



The Wolf

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Description: I watched you. I observed your every move. I devoured your very existence, and you didn't even know it. I was the monster in the shadows. I was the noise in the dark.

Your tight red dress called to me. It drew me in like a bull to a crimson flag. Hair the color of Merlot. Eyes so green they look like painted glass. Lips so plump and soft like the flesh of a peach. I touched your skin. I smelled your perfume. I felt your heart beating beneath the surface. I wasn't supposed to take you. I wasn't supposed to keep you. But I couldn't stop myself.

I was the hunter, and you were my prey.
Now, you're mine.

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Prologue

Don't stop. Keep going.

Leaves crunched and crackled under my soles like a fire roaring to life. The bottom of my feet stung from sharp pine needles and rocks like I was running over broken glass. Thin branches whipped across my face, making my skin bleed. My heart pounded in my ears. My chest ached with heaviness as my breathing became loud and ragged.

Despite what I felt, I ran. I ran because I had to. I ran because it was my only option. I ran because my life depended on it.

I ducked behind a tree, gasping for air and hoping for a moment of respite. My eyes were open wide, and yet, I couldn't see a damn thing. The forest was smeared out of focus like a Bokeh painting. Everything was dark, basked in a tainted moonlight as thick as smoke from a pipe. Shapes and shadows twisted in the darkness like monsters slipping out of dreams.

“This way!” a man called out. “She went this way!”

Every hair on my body shot up, prickling with fear as heavy boots vibrated the earth. I looked around, unsure of which direction to run. The sound of feet grew closer and closer, leaving me no other option but to keep running.

I took off again, blind as a bat but without the talent of echolocation. I ignored the surge of pain that shot through my heels and up my legs. My dress snagged on broken branches, tearing the thin satin like tissue paper and leaving me with new wounds

dripping warm blood.

Heavy boots tracked me with the precision of a cougar hunting a deer. No matter how fast I ran through the forest, the feet were right behind me. It felt like a sick game, as if they were enjoying the chase. These soulless assholes allowed me to get ahead just enough to let me think I was free, only to appear again right beside me.

I ran as hard and as fast as I could. I ran with a pure drive to escape—to break free, to save myself, to live. But running simply left a trail for them to follow. The men could see the broken branches and smell the fresh blood. So, I hid. I climbed down a small ravine and tucked myself under the edge, covering my body with loose debris.

Every inch of me was shaking and trembling. I did my best to steady my breathing and slow everything down to be as still as possible. In the silence of night, a single heartbeat could give my position away.

I heard voices closing in. They were mumbled voices, but I knew it was the men who were after me. Boots slammed to the ground, and voices whispered like crickets singing until it all stopped. Silence took over, leaving me with just the sound of my own shallow breathing.

I held my breath. My chest burned for air as I listened to the men talk. “She's close,” one of the men said.

“How can you tell? She could be anywhere,” the other man said.

The men were standing on the ridge directly above me. I could feel their weight as the ground sunk in and pressed down on my shoulders. Bits of dirt broke free, dropping onto my head and rolling down my arms.

“I can smell her.” The first man inhaled an audible breath. “Can't you smell her sweet

cunt?”

“I'd rather fuck that sweet cunt,” the second man said with a laugh. “Which way?”

“Head that way. We'll drive her out. I'm done playing this game.”

Chapter One

Poppy

“Poppy Aneska. My my my, look at you. You look stunning.” Dylan Graves grabbed my hand and spun me in place. His eyes licked up and down my body as if I was a delectable treat he could taste using only his sight.

I could feel his overly smooth fingers as they gripped mine. He was a man who didn't work an actual day in his pompous, rich, and comfortable life. The way his skin was softer than my own, and his nails gleamed like a freshly waxed car, was proof enough that he'd been living a life of luxury.

Dylan gave me a crooked smile, bouncing his eyebrows up and down as he said, “I could just eat you up.”

I wanted to throw up all over his expensive, powder gray Brioni suit and white collared shirt with a pastel pink tie. That would have sent him running in the opposite direction, spewing all sorts of crass words. Maybe it would even create a chain reaction. He'd yak because of my vomit, then someone else would yak, and more people would follow suit. The cycle would continue until everyone in the place was upchucking their Osetra Karat Gold Caviar and Louis Roederer Cristal Brut Champagne. The vomit itself would be worth ten times as much as the salary of the

janitor who cleaned it.

But I refrained. I stayed respectful because that was what was expected of me. Be polite, smile when you're expected to smile, laugh when you're expected to laugh, even if the person you're speaking to is an asshole.

So, that's what I did. I forced a big smile as best I could and bowed my head with gratitude. "Thank you," I said, my insides seething with disgust. On the outside, I was as cool as ever. My smile appeared genuine, my eyes delicate, and my cheeks flushed slightly as if I was flattered. The rouge of my cheeks wasn't flattery at all; it was pure discomfort.

Dylan ran his thumb over my knuckles, squeezing my hand a little tighter. "I don't see your daddy around. It looks like he loosened his leash a bit for you tonight, huh?" He grinned a deep, thick scowl that made my skin crawl. Dylan had an aura about him. One that said, "I get what I want, and no one can tell me no." He had been that way since the first time he walked into my father's office.

Dylan had been working with my father for years. He was in his early fifties, married with two children, and loose with his vows. I watched him over the years as he hit on different women who worked at my father's—or should I say, stepfather's pharmaceutical company.

My mother and father married when I was one. I never knew my biological father. My mother said very little about him, only telling me that he was a drifter she met when she was eighteen and wild. He came into her life like a storm and was gone before she knew she was pregnant. She didn't even know his full name. All she knew was he went by Vinny.

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My mother met my stepfather four months after I was born. He whisked her off her feet and accepted me as if I was his own. I did the same. He was the only father I ever knew.

I quickly pulled my hand free from Dylan's and took a step back. "Where's Mrs. Graves tonight?" I asked slyly. I thought it was a good way to change the subject and remind him that I wasn't a naive little girl who didn't know who he was. I wasn't going to, and never would, fall for the playboy act of his.

"She's out of town again. Which," Dylan said with a short pause as he erased the space I had put between us with a step of his own. "Leaves me free to roam. When the cat's away, the mouse will play." He licked his lips as his eyes ran over my body. "There's a nice little balcony upstairs, away from all this commotion and prying eyes. We should check it out. I heard there's a great view of the city."

"I think we both know my father wouldn't approve of you hitting on me like this. You could lose your job. Is that what you want? To be jobless? Money-less? How will you ever look anyone in the face again? How will your wife finance all her trips?"

"Your father won't fire me. He needs me. Besides, what he doesn't know won't hurt him. We can be discreet. It can be our little secret."

"I'm all set," I said flatly.

Dylan reached out and hooked his index finger around mine. "You're too gorgeous to be all alone tonight. That dress," he said as he bit his knuckles. "Goddamn, that dress hugs your curves perfectly."

“Let me make this crystal clear for you. Hit on me again, and I'll call your wife. And I won't just tell her about tonight. I'll tell her about Cassie, and Gina, and Lydia. I'll tell her about every woman you screwed while she was out of town.” I gave him a stern glare, plucked my finger free, then turned and walked to the bar.

I wanted nothing to do with that man. Dylan had been making little advances at me ever since I was sixteen. And it had only gotten worse since I became legal. There was no barrier for that man. Nothing was holding him back anymore.

The galas had become a crux in my life. When I was a young girl, I loved getting all dressed up with jewelry and makeup. I would get so excited to have my hair all done up with braids and decorative clips. I never wore the same dress twice. I'd get as excited to come to a gala as if it was Christmas. I couldn't wait for the next event where I could show off my new gown and shiny shoes.

But now, the events were different. The faces were still the same with a few new ones thrown in along the way. Those same faces had aged with new wrinkles and graying hair, different girlfriends or wives, expensive suits, and lavish gold adornments. Yet, the personalities never changed.

They had become their wealth. They no longer hid behind their schooling or bright ideas. They wore their money like cloaks on a priest. They weren't scientists, or pharmacists, or mathematicians, or doctors. They were diamonds, rubies, emeralds, silver, and gold.

I had finally seen this world for what it really was. It wasn't about helping people like I thought; it was about filling bank accounts. I was done. I wanted out. But I couldn't abandon it yet. I had to pretend. I had to mask my disdain and the ugliness I felt and parade around like the perfect daughter of the king. Any crack in the service was akin to pulling the wrong block from a teetering tower.

So, I acted like one of them. I wore the jewels and the fancy silk dresses. I laughed and smiled at all the right times. I lived the lifestyle they all thought I should be living. I was as fake as they were. The only difference was I knew it. But, soon enough, I would slip away, blend into the background, and disappear. I couldn't become what these people were. I refused to allow myself to slip willingly under water. My father would come to terms with my decision eventually. I just had to do it delicately.

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asked. He wiped off the smooth cherry bar top and placed down a fresh napkin. “Wine? Champagne? A mixed drink?”

“Surprise me,” I said, unimpassioned. The bartender wouldn't card me. No one would refuse the daughter of the most influential man in the state.

I took a small bottle of pills from my clutch and held it between my fingers. My name was clearly printed across the label, and my father's was printed as the provider on the bottom. I tipped the bottle and watched the oblong white pills tumble inside as I exhaled a slow, audible breath.

“Someone doesn't sound like they're having a good time,” a deep voice said.

I glanced to my right and saw a man sitting two seats over. He was wearing a jet-black suit with a blue handkerchief poking out of the breast pocket. Clutching a short glass, half filled with caramel-colored liquor on ice, he swirled it around, making the ice cubes bounce off the sides. The man's hair was dark brown, and his eyes were the color of freshly hardened amber. A thick stubble shadowed his jaw, rough yet smooth in the same breath.

My fingers itched to touch his skin, and I didn't know why. I passively closed my hand tighter around the bottle as if it would suddenly reach out on its own to touch his face.

He smiled with one corner of his mouth, then swallowed the rest of his drink. I watched his throat elongate, and the muscles tighten like a corded rope. “What,” he said as I stood silent. “Nothing to say?”

I tucked the bottle discreetly back into my clutch and said, “I'm having a really good time, actually. I like the music, it's nice. The food is amazing. Chef Genevive was flown in from France just—”

“You're a liar,” he said, cutting me off. “And not a good liar either. I can see right through you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked. The bartender passed me a pink mixed drink, and I took a quick sip. I didn't even care what it was. I just needed the alcohol.

“I think I was pretty clear with my words.”

“I understand what you said. What I'm wondering is why you're saying it as if you know anything about me?”

“A lie is a lie, doesn't matter what color you paint it. You're not having a good time. It's written all over your face.”

“I see what you're doing,” I said with a smirk. “I know exactly what this is.”

He chuckled as he rattled his glass to signal the bartender that he wanted a refill. “What is it you think I'm doing?”

“You're one of those guys.”

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“What guys?”

I laughed as I rolled my eyes. I turned around to face the other guests and leaned against the bar. “You're the conceded asshole who thinks he knows everything. I've spent my entire life around guys like you. Big head, bigger ego. Always right. Think they know everything.”

“I'm a lot of things, Red, but I'm not one of those guys.”

“Red?” I asked, confused. The man pointed at my red dress casually. I stood quietly, staring at him. I was trying to get a read on him, but it was hard. “If you're not the conceded asshole type, then what kind of guy are you? Save me the trouble of guessing.”

He shrugged a shoulder. “That spoils all the fun. If I tell you who I am, where's the excitement? You're just going to have to figure it out for yourself.”

“Dark and mysterious.”

“Those are your words, not mine.”

“Alright, Mr. Dark and Mysterious, what brings you here?”

“Work. Money. Recognition. Isn't that why all of us are here?”

“I suppose that's accurate. What exactly do you do for work?”

“It's hard to explain.”

I cocked a brow and said, “It can't be that hard to explain.”

“It's harder than you think. Besides, you wouldn't want to hear about it. It's boring.”
He picked up his drink and stared into the glass.

“Try me,” I said. “Don't let this dress fool you. I'm not a piece of arm jewelry like some of these women.”

He laughed as he set his glass down on the bar. “That's easy to see. You want to dance?”

I debated for a moment. “Sure. Why the hell not.”

Mr. Dark and Mysterious was the first interesting person I had met at one of the galas in years. I didn't want the excitement to end just yet. The second that guy was gone, I would be thrust back into the world of cardboard cutout people with the personalities of goldfish.

The man took my hand and walked me to the dance floor. The song was slow, rolling through the room like small waves against the sand. He pulled my arms up around his neck and wrapped his arms around my waist.

He took a step, making the first move. I followed his lead. The man manipulated my body with every step. He pulled to the right, and I followed. He stepped to the left, and with a soft flick of his wrist, he dipped me.

“Where did you learn to dance like this?”

“My mother made me take lessons when I was a kid. She said knowing how to dance

was a way to a woman's heart.”

“Is that right?”

“She was old fashioned.” The man pushed me away from his body and spun me around once, then pulled me back in close. “But I guess you'll have to tell me. Am I dancing my way into your heart?” He took my hand in his and pressed it against his chest.

“I don't know. I've never been hit on with a dance before.”

The man ran his thumb up and down my knuckles. Goosebumps prickled up my arms, and my belly fluttered with a million butterflies. He was peering deep into my eyes, his touch soft and strong at the same time.

It felt like we were the only two dancers on the floor. The only two people in the room. The last people left on earth. I was mesmerized by him. I had never felt anything like that before. It was just us and the music.

There were so many colors in his eyes. Yellows and browns, highlights of green and gold. They glistened like two gems in the sunlight. He never took them off of me. His eyes danced around my face, moved down my body, and then back up again.

I was lost in him, swaying mindlessly, enjoying his touch and scent and the feel of our bodies together. He moved us in circles across the floor. I followed him with every step. My body didn't resist as he danced us into a corner, hidden from everyone else, blocked by a large *Monstera Adansonii* plant with wide leaves cut like Swiss cheese.

The man stilled as his eyes glazed over. He pinned me to the wall with his chest, his hands coming up to capture my face. I didn't stop him. I wanted it. I wanted him. His

hands were warm as his thumbs ran back and forth softly over my cheeks.

I exhaled a single breath of air and licked my lips. The gorgeous man with big eyes and a jaw so sharp it could cut a diamond leaned in. His lips met mine, tongue sweeping into my mouth. He tasted like honey whiskey, sweet and savory with a hint of spice.

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My mouth parted easily, and my head tilted instinctively to let him kiss me deeper. My entire body was on fire. Every strand of muscle popped and sizzled in a way I never experienced before.

It was the best kiss of my life.

Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome ran one hand down my neck. The pads of his fingers grazed the outside of my breast. My nipple hardened, perking for attention. He circled his thumb around the stiff bead. I moaned into our kiss and arched my back.

My body was moving and reacting to that man with the same power as the strings on a marionette. His hand rode the curve of my hip, causing my back to arch and my eyes to close. His other hand massaged the curve of my jaw and the tender skin of my throat.

The man drew another coo out of me as he began to play my body. His touch was mesmerizing, putting me in a trance. He kissed me harder, crushing his lips against mine as his hand moved over my belly and around to my ass. I could feel his cock as our bodies ground together.

I had never been so turned on in my life. I was willing to do anything right at that moment. My stomach was warm and fuzzy, my sex was wet and throbbing, and all I wanted was more. More of his lips. More of his scent and the feel of him against me. More of his touch and power.

He squeezed my ass, pulling my hips forward. The tip of his cock rubbed my thigh. Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome traced my jaw with his thumb as his tongue swirled

around mine. His fingers dug into the muscle of my ass and gripped firmly. But I wanted something more. I needed something more.

There was something exciting and dangerous about what we were doing. Hidden in our little oasis of leaves, anyone could come around the corner and spot us. It only made me want him more. I grabbed his hand and pulled it around to the front, where the slit of my dress was. I broke the kiss and lay my head back against the wall. His eyes flicked between mine, a curiosity lingering in the air.

I parted my thighs and slipped his hand under the silk fabric. Thank God I decided to shave. He groaned as his fingers brushed my wet center. The man didn't say a word. He kissed me with such force as he slid a finger between the folds of my lips and smeared the juice of my desire.

Our mouths were tangled together, our breathing heavy as need and lust consumed us both. The man watched me carefully as he pushed a single finger inside my heat. I bit his lip, containing my urge to moan loudly. He didn't wince in pain. If anything, that only drove him deeper.

I felt one knuckle and then a second as he thrust his fingers inside my pussy. The mysterious man fingered me with vigor. My hips rocked and rolled forcing my clit against his palm. He used his thumb to massage my tender bud. My belly clenched, and tingles exploded through my body as he pressed hard and drew small circles.

“Maybe we shouldn't—” he said as he attempted to pull his fingers free, but I clamped my thighs shut around his hand, refusing to let him stop. The orgasm was so fucking close there was no way he could stop now.

“Shut up and finish what you started,” I demanded.

The man smirked as he drove his fingers back inside and teased my clit again. My

body began to tremble as the orgasm built in my lower belly. I was trying so hard not to scream with pleasure, and he could see that. So, he drove his lips onto mine and silenced me with a kiss as the orgasm swept in like a hurricane.

Sweat beaded up on my forehead. My toes curled. My knees tried to buckle. But Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome wrapped his arm around my waist and held me up. His eyes set on mine, and he smiled as he put his two fingers in his mouth and sucked them clean with a moan.

“I wasn't expecting to have dessert so early,” he whispered into my ear.

“That makes two of us,” I said. In a flash, I suddenly felt this wave of shame. What if he thought I was a slut? I didn't mean to give him the wrong impression. I don't do stuff like that. Not ever. That wasn't me. That was something primal.

“Look,” I said as I touched his chest. “I don't usually do this kind of thing.”

“Don't worry, I know that,” he answered. There was conviction in his tone. He was serious. He said it as if he knew me.

I grinned and asked with a side eye, “How could you know that already? We just met.”

As the song came to an end, the man pulled away and released me. I instantly felt cold and empty. I wanted him back around me.

“I know a lot of things,” Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome said. “But now I have to go.”

“Go? Already?” I asked. “Why?”

“I've got some work to take care of. Try to at least enjoy the rest of your night.” He

leaned in, kissed my cheek, and started to walk away.

“Wait,” I called out to him. “I didn't get your name.”

He looked back over his shoulder and smiled. “That's because I didn't give it.” Then he was gone. He disappeared into the crowd of people as if he was an apparition.

I spent a few minutes looking for him but couldn't find him anywhere. He was a face I didn't recognize. I had never seen him at any other event. I suspected he was someone sent by an investor, or maybe he was hired by a competitor from overseas. Either way, I'd never know. He was just a fraction of a second in my life, yet he remained as steady as a memory worthy of holding.

The night went on as usual. Glasses of wine were poured, expensive hors d'oeuvres floated by on platters, and dinners that cost three hundred dollars a plate were poked at with shiny silver forks and left hardly eaten. People threw around their weight with donation envelopes in the hope that they'd get recognition for how heavy it was.

Dylan glared at me from across the room as I walked around, chatting with lobbyist and big-name donors. I could feel his eyestrace my steps like a cat meticulously plotting its next move. He cut across the dance floor, his eyes burning a hole into my chest. The weight of his gaze was heavy enough to make me feel like I was trudging through thick snow.

He was drunk; I could tell by his wavering, sloppy steps. He bumped into the corner of a table and then stumbled into Mrs. Delfino. She let out a scoff and rolled her eyes as she adjusted the corner of her sleeve. But Dylan's eyes didn't move. He didn't acknowledge his bumbled footwork or even give her the courtesy of a subtle bow in apology. His eyes were just fastened on me like a treble hook in the mouth of a fish.

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I looked right to left, trying to find an exit. They all seemed so far away, leaving me anxious like a feral animal that was cornered. He was on me before I could slip away.

“Where the hell have you been all night?” Dylan asked. His tone was that of a jealous boyfriend.

“It's none of your business. I don't owe you any type of explanation for anything.”

“You've been avoiding me.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Dylan?”

“I saw you earlier. You had plenty of time to go around entertaining others. Why don't you make some time for me now.” Right at that moment, a waiter perused by. Dylan snatched two glasses of wine, drinking them one after the other as if he were at a frat party and all his pompous football buddies were chanting for him to chug.

“Dylan, you're drunk. Maybe you should have some water instead.”

“Maybe you should mind your own fucking business.” His words were mumbled, rolling out on a lazy tongue.

