

## PREFACE

There was a beauty in dying that day, one I did not expect when I'd imagined meeting my maker.

The blue water I sank through was angelic, quiet, peaceful. Link glided through the crystal waters as if he belonged to the gods of lakes and rivers. A lake was killing me that day. No, I take that back; my *decisions* were killing me that day, and he knew what decision had been made.

The sun shined, lighting the way as I sank farther and farther. His youthful-yet-wise eyes were so painfully determined to reach me, not to let me go, so determined to see my attempt fail.

My one hand graciously floated above me as my weighted foot led my final descent. I'll never forget the touch of his skin after his fingers stretched then touched the tips of mine—a sensation recognized only by one passing... saying goodbye, giving up, surrendering to the life he or she no longer wanted to live.

I found a beauty in dying that day.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Link and Whit*

I didn't mind being a loose cannon, a classic case of a rebel without a cause. I rather enjoyed my path to self-destruction. Why not? I was the opposite of depressing, and I wasn't harming anyone—just having fun as my pathetic clock of life ticked away. Okay, maybe that did sound a *little* morbid, and there was probably no maturity in such thoughts. But I felt if someone could've proved to me that there were *fun* in maturity, I would've shown you a sudden and magical transformation—if it were more fun than I was already having, that was.

The only person who had the ability to keep my 'live life to its fullest' mission at a moderate level was Link, a young soul cursed with an unending loyalty to me. Like me, he was one of the lucky ones. We had both managed to sustain our consciences and not let our money corrode our humanity. Our fat wallets—courtesy of our parents—never owned our free-spirited hearts, even though the money laced with lies ruled everything else, including love. We treated the less fortunate with the respect they deserved and secretly envied them because we knew firsthand money couldn't fill endless voids. In fact, it deepened voids and loneliness that one day, only he and I together would be able to heal...

As we sat in the dark, smelling the expensive leather of his overpriced car, his deep voice rumbled, "You ready?"

Is any teenager ready? No, but that was what made all this so invigorating.

"The question is," I playfully inquired, "are you?"

I understood that Link—formally known as Reether Jones—was the ultimate package, tall, strong, and handsome with dark hair. I should've felt more than fortunate to be sitting alone

with him, but not one part of me wanted him in that manner. In a complicatedly way, Link was my very best friend. Oh yes, his girlfriend, Constance, *hated* me. She wasn't exactly on my favorite person list either.

Link chuckled mischievously. "Born, baby. Born ready."

And that was why I loved him. In my eyes, Link was a complete badass. He was witty, sharp-minded, and bighearted, and I had yet to meet anyone who compared. Not that I let Link and his well-nourished ego know this because, well, where was the fun in that? Someone had to keep the heartthrob grounded, so I happily nominated myself for the challenge.

"Please," I joked. "You were *born* so I could *beat* you—like every time."

Underneath all the ridiculous expectations placed on Link and myself was our bond. We were the same, born into stuck-up families we practically despised. Link was being groomed for Yale, for law, like his father, but all he wanted was to be a professional football player. His incredibly large and strong physique was made for such an aggressive sport, but his father felt it was beneath him.

I was to go to Harvard for the medical program even though the sight of blood made my knees weak, and the only thing my knees wanted to do was dance. Since I was not as easily refused, my parents compromised to keep me quiet for the time being and fed my hunger by letting me dance temporarily until it was time to 'grow up' and face the path carved out for me.

Creases formed around Link's inquisitive, electric blue eyes as he grinned. "Popcorn our wager?"

"Large!"

Link burst out laughing. "Not falling for that again!"

“*Small popcorn.*” I grumbled to myself for being such a fool as I looked out his passenger window. In the corner of my eye, I saw Link’s strong hand grip his door handle as he started our countdown. “One.” I pulled my small mailbag over my head to secure it as my other hand eagerly gripped the passenger door handle. “Two.” My adrenaline kicked in. “Three!” Link yelled, and we began our race.

Our doors swung open, and I leapt from the fancy car that labeled him, denying his true worth. No dollar amount could ever define Link’s value. I slammed the door shut because that was one of our rules and took off for the front of the movie theater. Link’s car beeped as he set his alarm.

I knew this win was mine as I heard his keys hit the ground, and he yelled, “Damn it!”

I howled in celebration as I ran as fast as I could across the theater’s tiny parking lot. When my foot finally hit the long sidewalk, I heard our friend Harlan yell, “Whit, run!” I knew Link was coming up strong. I screamed, imagining his long legs gaining ground, and made my short legs go faster.

Even though Link adored me, he never let me win without earning it. I admired him for it because it always made me try harder and feel as if I had truly earned my success, something so simple—but so desired by both of us.

