

Prologue

TYLER

IN ORDER TO keep a secret, you have to be able to successfully tell a lie.

To successfully tell a lie, you have to trick your mind into believing your deceitful invention as the absolute truth.

First, you create markers in your mind of where the lie stems from—the *why* of it, *who* it involves, and those it will affect. From there, you branch out a barrier of details around the falsity to help eradicate any trace of what the truth once was. Once you believe it, you live it, instilling those details into the minds of those who surround you so they, too, invest in and strengthen your lie as truth.

Once that's done, it's no longer a lie.

The truth about lies?

They protect secrets, but secrets seldom protect anyone.

I should know because to protect my secrets and those I love, I've become a living, breathing fucking lie.

LARISSA

US PRESIDENT: BARACK OBAMA | 2009–2017
Asheville, North Carolina

L YING ON MY stomach, feet kicked up behind me, I'm flipping a page of one of Mama's outdated fashion magazines when the yelling starts—*again*. It's been nearly every day for the last week. But it's the *way* they're arguing tonight that has me popping my head out of my bedroom. As their roars escalate, I creep up to peek over the mezzanine rail to see them in another standoff. This time, Ciro met Roc at the door—where they're squared off now, screaming at the top of their lungs. Their war has been ongoing for some time, but somehow, I know this fight is different. I can *feel* it.

“You are no son of mine!” my father booms, his olive complexion reddening. “You have no respect!”

“And you're *a man to respect?*” my older brother spits, tipping his chin up in a blatant sign of contempt. “You're so fucking courageous that you dole out all of the orders and do *none* of the heavy lifting.”

Flinching, I pad toward the top of the stairs, remaining hidden in the shadows while bracing myself, knowing the turn this will take because of my brother's posturing and words. Roc has never gone this far.

“I know who you are, what you are, and Nonno would be disgusted if he knew what you—”

The crack from my father’s backhand echoes up to me, and I flinch again as my brother’s laughter rings out in response to the blow. The fact that Roc used our grandfather against him—the one person *Ciro DiCicco* feared shaming up until his death—tells me all I need to know. That, and the fact that Roc’s venom is filled with an underlying threat, has me fearful that my brother might not survive this rebellion. It’s the menacing look in his eyes—his voice littered with hate—that has me bracing for the worst.

“What’s wrong, *mostro*?” *Monster*, Roc spits. “You don’t like the truth?”

“As if you have some ground to speak. You think I don’t know what you did to that girl last summer? I’m done cleaning up your messes. You’ve disgraced this family for the last time!”

“It’s your sick fucking blood that’s running through my veins. You sold your soul long ago—and ours! This family is cursed because of you. Keep your filthy fucking fortune and plagued name. You might have *forced me* to help you *earn it*, but I want no part of it.”

“That’s laughable,” Father scoffs. “How will you buy your drugs?”

“I would rather be a penniless drug addict than a replica of you!”

“Then go!” My father’s tone takes on the deadly edge he uses when he’s about to act in a way that can’t be undone. “As of now, you get no protection from the name you so despise. I would kill you myself if I weren’t certain you’re about to save me the fucking headache.”

Ciro delivers this in a way that strikes fear into the hearts of every man who crosses him before he turns his back with finality. It’s then that Roc’s eyes find mine. In his return gaze, I see it—he’s not coming back. As if in afterthought, *Ciro* reaches into his pocket and tosses a fortune in bills at Roc’s feet. “This should buy enough to

rid me of you.” His following words send a cold chill down my spine. “If it doesn’t, you better make sure you crawl to an edge of the earth where I can’t reach you.”

The loose bills start to scatter when Roc cracks the front door, and Dad stalks toward his study. Roc continues to hold my gaze as I frantically shake my head, begging. He can’t leave. He won’t. He won’t leave us.

Seeming to read my thoughts, Roc breaks the stare and lowers his eyes to the dwindling pile of money before scooping just enough of the loose cash to not look like he took any. The rest scatters in the wind, along the foyer, trailing him outside the door before he slams it so hard that the glass surrounding it cracks. With it, so does my restraint. I swallow the bile that threatens as thunder rattles the walls of the house along with the wood floor beneath my bare feet.