“I'm not doing this. You don't make sense. I'm leaving.” I tried to step around him, but he held his arm up to block me. “Dylan, let me by,” I commanded as my eyes met his.

Dylan's eyes veered, stilling on mine. “I saw you earlier at the bar flirting with that

guy. Am I not good enough for you? Do you think you're so much better than me that I don't deserve the time of day? You have no idea how good I can make you feel if you just let me."

"You're married and more than twice my age. So, the answer is yes. You're absolutely not good enough for me, and you don't deserve one more second of my time. Now, if you'll excuse me—" I was saying as I tried to move around Dylan again, but he refused to let me pass.

"Let me get this straight. You have no problem whoring around with a stranger, but I'm somehow beneath you? Do you really think you're better than me? Because you're not. You're just a pussy that needs to be tamed."

"Dylan, stop," I said sternly. "I'm not doing this." I made another attempt to walk away, but he grabbed my wrist and yanked me close. "Let me go," I demanded.

"Not yet," he snapped quietly.

Dylan pulled me to a doorway and shoved it open. It led to another empty banquet hall. The lights were low, barely bright enough to cast shadows on the far wall. He squeezed my wrist harder. His fingers burned against my skin as he dug in hard.

"I see you for who you are. You're a goddamn slut. You were ready to spread your fucking legs for that guy. But I've got something better to give you." Dylan yanked me in so our chests were touching.

"Stop. Let me go, Dylan," I growled. "I don't want anything to do with you. And I never will. So you might as well get the thought out of your fucking head."

"But you'll fuck anyone else in a suit. Is that what you're saying?" He leaned in, placed his lips against my ear, and whispered. "I always knew you were a trashy little

whore. You're a stain on this empire, just like your mother.”

Tears bubbled up over my eyes as my lip began to tremble with sadness and rage. “Who the fuck do you think you are?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“Oh, Poppy, you naive little twit. You really are just like your mother. Your mother was a crazy fucking lunatic. She made your father look bad. She made all of us look bad. Your father couldn't control her, and it showed. By the attitude you have, it looks like your father might not be able to control you either.”

“Don't talk about my mother. It wasn't her fault. She couldn't help it. She was sick. She—” It dawned on me that I didn't have to explain shit to him. He was nothing to me. Dylan wasn't in charge of a damn thing. He had no control over my life. No power over me at all. “You know what? Fuck you, Dylan.”

“It bothers you when you have to hear the truth, doesn't it? You still want to protect her. You're still making excuses for her.”

“My mother wasn't in the right frame of mind. She made mistakes. She—”

“Poppy, your mother belonged in a fucking mental institution. She never belonged with us.”

“Fuck you.”

“Alright,” Dylan said as he smiled. “Your wish is my command.” He forcefully wrapped his arm around my waist, keeping me in place.

His breath stank of wine and caviar with the faint odor of Iberico ham. I twisted my face as he tried to kiss me. “Get off me!” I yelled. I desperately hoped someone else would hear me, but no one did. The music was too loud, the people were too involved

with each other, and the waiters were too busy. I was like a child screaming for help from inside a closed refrigerator.

“No, I don't think so. I want what I want. And I get what I want.” Dylan's hand swept over my thigh, and his fingers began to pull up my dress. He clutched me so tightly that I could barely breathe.

“Don't do this. You don't want to be this man.”

“I'm already this man, Poppy. So don't bother begging me to stop. It won't work.” Dylan gripped the center of my dress and ripped it. There was no resistance from the threads. The thin fabric split easily up the side.

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My back hit the wall as I tried to wiggle out of his grasp. I was trapped. Caged like a bird. He started to unbutton his pants when a noise startled him. Dylan's head jerked toward the sound, and I took the chance to escape.

I kned him in the cock, causing him to drop to his knees, and I ran. I ran out of the room and to the first door I found. The exit opened to the outside. I was smacked in the face with icy cold air. Tears were streaming down my face as my chest heaved with anger. So much anger. How dare he talk about my mother like that. How dare he try to force himself on me.

I have to get out of this place. I don't belong with these people.

My heels dug into the soft ground as I kept walking with no direction in mind. I could hear the thud of my heart pounding against the quiet backdrop of trees and the faint hum of music inside. I stopped, allowing my heels to sink all the way into the earth to the point it felt like I was barefoot.

I looked up at the clear night sky, my eyes swollen with painful tears. The stars glittered like fireflies suspended in time. For a brief moment, I could feel her. I could feel my mother. She was all around me. She was in the air I was breathing and the ground that was holding me up. A sense of calm settled over me as if she were hugging me using the universe as her arms.

A twig cracked behind me, exploding through the silence. My ears perked, but I kept looking straight ahead, just listening. The silence elongated through the air like music from a speaker. Another branch snapped, cutting through the dense quiet.

I thought I was all alone. I thought that I had removed myself from the rest of the world. I was wrong.

I attempted to look over my shoulder, but I barely had the chance. A large, gloved hand swiftly covered my mouth, muffling the scream that instinctively tried to escape. Everything just stopped right then: my heart, my breathing, the noises between my ears, the voice inside my head. I was frozen, unable to move or think, and then there was nothing. No sky. No breeze. No fleeting voices behind closed windows. Just blackness.

A blackness that left me feeling weightless and unaware.

A blackness that felt endless.

Chapter Two

Poppy

Nine years earlier

“Open your eyes, Poppy.” My mother's voice whispered soft and delicately like she was miles away. “Poppy, open your eyes,” she said again, her voice louder and more intense. It was not a dream anymore. She was waking me up.

I stirred slightly, groaning as I rolled over to look at her. “What is it? What time is it?” I asked. “It's still dark out.”

“It's three in the morning,” she said as she gently ran her fingers across my forehead and pushed the tangled mess of hair off my face.

“Three? Why are you up so early? I don't have to get up for school for another four hours.” I rubbed my eyes and blinked a few times as I tried to focus on her face.

I couldn't see her well. It was as if I was stuck between a dream and reality. She was there; I instinctively knew that. Yet, my mother appeared with the opaqueness of an apparition. A layer of foggiess floated over my brain, making me question the validity of my eyes. If I reached out, would my fingers swipe through her like she was made of clouds? I stuck my hand out and touched the hard curve of her elbow.

Nope. She's real.

My mother smiled and said, “I know it's early, but we have to go, Honey.”

“Go? Go where?” I sat up in bed, more alert and awake. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on. Get up. I'll explain it all on the plane. But we need to leave soon, or we'll miss our flight.” She turned around quickly and started opening my dresser drawers and pulling out clothes. “I know you're confused right now, but I promise I'll explain all of it to you later. Right now, I just need you to do as you're told. Come on, get up and put some clothes on.”

“Mom, what are you talking about? What's going on?” I pulled the blanket back and jumped out of bed. “Where are we going?”

“We're going away for a bit. On a . . . on a trip,” she answered. Her voice balanced between thought and conviction. “So, let's go. Get packed.” She went to my closet, dug out my suitcase, and then flopped it open on the bed. “Whatever we can fit in here is what we'll take for you.” My mother started stuffing handfuls of clothes inside. Socks, underwear, leggings, and shirts, but there was no method to her craft. She was just tossing things in randomly.

“Mom, what are you doing?” I asked. But my mother either didn't hear me or was ignoring me on purpose because she didn't answer and just kept piling clothes in the suitcase. “Mom, stop! Please, tell me what's happening.”

“We don't have time for this, Poppy!” she yelled. Her outburst was a mix of frustration and fear all at once. My mother quickly inhaled a breath as she ran her hand across her forehead. “Poppy, I swear I'll explain it all to you later. Please, right now, just help me pack.”

Her skin was white and clammy. Sweat beaded across her forehead and trickled down in thin streams. My mother's eyes jittered back and forth in the sockets, and her pupils were as big as dark pools. She looked terrified. I just didn't know why.

My mother had always been docile, gentle, and soft-spoken until she got sick. She moved either slowly or spastic now; there was no evenness to her flow. Her eyes were always void as if she was looking off at something in the distance. My mother's illness had gotten worse over the past couple of years. She would sleep for hours and only come out on occasion for food. She would be really happy and then turn angry out of nowhere. You never knew what version you were going to get.

Despite her illness, she maintained her appearance. She was always well dressed in matching outfits, with her hair fashionably braided or pulled into a French twist. But the woman in front of me was messy and distraught. Her hair was frizzy and untamed. There was no method to her clothing choice. She was wearing stained jogging pants and a shirt with some band on it that I didn't recognize, probably from her youth. The fabric was thin, worn to the point it was translucent.

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“I want to talk to Dad,” I said.

I started to walk towards the door, but she quickly grabbed my wrist to stop me. My mother squeezed hard, digging her nails into my skin. “No, Poppy.”

“Ow, you're hurting me. Let me go.” I tried to yank my arm free, but she held on tight. “Mom, stop. Let me go. That hurts.”

“Poppy! For fucks sake, you're nine years old; just do as your goddamn told!” Her tone hit me like a ton of bricks.

I was instantly afraid of her. There was something about her eyes—the twitchiness of them, the swelling darkness that seemed to be seeping over the banks of her pupils. The way I could see myself inside them, like she had two mirrors where her eyes had once been, made my chest squeeze. Thin red veins cracked across the white orbs, reminding me of spiderwebs scattered between blades of grass.

I didn't argue anymore. I was silent, doing everything my mother asked me to do. I had never been scared of my mother before—not once. And now it was a feeling I would never forget. This fear was different. It came from deep inside my body, spreading out like liquid fire, and setting my skin ablaze.

The moon was still out when my mother put our suitcases in the car. The house was dark. There wasn't a single light on, not even above the front door. The wind whistled as it swirled and danced between the forest.

She kept looking around as if someone might burst out of the trees at any moment.

“Get in. We have to go if we're going to make our flight.”

I climbed in the car without resistance. My mother took one last look around, then paused a little longer on our home. She seemed to be looking through the walls, through the furniture, through the caverns of empty space until she stopped. Her eyes steadied in the sockets, lips thinning as if she locked eyes with someone else. And then we were gone.

“Look, Poppy, I know this is confusing for you, but I don't want you to worry. Everything is going to be fine.”

I finally mustered the strength to ask, “Where's Dad? Is he meeting us at the airport?”

She kept her eyes on the road as she tilted her head and said, “No, Honey. Dad is not meeting us at the airport.”

“Is he meeting us where we're going?”

“No. He's staying home this time.” She twisted her hands around the steering wheel nervously as she frowned. “Don't worry about dad. This is for us.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

My father wasn't around all the time. He was a busy man with a lot of weight on his shoulders. He worked a lot, and his job required him to travel all over the world. My father was an important man. He was making the world better. He was making the world healthier. And he was saving people.

My mother pursed her lips briefly in thought then said, “It means you don't need to worry, alright? This is going to be fun—a fun girl's trip. How does that sound?”

I shrugged my shoulder as I turned to look out the window. "I don't know."

"Dad goes on all kinds of trips, doesn't he?"

"So why isn't he on this one with us?"

"Does he ever take us with him?"

"No." I sighed heavily, then turned to glare at her. "But that doesn't mean he never wanted to. He told me before that he wished he could bring me with him, but his trips are for business, not fun. But he promised me that once I was old enough, he would take me with him."

"That's bullshit," she scoffed, her voice almost a mocking chuckle. "God, he's so good at filling your head with lies."

"What?"

"Forget it. Forget about your father and what he's told you. This is our trip. Our trip. And we're going to have fun."

When we reached the airport, my mother gathered our stuff from the trunk. There was a nervous air about the way she moved. She kept looking around again, the same way she did when we were leaving our house, fumbling with our things as if they were covered in oil and too slippery to control.

"Okay, come on," she said as she tucked her purse under her arm and pulled the bags behind her. "Our flight leaves in two hours."

"Where are we going?"

“It's a surprise.”

She didn't look at me when she was talking. She was staring into her purse and rummaging around. I still felt the same fear that had come over me earlier at home. I didn't know what was happening, where we were going, or why we were leaving. The trip didn't feel like a trip; it felt like we were running away.

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“Ah, here they are.” She held up our plane tickets and waved them in my direction as she smiled a half smile. “Okay, so we're going to play a little game, too. How does that sound?”

“What kind of game?”

“We're going to pretend that we're different people. What do you think of that?”

“Different people? But why?”

“Because it will be fun, Poppy. Don't you play pretend? You pretend you're a doctor, or a vet, or a teacher sometimes, don't you ?”

“Yeah, I used to, but I'm not a little kid anymore, Mom. I'm nine, and I like who I am.”

“Well, this is kind of the same thing as when you were little, only better. It's for older kids, just like you.” She passed me a ticket. “Today, you're going to pretend to be Anna Hilstein, and I'm going to be Donna Hilstein.”

My face scrunched up tight at the name. Anna? I didn't even look like an Anna. “But why, Mom? Why are we doing this?”

“Honey, we do the same things every single day. You get up and go to school. I get up and I don't do anything but stay in the house. I just want to do something exciting for once. Something different. Something for us.” She stopped walking and dropped down to look me in the eyes. “Can you do this for me? Can you play pretend for a

little bit? Please? It would mean the world to me.”

I thought for a second and agreed. “Yeah, I can do that.”

My mother was right. She was always home because she was sick a lot. And when she did feel better, it didn't last long. Her bouts of feeling good lasted only a day or two. Long enough to bring my dad lunch at his office or maybe go for a nice walk. My mother was begging me with her eyes to go along with her plan. What harm was there in playing pretend? Besides, it could be fun to be someone else for a change. And I wanted to make her happy.

“Thank you, Honey. This means so much to me.” She kissed my forehead. “Alright, Anna, let's go catch our plane for a brand new adventure.”

The woman at the desk smiled and asked if we were checking any bags. We weren't, so, she checked our tickets. My mom passed her two little blue booklets with an overly bright smile.

“Have a nice flight,” the woman said without question.

She didn't ask me my name or look at me funny. Which was good because I wasn't sure how to be Anna yet. What did Anna like? What was her favorite color, her favorite food, her best memory? There was so much I still needed to come up with to play Anna Hilstein.

“Mom,” I said.

“Yeah?” she asked as she glanced at the terminal sign to see which way we needed to go.

“I don't like the name Anna. Can I pick a different name?”

“Uh, yeah, sure, but not yet. When we get to France, you can be whoever you want to be. For now, just stick with Anna.”

“France? We're going to France?”

“Oops, looks like I let the secret slip.”

“Will I get to see the Eiffel Tower?”

“You sure will. And if you do a really good job of playing pretend, I'll even take you to the restaurant all the way at the top.”

“Really?” The first spark of excitement flowed through my body like electricity flowed through a live wire.

“Really.” She cupped my head and scrunched her fingers in my hair. “Anna,” she said with a smile and a wink.

We boarded the plane. My mother wore big, obnoxious glasses that made her head look like a half sucked lolly pop. Her hair was stuck to her head from the sweat she couldn't stop seeping. She kept running her hands over her face and then wiping her fingers through her hair, pushing the sweat deep into the tangled mess.

I had never been on a plane before. Even though my father traveled for business a few times a month, he never took us with him. He always seemed to be visiting incredible places like Spain, London, Mexico, or Japan. He'd fly around the world, hopping from one place to the next, but my mom and I always stayed home.

It was my turn to explore. My eyes were glued out the window. When we took off, it was still dark outside, but now the sun was coming up over the horizon, making the ocean glitter like it was full of dimes. I could see the waves of the ocean below us

whenever the clouds thinned like chalk being washed away in the rain.

The fear I felt earlier was like a bug bite that stopped itching. It was there, but it was laying dormant, no longer a discomfort, just more of a memory being pushed away and replaced by something greater.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Paris,” the captain said over the intercom.

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“This is it, Honey. We're here. We made it to Paris.” She exhaled a heavy breath, her muscles relaxing all at once. She looked lighter. Her smile was more delicate and pure. “Come on, let's go set this city on fire.”

“What? No, I don't want to do that,” I said.

“It's just an expression, Honey. It means to live it up, enjoy ourselves, have a blast. We deserve it, don't you think?” my mother asked as she pulled out our carry-on bags from the overhead storage.

“Yeah, I think you're right. I'm ready,” I said.

“Good. Are you hungry? Because I'm starving. Let's start this adventure with a delicious lunch. And then we can do some shopping.”

I was overcome with excitement. Nothing could wipe the smile off my face.

Nothing.

Chapter Three

Poppy

Twilight was a weird thing. It was a place in time that felt paused, like you were floating above everything, unaware but still alert. There were fleeting images of

blurred faces with flashes of light no brighter than a flickering plane in the sky and voices as quiet as the whisper of dragonfly wings. That was all I could remember in the twilight. But there was more. I knew there was more, even though it escaped me. The memories were like dreams swept away by consciousness after opening your eyes. I could feel them, but I could only grasp the illusion they were there.

I opened my eyes to darkness. For a brief second, I thought I was blind until a thin glow of light appeared near my feet. I tried to lift my arms, but I couldn't. Panic set in, causing my heart to race and my breathing to quicken.

What's going on? What's happening?

I bent and pulled, trying to move my arms and legs. Coarse rope scratched my wrists and ankles. My arms were bound in front of me, and my ankles were tied together. I was still in my dress from the gala, but my heels were gone. The silk fabric was stuck to my damp skin like wet leaves on the pavement. The dress twisted and tightened, suffocating my entire body.

Fuck. Where the hell am I?

I can't breathe! I clawed at my throat as if there was rope around my neck, but all I did was scratch myself. I was going into a state of shock. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. I had to calm down. I needed to focus.

My body jostled around as the sound of an engine bled between my ears. As I took another slow breath, I could smell exhaust fumes in the blank space around me. In one explosive burst, I realized I was in the trunk of a car. The tires whirled against the ground. Pebbles popped and crackled as they spit beneath the treads. Each bump rocked my body, causing it to jump up and slam down hard.

Shit. What the hell do I do? What is happening?

I was trying to remember the evening. The night played through my mind. I was at the lobbying event. I had a drink. I remembered Dylan, and instantly, I was angry. Then I remembered being outside and hearing a noise.

Was I fucking kidnapped? Am I in the trunk of the kidnapper's car?

When I was a child, we had a safety class in school. A firefighter had come in and told us about not playing in old refrigerators because you could get stuck and run out of air and how if you played in the trunk of a car, the heat could harm you, but that most vehicles had a latch inside in case you got stuck and needed to get out.

The newfound memory ignited a rush of adrenaline. I could do something to help myself. I could escape. I felt around the trunk. My hands glided across the roof and down where it latched shut. My fingers danced across the ridges, tracing and feeling in the darkness. Another bump caused my head to ricochet off the trunk lid. It left me dazed for a moment, but I wouldn't give up. I started feeling around again, more determined to find the emergency pull string.

Got it.

I gave it a hard tug, but it broke free, draping against my palm like a strand of loose hair. I grunted with frustration, punching the roof of the trunk with both hands. "Fuck!" I screamed. "Let me out! Fucking let me out!" I screeched as loud as possible, kicking my legs up and down like a beached fish and slamming my arms. I had lost my mind in an instant. I couldn't control myself at all. I felt enraged. "Let me out of here! Fucking let me out of here, Asshole!" I punched again and again, hitting the trunk as hard as I could.

The car began to slow down. The wheels dragged against the pavement as it veered to a stop. The engine hummed softly, vibrating the metal frame beneath me. I listened intently, waiting.

Time seemed to slow down. The engine's rumble hemmed and hawed between trying to go and trying to stay idle. The sound of a door creaking open startled the silence. I inhaled a quick breath, listening as heavy feet slowly clicked against the ground.

My fingers began picking at the binding, trying to break my arms free. Over and over, I feverishly scratched and pried as the feet moved closer to the back of the car. I twisted my wrists back and forth. The binding burned against my skin, but I didn't care. I needed my hands. The intense need to be free was pushing through the pain.

The binding around my wrists finally broke free. I moved to my ankles, working at the knot in the rope. It was tight, but I was determined to get it off. A key clinked against the lock. My fingers became more frantic as they worked. My ankle binding finally loosened and fell off.

The trunk popped free, allowing cool, fresh air to spill in, filling me with new life. It lifted fast, revealing the outline of a man. I couldn't see his face, just his hands as they burst towards me like tentacles.

I slapped and punched at him, all while screaming as loudly as I could. "Get the fuck away from me! Fuck you! Help! Help!" I had no idea where I was, but instinctively, I yelled for a savior.