Harlan opened the front door, holding out my movie ticket. As I passed him in a blur, I grabbed my ticket and yelled, “Thank you.” I skidded to a stop at the ticket collector’s podium—the finish line. I high-fived his waiting hand as my nostrils detected delicious movie popcorn. Ford, whose incredible height always reminded me of my shortcomings, was collecting tickets. He smiled at my obvious win. “And he loses again!”

Out of breath, I said, “Getting off in time?”

Ford smirked. “Now don’t *that* statement have a *double* meaning.”

He leaned down so I could kiss his adorable cheek. I headed to the concession stand.

“Perv. I’ll save you a seat.”

Coming through the door, Link bitched to whoever was willing to listen. “I dropped my keys. Otherwise, I totally had her.”

“She cheats.”

*Aw, there’s that horrid voice.* Constance, Link’s girlfriend, commented yet again on matters that did not concern her.

“When are you going to learn?” she continued. My shoulders tightened as her high heels clicked across the old flooring.

I refused to believe that Constance’s beauty—overshadowing my own disastrous excuse for femininity—was the real fuel for our feuds.

To the oldest movie theater employee in the history of earth, who was waiting for my order, I said, “Yes, I will have a”—I stopped to grin over my shoulder to the jealous loser Link—“a *large* popcorn, please.”

Frank chuckled as he typed on his register. “Not falling for that again?”

The elderly man clearly remembered the fit I threw at that very counter when I’d learned my best friend had cheated me out of my favorite snack. That day, I’d gotten my prize, but it was only a *small*. Tricky Link always kept me on my toes.

“Nope. And don’t hold back on the butter.”

“All that butter is going to make her ass fat,” mumbled Constance, as the rest of my friends caught up.

“Don’t start, babe,” Link warned his personal freak show.

I ignored Constance. “Frank, on *that* note, I’ll take a Coke too—on Link’s tab of course.”

I faced Constance and condescendingly asked, “Anything else?”

“You’re a bitch?”

Instead of returning the hatred, I turned back to Frank. “And M&Ms, please.”

“Hey!” Link laughed. “Why do *I* have to pay for *her* loud mouth?”

After Frank handed over the goods, I popped some of my crunchy, buttery, well-earned prize in my mouth. “Because Constance is a *constant* pain in my—”

“Okay.” Harlan put his arm around my shoulders to wisely guide me away before I got to express the rest of my ‘constant’ thoughts.

“Let’s go find some seats.” Harlan stole a handful of popcorn, clearly still trying to distract me. I hollered my disapproval as he called over his shoulder to Link, “You’ll get her M&M’s and Coke?”

Link mumbled as he dug into his wallet. “You mean *my* Coke?”

“Why did you bring her?” I asked Harlan, as I was escorted down the hall toward our theater—one of the two in the rickety building.

Harlan lived near Constance, on the other side of the rural town in Connecticut where we attended school. Link and I lived on the opposite end. Link was supposed to be a pupil at the private school closer to our home, but he chose to follow me instead. The school with the dance program had the required elite status, so his parents allowed it. We’d planned our freshman year to be just the two of us against the world, but surrounded by unknowns in an unfamiliar school, we met Harlan and Ford. The four of us had caused chaos ever since.

Harlan looked down at me—as did most of the population. “Because your best friend thinks he’s in love with her.”

I ate more popcorn. “Ugh, don’t remind me. I still can’t comprehend this fact. Denial seems to be my best option at this point.”

Harlan muttered, “I swear you and Reeth will marry someday.”

I stopped walking, so I could deliver an adequate stink-eye. Harlan laughed. “Okay! So you have *two* issues you are in denial about. Got it.” Harlan opened the theater door for me. “Whitney, if you’d give Connie a chance, you’d see she’s actually pretty cool... when not hating on you, of course.”

Harlan admitting to Connie being a bitch made me abandon my dirty look and move onward. As I sat in a theater seat with Harlan to my right, I thought about how I couldn’t imagine being friends with the wench from hell, but I hated the thought of punishing Link for my personal tastes. It wasn’t his fault that the girl had incredible endurance and chased him until he caved our senior year.

Just then, Link entered the theater and attempted to sit in the seat to the left of mine. Even though I was on the fence about forgiving him for falling for an alien in high heels, I complained. “Hey, I saved that seat for Ford.”

“I can only handle one bitching out at a time, Whit.” Link claimed the saved seat, his big shoulders promptly demanding some of my designated space, and seemed to have no regrets about his criticizing comment.

One should be offended, but Link was only checking me—keeping me in line, as I always did him.

Constance sat next to him. “I’m not a bitch.”

“Here we go again.” Link sighed, as if tired of being completely misunderstood.

Watching his jaded expression age him, I realized Constance and I were being selfish. A decent character like Link did not deserve to be tortured because he loved two girls. Or at least I believed he didn't. I knew his love for me was different, but it didn't stifle the way he felt for Connie. I found myself whispering "I'm sorry," thinking again about what Harlan had said as I leaned my head on his arm. I knew I needed to accept that my friend had feelings for someone.