Knowing what going after him will cost me, I take the first step down as Ignacio fearfully calls my name from behind his inch-open bedroom door. Turning, I aggressively shoo him back into his room. Panic wins as I take the stairs as quietly as I can and manage to clear my father’s line of sight. Just before I do, I catch a glimpse of Ciro where he sits in his study, staring into a roaring fire, before I hit the landing and quietly slip through the front door.

Rain pelts my neck and scalp as I race toward my brother, ignoring the pain from the sharp gravel digging into my bare feet as I call after him.

Glancing back, Roc stops at his driver’s door and, after spotting me, immediately begins to jerk his head back and forth in warning. “Go inside, sorellina,” *little sister*, “you know what will happen if he finds you out here.”

“Where will you go?”

Looking up, he scours the house, eyes darkening, expression tortured, as if the house itself represents everything that haunts and hurts him, when we both know it’s *the man* inside. The man he just bravely faced off with. “*Anywhere* but here.”

“When will you be back?” I ask, my lips trembling as I purposely press my feet into the sharp gravel to keep from crying. Emotional displays other than well-constructed hurled venom are considered a weakness in our family.

“I won’t.”

“You can’t leave us here!” I shriek, panic seizing me as he opens his car door. “Please don’t go,” I beg, tugging at his T-shirt as he stops and hangs his head. Turning to me, he bends and grips my shoulders.

“I have to, and you know why. Listen to me, Larissa. As soon as you get the chance, you get away from here, from *him*. Run as far and as fast as you can. For yourself and for Ignacio, don’t let him turn you into one of his monsters, okay?”

“But you’ll come back for us.” I search his eyes for any sign of hope as he tightens his grip on my shoulders.

“Promise me!” he bellows above the increasing wind and rain.

“Take us with you—”

“Promise me,” he grits through clenched teeth.

“I promise,” I utter as fear cripples me that I have no idea how to keep that vow. If he leaves, it will be an impossible feat.

“Go back inside before he finds you out here!” he shouts, but I continue to grip his arms as he tries gently to free himself. My fingernails drag over rough, raised skin as I fight to keep a hold on him. Looking down, I spot the bold edges of a heavily blackened tattoo, which wasn’t there the last time he was home. Thunder rattles the ground as I study it—the wings of a bird, a crow, I think—but it’s too dark to fully make out. Releasing my fingers, Roc gently pushes me away to gain space while I persistently beg him not to go. Once free, he slips into his car, and I call his name again, pounding on his driver’s window as he scans the house for long seconds. It’s the start of his engine that has me full-on screaming, uncaring

of who might hear. This cry not going ignored when sorrow-filled, dark brown eyes meet mine through his window. I see it then. Whatever protectiveness he feels for me, for Ignacio, is not enough because, short seconds later, he's spinning tires and speeding away. I watch on, absorbing the sight of his car as he bullets down the driveway and out of the gate. Not once slowing, his exit becomes purposeful and absolute.

Gone.

Rain soaks me as I stare after him for long minutes, praying he'll change his mind and come racing back, both for Ignacio and for me. That he won't be so selfish as to leave us to fend for ourselves in this hell. But it's a foolish hope because I saw it in his expression—in his departure. All lingering hope disappears when the gates close. Locking me in. At the sight of it, a guttural cry bursts from me. At both the loss of him and what his permanent absence means.

Soaked through by the chilling rain, I turn back toward the house and freeze when I'm met by familiar sapphire eyes. Inside his return gaze swirls turbulent affirmation of the same knowledge. There's no escaping my fate, and there's nowhere to run. My brother's betrayal makes each step back toward my damning fate even more grueling.

In my darkest moment, I curse my brother's future to be just as tormented as the one he's cursed me with.