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The man was startled, not expecting to find me untied. He stumbled backward, leaving me enough room to pop out and take off running. I didn't look where I was going; I just ran. I darted towards the treeline and kept moving.

“Fuck! She fucking took off! Get your ass out of the car!”

There's more than one. . . Fuck! Who are these people?

“What the hell happened? How did she get loose?” The other man barked as he shot out of the car.

“Fuck if I know. She went that way!”

“Well, don't just stand there! Let's go fucking get her!”

I was already moving quickly, but when I heard that man yelling, I ran. I ran as hard and fast as I could. I broke through bushes and crashed through sharp branches. But they were always on my heels. Following. Tracking. Hunting.

No matter how fast or how far I had run, they always seemed to be two steps behind me. I found a little ravine on the mountainside and tucked myself inside. The men appeared above me, talking out a plan, knowing I was close but not knowing how close I actually was. The men took off in different directions. I waited a few moments, then darted back in the direction I had come.

If I could get to the car, I might be able to get away. It was still running when I broke free. The keys should be inside, and I could drive off. Adrenaline fueled me like dry

debris fed a fire. But I made a mistake. I thought I had outsmarted the men by doubling back to the road. The silence of the forest was a trick. The adrenaline that ran through my veins, percolating like hot coffee, made me think I was in control.

A set of arms flew out from behind a tree, capturing me around the waist. The man lifted me off the ground and spun me around, slamming my back against the tree.

“You stupid fucking girl.” His face was masked by a sheet of darkness. “This was the wrong move.”

“No! Let me go!” I wiggled and kicked. I punched blindly, connecting with his body.

The man used his weight to pin me against the tree. He gripped both my wrists, forcing them over my head. I couldn't move. I was trapped again. “Enough!” he yelled.

My eyes were full of tears. I couldn't see the man's face as the wind blew the treetops and the moon cast down a beam of faint light. He was warped like a Picasso painting, blurry and smeared. “Let me go! Please, just let me go!” I was begging him to set me free. “Why are you doing this?” My voice softened as I cried. “You don't have to do this.”

“I told you to shut the fuck up.” He took both my wrists in one of his bear-sized hands and held them tight. “Your pleading won't get you out of this.”

“You don't have to do this! Just let me go!” I wailed, inhaling deep, petrified breaths. Each breath was more intense and fearful than the last.

“God just shut the fuck up,” the man snapped. He used his free hand to pull something shiny out from behind his back. As he lifted his arm, the moonlight caught a piece of the metal object.

That's a gun. . .

“Please, don't kill me. My father has money,” I said frantically, trying to keep his attention so he didn't do something stupid. “He'll—”

Thwap!

The man brought the butt of the gun down hard on my temple, knocking me out cold. In an instant, everything was gone. The sky, the man, the cold, the world: all of it was gone as he sent me spiraling into unconsciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking up at a ceiling fan. It had three blades rotating with a slow, sloppy wobble. Dust soiled all the edges like mud around the sole of a sneaker. There was a musty scent that soured the air.

I rubbed my eyes. They felt dry and itchy, and my throat hurt when I swallowed. The right side of my head throbbed. I softly touched my temple with the pads of my fingers, gingerly examining the tender lump.

What the hell happened? Where am I now?

I slowly pushed myself up from the small cot I was lying on and looked around. There was a door across from me, a window to my right, a small stool, and a cot. That was it. There was nothing on any of the cracked, dirty plaster walls. Not a picture. Not wallpaper. Not even crown molding to show the room had once held some sort of meaning other than a tomb. The floor was old, dull wood that was buckling in random places. The ceiling was speckled with dark orange water spots and giant cobwebs as thick as cotton candy in the corners.

Confusion smothered me. I couldn't think. I couldn't remember. I couldn't feel. My brain was trying desperately to grasp everything all at once, but it wasn't making

sense. The room didn't make sense. The cold chill rippling through my body didn't make sense. The rancid air didn't make sense.

I twisted on the cot and set my bare feet down on the icy floor. The silk of my dress pooled in my lap like red water. I looked down at my toes. They were purple in color because it was so cold in the room. My fingertips were almost completely numb. I tapped the pads of my fingers together, then rubbed them harder, trying to bring them back to life.

What the hell is happening?

Where the hell am I?

I stood up, my legs shaky and weak but steady enough to stagger over to the window. The glass behind the boards was opaque with a yellow film. I rubbed the side of my palm in small circles, creating a tiny ecliptic opening. I pressed my eye to the glass but couldn't see anything. No sky. No trees. No water. Just the darkness of night.

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Slowly, I turned around and laid back against the wall. I dug my fingers into my hair and held my head. My heart was racing so fast I thought it was going to come out of my chest. I slid down the wall, my breathing becoming more ragged and unsteady. The room began to spin and warp, making my stomach turn.

“What the hell is happening right now?” I said out loud. I dragged my hands down my face and focused my eyes on the floor to stop the seasick feeling, but I couldn't control my body.

My skin was hot to the touch, and my chest was tight. My entire body trembled as fear quickly spilled over me like cold water. My muscles rippled and convulsed as I curled into a ball on the floor and hugged my knees.

This was not something I could foresee. To wake up in a room that was now my dungeon. Strange men had stolen me. They whisked me away without permission, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Someone will come looking for me. My father won't rest until I'm found.

My father would never let anything happen to me. The thought gave me a boost of hope. I quietly stood up and walked to the door, reaching out to touch it. I let the pads of my fingers softly dance across the wood, then pressed my ear against it to listen.

There was only silence. No voices or movement, just a numbing quiet. I tried to turn the handle, but the door was locked. “Fuck.” I whispered as I spun around, my eyes straining to find something I had missed before.

Cot. Window. Stool.

Window, stool, cot.

Stool, cot, window.

Nothing. There was nothing. I looked up at the ceiling and spotted a small vent. It looked like it might be big enough for me to slip through. I grabbed the stool and placed it underneath, but even on the tips of my toes, I couldn't reach it. I moved the cot over and placed the stool on top.

The stool wobbled as I climbed up. It took me a second to balance myself before I could stand straight. I reached my arms up, stretching them as far as they could go. I was close, so close to the vent, another couple of inches, and I would have it.

I looked down at the floor, then back at the vent. Then I jumped. I didn't even think about it. The thought never even crossed my mind, my body just reacted to the situation. Fight or flight. I was fleeing.

The tips of my fingers slammed against the vent's fins. They slid through the thin openings. The sharp metal edges sliced me open, but I ignored the sting and held on. The stool shot out from beneath me, tumbling to the floor with a loud bang.

I was dangling from the ceiling, my fingers wedged into the slits. Warm blood began to trickle down my hands and over my wrists until it was running down my arms. I didn't feel any pain, and the blood didn't make me nervous. I wanted out of that place and was willing to do anything to make it happen.

I tried to yank and pull the vent cover off. I bucked my body hard. The vent cover cracked and pinged, shooting screws across the room. I knew I could pull myself inside and escape if I could get the cover off. The vent dropped open, causing my

body to swing like a gymnast doing a bar routine. The cover broke free, sending me crashing to the floor.

I lay weeping on the cold, cracked wood like a pile of moss stuck to the bark of a tree. I cried. I cried so hard my body jolted violently as all the emotions plunged me into a pit of despair.

I lay on the floor, unaware of time. I might have been there for a few minutes or a few hours just crying, but I didn't care because I didn't plan on getting up. What was the point? I was trapped like a mouse in a tank. The only difference between me and the mouse was I knew I couldn't get out.

A mouse would keep running into the walls and jumping into empty air. A mouse would circle the room, thinking it might look different on the other side. A mouse might think there would be an escape in the next corner. Unfortunately for me, I was aware the room had only four walls, and my exit was locked.

Clink clank chunk.

My ears perked at the sound. I hadn't heard anything other than my own breathing and the screaming voice inside my head since I woke up. I forced my eyes open and looked at the door just in time to see the knob starting to twist.

I lay there watching it as if it wasn't real but a dream instead. The handle turned in slow motion. The door creaked open, allowing the air from outside to seep in. The door opened fully, and the entryway was suddenly filled with a silhouette.

I couldn't see a face, but I knew instantly that whoever it was wasn't there to save me. His arms dangled by his sides. Shoulder to shoulder spanned the width of the entire door frame. The man stood silent as he stared at me.

He took a step in. The faint glow of the bulb in the ceiling fan cast a yellow light across his face. The man had sharp cheekbones and a square jaw. His nose was crooked at the bridge, and his lips were thin, almost nonexistent on his mouth. The paper-thin line curled into a scowl as he opened and closed his hands at his sides. But his eyes struck me like a dagger to the chest. They looked black as the bottom of the ocean, empty and cold with a glint of anger.

My heart began to race as I peered up at a face I didn't recognize. He took another step forward, and instinctively, I pushed myself up and started crawling backward. My fingers clawed at the floor, and my body began to tremble.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice shaky. “What do you want from me?”

He stopped a foot away, his breathing heavy. His pupils were on fire as if he wanted to rip me limb from limb. “From you,” he said as he stooped above me. “Nothing.”

He was smiling an evil, deranged smile. His skin was pock-marked with large craters across his cheeks. A shadow of stubble stained his face, reaching almost up to his eyes. His dirty blond hair was slicked back with so much grease it looked brown. He smelled like stale cigarettes and musk, like when it rains outside during the summer, and the air is so thick you can taste the dirt in the humidity.

I could taste him. His saltiness, his rancorous, his evilness.

“Who are you?” I asked.

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“That doesn't matter.” He inched closer and reached out toward my arm. “Let me help you up,” he said.

I scrambled backward, bumping into the cot. “Don't fucking touch me.”

“Fine. I won't help you then. You can stay on the floor for all I care.” The man ran his hands down his shirt and walked back to the door.

He held the door, ready to leave, when I said, “Please, just let me go. I can get you money, an airplane, anything you want. Just name your price.”

The man looked back over his shoulder. A thin strand of hair fell over his face, creating a shadowed slash on his skin. “I don't need your money, Sweetheart.”

As he opened the door wider, my body reacted before my mind could catch up. I jumped to my feet and bolted. Charging forward, I screamed at the top of my lungs. My hands were stretched out in front of me, ready to shove him out of the way.

I struck him hard, using all the strength I had to move him aside. There was no floor beneath my feet. No air in my lungs. No fear in my soul. All I felt was need. Need to get out. Need to be as far away from him and this place as I could.

The man teetered on his heels, giving me enough room to squeeze by. My heart hammered in my chest with every step. But freedom didn't last long. The man threw his hand out and grabbed a fistful of my hair. He yanked hard, snapping my head back. A sharp pain zipped down my neck, tracing my spine, and then moved through my legs.

As he pulled me back into the room, I saw someone from the corner of my eyes. Time was suspended just long enough for me to see another man. He was standing in the hall, his hands in his pockets, leaning against the wall.

Our eyes connected, but there was no emotion on his face. He just stood there. Blank face, still as a frozen lake, and cold as ice. His eyes bore into my chest, taking my heart hostage.

I recognized the second man.

We had met before.

Chapter Four

Poppy

I was on the floor, my body in a heap and my scalp on fire. The fan motor squeaked like a record spinning under a broken needle. The floor was gritty. Granules of sand clung to my skin like sugar to a wet spoon. My nose was pressed against the wood, and it smelled like a dirty gym bag with a hint of bleach.

Who else had been here? I wondered as my mind slowly rotated through a carousel of grief, anger, and despair.

How many other people had been in this same position? How many women had crumbled to this very floor like rotted wood sheds off a tree? How many tears had been absorbed by the floorboards, giving it the scent of dejection?

I peeked out from under my arm and watched the fan's blades as I listened to the slow

precession. My heart was beating, but not as hard or fast as before. I was numb. Completely and soullessly numb. My soul had gone into hiding, making me cold all over. Every thought of escape had vanished. Depression ate away at me like maggots on a carcass.

Look where I was. Trapped. Captured. Stolen without reason. And unless someone unlocked the door to set me free, I wasn't leaving of my own volition. All of this was because I had allowed lust to blind me.

I curled my knees to my chest and hugged them tightly. What had I done to deserve this? What had I done to end up in the hands of a monster? What sick game had I been dragged into?

My lids grew heavy. I blinked longer, and slower until my eyes closed and I drifted off into unconsciousness. I had a dreamwhile I was sleeping. The same dream that had haunted me for years. The same dream that had no ending.

* * * *

“Where are we going today?” I asked as I watched my mother.

She was curling her hair, giving a spritz of hairspray to every new curl. When we arrived, my mother was blond, but now she had black hair. She dyed it a few days after we arrived in Paris. She even tried to have my hair dyed, but the woman said she wouldn't do it on a girl my age, and I had to be at least thirteen. So, my mother had her cut my hair short instead.

I didn't like it at first, but I was getting used to it. It was way easier to brush because it didn't get as full of knots. Plus, it also stayed out of my mouth when I ate now. My mother said it made me look more sophisticated. She said we fit right in with the other locals like we belonged.

“Today, we're going to take the train to Italy,” my mother said.

“Italy?”

“Venice, to be exact.”

“But we haven't seen everything here yet,” I whined.

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“Honey, we've been here for two weeks already. We need to keep moving.” She glanced over at me and smiled. “Why don't you go pack your bag, and we'll leave when I'm all done with my hair.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice low.

“You sound sad. Aren't you excited for another adventure? We're taking a train. Doesn't that sound fun?”

“I guess.”

She set her curling iron on the bathroom vanity, then dropped down in front of me. Gripping both my arms, she ran her thumbs up and down as she said, “This is our adventure, Poppy. Our grand adventure. Let's make the best of it and see as much of the world as we can. What do you say?”

“Okay,” I spoke evenly and uninterested. I didn't want to leave yet.

I really loved the smell of the freshly baked pastries and all the little shops and cafes. The streets were always filled with people, and the buildings looked older than the oldest church back home.

“We can ride the gondolas. In Venice, there are restaurants and shops all along the river that you can boat to.”

“Really? It's a city on water?”

“Basically. Sounds cool, doesn't it?” I nodded my head. “Good. Now go pack. I'll be ready in a few minutes.”

We took the train through the Alpine foothills, across the lagoon, and into the Santa Lucia train station. I was in awe on the train. Blossoming meadows full of white and purple flowers flashed by us like neon lights. The tops of the mountains were covered in snow, while the base was brimming with thick green trees. It was incredible.

When we arrived in Venice, I was surprised to see there were no cars. Not a single one. We walked along the streets made of gray brick. My shoes clicked like heels on tile. The houses were all stacked together tightly, with a sliver of space between them like slices of a loaf of bread flopped open.

We stopped at the edge in front of the water. I pinched one eye shut and looked through my hands. I tried to push the slices of houses back together in my mind. It didn't work, but it made me smile.

“Come on, Poppy,” my mother said.

I glanced over at her. She had her hand out to help me climb into the thin, long boat. My mother began speaking Italian with such fluency to the gondolier I was in awe. He nodded and smiled, then said something back.

“Grazie,” she said.

“Mom, I didn't know you could speak Italian.”

“There's a lot you don't know about me, Honey. I lived a whole other life before you came along.”

“Does dad know?”

“No, Honey. I had a life before your father, too. Sometimes, there are certain things you keep just for yourself, like knowing Italian.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Of course I can. And I will. I'm going to teach you a lot on this adventure.” She wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me in. “We're starting over, Honey. It's time for us to truly live like we were meant to.”

I didn't know what she meant by that. I was so overwhelmed with all the sites around me that I barely paid attention to what she was saying. The excitement flowed through me like rain flowed down smooth glass. It was perfect. Everything was perfect.

My father would go away for work for days, weeks, and sometimes months. He'd travel and leave us at home because my mother was usually sick. Some days, it was hard for her to get out of bed. She would sleep all day and only get up to take her medication or stare out a window.

Dad would say the world was poison to my mother, but at home, he could keep her safe. As for me, my father said his trips weren't for little girls.

Being in Venice, traveling with my mother, who was smiling and laughing, and seeing all the beauty around me, I couldn't help but wonder why he would want to keep all of this from us. I began to resent him for keeping me locked in our home. I began to resent him for saying my mother was too sick to do anything. She looked perfectly fine right then.

Not once did she complain about having a headache or any pain in her body. My mother hadn't talked to herself once since we left home. She moved smoothly, her steps firm and confident. Her cheeks were as pink as cotton candy. Her skin was the

color of ripe peaches and not the pasty white I was used to seeing. Even her eyes had a glow that radiated like the sun cresting the horizon in the morning. The dull, foggiess I had seen so many times before had disappeared.

What changed?

My mother held my hand as we climbed out of the gondola and walked to a little restaurant called Grande Zucca. There were a few wooden-topped tables outside under a brown awning. The menu had a pumpkin on the front, which made me think of Cinderella. Except in my story, an evil stepfather was keeping me locked away, not a stepmother.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay now?”

“Of course I'm okay. Why do you ask, Honey?”

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at my plate. As I poked at my food, I softly said, “Because you were sick before and now you seem better.”

“That's because I am better, Poppy. People get sick, and then they get better. You've been sick before, right?” I nodded yes. “And now you're better, right?” I nodded again. “See. So, there's nothing to worry about.”

“What about your medicine? I haven't seen you take it at all. Do you not need it anymore?” I asked.

“Look, Poppy, life is going to be much better now. I'm perfectly healthy, and I don't want you to worry about me anymore. Now, eat your food. We have some shopping to do.”

We spent the day going from shop to shop. I tried on dresses and big, fancy hats. My mother found a beautiful yellow silkscarf. She wrapped it around her head, making her look like Audrey Hepburn.

It was late when we got back to the hotel. My belly was full from dinner, and I was tired. My mother tucked me in the bed, kissed my forehead, and told me to get some sleep because she had a surprise for me for tomorrow. She wouldn't tell me what it

was even though I asked a dozen times.

I remember her sitting in the chair by the window, drinking a glass of wine as she looked out over the canal. I was half asleep. My eyes kept blinking longer and longer as sleep stole me away. I was happy. It was the only time I remember being truly happy. My mother was right. We were on the most incredible trip of our lives. One day, I would look back and remember our adventure.

BANG!

* * * *

I shot up straight. Sweat poured down my temples, and my heart beat like a rabid, caged animal. My eyes darted around the room. The fan was still rotating at a dying speed, doing nothing to circulate the stuffy air. I raked my fingers through my hair as I exhaled.

That fucking dream. I hate that fucking dream.

“I thought you were going to sleep for days,” a man's voice said from behind me.

I whipped around to see a figure sitting on the stool in the corner. The man leaned forward, resting his elbows on the top of his knees as he glared at me.

“You,” I said.

“Me.” The man gave me a playful smirk, but it felt more devilish than anything else.

It was the stranger from the bar. He wasn't in his suit anymore. The man wore a fitted navy blue shirt with jeans and black boots. His hair was messy, unlike the nicely combed and manicured look at the gala.

His eyes were dark as he peered at me from across the room, but he said nothing more. No explanation. No, “I’m sorry. I made a mistake.” No, “I fucked up. Let me take you home.” He said nothing.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m not doing anything.” He opened and closed his hands casually with a smug look. “I was just sitting here waiting on sleeping beauty to wake up.”

“Don’t be a fucking asshole. You know what I’m talking about. You kidnapped me. I don’t think most people would call that nothing.” I pushed myself up off the floor.

“I’m not most people,” he said.

“I want to go home.” I walked to the door and pointed. “Open this damn door and let me out now,” I demanded.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can, and you will. Let me out of here.”

“I can’t.”

“This is fucking bullshit.” I stormed over to him, my back straight as an arrow. “I don’t know what kind of sick game you’re playing, but I don’t want any part of it. If you think I’m going to let you fuck me—”

“Don’t be so full of yourself. I didn’t bring you here to fuck you. I wouldn’t need to kidnap you for that. I had my fingers inside you less than an hour after meeting you. I wouldn’t need to be this extravagant to fuck you.”

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“That doesn't mean shit. I'm not that easy.”

“Trust me, you wouldn't have denied me.”

“Who's full of themselves now?” I asked.

“Listen, Red, this isn't a game. I'm not toying with you. You're here because you need to be here. Understand?”

“Maybe I didn't make myself clear enough. Let me go right now, and I'll make sure my father goes easy on you.”

He chuckled as he pointed up at me. “I didn't know you had such a sense of humor.”

“I'm not joking with you. Do you have any idea who my father is? He's important. He knows people. And when he finds out you kidnapped me, he's going to have you put behind bars for the rest of your life.”