In complete shock, Link looked at Harlan. "What did you say to her?"

"The truth." Harlan dared to stick his fingers in my bucket of popcorn again. He quickly retreated with a chuckle when I growled my final warning.

Ford walked in, and after one second of observation, he complained. "Whitney! My seat?"

I sat up and opened my mouth, but before I got to reply, Link answered for me. "Pick an outer seat, chump. I sit by my girls."

Ford gestured to Harlan, who said, "Not moving. You win the prize." Ford eyed the winnings. "Connie? You settled yet?"

Apparently, he was also over our bitching.

The blond disaster answered, "What choice do I have? My boyfriend just called me a bitch."

I felt compelled to help my partner in crime. I leaned forward. "Link meant that is how you are *acting*, and he... didn't single you out... and, and, I... *possibly*... am to blame... for your... behavior."

Okay, so some jaws hit the ground, but I was completely capable of swallowing a little pride for the most important person in my life. Link looking at me with a grin told me how much

he loved me and how much he admired me. While Link kissed my forehead, I asked in shame, “Why do you put up with me?”

“Because under your fake tough exterior, there is a heart of gold. And because you are the cutest redhead in the world.” He whispered, “I love you, girl,” and handed me *my* Coke.

Feeling worthy again, I took a big swig and let my junk-fest begin.

As we settled properly into the seats that would own our asses for the next two hours, more patrons entered while Constance griped yet a-freaking-gain. “Why did we have to choose a dancing movie? Who cares about a ballerina’s struggles and boring drama?”

See? Constant pain in my—

“Babe! Enough!” Link snapped. “Whit just apologized to you. Do you have *any* clue what a rare event you just experienced?”

Ford whispered to her, “FYI? Never been done.”

“When pigs fly, I will accept *that* as an apology,” said the one the circus was hanging missing posters for. Constance and I were a work in progress.

“It’s the closest to one you may ever receive,” Link explained. “Please! Meet Whit halfway here, Connie. Damn.”

Harlan and Ford glared, informing Constance that they were one hundred percent behind Link. I knew this glare. I had been the recipient once—or many times.

Looking as if she felt the pressure of our clan’s judgment, Constance finally said, “Fine. I’m sure... this will be a good movie.” She leaned forward and looked over to me. “Thank you for the apology, and good choice of movie, Whitney.”

Ford and Harlan looked around. Link’s shoulders relaxed, and he chuckled at his next two challenges. “What are you two idiots doing?”

Still in search of something, Harlan and Ford spoke in unison. “Looking for the flying pigs.”

As the theater darkened slightly, Link leaned to me. “Are you nervous?” He knew me, which meant he knew what was truly on my mind—not the movie. I’d just learned that day that I’d earned a dance audition I desperately wanted, and to fail meant my parents were right. “Nah, I got some congratulations and some expected cold shoulders, but I’m good.”

Link’s eyes studied me. “Whit.” He clearly saw through my lie.

I looked directly into his big ol’ blues and aggressively nodded. I was. I was so nervous about my upcoming audition that I could’ve puked, but I didn’t want to waste any of the delicious popcorn that I was noticing to be a little dry.

“Where are you going now?” Link asked, as I stood up.

“Frank shorted me on my butter. Old bastard knows better.” I accidentally stepped on Link’s big foot, causing him to yelp in pain.

“Aren’t dancers supposed to be graceful or something?” Ford teased me as I tripped past him.

Harlan clarified an apparent fact. “Whit’s a graceful klutz at best.”

As I ran out the door, tripping once again—on my own two feet this time—I loudly whispered, “Ford, have them hold the movie ’til I get back.” As an employee of the establishment, I felt he should have some pull.

“I’m a ticket boy, not God.”

I ran to the concession counter to see Frank had abandoned his post. Without an employee in sight, and a movie guy refusing to push pause, I took my only option. I climbed over the counter to get my own damn butter.

As I was falling off the other side of the counter—after a shameful ass-in-the-air presentation—it was evidently clear Harlan was right. I might have been one hell of a dancer, and had a rare audition with Tender West’s summer dance program, but I truly was a complete klutz.

After pulling myself off a filthy floor, I wiped questionable grease off my palms and mailbag and grabbed my bucket of popcorn—and yes, I refilled it, deciding I was a regular and deserved a couple of free kernels. Feeling giddy at finally having control over the infamous butter machine, I swore angels sung in harmony, and I smiled and squealed in delight.

When I heard a chuckle behind me, my nervous stealing hands threw my bucket of popcorn up into the air, announcing my guilt. I turned to see who had busted me and looked into the most mysterious, trouble-promising, male blue eyes in the whole wide world.

