is moving, and now I'm out of the LIC. I guess it's a big deal, but I'm still recovering from Kaylee's scolding and my own self-loathing, so I don't really feel anything.

I squint, and look out the window. All I can see is a long stretch of brown earth and then the sky. The sunlight is golden, and I imagine the smell of it, clean and free of chemicals. I'm as free as I'll ever be now. Holy shit! The feeling, bright and hot, overwhelms my shame. I'm finally a part of the real world. Maybe I can't do *anything* I want, but it's definitely better than before.

I remember Dyl spluttering after he sipped the scotch, and smile. *Don't forget what you are.* The only reason I'm on this trip is to reach Juliet. Even though it feels like it, it's not a big deal. Right now I'm nothing, a blank page waiting to be filled. I shouldn't feel anything until I meet Juliet. But man, that was funny. *He's* funny.

All I have to do to survive is make sure that boy dies.

My smile fades.