“That's not how this is going to go. I'm not sure you noticed, but you're not the one in control right now. I am.”

“He's going to come looking for me. My father is going to have everyone hunting you down like the beast you are.”

“Sit down,” he said. “And let me explain exactly how this is going to go.”

“No! I won't sit down! I said let me go!” My voice was shrill as I screamed. I threw

my arms up and yelled, “Let me the fuck out of this place!”

He jumped from his seat, grabbed me by the arms, and pushed me backward. “Sit the fuck down,” he commanded as he forced me onto the cot. “You're not going anywhere. I'm in charge. I'm the one who tells you what's going to happen. And right now, I'm telling you that you're stuck right where you are whether you like it or not.” His lips snarled into an angry frown as his eyes turned to slits. “Nothing is going to change that.”

“Why are you doing this? Just tell me that. Tell me why you're doing this to me. What do you want from me?”

“This might come as a surprise to you, Red, but the world is a dangerous place. There are bad people out there doing bad things. And sometimes, your luck runs out. Cross paths with the wrong person, and that bad finds you. You can't buy your way out of this. Your money means nothing here.” He turned and started for the door.

Why is he doing this?

I couldn't understand why he picked me. Why was I the one he wanted to hurt? What had I done to him? Plenty of women were at the event; why did he have to choose me?

“Tell me why you're doing this.”

He arched a brow and shook his head. “You still don't understand that you're not in charge, do you? This isn't the Red Riding Hood Show.” The man looked down at my tattered red dress with a grin.

He reached out to grab the doorknob, so I quickly said, “I still don't know your name.” I wanted something from him. Anything. Any information would be useful,

but the least he could do was give me his name. Shit, he had his fingers knuckle deep inside my pussy, and I still didn't know who he was.

“My name's Vega Lobos, but people just call me El Lobo.”

“El Lobo? What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

He smiled and said, “The Wolf.”

Chapter Five

Poppy

I tossed and turned on the cot. Vega brought me a scratchy wool blanket and a bottle of water. He didn't say a word. He simply placed the items on the stool and left. I tried to ask him more questions, but Vega just flashed me a stern glare before bolting the door shut.

I kept trying the door to see if it was still locked. I was obsessed with it. As if someone might secretly unlock it to set me free. Every so often, I would hear someone walk by. I'd jump from the cot and start banging on the door. I'd pound so hard there was no way whoever it was didn't hear me. But they never made a sound. They never stopped. They just kept going.

The room kept feeling like it was getting smaller and smaller. I paced around the perimeter, walking from corner to corner, from wall to wall, from door to window. The walls were slowly closing in on me, and I was suffocating.

There was a sensation that something heavy was sitting on my chest. My head was

dizzy, and my lungs burned. My hands shook, trembling with fear and uncertainty. I was cold but sweating like I had just finished a triathlon.

I was breathing heavily as I lay down on the cot and covered up with the blanket. My skin itched from the fabric, but I ignored it. My eyes were too swollen, and I was too tired from crying and beating on the door to do anything but sleep.

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I had the same dream about Italy for years, and I always woke up at the sound of the crash. Tonight was different. As my eyes closed, the dream picked up where it left off. The loud bang was like the ding of a bell at the beginning of a boxing match. It was the feeling of terror that finally opened the door—the impossible feeling of dread and fear I was living in that pulled the curtain back and revealed the full nightmare.

* * * *

The door to our hotel room burst open, and a rush of people ran inside. My mother screamed at the top of her lungs. I jumped over the bed and hid between the nightstand and the wall. I didn't even think about it; the instinct to hide kicked in.

Three men were dressed in all black from head to toe: black suits, black undershirts, black ties, and black shoes. The only spit of color was red handkerchiefs in the breast pockets.

The first man through the door had slick brown hair and olive-colored skin. His face was square, and his jaw was covered with a thick, grizzly beard. A scar went through the center of his right eyebrow, exposing the only soft, pink skin on his face.

The other two men were taller and leaner. One guy had brown hair with white streaks salting the sandiness, and the other was blonde. They almost looked like siblings. They had the same blue eyes, same round faces, and same thin lips. They even stood with the same wide stance and dangling arms that looked too thin for their broad bodies.

The square-faced man quickly grabbed my mother and covered her mouth with a

white cloth. She tussled and fought, punching and kicking until her limbs went limp and her eyes closed. My small body shook as tears streamed down my face.

“Get the girl,” the man holding my pendulous mother said.

The other two men looked in my direction with simultaneous head flicks. They stood still but only briefly. The man with blonde hair darted in my direction with his arms out. His lips were twisted, and his teeth were bared like a rabid raccoon lunging forward.

I tried to scramble under the bed as I yelled, “Mom! Mom! Wake up!” My feeble legs pushed and bucked. My toes dug into the plush carpet, scraping with urgency to get away.

I was almost all the way under the bed when the man grabbed my ankle and yanked me out like a farmer plucking a piglet from its mother's nipple. He pulled so hard it felt like my leg was going to pop out of the socket. I wiggled and flung my arms, trying to break free.

His giant hands pinched and bit at my skin as he gained control of me. The man's hand slid across my face, and I chomped down hard. Warm blood smeared my lips. I could taste the sour and tangy iron in my mouth.

“Ah! Fuck! The little bitch bit me!” he yelled, releasing me to look at the wound on his hand.

“Just fucking get her, Shit-head!” the scarred man barked.

I tried to run, but my muscles didn't want to work properly. They were like cooked spaghetti, flaccid, weak, and buckling under my weight.

The blonde man became more aggressive, grabbing me so hard his fingertips hit the bone. I let out a blood-curdling scream. He put me in a bear hug and lifted me off the ground. "Gotcha," he said playfully. "You ain't going anywhere."

"Let me go! Mom! Mom, wake up!" I screamed, reaching my arms desperately toward her. But she didn't respond. Her eyes stayed shut, and her body was still. Through my screams, I cried. I wept for my mother, uncertain if she was alive or dead. I wept for myself, scared of what would happen to me next. I wept from the fear that my life was over.

"Will you shut her the fuck up?" the man holding my mother said.

Before I could react, the third man lurched forward and covered my mouth with the same type of white cloth that was used on my mother. I took a few deep, frantic breaths. My eyes connected with the man holding my mom. He grinned a big, crooked, lopsided grin. Then everything went black.

Chapter Six

Poppy

I'm going fucking crazy. I need my medicine or I'm going to lose my fucking mind.

The nightmare that had haunted me since childhood was getting more vivid than ever before. It was happening; I was going insane, and it would only get worse. It wouldn't be long before reality and my imagination were blended so well I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Without my medication, there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Schizophrenia is a bitch.

“Breakfast,” Vega said as he closed the door behind him. He put the plate down on the stool and pushed it forward.

I stared at him as I rested on my side on the cot. My hands were tucked under my head, and my knees were pulled up. I didn't say a word. I remained stagnant, silent, and vacant of emotions.

“Seriously? You're just going to lay there like a fucking mute and glare at me like I'm some asshole?”

“You're not like an asshole. You are an asshole.”

“I'm doing you a favor.”

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“A favor?”

“Yeah, a favor. I don't have to feed you, but I am. So, fucking eat.”

I was annoyed and rolled away from him as I said, “I'm not hungry.”

He let out an audible breath. I felt him move closer. His figure cast a shadow across the wall I was facing, erasing the visible hairline cracks and small pits. “You might not want to eat, but you have to.”

“Are you going to force it down my throat?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Fuck you,” I barked.

“I know what you're doing. You want some form of control. You don't feel like you have any; this is your way to take back what you can. But if you think I'm going to go through all of this just to let you starve yourself to death, you're wrong.”

“I think you have it backward. It's not me that wants control; it's you.” I flipped to my back and pushed up on my elbows. “You're the only one who seems to care if I eat or not. Why? Why does it matter?”

“Eat.”

“I asked you—”

“I heard your question, and my answer is for you to fucking eat. It's been three days since you've had any food.”

“How the hell do you know when I ate last? Have you been stalking me?”

“I know because I was at the same party as you. Remember?” Vega bit his bottom lip and smirked. “I'm only going to say it one more time.Eat.”

“Fuck you.” I veered my stare. “You can't make me do shit.”

“Fine, be stubborn. Looks like we'll do this my way then.” Vega stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

I slapped the plate of food off the stool. The food tumbled over the floor as the plate shattered into a dozen pieces. I raked my hands through my hair and down my face. All I wanted was to go home. There had to be a way out. I just had to figure out how. I could try to break the window. Or I could wait by the door, and when Vega came back, I could hit him with the stool and get away.

A jagged piece of ceramic winked at me from the floor.Yes. A weapon.

Vega didn't realize it, but he had left me a gift. He gave me something to protect myself and he didn't even know it. I snatched the broken shard and slipped it under the mattress. A plan was slowly forming in my mind. The next time Vega came into the room, I would be ready. I would play nice and get him to come close enough so I could stab him in the neck and escape.

I felt a renewed sense of hope. There was a plan, a surprise attack, a chance to break free. The sheer possibility was enough to almost make me smile.Almost.

I sat tapping my fingers nervously against my thighs. My patience was thin. I found

myself wishing for Vega to return. Longing to see his face. I hadn't wanted something so badly in my entire life.

The lock clicked open first. My eyes shot to the door, and my heart started racing. The doorknob rotated in slow motion. My heart beat even faster. It pounded like a drum, vibrating against my ribs.

I placed my hand on the edge of the mattress where the shard was. The door opened, and Vega walked in. I didn't move—not yet. It was too soon. Patience would be key. It had to be a surprise. Vega wasn't a small man. He could easily overpower me if I wasn't careful and precise.

He stood in the doorway, his arms hanging at his sides. Vega's eyes dropped to the floor. “I see you didn't change your mind about eating. That's too bad.” He leaned against the wood frame, folding his hands in front of his waist. “But you didn't have to throw a tantrum like a child. What a waste of food.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck me?” Vega said with a grin. “We came real close the other day, didn't we?”

“I fucking hate you. Fuck you!” I spit at him.

“Feisty little thing, aren't you?” Vega chuckled and smiled. “But, you're about to lose your edge, Red.”

“My name isn't Red, fuck face.”

“I don't give a shit. All that matters is you eat. You being dead defeats the purpose.”

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“What the hell does that mean?” I asked, softly tracing the smooth edge of the makeshift knife under the mattress.

He smiled again as he took a step into the room. Only he wasn't alone. Two more men stood behind him. Their faces were shadowed. They were like two demons rising from the ground. Death walking behind my executioner.

“What is this? Who are they?” I asked, my voice rattling with disdain as my eyes darted between all three men.

“Them?” Vega glanced over his shoulder. “They're here to help me.”

“Help you with what?” My fingers carefully stretched under the edge of the mattress to grip the broken plate.

“Well, you won't eat on your own. So, you leave me no other choice.”

The other two men came to his side. They both had something in their hands, but I was too freaked out to see what it was. All I could do was react. My nerves kicked in full force. I yanked the shard out of its hiding place and jumped to my feet.

Instantly, I felt woozy. I was dehydrated and weak from having nothing to eat or drink. The room spun, and my head pounded with a terrible headache, but I didn't let it stop me. I lunged forward as I screamed, “Get the fuck away from me!”

The jagged edge of the broken plate cut into my palm as I flailed my arm in Vega's direction. I struck him with it, sliding the blade down his cheek. Vega grunted, but he

never yelled or cursed in pain. He didn't flinch. He didn't even try to move. He stood there motionless.

Vega grabbed my wrist and twisted it hard, forcing me to drop the shard. His mouth went crooked as he said, "Nice try. Unfortunately, you lost this battle." He manipulated my body as easily as gum on a hot sidewalk.

My arms were suddenly pinned behind my back, and he was walking me back to the cot. The other two men moved around like bees, shuffling and pushing blurred objects. I tried to fight him. I jerked my body and dug my heels into the floor.

"Fuck you! Let me go! You can't do this, you fucking asshole!"

It was useless. Vega was too strong. He threw me onto the cot. My arms and legs were strapped down before I had a chance to protect myself. A belt was put across my stomach and yanked tight, keeping me flat. I was hot all over, as if the room was on fire and I was sitting in the center of it. My skin burned. My insides were melting like wax.

I frantically looked around. The two new faces were over me, but they weren't paying any attention to me at all. One man was wearing small, round glasses that kept sliding down the bridge of his nose when he tilted his head. He'd shove them back up with a knuckle. His hair was gray, and he wore a long white lab coat like a doctor.

The other man had smooth tan skin, shaggy brown hair, and a similar white coat. They were both wearing blue latex gloves and were handling thin plastic tubes as they talked to each other quietly.

The man with shaggy hair grabbed my arm and held it firmly at the elbow. I felt a sharp pain as the other man stuck a needle under the skin.

“What are you doing? Stop! Let me go!” I screamed. I yelled at the top of my lungs, yet it felt like no one heard me. “No! Don't do this! Let me go!”

The men didn't glance at me. Their eyes didn't shift with concern or empathy. The two men, holding me down and violating my veins, paid as much attention to me as a butcher to the meat they were filleting.

The needle pinched as they taped it down and hooked it up to a machine. A bag full of fluid dangled, dripping slowly into the tube that was now attached. My eyes were wild. I looked at the men, at the ceiling, and to my left and right. I even tried to arch my neck to look behind me.

The two men whispered back and forth. I could hear single words, but they were foreign to me. The words didn't make sense.

“Lidocaine.”

“Lubricant.”

“NG tube.”

The shaggy-haired man passed things to the man with glasses. The man with glasses took the items and set them on a metal tray beside him. The man with glasses looked at me for the first time and said, “Do not move. If you move, I could kill you.”

I looked at him wide-eyed. “Why are you doing this to me?” I asked.

He didn't answer as he inserted the tip of a small bottle into my nose. I tried not to breathe, but I was so afraid I couldn't control my body. My lungs rapidly expanded and collapsed as my nostrils stung with the sweet scent of banana.

“Please. You don't have to do this. Just let me go. My father will give you whatever you want. Name your price.”

“Don't move,” the man demanded as he looked back and nodded at Vega.

Vega stepped around the men and came to stand by my head. “The sooner you learn to follow directions, the easier it will be for you. You're just making things more difficult for yourself. It doesn't have to be this way.”

“Please,” I begged as tears streamed down my cheeks. “I swear to you, my father will give you anything you want. All you have to do is let me go.”

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Vega gently brushed the hair from my face with his fingertips as he smiled. "Ignorance isn't a blessing; it's a curse." He spread his bear-sized palm over my forehead and pushed my head down.

The man with glasses took a small plastic tube and forced it up my nose. It didn't really hurt, but the second it moved from my nasal passages to my throat, I began to gag. My insides bubbled up, pooling in my throat and trying to come out. My eyes watered with tears that were hot as fire.

I blinked, releasing the tears. Vega's eyes connected with mine, and for a split second, I thought I saw a flicker of compassion. It was quick, disappearing the second I blinked again. The tube slid all the way down my esophagus and into my stomach.

"There," the man said as he taped the tube to my cheek. "We're all done here." He pulled the gloves off his hands and dropped them on the tray. "I'll be back in a little while to check on her."

Vega released my forehead, but his hand stayed on my head. He rubbed the side of my temple with his thumb, drawing light circles. "I'll come get you when she's finished."

"Come get me immediately if you see any blood around her mouth or coming out of her nose," the man said.

"Of course. I know how this works."

"You're going to need stitches," the man responded. "That cut is pretty deep."

“I’ll worry about that later, it’s fine for now. Thank you. You can go.”

“I can just grab—”

Vega snarled, “I said go.”

The two men left, leaving us alone. Vega kept rubbing my head. His fingers moved into my hair, massaging my scalp.

“What is happening to me?” I asked.

“I warned you,” he said callously. “But you didn’t hear me.”

Chapter Seven

I twisted. I pulled. I yanked with all my might. But I couldn’t break free.

My skin was rubbed raw around my wrists and ankles. The cool sensation that flowed into my veins had diminished and was nothing more than a warm burn. I had this foreign object going down my throat and the insistent urge to spit it out.

Vega was sitting on the stool across the room, watching me. “I don’t know why you’re still fighting it. It’s a losing battle.”

“I don’t feel good,” I said. “Please, untie me.”

“You don’t feel good because it’s like you’re running on a full stomach. Quit moving around so much and you won’t feel like shit.” He stood up and stalked toward me. His eyes danced over the bag connected to my arm. Vega tapped it gently, causing it to swing back and forth. “It’s almost empty. Won’t be long now until you’re finished.”

My eyes felt puffy from all the crying, but I had no more tears to shed. There was nothing left inside me despite the fluid being forced into my body. “Why won't you give me any answers? Please, just tell me why I'm here.”

Vega stroked his jaw as his eyes settled on mine. “Answers won't change anything. Do you think having all the answers will help? Because it won't.”

“You don't get to decide that for me. I should be the one that decides if it helps or not.”

“I don't know if you realize this or not, but you don't get to make the decisions here.”

“Then who does? You?”

“Yeah, I'm the one in charge. You might not like it, but that's life, Red.”

“My name's not Red. I told you that already.”

“I know, but that pretty red dress gave you the title.”

“Can't we talk about this? I'm sure we can fix whatever the problem is. Tell me what's going on. How can I help? Obviously, you need something. I can get you whatever you're looking for. I'm sure of it. Just talk to me.”

“You're not here to be my therapist,” Vega sighed.

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“Maybe that's exactly what you need since you're torturing innocent people.”

“Torture?” He let out a chuckle. “You think this is torture? Wow. This would be pathetic as a form of torture. Trust me, if I decide to torture you, it won't be like this.”

“How about you grow some fucking balls and tell me why I am here then.”

There was a knock at the door. Vega turned and called out, “Yeah?”

“It's time,” a man said.

Vega moved to the door and opened it up. The man with glasses was back. He pulled on gloves as he walked into the room. He looked and acted like a doctor, but he was so cold—dead on the inside. Obviously, whatever compassion and ethics he once held were gone.

He pinched the tube and slowly pulled it out of my nose. The sensation was strange, like pulling a long string of spaghetti out of your mouth that had gotten stuck in your throat. I coughed a little until it was finally free.

The man then moved to my arm. He placed a gauze over the IV line against my skin and plucked it out. A small piece of tape was placed over the gauze. He had a few words privately near the door with Vega that I couldn't hear, and then he walked out as if nothing had happened. He just walked away like he hadn't just violated the Hippocratic Oath.

Vega came to the edge of the bed. His fingers teased the ends of the bindings at my

feet. "I'm going to untie you now, but just know, every single time you refuse to eat, this is what happens. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to eat from now on?"

"Yes. I'd much rather eat than go through this again."

"Good. We understand each other then."

I arched a hard brow. "I don't think we understand each other at all."

He pulled the knots loose and said, "I'm not asking you for much. All you have to do is comply. Do as you're told, and this will go much more smoothly."

My eyes burned with fire. "Smoothly? How can you even say that? You're talking like this is normal. This isn't normal. I want to leave, not comply with a fucking a thing." I sat up and rubbed my wrists as he pulled the last binding off.

"Well, unfortunately for you, complying is your best option." He stuffed the rope bindings in his pocket and walked to the door. "Do you want to take a shower?"

"What?" I asked, confused by the question and his casual stance. Vega didn't look out of place or uncomfortable. He looked right at home, relaxed and at ease with the entire situation.

"Do you want to shower?" he asked again. I stared at him for a moment with a look of perplexity. "Well?"

I glanced around the room, twisting my head left to right and then looking behind my

back. “Where? There's no shower in here. Are you going to bring me a bucket of cold water and a bar of soap? Another favor for me just like this meal.”

“There you go with that humor again. I'm not talking about a bucket of cold water. There's an actual shower you can use.”

I let his statement linger for a moment. The shower was someplace else. If I agreed, he'd have to take me there, and maybe I could find a way out of this place. The thought ignited a flicker of excitement and hope.

“Yes, that would be nice. I could use one.”

“This way,” he said. He opened the door but stopped abruptly. Vega turned to face me. “No funny business. I don't want any more trouble. Do you understand?”

“Why would I cause any trouble?”

Vega didn't answer. Instead, he tugged one of the bindings from his pocket and said, “Hold out your hands.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Just do it.”

“No.”

Vega clenched his jaw and tilted his head. In one quick swoop, his hand was around my throat. He pulled me, shoved me against the wall, and growled. “This isn't complying. This is the trouble I'm talking about.”