LARISSA

US PRESIDENT: PRESTON MONROE | 2021–2029
Barga, Italy
Three months ago

FINGERING MY NECKLACE—A gift from my cousin, delivered just this morning—I stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror in wait. The click of her heels gives away her approach, but I now know that sound is intentionally meant to strike terror into the hearts of those who have crossed her. Certain she’s aware it’s one of her best intimidation tactics. Everything she does is purposeful yet so expertly executed that it seems unintentional, which makes her one of the most formidable women in the world. At least to those who know of her. A woman who’s spent years crafting me into a replica of her for this purpose, for this very day. Though I’m rattling with nervous excitement, I show absolutely no trace of it as I gaze into my reflection. When the clicks stop, Tula appears, her eyes meeting mine in the glass, a slight softness in her return stare before it disappears, and she begins to circle me in appraisal. After one thorough sweep, she stops in front of me and brings her most potent gaze to mine. In the next second, she nods her consent. A simple gesture to some, but a powerful one for me. An approval that sets me free.

I’m ready.

TYLER

Florida Coast
Three months ago

STRAPPED UP AND ready, sweat gliding down my back as a murky violet-gray dawn commences, the fading crescent moon peering down on us as the only witness. The birds begin their scattered songs as if all is right in the world. Despite the positioning of the men around me, there's an unnatural stillness in the air—one I've become all too familiar with. I first noticed it during my missions overseas. It was just as present the morning Dom died.

This stillness is not at all a calm before the storm but an indication of the presence of evil.

That same awareness hit me hard just as we crept through the gate minutes ago, stealthily moving through the heavily manicured and whimsically deceptive grounds to surround the fortress. Duplicitous to the naked, untrained eye, the exterior looks like something out of a fairy tale—blooming wisteria hanging from archways of expensive wood, trickling fountains surrounded by flowering bushes—but that's where the illusion ends, at least for me. Because I know the strategy behind this type of deceit in a way few others do, and what the pattern looks

like. My enemies and I share a commonality in deception for the sole purpose of maintaining our secrets.

Thanks to Dom, I've been made privy to more of the secrets kept by our growing number of enemies. Thrust more thoroughly into the rabbit hole in the year and change since we've taken Antoine and his army down. Full credit to Dom's torturous legwork; I've witnessed the countless evils that have taken place inside the walls of the mansion we're surrounding. Walls covered with priceless art and highly polished marble floors flown in from Istanbul. The other extravagant expenses make up the fraudulent palace—the lie—which commands acknowledgment from those of lesser power. Those expected to bow to the owners, to receive and regard them as no less than the gods that these delusional fucks believe themselves to be. But for me, just inside the oversized oak doors, mere feet away, rests the very definition of evil.

Their crimes against humanity are plentiful, the most damning of them cementing my participation in this morning's raid. With the lie-encircled secrets Dom left on his laptop for us to uncover along with his task list, he made us privy to the parties guilty of atrocities he had hopes of bringing to light, and for the possibility to both expose and dispose of these types of deity wannabes.

His older brother takes his place opposite me against the arched brick hallway just short of the mansion's entrance. Tobias was insistent on participating today when I told him I would personally be overseeing the raid to take down these particular monsters.

Heaviness of what we're about to do fills the still air, emanating throughout the space and bouncing from everyone occupying it. Though I feel every bit of said heavy rattling inside my head and chest, I continue to play my part and keep my vow to shield those I love and care about from the thoughts I'm having. A battle that started with my own time behind enemy lines and, more

recently, the unveiling of Dom's task list. A war Dom himself fought every day he kept the information in his mind and close to his chest.

The battle within me is raging daily now, along with my theory, which is rapidly threatening to solidify itself as fact—that we're not enough.

That we have no fucking way of balancing the scales, let alone shifting their weight in our favor. That we have a very slim chance of winning the battles ahead, let alone the war.

What I suspected as a newly inked bird and budding soldier has become less a suspicion and more of an undeniable truth since I saw the evidence of just how easily this world can fall victim to the most depraved of minds.

The worst part? My dwindling desire to risk it all for a world that collectively seems to no longer give a fuck. Not about the damage they're doing to each other, let alone anyone suffering at the hands of this type of evil.

Even so, I'll continue to do my part. To try, as much as possible, to be a beacon of hope, even as my own diminishes. To convince those who are inked and fighting with me to believe that we have a chance of tipping those scales.

Daily, I think about the part my son recently signed up to play and wonder if he's glimpsed the amount of doubt and fear growing inside me.

I've witnessed true evil in my time as a Raven and a soldier, and finally being able to fully combine both roles in these last years has been both freeing and damning.