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He held me firmly in place. His fingers tightened, pressing against the throbbing vein in my neck. Vega's face was inches from mine. I could smell the mint on his breath and the musk of his cologne.

I wanted to speak, but the pressure was too great. All I could do was gasp with airless words. Vega's eyes darted between mine. They were dark, glinting like gunmetal under the low light. His jaw was covered in stubble, and his hair swept across one eye.

“I'm going to tell you one more time. Give me your hands.” I held up both arms. “Good girl.” Vega released my throat and tied the rope around my wrists. He wrapped the other end around his hand and walked forward, tugging me behind him like a dog on a leash.

The building was old. What I thought was a rundown hotel was actually an old factory. The hall opened up to a giant room. We were on the second floor. Beside me was a flaking greenrailing. Below us was a cauldron that had to be twenty feet high with a diameter as wide as an above-ground swimming pool.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“It's an old soap factory, been shut down for years. I bought it a little while back. It works great to keep things under the radar.”

“You bought it?”

Who was this man? If he had the kind of money to buy a factory, why take me? What

was the purpose? What could I give him that he didn't already have?

“What? Do I not look rich enough to make a big purchase?”

“People can be all kinds of things beneath the surface. Clothes don't mean shit.”

That was one thing I did know. I learned it firsthand from my father and the people who worked for him, the politicians he bribed, and the police he paid off to look the other way. You grow up thinking that people are exactly who they say they are, and then one day, you see the truth. The veil gets lifted and the world you knew is gone.

“For once, we agree on something,” Vega said. “Humans are chameleons.”

The metal floor was cold beneath my feet. My toes prickled like I was standing on a solid block of ice. “What kind of work do you do?”

“The kind that's none of your fucking business.” Vega gave the rope a tug as he got a few steps ahead of me. “Enough with the questions.”

I stopped talking and took note of every door and window. The windows were fogged up and high above my head. There wasn't a chance in hell I could climb to one and jump out. There were several doors, but it was hard to tell if any of them were an exit.

“The shower is in here.” Vega pushed through a doorway.

The hinges creaked loudly as the door swung inward and slammed loudly as it closed. The room was covered in clean white tiles. There wasn't a spec of dirt anywhere to be seen. It appeared as sterile as a hospital. A far cry from the filthy room I was being kept in. Vega pulled me all the way to the corner of the room.

“Where's the shower?” I asked.

“Right there,” he said as he jerked his head.

There was a drain built into the floor, and a shower head with hot and cold handles was built into the wall. A small basket with soap and shampoo was on the floor against the wall, and a towel hung on a rack right above it. The tiles were as bright as if you stared straight at the sun. Blinding and vibrant despite having no color.

“You have ten minutes.” Vega released the tether.

“I can't shower like this,” I said as I held up my tied hands. “Can you untie me, please?”

He pursed his lips but reluctantly agreed. “Don't try anything stupid.”

“I won't.” I thought he would give me some privacy, but Vega only turned around to face the opposite direction. “Aren't you going to leave?” I asked.

“Why? So you can try to escape? Not a chance in hell.” Vega answered quickly without a second thought.

“I can't shower with you standing right there,” I proclaimed, instinctively covering myself with my arms. I wasn't naked, but just the thought of having to shower with him right there made me feel completely exposed. “Some privacy would be good.”

“Fine. Then you don't shower. I'll bring you back to your room.”

Vega turned and started to reach for me, but I said, “Okay. Alright. I'll shower. Just promise me you're going to stay facing the other way and not be a pervert.”

“Pervert? Did you forget I was inside you already?” Vega ran his finger under his nose and inhaled a deep breath. “I think I can still smell you on my skin.”

My brows angled hard as my pussy clenched with the reminder. My body was defying me. I didn't want to think of the pleasure he had given me. "Promise me," I demanded.

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“I don't make promises. I can give you my word that I won't; that's it.” His voice echoed over the tiles, making it sound like he was all around me. I shuddered. My skin bristled as his voice encased me in a warmth of sound.

“I guess that's good enough.”

“It has to be good enough because that's all you're getting.” Vega twisted away from me and faced the direction we came in. “So, let's go. Get it over with.”

I slipped my dirty red dress off and kicked it to the side. The metal of the faucet was cold against my fingers, and the floor was smooth under my feet. I turned on the shower and let the hot water cascade down my body.

The water swirled around my feet like a whirlpool in the middle of the sea. Dirt slid down my legs, creating a swamp around the drain. The beautiful whirlpool was now a mudslide, just like my life.

“Hurry up. This ain't a spa,” Vega barked.

“I'm almost done,” I said as I rinsed the shampoo out of my hair. I turned off the water and wrapped myself in the towel. “Okay, I'm finished.”

Vega turned around and said, “It's about damn time.” He looked me up and down. “Why didn't you put your dress back on?”

“Because it's dirty and disgusting.” I kicked the dress in his direction. “I'm not wearing that. Look at it.”

He dragged his fingers through his hair and eyed me. "That's alright. I have something else you can wear." Vega held up the rope and said, "Hands."

I complied, holding out both wrists for him to tie. Vega grabbed the binding and walked towards the exit, pulling me along again. I should have felt less than human. I should have felt disturbed and disregarded. I was being walked like a pet. But I didn't feel anything at all. I was more focused on finding a way out than caring about the optics.

The factory was quiet. It obviously wasn't a factory that was in operation. There were no other people around. Other than the few people I had seen, there certainly wasn't enough to run a place this big. A factory like this, if it was running, would be loud and buzzing with life in its heyday.

We reached the door to where Vega was keeping me. "I'll be right back with something for you to put on. Sit tight." He pointed at the cot as his hulking shoulders blocked the doorway.

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere," I forced a smile as my brows reached high.

He chuckled lightly and shook his head. "I wouldn't suggest you even try." Vega shut and locked the door.

I sat on the bed. I was cold. My hair was dripping over my shoulders. The water droplets tickled as they glided down my back. I was shivering from head to toe. I tried to wrap the damp towel tighter as if that would help. It didn't do shit. My teeth chattered, rattling around inside my head like dice.

Vega returned a few minutes later carrying a bundle in his arms. "Here," he said as he dropped the clothes on the cot. "You can put these on. I have some shit to take care of right now, but I'll be back in a little bit with your dinner."

“It's pretty cold in here. Any chance you could turn the heat up?”

“I'll see what I can do.” He tossed me a smile and a nod.

Vega started to leave, but I stopped him. “Wait,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Don't do that.” He looked back at me over his shoulder, his voice ominous. “Don't thank me.”

“I'm serious. I'm sure you didn't have to let me shower or give me clean clothes. I appreciate it. I honestly do.”

Vega lifted a brow suspiciously. “You're full of shit.”

“I'm not. The little things matter.”

“Don't mistake my actions for kindness.” Vega's mouth turned razor thin. “And you being pleasant doesn't change a thing. I hope you know that. People lie. Especially people in your situation. They lie all the time.”

“I'm not lying. I swear.”

“They say that too.”

“I'm not a liar. My name is Poppy Aneska. Does that ring a bell? I wasn't lying when I said my father would come looking for me or that he'd give you any amount of money for my return. Although, if you own this place, I don't know if it's the money you're after.”

“I know exactly who you are. That's why you're here.” My mouth dropped open as Vega smiled and shut the door behind him.

I wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time. Vega knew what he was doing. This was planned. I was his target.

Chapter Eight

Poppy

I felt a tickle across my forehead and swatted it away. The tickle came back, soft as a feather. I swatted at it again.

“Poppy, wake up.”

I jolted awake, pushing myself up quickly. Vega was sitting next to me with a plate of food. “Jesus. Why the hell are you sneaking up on me?” I asked, shaken by his sudden appearance.

“I didn't sneak up on you. You were passed out. You probably haven't slept like that in days.”

“You're right. I haven't. I wonder why that is?” I eyed him with an accusatory glare.

“I detect a hint of sarcasm.” He thinned his lips as he set the plate down on the stool. “Poppy, you're going to have to come to terms with this. You're here, and there's nothing you can do to change it. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

“How the fuck can I come to terms with this? I don't even know what the hell this is. Or why I'm in this at all!” I flailed my arms around with the grace of an inflatable in the wind.

“Look, you're not going to believe me when I tell you this, but I am trying to help you.”

“You call this help?” I threw out a single arm as I looked around at the sad excuse for his version of help. “On what planet would anyone call this helping someone?” I jumped from the cot and stood so close to him that my toes touched his shiny black shoes. “I tried to be nice! I tried so hard to see if you had any good in you. But you kidnapped me! You took me without permission! You keep me locked up in this room! And you want me to think you're helping me? You're fucking insane.”

Vega laughed as his jaw clicked back and forth. “You don't have any idea what I've done for you. You want to see what taking you without permission would really look like?” His giant hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me in so our chests touched. Vega's eyes danced between mine, his thoughts visible and wicked.

My eyes lingered on his, moving down to his mouth. He licked his lips. The faint scent of cologne slipped into my nose, turning on a feral instinct inside me. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to feel and taste him.

The man I met at the gala, with the dimples and nice smile, the handsome eyes, and the smooth voice, was all I could see. For a split second, I forgot where I was and what he had done. My mind flipped with shadowed memories of his fingers inside my body and how good that made me feel.

His thumb stroked my lower back as he reached up with his other hand to touch my cheek. Vega slid his knuckles down my jawline and tipped my head so I was looking at him again.

“You should fear me, but you don't. If you were smart, you would. People don't call me the Wolf for no reason.”

What the hell is wrong with me? I shook myself back to reality.

I hated myself for thinking about his lips and his hands. For feeling it. For wanting it. I really was fucked up in the head. What other explanation was there for wanting a monster?

Maybe it was because of the restricted life I lived. Or the whispers that would float between walls as easily as mold through a vent. Whispers that painted me and my mother as freaks. When I got older and my father finally decided to bring me into his world, I saw how people looked at me. I saw the side-eyed glances and felt the weight of the room when I walked in. But my father promised me I wouldn't end up like her, that I was different.

I am different. I can get myself out of this mess. I sucked in a ragged breath, held it briefly, and then let it go. "I don't think you're as bad of a guy as you say you are. If you were, I'd be dead."

"You're right about that. If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead."

"Then why take me? Why am I here? What the hell do you want from me?!" I yelled, slamming my fists against his chest. "Kill me already! Just get it over with!" I hit him again and again. "You obviously want something from me, so fucking take it! What the hell are you waiting for?"

Vega didn't budge. His arm stayed around my back, and his hand came up to capture my face. "Is that what you want? You want me to kill you?" he asked.

My jaw clenched tight, eyes turning to slits. "No. I don't want to die."

"Then why ask for it?"

“What else is there?”

Vega bit his lip, tugging it with the edges of his teeth. “You shouldn't put ideas in my head.”

“What the fuck do you want from me?” I asked bluntly.

He leaned in slightly, bringing his lips so close to mine they were almost touching. I could smell the scent of mint on his breath. His hand gently caressed my cheek, and his other hand massaged the dip in my lower back.

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Kiss me. My mind flashed to the gala. Touch me. Take me. . .

No! What the fuck am I thinking!

A war had begun. The push and pull of want and disgust were battling. The hate I felt was cradled with desire. My body grew warm. My sex pulsed. Every nerve exploded with screams to push him away and pleas for his lips against mine. My stomach rolled with butterflies and knots. Fire burned between my thighs with hate and lust.

I had the urge to slap myself, but instead, I attempted to slap him. He dodged my strike, so I punched his chest and tried to shove him off me. "Let me go," I snarled.

Vega leaned in. "I will, but," he whispered. There was a long pause. Long enough for me to hear each breath he took.

His words vibrated over my lips, making my knees shake. Whatever trance he was putting on me, I had to break it. There was no room for this right now. I couldn't yearn for my captor. I had to hate him. I needed to despise him.

The hook he was dangling had somehow pierced my chest and was reeling me in. I couldn't take it anymore. No matter what my body said, I had to stay in control.

"This isn't fair," I said. Vega loosened his grip, and I took a step back.

"Life isn't fair. Most people know that. But most of those people don't grow up with a silver fucking spoon in their mouth."

“You have no idea what my life has been like,” I growled. “So what if I had money. Money doesn't equal happiness. It can buy a lot of things, but sorrow isn't solid. It can pass through fancy clothes and expensive jewelry. It can infiltrate the strongest walls and rip you to pieces. Suffering doesn't stop with dollar signs.”

“You know what true suffering is?” Vega asked with an air of arrogance. He was looking at his hands, opening and closing them repeatedly. “It's watching someone die. Have you ever watched someone die?” he asked as his eyes found their way back to mine.

I stood silently. How much information should I tell him? How much did he deserve to know? He hadn't earned my suffering. He had done nothing to earn the right to know the pain I lived with.

“Yes. I have,” I said clearly and sternly. “I watched my mother die. Who did you watch die?”

What did any of that matter now anyway? It was in the past. There was nothing I could do to change that. I couldn't bring her back. No one could. It was time for me to own my suffering. Speak it out loud and make it real. I spent years in denial, living my life as if I'd get to see my mother again one day.

Being in this place made me realize there was no one watching out for me. There was no God. There was no Heaven. There was nothing. Because if there was, my mother would have rushed in to protect me.

Vega watched me carefully. His eyes traveled around my face, searching for falsehood. I was being brutally honest. I had no reason to lie to him. Let him see me truly vulnerable. Let him see the human side of me. Let him see Poppy, the person, and not just a toy for his sick game.

“Your turn,” I said.

Vega's eyes steadied on mine. I watched them turn to ice, allowing my reflection to peer back at me. There were dark bags under my eyes. My lips were dry and cracked like brittle plastic. It was me, but it didn't look likeme.

I must have let out a soft gasp because Vega flicked his eyes to the floor and said, “Forget it. Just eat your breakfast.”

Tears bubbled up over my eyes. I blinked rapidly, wiping them away. “I'm not doing this anymore. Give me some fucking answers!”

“Sit down and eat!” he yelled back, pointing at the cot. “Or should I go get you some help again?”

My eyes burned to keep crying, but I was so angry I refused to let them out. I dropped down onto the bed, forked some scrambled eggs into my mouth, and bit the toast. “There. Happy now, asshole?” I asked. Crumbs spurted from my mouth and stuck to my lips.

Vega reached out and ran his thumb across my lips, wiping away the crumbs. I shivered. There was nothing I could do to stop it. And he felt it. Vega's mouth curled to one side. The dimple emerged, sucking all the air from my lungs.

“Yes, I'm very happy.” His phone vibrated in his pocket.

“Aren't you going to get that?” I asked. “Might be important.”

He chuckled as he pulled out the phone and glanced at it. “I doubt it.”

“Well, who is it?” I asked as I took another bite of eggs and a small sip of water.

“Telemarketer?”

Vega ignored me and walked to the window. He peeked through the small circle I cleared and asked, “What was it like for you growing up?”

“I don't know. Same as most people, I suppose.”

“Tell me about it.”

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“There isn't much to tell. I went to school like everyone else. My father worked long hours. My mother did things most moms do when she could. It was a normal childhood.”

“What does that mean? When she could?” he asked. Vega looked at me over his shoulder.

“Before she got sick.”

“Your father is one of the richest men in the world. He should have been able to get her the best doctors. You're telling me he couldn't help her?”

“I don't know what you want me to say.”

“Doesn't that seem strange to you?” Vega asked as he looked back to the window.

I shrugged my shoulder. “No. Sometimes it doesn't matter. You can't save everyone.”

Vega grunted. “Is there more?”

“More what?”

“More to your story?”

“No. That's what it was like until I turned sixteen,” I said.

I left out the part about my own illness slipping in and attempting to steal me away.

But my father saved me. He did for me what he couldn't do for my mother.

“What happened when you turned sixteen?” Vega turned and leaned against the window.

“I started working for my father doing little things. I filed papers. I would shred old documents. Occasionally, he would let me sit in on meetings and take notes. The older I got, the more responsibilities he gave me.”

“Is that what you wanted? Did you want to work for your father?”

“I guess.”

“That sounds skeptical. You had other plans, didn't you?”

“I think we all have other plans when we're kids. Did you want to grow up to become this? Is this what your father did, too? Was he a despicable scumbag who kidnapped people for ransom?”

Vega frowned. “I told you I didn't take you for your money.”

“Why else would you take me? It's the only thing that makes sense. There must be something you need.”

He walked forward, his eyes locked on mine. “Poppy, there are a million reasons why I might take you.”

“Maybe. But for you, there's only one. The other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand-nine hundred and ninety-nine don't matter.”

He stroked his jaw and let out a breath. “You're right. I'm not going to tell you you're

not. I do have a reason for taking you.”

“But you're not going to tell me what it is? Why?”

“I think you'll figure it out eventually. You said it yourself; you're a smart girl. I don't doubt you'll get the answers you want without me having to tell you a thing.”

“So this is it then? I get to spend the rest of my life here? Trapped in this fucking room?”

Vega's lips went taut as he took long, commanding steps in my direction. His back stiffened as he pointed down at me. “There are worse things that could happen to you. I'm the only thing keeping them from reaching you. You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you!” I yelled as I jumped to my feet. “I will never thank you for a damn thing!”

He grinned as I stared him down. “You'll thank me. I can promise you that.” Vega ran his thumb down the curve of my jaw.

I slapped his hand away. “Don't fucking touch me,” I choked out between angry breaths.

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“You had no problem letting me touch you when we danced.”

“That was before I knew what a piece of trash you are. If I had any idea, I would have kicked you in the balls and had you arrested.”

“That wouldn't have stopped a thing. You're lucky I took you and not one of those other guys.”

My jaw clenched tight, and my hands balled into fists. I couldn't stop myself. I pulled back and punched Vega straight in the face. My knuckles crunched against his nose, causing his head to snap back.

He sucked in a breath and grunted as he grabbed his nose. Blood began to seep through his fingers and down his hand. Bright red flowed down his wrists and disappeared into the cuffs on his sleeves.

“Nice hit,” he said, his voice nasally. “You cold-cocked me. A cheap shot, but it was a good hit. I didn't see it coming.”

“Fuck you,” I shot back.

Chapter Nine

Poppy

“Get up. We're leaving.”

“What?” I asked as I sat up.

Vega was standing in the door with a small bundle under his arms. “Here, put these on and make it quick.” He tossed the bundle at me.

“I don't understand,” I said as I caught a small pile of clothes. “What's happening?”

“Just get dressed and come out when you're finished,” he said and shut the door. Vega gave me a pair of jeans, a yellow shirt, and a pair of flats—no bra, no panties, no socks or a jacket, just the bare minimum needed to consider me dressed.

I pulled on the clothes quickly and waited at the door. Was this it? Was I finally being traded for whatever Vega was after? The room didn't hold any significance, but it had, in all sense of the meaning, become home. I curled my thin fingers around the doorknob and twisted. It turned without resistance, allowing me to open it freely.

I half-heartedly laughed when the door opened. What a cruel joke. I had tried to open the door a million times. The one time it gives me free passage, it's not to let me go. Vega was right outside, leaning against the wall. His face held an air of impatience as he glanced up from his phone.

“Come on. Time to go.” He reached out his hand. Instinctively, I took it.

Vega's hand was rough, covered with tough callouses and coarse skin. His thick fingers wrapped mine, but not to control or command my participation. He held my hand as if to protect me. To move me out of harm's way. And yet, he was the predator. He was the beast with teeth bared, eager to feast.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“Someplace else,” he said as he pulled me down the hall.

“Why?”

“Because.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's my answer to you.” He picked up the pace, walking faster. “There's a car waiting for us outside. Once we're inside it, I'll tell you more.”

“Why not tell me now?”

“I was hoping it wouldn't come to this.” Vega glanced briefly at me. His eyes were almost sympathetic. “But now I have no choice.”

“What are you talking about? Hoping it wouldn't come to what?”

“We just need to go.”

He guided me down long halls and dark stairwells. Through eerily quiet corridors and musty, dirty rooms, our feet shuffled like mice scurrying through the walls at night. We finally reached a set of rusted double doors with a crooked exit sign dangling above. The sign wasn't lit. There was no glowing red filament or buzzing of fluorescent bulbs.

Vega pushed one door open with a stern arm. The sun exploded like an atomic bomb, blinding me instantly. I blocked my eyes with my free hand. I could barely open my lids all the way. My eyes burned as if someone had just thrown salt in my face.

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“Climb in,” Vega said as he pulled the door open on a large Suburban. “Let's go. Make it quick.”

I did as he said, slipping into the back seat. Vega climbed in behind me and shut the door. He tapped on the partition between us and the driver, and the vehicle took off. The tint on the windows helped ease the ache in my eyes. I looked outside and watched as we pulled out of a dirt parking lot and onto a desolate road.

Vega stared out the window, too. He looked lost in thought, his mind wandering, suffering whatever plagued him in silence. I was tempted to speak but didn't want to interrupt his internal conflict.

“Well?” he finally said.

“Well, what?” I asked as I rubbed my hands between my thighs.

“You had a million questions before. Now you have none?”

“I still have questions. I'm just not sure what the right ones to ask are.”

“There are no right or wrong questions. I'll answer what I can.”

I veered my eyes and asked, “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I'll answer what I can.”

Cryptic. Always cryptic. Vega never gave a straight answer for anything. Even at the

gala. He was a puzzle, and I wasn't interested in putting the pieces together.

“Fine. Who are you really?”

“My name is Vega. That was the truth.”

I eyed him. I wanted answers for everything. I just didn't know if I could trust what he gave me. He might assume that a person in my position would lie about anything. I could say the same for him.

“Go on. Ask me something else.”

I pinched my lip as my eyes darted to my feet. “I don't know what to ask.”

“Okay. I'll make it a little easier for you. I'll tell you some of the things I know you want to know.”

“You don't know what I'm thinking.”

“You're right. I don't. But I know your questions.” Vega twisted in his seat so he could look straight at me. His mouth tightened, and his jaw clenched. “I'm a hunter.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You know what it means,” he said, his mouth curved into a slight grin. “Think about it. It's not hard to figure out.”

My body stiffened as my eyes opened wide. Vega wasn't hunting deer or wild turkeys. He wasn't an animal control officer. He hunted people, and I was his most recent catch. I was sitting beside the devil. A man with no morals. He was a killer.

Vega reached out and touched my hand. I slapped him away. “Don't touch me!” I yelled. “I knew you were going to kill me! I knew you were evil!”

“Poppy, calm down,” he said. His voice was smooth and even.

“Don't tell me to calm down! Why me? What did I do?” My breathing became heavy and labored. “What the hell did I do to deserve this?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “You didn't do anything, Poppy. I didn't take you to kill you. I took you to save you.”

“Bullshit.” My voice was tempered with rage. “You lie.”

“If I was lying, you'd be dead already.” Vega smiled and chuckled. “I'm good at what I do. You wouldn't have seen it coming.”

My eyes met his, searching for falsehood and deception. He glared back, unwavering and still. “If you're not going to kill me, then let me go. Prove you don't want me dead. Give me back to my father. I can convince him not to press charges for kidnapping me.”

“You're not his daughter,” he said without hesitation. “Because he's not your father.”

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“Yes, I am,” I said. Of course, I was his daughter in every sense of the word except blood. He didn't provide the seed forme, but he raised me like his own. I might not see eye to eye with him on things, but he was there for me. Hewasmy father.

Vega arched a brow and tilted his head. “Do you think I could do what I do without research? I know a lot of things. More than you realize. To start, he's your stepfather, not your father.”

“Blood doesn't matter. He raised me. He's my father. Give me back to him.”

“I can't do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can't. You don't belong to him anymore.”

“You're sick. You're a sick, twisted piece of shit,” I said as I started to cry.

“It takes a sick, twisted piece of shit to do what I do.” Vega leaned in and wiped the tears off my cheeks. “But you don't need to fear me. I'm not going to hurt you.”

“Why should I believe you?” I asked. “How do I know you're telling me the truth?”

His thumb ran over my jaw and down my throat. I swatted him away again. Vega leaned in, coercing me to lean back. I had no place to go, and he knew it.

He smiled, forcing my eyes to his lips. Vega's mouth was so close to mine. His skin

was warm. His breath was hot. My mouth buzzed for his like a magnet to metal. The kiss we shared at the gala and the way his hand worked my body almost washed the anger out of me. My heart thrashed. It beat like a hammer against a nail. I silenced it with a quick reminder that he wasn't just a man I shared an intimate moment with; Vega was a man with blood on his hands.

“You don't have to believe me,” he whispered. “But just so you know, without me, you will die.” My eyes turned to pinpricks. Vega grinned as he spoke. “I was hired to kill you. You thought you were living a safe little existence. You were wrong. Safety can look like all kinds of things. It can even look like love. Love from a friend. Love from a husband or wife. Even love from a parent. But that safety is never secure. It's never real. You've felt it, Poppy.”

“What are you talking about? No one wants to kill me. What reason would anyone have for wanting me dead? I haven't done anything.”

The only person I could remotely think of was Dylan. He was the only person I had scorned. The rage he had at the gala, the way he grabbed me, and what he said were enough for me to know. He did this. Dylan was responsible.

“Not all questions deserve answers. Who wanted it doesn't matter. What matters is they won't get it.”

My back was pressed against the door; the handle was jammed into my spine. The coolness of the glass window kissed the skin on my neck. I bristled. Vega stayed close to me, giving me no room to breathe.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asked.

“No,” I said quickly.

Vega bit his bottom lip as he squinted his eyes. He studied me for a moment, then said, "You're not afraid of me, but you are scared of me."

"You are a murderer. That might have something to do with it," I snapped.

"No, that's not why." His eyes flicked between mine. They moved back and forth and then around my face. He was reading me. "You're scared because I turn you on."

"What?" I exclaimed. "No. Absolutely not."

He chuckled softly and ran the very tip of his finger up the side of my arm. "Yes, I do. You can tell me no all you want, but your eyes say otherwise. You want me, just like you wanted me the other night."

"You're still a conceded prick. I'm glad to know that wasn't an act and is just part of your personality. I appreciate the little bit of truth in this whole mess."

Vega smirked as he pulled himself away, putting space between us. "We are who we are, Poppy. I'm the villain in the story; you're the damsel in distress."

"In what fucking story does the villain help the damsel?"

"This one."

"I still don't see how this is helping me."

"You're alive, aren't you?" Vega asked.

"For now. But for how much longer?" I asked.

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His eyes were set on mine. Motionless and dark. He didn't smile. The muscles of his face didn't twitch. Vega's hands spread open across the tops of his thighs, and he inhaled a deep breath. A weighted breath. A breath that he didn't let go of for a very long time. And once he did, he turned his head to the window.

Vega didn't answer me. We drove in silence. I watched the trees and the mountains whisk past. Little houses would pop up every so often. Small stores or plazas with a handful of shops were peppered in between. The driver knew where we were going. Vega knew where we were going. And I was still in the dark.

“We're getting close,” Vega said as he shifted in his seat. “Not too much longer.”

“Can you tell me where we're going?”

“My home.”

The car turned up a long, dirt road, and twisted and turned around sharp corners and blind bends. Eventually, it opened up to a house that didn't fit. It wasn't a log cabin. It wasn't covered in debris and lost to time. It was the diamond in the stone. A beautiful chalet-style cabin with huge windows and a deck that wrapped around the outside was in the center of a large clearing. The roof was made of metal, and a stone chimney separated the windows like the bridge of a nose. Smoke poured out of the top, lifting to the sky and bleeding into the clouds.

“You live here?” I asked.

“I do.”

“It's so far away from everything.”

“That's the point. No one knows where it is.”

“The driver does.”

“My driver, Samuel, he's like family. Plus, he knows if he ever tells anyone, I'll kill him and his family without a second thought.”

“Some boss you are.”

“It's a dangerous profession, Poppy. I don't take any chances.”

“You took one with me, didn't you? You're supposed to kill me. That was your job, wasn't it?”

“You're right,” Vega said calmly as the vehicle came to a stop. He opened his door and glanced back at me. “Don't make me regret it”.

Chapter Ten

Vega

“Who is she?” I asked as I slipped the photo out of the folder.

It was a young, pretty girl with big blue eyes and dark brown hair. She was smiling at the photographer, happy, blissful, and completely unaware of what was coming.

But I knew what was coming. I was looking at a dead girl.

“Who she is doesn't matter. That's not what I'm paying you for.” Gerard adjusted

himself in the chair. He crossed his right leg over his left to pick something off his shoelace and flicked it onto the floor. "I think it's irrelevant."

"What you think doesn't matter to me. I need to know her name. How the hell am I supposed to do my job without it?" I questioned the man sitting in my office.

He said his name was Gerard and he had a job for me. Gerard claimed he had worked with my father years ago. Whether or not he could be trusted was still to be determined. My profession wasn't one you see kids aspire to become in high school. No one wrote Future Hitman in their senior yearbook.

"Won't that make it too personal?" he asked.

"I know all their names. It's how I get the job done." I held the picture, burning her image into my mind. "So, what's her name? I won't ask you a third time." I flicked my eyes to his.

This wasn't a game. I didn't play games. If he wanted it done right, I needed to know.

"Poppy Aneska."

I arched a brow as I dropped my eyes back to the image. "You're serious?"

My job came with enough risks; I didn't need to deal with some asshole who might get cold feet. I took my job seriously, and once the deal was made, there was no going back. If I even thought for a second that this man wasn't serious, that he might have second thoughts, or that he was working with the cops, I was out. So far, he didn't smell like a rat. But again, trust was earned. I didn't care if he was best friends with my fucking father, I didn't know him. Gerard was just another asshole as far as I was concerned.

“I wouldn't be here if I wasn't,” Gerard said sternly.

“What did she do?”

He ran his fingers across his forehead and through his ash gray hair. Gerard wore a deep blue business suit and shiny black shoes. The olive green tie with small yellow triangles didn't match. Thick-rimmed, black glasses sat tightly against his face, and a thin mustache traced his upper lip like a chocolate milk stain.

“This is supposed to be easy. Your father—” he started to say, but I cut him off.

“You really knew my father?” I asked.

“How do you think I knew to come to you? You don't exactly advertise on Google. Your father and I have a history.”

“Well, let's get one thing clear: I'm not my father. I don't do things the way he did. I don't answer to anyone. I don't take orders from anyone. And no one speaks for me.” I slipped the photo into the folder and slid it back to him.

“Don't you need it?” he asked, slightly bewildered.

“Nope.”

“How will you know you have the right person without the photo?”

I tapped my head. “I'll recognize her. I don't need the picture.”

Gerard furrowed his brows as his mouth crinkled and his mustache ruffled like a bird fluffing its feathers. "Look," he said. "I need this done as soon as possible. She's a threat to everything I have worked my entire life for. I need her gone for good."

"She looks like a child. How could a child be a threat to you?"

"She's not a child. Don't be fooled by her beauty. She'll be my downfall. I refuse to let that happen. I need this done before she does something stupid."

"So you want me to kill someone for something that hasn't happened yet? This is a first."

Most of my clients were mob bosses who wanted some distance between them and the hit, jaded lovers, or victims who wanted revenge, but this was new. This was a vendetta for future actions that hadn't even occurred yet.

"You're a professional, aren't you?" he asked.

I relaxed in my chair and thumbed the edge of the desk. "I don't eliminate people who are innocent."

"She's not innocent," Gerard said through clenched teeth. "She knows too much, and at some point, it's going to destroy everything I've worked for. She has to be removed completely before that happens." His hands were on the desk, closed into tight fists. His knuckles were bright white, and his skin was pulled so thin that I could see the veins webbed beneath. "I have no problem finding someone else if I can't trust you'll get it done. Maybe I'll hire someone to take care of both of you."

"Did I just hear you threaten me?" I leaned over the desk and glared at him. "I'd love to see who you hire to come for me. I hope you're not squeamish because I'll leave their fucking head at your door."

Gerard kept his eyes on mine as he swallowed hard. “I’m not trying to offend you. I just can’t wait any longer. I need this done. Your father never—”

“I told you already, I’m not my father. And you definitely offended me. I don’t take what I do lightly. This is still someone’s life we’re talking about.”

He laughed out loud and pointed a finger. “You get paid to kill. It’s what you do. You don’t care about whoever is at the other end of your barrel.”

“I don’t if they’re bad people, but I do if they haven’t done a thing to deserve it.”

“She deserves it.” The man exhaled hard as his eyes opened wide. “She killed her mother. What’s more evil than killing the person who brought you into the world?”

“She killed her mother?” I asked. He shook his head yes. “Tell me more,” I said.

The man told me how Poppy was insane and dangerous. She lies. She steals. She manipulates everyone around her. And she killed her own mother. The beautiful young girl in that picture, beaming with life in her eyes, had a black soul.

“Why didn’t you tell me that in the beginning?”

“I didn’t think the details mattered. If she continues the way she is, I’ll be dead in a year. I can’t let her do that to me. I won’t let her win. She wants to take everything from me.”

I shook his hand, knowing this wouldn’t be an easy kill. I killed men who defied orders and stole fortunes. I killed men who murdered brothers and raped sisters. I didn’t kill young girls.

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If she was guilty of killing her mother, the law would have stepped in and removed her themselves. She would be in a mental hospital wearing a straight jacket or in prison wearing orange.

“I have one more question,” I said. Gerard looked at me and rolled his hand for me to go on and ask. “Why isn't she locked up for killing her mother?”

“Because she's good at what she does. Maybe even better than you. Why aren't you locked up?”

I didn't answer. Could she be that smooth? Could someone who looked so vulnerable be that deceptive? I was going to have to find out.

“So,” he said as he stood up and walked to the door. “Do we have a deal?” he asked. The man had one hand out for me to shake, and the other was passing an envelope.

“I'll get it done.” I shook his hand, took the envelope with the cash, and slipped it into my pocket.

“Do you know when?”

“When the time is right.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. “I can't wait too long.”

“You want it done right, and that's what I'll give you. That's why you called me and not someone else because you trusted my father in the past. Give me that same trust,

and you won't be disappointed.”

He nodded, placed his hat on his head, and walked out. I turned around to see he had left the folder on my desk. I picked it up and took out the picture. I didn't know her age. I didn't know her favorite coffee shop or where she went on a Friday night. My fingertips traced the outline of her face as I looked into the still eyes of a girl who couldn't see her future.

I took a lighter out of my pocket and lit the end. The corner of the picture ignited with a small flame. It curled and blackened as the fire devoured her face. Ashes and embers fell to the floor. I stomped them out and got to work.

I spent as much time as needed to learn about Poppy Aneska. For over a month, I followed her, watched her, and became infatuated with her. Her smile was infectious, spreading like a disease to those around her. When she spoke to someone, she looked them in the eyes. She paid attention. She listened. Poppy was, from what I gathered, perfect.

Perfect teeth. Perfect skin. Perfect hair. Perfect body.

Her curves turned heads. Her laugh made men tremble at the knees. Her aura made women seethe with jealousy. But most people loved her. I couldn't see the evil that man spoke of. But evil comes in different forms. I knew that all too well. Every time I looked in the mirror, evil stared back.

I put on a black suit, splashed some cologne on my cheeks, and fixed my hair. The gala was tonight. It was time to fulfill my obligations. I was a man of my word. Poppy would be gone, erased from this earth. It would look like a suicide. For all appearances, she would follow in the steps of her mother.

People would grieve her. They would shed tears and share memories. They would

hang pictures and place small memorials. Her memory would live on with foundations and grants in her name. I could already see it. The Poppy Aneska foundation for suicide awareness. A grant for young scholars who want to study pharmaceuticals. A bench with her name on it in the park she loved.

I stood in the back of the ballroom, watching the parade of fools pass around golden cups filled with silver. These people were horrible. If it was up to me, I'd kill each and every one of them.

I had never seen more evil in one place than the gala. I recognized some of the faces. Governors, senators, and corporate executives all huddled together under one roof. You could smell the deception as they shook hands and grinned. These were the people that ran our country.

I snagged a glass of champagne off the tray of a waiter as he walked by. My eyes never stopped moving. I was on the hunt for Poppy. The man who hired me had no idea when or where it would happen, and he didn't need to know.

All communication was usually cut off with the client the second we parted ways. It was essential to keep my plans quiet. My clients never had the details. They told me the name, gave me their pathetic reason, and paid.

Normally, there was no regret on my end. This was a job. There was nothing pretty about what I did. It was dark and twisted, but I'd be a liar if I said I didn't get some enjoyment from it. The adrenaline was a drug. Anyone who has ever taken a life will tell you what a fucking high it is. But for this job, I did something out of the ordinary. I called Gerard back one time and one time only.

"You sure about this?" I asked him. I had to make sure. I just needed to double check.

"I'm sure. Why? Are you getting cold feet?" he asked.

“I don't get cold feet. But this isn't a typical situation. She's your stepdaughter.”

The man let out a slow breath and growled, “I paid you to do a fucking job. Do the fucking job, or I will find someone else to do it. You have one week.”

“We went over this. I don't take orders. I'll do it when the time is right.”

“One week,” he repeated and then hung up.

Well, it had been two weeks since that call. You can't rush this shit. Rushing equaled leaving evidence and getting sloppy. I was not sloppy. But if I was going to kill Poppy for him, the timing had to be perfect. This wasn't a wife with a vendetta; this was a stepfather with a thorn in his side.

A shimmer of red light caught my attention like a beacon at sea. It was Poppy. The dress clung to her body like paint. Her curves danced with the fabric. My eyes traced the outline of her plump ass and sleek back.

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Poppy was unaware of me. She had no idea she was being stalked like prey. We weren't built that way anymore. Humans have been on top of the food chain for so long that we have lost that instinct of survival. There was no need to use that sixth sense, so it had faded over time with evolution.

But there were a select few. The people who still had that sixth sense. I'd see them look over their shoulder, ears perked, feeling like they were being watched like a deer in the forest. They knew what was coming. They were aware that death was around the corner.

Poppy was not one of those people. Not once did she feel my eyes on her body. Not once did she feel my presence as I shadowed her around the room. Poppy was light as air.

A man approached her. I recognized him from my research. Dylan Graves. He was a big shot at her father's company and a royal asshole. He used women. He took advantage of his status and forced himself on the weak. The women who were looking to advance their careers, or the women who were shy, or those that thought sleeping with him would bring them great fortune. I was surprised no one had hired me to kill him yet.

Poppy looked uneasy as he spoke, but she smiled anyway. He was too close to her. Instantly, anger swelled deep in my core. My hands clenched at my sides. My chest tightened. The seams of my suit struggled to stay together as my muscles expanded.

She said a few words to Dylan, her body language rigid and annoyed, and then she walked to the bar. That was my chance to get close to her. I walked to her side. We

had a short conversation and I asked her to dance. She agreed. We danced. The dance led us to a corner where I had her all to myself.

Her cheeks blushed, and her eyes lit with wicked destruction. She was going to be the downfall of my sanity, and she didn't even know it. I kissed her, leaving my mark on her skin. I played her body, making her knees tremble and her pussy soaked. She had burned herself into my existence.

Poppy Aneska was mine.

I pulled away from her and left her standing in the shadows, bewildered and dazed. I would come back for her later. I disappeared, abandoning her like wolves abandon their wounded young.

I needed to get my head straight. None of that was in the plan. I didn't expect to be in that position. I wanted to fuck her so bad I had to walk away. I was there to kill her, not enjoy her.

But as I watched her from a distance, I saw something. I saw Dylan go up to her again. He was drunk, barely able to walk straight, and angry. I could see the vile look in his eyes. He wanted to hurt her.

Dylan grabbed her and leaned in, whispering words I couldn't make out. I didn't need to hear him to know that what he was saying wasn't good. Poppy's eyes welled with tears, and her mouth folded into a scowl. She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let go as he dragged her through a door.

I became enraged. Fire brewed in my veins, percolating under the skin. Every hair on my arms and neck bristled. I stood up and darted to the door. I attempted to open it, but it was locked. I ran to find another way inside. There had to be a way in.

As I moved away, the door flew open, and Poppy ran out of the first exit she saw. The man came out a few seconds later, walking slowly with a wider gait. He staggered around the room, downed two more drinks, and then made his way to the bathroom behind the bar. I followed him. I didn't even have to be careful about it. He was so drunk he probably wouldn't have seen an elephant if it stampeded over him.

I glanced around briefly to make sure no one was looking and followed him inside. He was at the urinal resting one arm and his forehead against the wall for support. I turned the lock, sealing us inside.

The man was mumbling to himself under his breath. "Fucking bitch. She doesn't know who she's fucking with. Who the hell does she think she is?"

"You normally talk to yourself?" I asked.