As that initial high continues to wear off, the reality of what we're up against has those hopes dwindling by the day because of the sheer amount of evil there is. Of how far it stretches, what it's gotten away with so far, and for how long.

I was naïve.

We all have been, but I refuse to point that out to my brothers—especially Tobias, a man who's worked his

whole life to get to this point. In no way do I want to convey to him that we're going to need more than just prime real estate in the White House to accomplish what we started so many years ago.

That truth weighs heavily on me as I study Tobias now, uncertain if I should go to him with this or if I should tell him at all. We're doing what we can, and maybe it will be enough for him. Maybe it should be for me as well.

Deciding I can't find it inside me to break this to him—at least not today—I do my best to briefly lighten the atmosphere as I take in his appearance.

“How did you already manage to scuff your shiny new boots?”

Tobias's brows furrow in irritation as he glances down at his recently purchased, flawless black boots. It only takes a second for him to realize I'm busting his balls.

He rolls his eyes at me, lips lifting slightly in amusement as he mutters an “imbecile” under his breath. His choice of insult draws an instant ache from me, the French lilt around the word taking me back in time, more particularly to a face and image burned into memory. A sunny day in a former life. At times, it's fucking torturous having a memory as vivid and as sharp as mine. Being unable to forget the details can, at times, be a cruel gift.

Thankfully, Russell distracts me, dispersing the image by tossing in his own commentary for Tobias over the line through our earpieces.

“You do look ridiculous, T,” Russell snarks. “Seriously, who in the fuck dresses up for a raid? Please tell me your hair isn't combed back with product?”

“Fuck you,” Tobias mutters, clearly embarrassed by being called out, his expression riddled with admission. Because my bougie French brother did, in fact, slick his hair back with product as he dressed for a government raid. Well, technically, a special ops raid by a legitimate government organization that's still highly classified.

Something we've done our fucking best to protect in recent months with the amount of trash we've gathered and disposed of. We've made every effort imaginable to make sure none of it has been televised or reported in any way. At least not yet. We have a tactical plan for how we're going to release the information and when. And only if forced. But since two or three of our raids have been leaked and televised—something that still has me fuming—we might not have a choice. These fuckers have ways of warning one another, and it doesn't seem to matter how covert we are.

"My guess is he's trying to camouflage the fact he's gained the freshman twenty," Russell coos.

"Isn't it freshman fifteen?" I jest.

Tobias snaps his attention to me. "What is that? This freshman twenty?"

Shaking my head at my brother, I can't help but marvel at just how un-Americanized Tobias is at times.

"The weight you gain when you get comfortable in a new relationship," Russell happily supplies, and I can't help but chuckle as Tobias palms his vest while craning his neck to check himself out.

"I wear the same pant size as I always have, *connard*," *asshole*, he snaps.

"Doesn't matter if you have a dicky-do."

"Dicky-do?" Tobias poses as a question to me, but our mics are far too advanced to miss even a pin drop.

"It's when your gut sticks out more than your *dicky-do*," Russell quips in answer, pulling a laugh from everyone on the line.

"You still look good, baby," I coo, giving him an air-kiss pucker of my lips, which earns me a death-threat return stare.

All traces of humor cease when two of our most trusted line up just outside the massive front doors, cueing us in that it's showtime.

“For Dom.” I intentionally trigger every bird on the line into the heaviness of the moment to regain our collective focus. The shift is instant for Tobias, as his eyes blank out briefly before filling with a familiar determination and fury.

Our earbuds sound with Russell mimicking the same sentiment as he readies himself from where he sits in a control room hundreds of miles away. One of the few birds I made damn sure flew with me to DC just after Preston won the election. Now, a little over two years and change into what we can only hope is Preston’s first term, Russell has proven my demand to take him with me was a wise decision. My most recent request is for Peter to join the fray under Julien’s wing.

Within one slow blink, I clear every imaginable thought to conjure the pocket. A heartbeat later, I’m in the black, my tunnel vision at the ready. Every bit of my focus is sharp, intent on my mission as I mentally run through the blueprint of the minutes ahead. Looking past the faces of the men outside the door who search my person awaiting my signal, I summon the rage I’ve been harboring. A single hand gesture later, we splinter the doors and unleash hell.