"Some fucking prissy bitch just kicked me in the balls. I'm lucky I'm not pissing blood. She's going to get it, though. I'll show her. Next time, she won't be so lucky. I'll fuck the shit out of her before beating her face in. Then she'll show me the respect I deserve."

"So you tried to rape her? Is that what you're telling me?"

He grunted and looked over his shoulder. "It isn't rape if the bitch is asking for it." The man shook his cock, then tucked it back into his pants. He turned to leave, but I blocked him. "Get the fuck out of my way," he demanded.

"You shouldn't have done that," I said.

"Oh yeah? And what are you going to do about it?" he asked through slurred words.

"I'm going to make it right."

The man scoffed and tried to step around me. “Move,” he said.

I matched his movement. “I don't think so, Dylan.”

“Who the hell are you? Do I know you?” Dylan squinted as if he'd be able to recognize me through his drunken glare.

“No, but that's alright. I'm surprised we haven't met sooner.”

His eyes widened; he opened his mouth to speak, and before he could get a word out, I grabbed him by the hair and slit his throat. Dylan had it coming. Bad men always do.

Chapter Eleven

Vega

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“We can't stay here long,” I said as I locked the door behind us. “But it'll be fine for now.”

“It's not like you're really giving me a choice,” she responded as she stepped into the living room and looked around. Her eyes took in everything. The paintings. The furniture. The large area rug. The busts of animals pinned to the walls. “You kill all these?” she asked.

“Some of them, but not all. My father killed some, too.”

“Hunting runs in your family. I guess we can't choose what gets passed down to us.”

“You could say that I inherited it from him. I'm not ashamed of that. My father was a good man.”

“Yeah, I'm sure every therapist would agree with that, too. A father who trained his son to kill should be given the Father of the Year award.” She stood beneath the bust of a stuffed deer and softly petted its fur. “Sixteen points on this one.”

“You hunt?”

“Not exactly. I did a lot of reading as a child.” Her fingers moved slowly over the fur, caressing the buck as if he could feel her touch. “Who killed this one?”

“I did.”

Poppy let out a chuckle as her hand dropped lifelessly to her side. “I bet you enjoyed

it, too. Like the first sip of liquor to a home-bred alcoholic.”

“To be honest, no. I didn't enjoy it at all.”

“Bullshit.” She cocked her head and peered at me. “I don't believe that for one second.”

“It's true. I was only ten when I shot him,” I said as I stepped to her side. I looked up at the buck and touched his nose. “I was hunting wild turkey, not deer. This guy—” I slapped the side of his snout. “This guy charged me. I didn't see him until it was almost too late. I got lucky.”

“I wonder how much luck I have. It doesn't seem to be much, honestly.” Her eyes fluttered to mine briefly before going back to exploring.

Poppy moved from one bust to the next. She wanted to know who and how it was killed. The buck was the only unintentional death in the room. My father took that kill as an opportunity to teach me, to show me that beauty can be dangerous. He taught me that without death, there would be no life.

My father showed me how our family relied on death to survive. But my father and I looked at the world through a different lens. He killed, and it didn't matter who you were or what you did. I couldn't do that. I couldn't just kill so callously. Not that there hadn't been unintended casualties here and there. It came with the job. You can be careful, plan ahead, and plot every single scenario, but nothing is definitive. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it went as planned. Yet, that one percent couldn't be avoided.

“It's cold in here,” she said.

“I'll build up the fire more.”

“Let me get this straight, you're obviously a wealthy man. There's electricity but no heat?”

“There's solar panels and a fireplace. I like to stay off the radar.”

“I wonder why.”

“Sit down. I'll have it warmed up in here in a few minutes.” I walked to the fireplace and started to add fresh logs. “You can use that blanket if you want to cover up.”

Poppy tucked her feet beneath her and wrapped herself in the blanket. “How long are you keeping me here?”

“I don't know,” I answered. “As long as it takes, I guess. The longer you're with me, the longer I can keep you alive.”

“I'm so confused.” Poppy snuggled into the blanket, her eyes sternly fixed on mine. “I don't know what to think anymore.”

“How about you just listen for now? Can you do that?” She thinned her lips and nodded. “You have to stay with me. Being with me is the safest thing for you, but being with me doesn't make you safe. I did something I wasn't supposed to, and people are going to come looking for me. Those same people are already looking for you, too.”

“What people?”

The fire began to crackle and pop as I poked the red embers. When there was a steady flame, I went to the couch and sat next to her. “Poppy, you're not ready to hear the truth. I know you think you are, but you're not. For now, you just have to trust me.” I reached out and touched her cheek.

Her eyes were studying me. I was screaming inside for her to see me as the man I was and not the monster she imagined. I wanted her to look into my soul and see the light, not the darkness.

“Trust me, Poppy,” I said as I held her face. “I’ll explain everything when I know you’re ready to hear it.”

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“What the hell does that even mean? Ready to hear what?” she asked.

“I can't right now. You need to open your eyes first.”

“Another response without a real answer. Thanks for that. It was really helpful.”
Poppy tucked her chin into her chest and stared at the fire.

I pinched her chin and turned her head back to me. She didn't want to look at me, but I forced her to. “Poppy, you know the truth. If I told you, you'd hate me even more than you already do because you wouldn't be seeing it with your own eyes. You just have to listen to yourself.”

“All I hear is screaming when I listen. There's so much noise inside my head.” Her red, glassy eyes flicked between mine. “I can't quiet it down long enough to think anymore. Everything is just too much. I'm overwhelmed. I'm exhausted. I'm afraid. I don't want to be afraid.”

“I won't say I'm sorry for doing this to you. All I can do is show you I won't hurt you.”

“What about back at that factory? You forced those men to stuff that tube up my nose.”

“I wasn't going to let you starve yourself to death. I didn't do all of this just to let you kill yourself.”

“You have people that work for you. I thought serial killers worked alone?”

“Of course, I have people. Even the worst of us need help at times, but I'm not a serial killer.”

Poppy laughed as she pulled her face free from my hand. “How many people have you killed?”

“I don't keep count,” I said.

“What's the definition of a serial killer?” she asked coyly. “I think it's someone who kills multiple people for fun.”

“Stop. It's not the same.”

Poppy's lids thinned as her lips sealed tight. “Mm-hm. Whatever you say.”

“I'm serious. It's not the same thing. Serial killers do it just because they want to. I'm a paid professional. But I don't just kill anyone. There's a method to it. I have a system.”

“Right,” she said. Poppy didn't believe me; that was easy to see. “So, these people that work for you, do they know what you do?”

I nodded. “Of course they do.”

“And they're okay with it?” Her lips parted as she inhaled a breath.

My eyes were drawn to her mouth, to her supple and soft lips. The dewy glisten of her skin under the glow of the fire made me hard. Was it wrong to want her when she looked so vulnerable? Was it worse that I didn't care?

“Let's not talk about this right now. We're both tired and need some rest.” I wanted to

avoid the conversation at all costs. I didn't want to explain my reasoning for what I did. And I especially didn't want to explain it to her.

“I don't want to sleep. I hate sleeping. And you took my medication, so now I have no peace either.” Poppy inhaled a deep breath as her eyes followed the dancing flames.

“Those pills weren't good for you.” I got up from the couch and walked to the cabinet on the wall to my right.

“Now you're my fucking doctor, too? Is that what you are?” Poppy's mouth hung open slightly as her eyebrows dipped into the bridge of her nose. “You have no fucking clue. Without my medication—”

“Without your medication,” I said, cutting her off. “Your mind will clear.” I took out two glasses and filled them with whiskey. “Here.” I held out a glass to her. “This will take the edge off.”

“You want to get me drunk? Is that going to clear my mind?” Poppy let out a condescending laugh. “You're a real fucking gentleman. Aren't you?”

“No, I just want you to relax a little. Drink it.”

“You probably poisoned it.” Poppy looked inside the glass, inspecting it for any residual powder or drugs.

I sat back next to her and took a sip of my own glass. “Fine, don't drink it. Stay up all night and feel like shit tomorrow.”

“You're such an asshole.”

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“You like assholes.” I downed my glass and poured another. “That's one thing I know about you.”

Poppy's eyes turned to slits. Her mouth folded at the corners as her fingers tightened around the glass. In one quick move, she knocked back the entire glass of whiskey. She held out the empty glass and nodded for me to fill it again.

“Is this what we're going to do while we're here? Sit by the fire, get drunk, and what, share stories? Pretend like this is a weekend retreat at a ski lodge?”

“Would that be a bad thing?” I poured her another shot and then one for myself. “It's better here than at the factory, isn't it? Would you prefer to surround yourself with those types of people from the event the other night? Rich, smug, narcissistic fuck faces?”

She shrugged a shoulder as she held the glass in her lap. “Yes and no. I know how those people are and what to expect from them. I can't see the future here. And those people didn't kidnap me. Here, I'm still your prisoner.”

“Those assholes would never put their life on the line for you. Not one of them. I can tell you right now that most of the men in that room would have thrown you to the wolves just to protect themselves. Just so we're clear, you're not my prisoner. You never were. And you're alive,” I said.

“For now.”

I snapped back a third shot and then a fourth. “Let me ask you something,” I said. My

voice hissed from the back of my throat because of the alcohol. “Do you think you're any more of a prisoner here than you were at Aneska Pharmaceutical?”

“It's not the same thing.”

“I'm serious. Think about it. Really think about it.”

She glanced off into the room. Her mind was spinning, but she didn't say a word. I waited patiently for her to say something. I wasn't going to let her get out of answering that question. It was vital for her to realize the difference between costume jewelry and a real gem. Just because those people wore smiles and fancy suits didn't mean they would do what I was willing to do to protect her.

Poppy finally broke the silence and said, “It's still cold in here.”

“Come here,” I said as I held out my arm. She gave me a funny look and leaned away. “Just come here. I'm not going to hurt you.”

“I think I'll stay right where I am.”

“You said you're cold. I can help you warm up.” I smiled. Poppy glared at me. “Did you already forget how hot I can make you?” I asked. Her eyes opened wide as she held her breath. “I didn't think so. What happened at the event wasn't part of my plan, even if you think it was. That was real. You wanted it, and so did I.”

“That was before I knew who you really were,” she said sternly. “Things have changed since then.”

“You still don't know who I am. All you know is what I do for a living, but that's not who I am.” I slipped my arm around her shoulders. She was stiff but didn't resist. I pulled her against me and started to rub the outside of her arm. “Tell me honestly, do

I really scare you?"

"No," she answered.

"And why not? Why are you not scared?"

"I don't know. I should be afraid of you, but I'm not. I shouldn't want you to touch me, but I do. I shouldn't want you to hold me, but I do. I don't understand it. I think I'm losing my mind. I have to be."

"You're not losing your mind. You just know I'm not here to hurt you, even if my actions are telling you something different. Listen to yourself. It's telling you the truth."

She leaned her head on my shoulder and ran a finger around the edge of her glass. "I want to believe it. I want to believe you when you say it, but what proof do I have? How can I trust you?"

"I've already killed for you."

"What does that mean?" she asked, looking up at me with big doe eyes. Her pupils were like giant pools, innocent and naive yet lucid and clear.

"Dylan Graves."

"Dylan? What about Dylan?" Her voice was shaky, and her body stiffened. "What did you do?"

"It's not what I did that's the issue. It's what he did. What did he try to do to you? What has he done to others? You asked me how many men I killed, but how many women had he objectified or raped? I can tell you I've never raped a woman. I've

never hurt a woman. And I've never killed someone who didn't deserve it. That I can give you my word on.”

“Who decides who deserves what? You?” she asked. “Are you God?”

“I'm no god, Poppy. It's actions. People's actions decide what they deserve. Dylan tried to rape you. He's raped other women. We both know that for a fact. He got what he had coming.”

“And what about his family? His wife? His kids?” She sat up straight, her tone firm. “What about them? How is his death fair for them? Did you even stop to think about how that would affect them?”

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“You mean the wife that was never home because her husband beat her? And the kids that barely knew their father? What little they did know of him was colored black and blue. They vividly saw that on their mother's face.”

Poppy glared at me. She was thinking. She thought about the reality of what Dylan had done. He was evil. He didn't deserve to live. Dylan was the worst kind of predator. Worse than a lion, or a bear, or a shark. At least you knew what they were going to do to you. People like Dylan Graves were far more dangerous.

“What you did,” she started to say.

“What I did just saved, God knows, how many women. I couldn't let that happen anymore. He had done enough damage already. No one is going to miss him. And after what he tried to do to you, that was all I needed.”

“You killed him because of me?”

“I killed him because the sight of seeing you hurt killed me. I won't let anyone lay a finger on you.”

Poppy licked her lips. She softly bit her bottom lip and tugged it into her mouth. I felt her snuggle up closer, closing any gaps between us. I tightened my arm around her. She untucked the blanket and covered my lap with it.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don't thank me yet. It's not over.”

She set her glass on the floor and slid her hand around my stomach. I held her like that, close and firm. Poppy's gaze never left mine. She stared at me with gentle eyes. No fear. No hate. No questions. It was as if she absorbed my words and let them swim around her body.

I touched her cheek, tickling the tips of my fingers up and down her face. Her lips were soft and delicate. I wasn't going to let Poppy's own worry, fear, or uncertainty about the future blacken the calm in the storm.

I was going to take her and make her mine. I was going to show her that not all beasts were monsters. Not all evil was wrong. Not all of me was rotten. Deep within this body made of flesh and bone was a man. A man who knew what it was like to end a life and a man who knew what it meant to save one.

Poppy didn't do anything to deserve the fate cast down on her like rain on a road. The sheer weight of her death on my shoulders was enough to drop me to my knees. I wouldn't do it. I refused to.

I was going to give her pleasure where she could see none. I was going to give her every reason to want revenge of her own. And I was going to start with the open flesh of her lips. They were screaming at me again, just like at the gala. Screaming to be kissed and licked and tasted.

The pads of my fingers traced her jaw. I pinched her chin to lift her face higher. Poppy licked her lips as she began to exhale a slow breath. I captured her breath with a kiss. She cooed gently, partially surprised and partially surrendering willfully.

Her chest rose, bringing her tits closer to my hand. She moaned into our kiss as our tongues rolled, twisting like two snakes in a dance. Poppy's eyes closed as her body began to arch and bend.

She was losing herself. Allowing me to erase her thoughts like a layer of white paint over a colored canvas. I ran my hand down the center of her chest, over her naval, and cupped her mound.

Poppy groaned, her lips feverishly suckling mine. Her nipples beaded under her shirt, enticing me to touch them. Goosebumps broke over her skin like mountain peaks as she pushed her pussy against my palm.

I enjoyed how her skin had flushed. I could feel the heat of her body radiating beneath her clothes. She was hot as freshly fallen embers. Every inch of her body sizzled with desire. Desire only I could give her.

With no resistance, I pulled her shirt over her head. Poppy didn't want to break our kiss; she kissed me until the shirt was at her jaw and came back full force before it was over her eyes. She grabbed my face, kissing me even deeper. Her movements were frantic, ravaging, devouring, like she was hungry and hadn't eaten for days.

I grabbed her tit with my hand and squeezed. Poppy groaned against my lips with a sultry smile. I pinched one nipple, then moved to the next. More goosebumps emerged, turning her skin to braille.

My cock was hard as steel, pressing so angrily against my jeans it hurt. I wanted to be inside her. I wanted to feel her warmth from within. I wanted her hot cunt to sheath my length and never let it go.

A darkness brewed inside me. A darkness that was all animal, resembling no man on earth. I slid my arm out from around her and dropped to my knees in front of her. Poppy's hands slipped through my hair and tugged.

I yanked her pants down her legs, exposing her wet heat. She was breathing heavily. Her back arched hard as I brought my face to her glistening pussy. I licked lightly

around the edge, causing her thighs to clamp shut. I pushed them back open and held them in place.

I licked her again, all around her lips and up the creases of her thighs, but I stayed away from her clit. I wanted to make her beg for me. I wanted to see her quiver and wiggle for more until she was about to go insane.

My tongue glided all around her needy button, moving close and then pulling away. She was soaked. Her pussy was seeping with sweet juice. Poppy tasted like new beginnings. She tasted like honey and bourbon. She tasted like a meadow after a fresh rain. She tasted like new life.

The tip of my tongue hit her clit, and it sent her body into a frenzy. Her hands clutched the blanket. Her legs trembled. Her back bowed. Poppy stopped moving, letting out a moan as beautiful as an angel singing.

“That's all it took to make you cum. One flick of the tongue.”

“I couldn't stop it,” she said between labored breaths. “It surprised me, too.”

“I wouldn't want you to stop it. I wanted to make you cum now so fucking you would last longer.” I yanked off my shirt and tossed it blindly. I unbuttoned my pants and pulled them off. My cock was hard and ready. The tip glistened with pre-cum. I smeared it around as I held my shaft. “You're mine, Poppy Aneska. I'm going to prove it to you.”

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I started to position myself against her entrance, but she sat up quick and put her hand on my chest. “Wait,” she said. “I . . I’ve—”

“What? Never had a cock this big before?” I asked with a smirk.

“No,” she said bashfully. “I’ve never done this at all before.”

“You’re a virgin?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said with a hint of embarrassment.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t lie about that.” She started to close her legs and cover herself up as if she was ashamed.

“Don’t,” I said, stopping her. “You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“I just. . . This feels—”

“Wrong?” I asked. Poppy nodded. “Well, it’s not. We’re both consenting adults.” She arched a brow. I held up my hand. “I know. It didn’t start that way, but you want this. I know you do. Right? Tell me you want this, too.”

“Wanting it has nothing to do with it. I’m your prisoner.”

I traced my finger over her naked stomach. Poppy’s belly shook as I circled her naval

and tickled down to her mound. A small tuft of hair covered the top. I twirled it with my finger, then moved down the center.

“You were never my prisoner, Poppy. You were my prey, and I caught you.” She bit her lip as her legs slowly spread open, and her hands fell to her side. “Are you afraid of having sex? Is that what scares you?”

“No,” she whimpered as I teased her delicate folds. “I’m afraid of how badly I want you.”

I smiled as I flicked her clit with my finger. Poppy moaned as her legs butterflyed wide and her eyes slammed shut. “Look at me,” I commanded. She opened her eyes. “Don’t take them off me,” I said.

I palmed my cock, stroking up and down as I teased her wet center. Poppy was a virgin. A pure, untainted, beautiful virgin. I wanted to draw this out. I wanted her to drip. I wanted her to beg me to fuck her.

Poppy’s gaze moved to my dick. She watched me as I squeezed the tip and then glided down to the base. She was mesmerized. Her eyes were glued to me as my cock grew harder and harder. The tip was swollen and red, eager to feel her heat. But I wasn’t going to drive inside her carelessly. I wanted to savor every moment.

I smeared her silky juice up and down her folds and back to her entrance. I pushed my finger inside. Her walls tightened around me, refusing to let me out. I fucked her with my finger, turning it from one finger into two. She winced a little at the change in size, but her discomfort quickly faded. Poppy gyrated her hips, riding my fingers with need.

“I’m not letting you cum again, Red. You’re going to have to wait for me this time.” Her eyes longed for more as I freed my fingers from the tight cavern.

“I don't want to wait.” Poppy attempted to move her hand to her pussy to finish herself off.

I moved her hand away and pressed my dick to her opening. “I never said you had to wait long.” I pushed the tip inside until my crown disappeared. “I'm just not going to let you cum without me this time.”

Her eyes sparkled like two gems as her mouth formed the perfect O. I felt her pussy clench and her thighs flex. She was bracing herself for my length. Anticipating the pain and the hurt that it would bring.

I reached forward and stroked the side of her face. “I promise I won't hurt you.” Poppy nodded as she exhaled a slow breath through tight lips. I held her jaw and forced her eyes to stay on mine. “Just keep your eyes on me.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice a mere whisper.

I pushed my hard length in deeper, never letting my eyes deviate from hers. Poppy's skin was strawberry pink. Her breathing was so shallow it looked nonexistent. The deeper I pushed, the more her eyes twinkled. They sparked with fear and uncertainty. They fawned with lust and need.

Poppy's eyes stayed on mine as my entire cock vanished inside her. I paused, letting her walls adjust. Her pussy clenched and loosened, pulsating like a heart about to burst. I slowly pulled out to the crest, then pushed back in. Her juice was silky, coating my shaft like grease on a piston.

My hips thrust gently. Poppy's body, stiff at first, began to roll. Her nipples peaked like perfect mountain tops. I leaned forward and sucked one nipple into my mouth. I nibbled the firm bead, plucking it with my teeth, and then moved to the other.

Poppy let out a sexy coo as her hips bucked, forcing her clit against my furry base. The tension in her body melted away, and her lip began to quiver. Her eyes began to roll back in her head, so I grabbed her face and shook my head no. I needed her eyes on mine.

I picked up the pace, fucking her harder and faster. My toes began to curl as the orgasm brewed below. Poppy wrapped her legs around my waist and held on tight. Her hands raked through my hair, down my shoulders, and over my back. She dug her nails into the muscles as the pleasure of her own orgasm spread like wildfire.

My balls drew up, and my nerves exploded as I shot hot cum into her soaking pussy. Goosebumps sprung up all over her skin as she moaned loudly. Her clit pulsed as the orgasm swept through her body, washing away the last few days.

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There was no more factory or prison room. There was no more anger or rage about what I had done. I stole this woman to keep her safe because I claimed her the moment I saw her.

I dropped onto her chest, our breathing mirroring each other. I could feel her heart beating. Her skin was damp with sweat. I pulled my cock free and crawled up beside her on the couch. Taking her in my arms, I held her. “Is this what you pictured for your first time?” I asked.

“Not even close,” she said. “But in reality, who really has the first time of their dreams?”

“No one. Dreams and reality are totally different things. That's why I never dream.”

“You never had a dream before?”

“Oh, I've had dreams before. I just learned early on that reality can't be controlled. You are what you are. Wishes are just kid games. There's nothing you can do to stop fate. You were born to be something, and you can't change it.”

She snuggled herself against my chest and pulled the blanket over us. “I think you're wrong.”

“And why's that?”

“Because you broke the chain. You didn't do what you were supposed to do with me. You changed fate.”

I looked at her, thinking about her words. “No, I didn't. I changed our paths; it doesn't mean I altered our fate.”

“What is our fate then?” she asked.

“I don't know. I can't see the future.”

Poppy's eyes moved around my face, coming to a stop where she had cut me. “Does it hurt?” she asked as she reached her hand up and touched the wound.

“No,” I answered.

“I shouldn't have done that to you. I'm sorry.”

“Yes, you should have. You don't need to apologize. I would have done the same thing. You were blindsided and had no idea what was going on. It was actually pretty badass if you ask me.”

Poppy smiled as the pad of her finger traced the hard scab. “It's going to scar.”

“I don't care. It'll make me look even more dangerous. Who isn't afraid of a man with a gnarly scar on his face?”

She giggled as she laid her head on my chest. “Gnarly. That's a word I haven't heard in years.” She yawned as she spoke.

“Get some sleep,” I said.

Poppy blinked a few heavy blinks, and then her eyes shut. I felt her entire body relax as she drifted off. I stayed up just looking at her. She had no idea the lengths I would go through to protect her. My hunt had ended. I caught my prey, and I would never

let her go.

Chapter Twelve

Poppy

Dreams and reality are similar, like mirrors reflecting a backward image. Vega might not think they're connected, but they are. They're chaos and control in one place. They're wishes and desires. They're the brightest and darkest of our souls. Filth and beauty go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. It's like good and evil. Laughter and sadness. Anger and happiness. To appreciate one, you needed to have the other.

But what happens when reality and fiction bleed together? When you can't tell one from the other? When your dreams and reality mirror each other so closely, you question which is true? If you can't tell them apart, then it all becomes chaos. And chaos is a wheel that just keeps spinning.

My dreams had become vivid movies. Movies that felt so real I could feel the sheets beneath my back and the comforter around my chest. I could smell the fabric softener in the fibers of the blanket and the shampoo in my cold, wet hair.

I was a child again, waking up in bed at home. I was confused. Something was off. It didn't feel right. I remembered men and the sound of someone screaming. I remembered the last feelings I had were fear, pain, and sadness.

My father was sitting at my bedside, running his fingers through my hair. He smiled at me. "Hey, Pumpkin," he said as he leaned in and kissed my forehead.

"How did I get here?" I asked as I looked around with wild eyes.

“What do you mean how did you get here?” His smile broadened as he placed his hands on his knees. “You've always been here, Pumpkin. It's morning; time for you to get up now.”

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“What do you mean?” I pushed up in the bed. “I was in Italy with mom.” My eyes shot open wide. “Oh my God. Where's mom? Is she okay? These men came into our hotel room and—”

“Woah, woah, woah. Pumpkin, slow down. What are you talking about? You weren't in any hotel room, and you certainly didn't go to Italy. I think I would have known about a trip like that.”

“Yes, I did. I went with Mom. We went to Paris first, and then we went to Italy. These men forced their way into our room, and one of them did something to Mom. I saw it, Dad. I was there.” My voice was crackling as I spoke. I could barely hold back my tears.

My father ran his hand down my head and said calmly, “It sounds to me like you had a bad dream. Actually, that sounds more like a nightmare. Your imagination is pretty wild.”

“I'm not lying. I'm telling you the truth. Where's mom? She'll tell you,” I sniffled and took a deep breath.

“Mom isn't feeling well today. She's sleeping. Mom needs as much rest as she can get when she's sick, you know that.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “No, that's not true. She was better. Mom wasn't sick. We flew on a plane. We were on an adventure. We used pretend names, and she even cut my hair. See?” I ran my fingers through my hair, pulling at the ends.

“Pumpkin,youcut your hair. Last night after dinner, you talked about wanting it cut, and when I said no, you stormed off. I didn't think you'd cut it yourself, though.” He lifted the scissors off my dresser with a concerned look. “Are you feeling alright? Do you have a fever?” He placed the back of his hand against my forehead. “You're burning up.”

“Dad, I swear—”

“Look, sometimes dreams can feel real. And if you have a fever, it's even worse. I'm going to go get you some medicine.”

“I feel fine. It wasn't a dream. Go ask Mom. She'll tell you.”

“She's sleeping. I told you that.”

“I want to see her.”

He grimaced as he rubbed his jaw, thinking. “Alright, but you can't wake her up. You need to let her rest. She isn't well, Pumpkin. And then we need to get you something to bring down this fever.”

“Fine.”

My father stood up, tucked his hands in his pockets, and nodded. “Let's go.”

I followed him to her room. My mother and father slept separately because she was sick a lot. I wasn't sure what was wrong with her, but it seemed like she had been sick on and off my entire life. My father only told me that I would understand it better when I was older.

His penny loafers squeaked against the wood floor. His pleated pants swooshed back

and forth with each step as his thighs rubbed together. My father's button-up shirt was tucked into his pants, and his gray vest was buttoned all the way to the top. He always wore a tie, and that day, he chose a bright red one. I remembered the red vividly because it was the same color red as the handkerchiefs the men had.

As we approached the door, my father stopped and turned to face me. "I'm warning you, Poppy, donotwake her up. I'll let you see her so you know you had a bad dream, but that's it. Understand?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm telling you the truth. We did fly to Paris, and then we took a train to Italy. I'm not lying." I pushed past him and opened the door.

My mother was tucked peacefully into bed. The covers were tight and snug all the way up to her neck. She was sleeping, just like my father said. A towel was draped over her hair and across her forehead. The lamp next to her bed cast a yellow glow, making her skin the color of amber.

My father placed his hands around my shoulders and squeezed. "See. She's sound asleep, just like I told you," he whispered.

"I'm telling you it's true. Look," I said, pulling away and darting to her side. "Her hair is black. She dyed it in France." I gently pushed up the towel, exposing her hair, but to my surprise, it wasn't black. Her hair was now the same beach-kissed blond it had always been. "But. . . She dyed it. It was black. I swear she dyed it black."

"Pumpkin, I don't know what else to do to prove to you it was just a dream."

I was aghast. Was I going crazy? I remembered everything. Every moment. Every sight. I could probably bring my father there and be his guide. But now, I wasn't so sure. Could a dream be that memorable? That real? That tangible? I could still smell the fresh pastries of Paris and the musty, brackish water of Venice. I could still feel

the silk sheets on my skin and the warm breeze as it blew through my hair.

“Poppy, as you can plainly see, Mom's hair isn't dyed.” He gave me a feigned smile as he held out his arm. “Let's go get you some medicine. That fever needs to come down. I'm getting worried now.”

“I don't have whatever it is Mom has. I feel fine.”

“You can't catch what your mother has that way. People sometimes just get sick, Poppy. It's a natural part of human life. A high fever can do all kinds of things, especially cause hallucinations.”

I walked by him and back into the hall, giving my mother one last look over my shoulder before my father shut the door. “I'm so confused.”

“That's why you need to trust me. I know what I'm talking about.” He guided me along with his hands on my shoulders to the kitchen.

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“It felt so real.”

My father pulled out the stool at the kitchen island. “Hop up.”

I did as I was told. The stool was cold against the back of my thighs. I shivered. “Is there something wrong with me? How could I not know I was dreaming?”

“I told you, a high fever can cause hallucinations. People who have them think they're real. I've seen people think bugs were crawling on their skin, and one man even thought he was Benjamin Franklin. He recited historical information, and all of it was accurate, but he wasn't Benjamin Franklin.”

“Really?”

“Yup. He was convinced. In reality, he was suffering from a fever that was one hundred and six degrees because he had a brain tumor.”

“Do I have a brain tumor?” I asked. My voice was shaky, and my eyes popped open wide.

“No, Pumpkin. You don't have a brain tumor.” He gave me a smile and then began rummaging through his bag. He took out a brown bottle and poured some cherry-red syrup into a medicine cup. “Here, drink this. You'll feel much better after.”

“Are you sure I don't have a brain tumor?” I asked as I took the cup and drank down the sour liquid.

“I'm positive.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I'm a doctor.”

“I thought you were a pharmacist?”

“I'm that too. I'm a doctor who develops medicine.”

“Well, your medicine tastes horrible.” I stuck out my tongue and scrunched up my nose.

“Think of it like vegetables. They don't always taste the best—”

“Like peas,” I chimed in.

“Yes, like peas. But they're good for you. They help your body get stronger.”

“Then why is Mom always so sick? You give her medicine, and it doesn't seem to help.”

“Mom is different.”

“Why? What's wrong with her?”

“Pumpkin—”

I cut him off. “You said you'd explain it to me when I was older. I'm older now.”

“Not old enough, Poppy, but soon. Alright?” He stood beside me and draped his hand

down my head.

I pulled away and looked up at him. “When is soon? What if I do have what she has? Maybe I'm going to be as sick as her.”

“You just need to trust me. You don't have what your mother has, and I will explain it one day. Right now, I want you to go upstairs and take a shower for school.”

“But I thought I was sick? Shouldn't I stay home and get better like Mom?”

“The medicine will make you all better.”

“Yes, but—”

“Forget about the fever. I think school will help take your mind off that nightmare.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

I quirked a brow as I frowned. “But I’m sick. You said I have a fever. I shouldn’t go if I’m sick, Daddy. I might get someone else sick.”

“It’ll be fine.” He leaned on the counter and said, “I’m gone too much. I need to be around more for you. You need your father in your life, and I need you. Who’s going to run my company when I’m gone?”

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere right now. I mean in the future when I’m old. I want you to be the one who takes my place.”

“Dad, I could never run your company. I’m just a kid.”

“Your training starts now then.” He stood up, walked to my side, and kissed the top of my head. “Go get ready. We leave in an hour.”

“Are you sure I’m not too sick to go to school?”

“I just cured you, Pumpkin.” He placed his hand against my forehead. “Your fever is gone already.”

For the first time in my life, my father brought me to school that day. It was

nice—different, but nice. When I got home, all I wanted to do was go to bed. My father was there, which was out of the ordinary. He was always at work. I usually didn't see him until after dinner, and that was just him passing by to head to his office to do more work.

I came into the house, not in the mood to talk. My father was waiting at the door, but I walked right by and went to my room.

“Poppy, how are you feeling?” my father asked.

“Uck,” I said.

He followed me to my room and sat on the edge of my bed. My father grabbed my face in his hands and moved my head around. “Your color is back. That's good.”

“Well, I don't feel good.”

I felt like I had been hit by a train. Going to school was probably not a good idea. After the medicine that morning, my stomach began to hurt, and I had a headache. I barely ate lunch, and I felt super tired.

“A virus can do that.”

“Can it really?”

“Of course it can. We never know how our bodies will respond to something foreign. Let me listen to your lungs.” He went and retrieved his medical bag. My father pressed the bell against my back and listened. “Take a few deep breaths for me.”

I did as he asked. He moved the bell to my heart and listened again. My father then pushed the warm pads of his fingers around my neck and under my jaw. He held open

one eye and flashed a light, then repeated it on the other.

“But I thought your medicine was supposed to make me better.”

“It did, it took down your fever, but that doesn't mean you won't still feel a little sick.”

“A little sick? My head is pounding, and my belly hurts.”

“That will all go away. I promise. Do you remember telling me about going to France this morning?”

I looked up at the ceiling as I tried to recall the dream. Bits and pieces floated through my mind, but they weren't fitting together as well as they had that morning. There were blank spaces now. Voids within the dream that I couldn't picture anymore.

“I remember a little bit. Why?”

“Well, I was talking to a few colleagues of mine, and I think I know what might be happening. Do you remember a few months back when you were riding your bike down the hill in the back?”

I thought about it. I remembered riding my bike to the park during the summer before school started and riding it around the loop in the driveway, but I didn't remember riding it down the hill. “No.”

“You don't remember it at all?”

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I thought long and hard. “Maybe. But I'm not sure. It doesn't stand out.”

“You were trying to see how fast you could go, and when you hit the brakes, they didn't work. You don't remember hitting the big oak before the creek?” I shook my head no. None of that rang a bell. “Well, you ended up going over the handlebars and hit your head on the trunk of the tree. You got a small concussion from it, and I didn't think it was a big deal at the time. But Dr.Jones and Dr. Henson mentioned something to me that makes sense. It's called Confabulation.”

“What is that? Is it bad?”

“Well, it may or may not be bad. When you told me about France, I didn't remember this, but your mother used to play a game with you when you were little where you'd use the furniture and pretend to fly to different places. It came to me at work. I remembered coming home one night, and you two were pretending to be in Paris. I think my colleagues might be right because you didn't go to Paris. Confabulation is like an error in your memory. Your mind creates a memory, and it's so believable that you don't even know it's false.”

“Is this what Mom has, too?”

“Not exactly. Mom has something different. I do want to run some tests on you to see if maybe you inherited what she has. There's a chance it could be passed to you.”

“I thought you said I didn't have what she has? You said—”

He held up his hand and placed it on my cheek. “I know what I said, but I might be

wrong. And that's okay. I don't want you to worry, though. If you do have what she has, we can treat you before it gets worse, and you'll be just fine."

"I don't understand. Why can't she get better, but I could?"

"Because your mother went undiagnosed for a really long time. It's much harder to treat someone like that. You, however, are still very young. I can make you better. Besides, Mom has a hard time taking her medicine and following directions. But you can do that, right? You can follow directions for me?"

"Of course. I know how to listen, Dad."

"It's one thing to listen, Pumpkin. It's another thing to do it."

"I'll do it. I don't want to be sick."

"Good. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. I'm going to make sure you get better."

I wished I could remember more of my childhood. There were so many blanks, so much blackness that I couldn't feed with images, gaps that had nothing. My memories went from lunch at school to Christmas months later.

From the age of ten to fourteen, my father had to fill the memories in for me. He would ask me about something that happened. Did I remember being in the hospital when I had my appendix taken out at twelve? Did I remember the trip we took to Florida during one of my mother's "good" months? Did I remember the Christmas when I got my first cello?

I remembered some. But I also remembered the loud yells in the basement, the scary men who came and went, and the folders of people I had seen on the table. I also still remembered, or thought I remembered, going to Paris and Venice with my mother.

Yet, my father insisted none of that happened. He told me it was my imagination. He was convinced my mind was playing tricks on me.

How could I decipher reality from fiction when I didn't know the difference?

I remembered nights when my mother screamed in agonizing pain and cried that people were trying to kill her. I remembered the police bringing her home after she was found wandering the streets late at night in her nightgown without shoes, babbling about spirits and the devil poisoning her. My father validated some of the memories of my mother and denied others. He said she never screamed in pain; that that was just a dream. He said she had been brought home by the police that time but denied people were trying to kill her, stating it was my mother's illness causing her delusions.

I was as crazy as my mother. I had inherited her disease. Chaos was all I knew. Chaos was my dreams and reality bleeding together, and I had no way to tell them apart. They all felt real. There were details so fine I never understood how it could be a dream.

What was reality for a person like me?

What if my entire life was a lie?

But what if I wasn't crazy at all?

Chapter Thirteen

Poppy

I woke up in a cold sweat. A sweat so icy it chilled me to the bone. I sat up straight, my breathing short and spastic. For a moment, I forgot where I was. I looked around

at the unfamiliar space, at the log walls and the hanging tapestries. My eyes darted between the boar head and the antelope bust.

“What's wrong?” Vega asked. My eyes shot down to his. He sat up beside me and wrapped his arm around my waist. “Are you alright?”

“Everything was a lie. Wasn't it? My entire childhood was just a stage for my father.”

“Why do you say that? What did you remember?”

“The manipulation. The false sense of family. My life was a lie. I can feel it.”

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“Not all of it was a lie,” he said. “That's not possible. There's always some truth between the layers.”

“I don't know,” I said. Everything in my life seemed like a listless vision. Dreams were built between memories. The building blocks of my world were made of clouds, lacking anything that resembled solid earth.

“I know,” Vega said with firmness. “I know it wasn't all a lie.”

“Maybe it wasn't, but which parts are real?” I dragged my hands through my hair as I looked into the dimly lit room. “How am I supposed to tell the difference between reality and illusion?”

“I know your mother loved you. That wasn't a lie. I know she tried to give you a better life. And I know she tried to protect you.”

“What about the rest? If that's all I have—”

“That's all that matters,” he said with confidence. Vega pulled me against him and stroked my hair. “The rest can be forgotten.”

“I don't want to forget. I want to remember so history doesn't repeat itself. I barely remember my childhood, and I don't know if what I remember is even real.”

“It will come back to you eventually. And when it does, you'll have all the answers you're looking for.”

“I just don't understand. What happened to me?”

“Your father happened to you. I'm sorry, Poppy, but he took everything from you.”

“How? How did he do it?”

Vega held up my bottle of prescription pills and shook it. “With these.”

“I don't understand. He drugged me?” My eyes widened as tears bubbled up, making Vega's face fuzzy. “Why would he do that?” I shook my head in disagreement. “No. It doesn't make sense. He had no reason to erase my memory.”

“You were a threat, Poppy. You and your mother.”

“No. You're wrong. You don't know what you're talking about. My mother was sick. She was a schizophrenic. She had delusions, and my father tried everything to help her.”

“Your mother was getting in his way. She threatened to leave him and expose him for the criminal he is.” Vega opened the bottle and poured one of the pills into his hand. He picked it up between two fingers and began rolling it around. “Your father has spent years building his empire. Why do you think he's so powerful? How do you think he made his millions? It's not from curing cancer or treating high blood pressure.”

“He's in the pharmaceutical business,” I answered. “You can make that kind of money if you know what you're doing. My father is brilliant.”

“He's an evil genius.” Vega stared at the pill, rolling it around like a sparkling gem. “You know why he did this to you. It's just buried in your memories someplace, waiting to be found.”

“No. I don't believe you. You're making this shit up to keep me here.” My chest tightened as the realization set in that this was a trap. Vega was trying to lure me into his den and keep me here willingly. “Do I look stupid? You're just using me. You want something, and I'm how you get it.”

“You're wrong.” Vega shook his head with a frown. “Poppy, your father sells this shit on the black market. He pedals different drugs he creates to foreign countries, drug lords, even our own government. He's not the man you think he is, Poppy. And I know deep down you see that, too.”

“No. That's not true. You're lying.” It was hard to wrap my head around the thought. I was in denial, like an alcoholic refusing to see the beer in their hand. “Why would he do that? He has no reason to do that. He wouldn't. He makes millions creating medication. My father helps people. He helped me. He tried to help my mother. That medication has helped to keep me sane for years.”

“Sometimes there isn't an explanation for why people do things. Sometimes evil is just evil.”

“But my mother—”

“Your mother wasn't sick. Her paranoia and delusions weren't in her head. They were real.”

Tears streamed down my face. “No. You don't know that.”

“Yes, I do, and I can prove it. This fucking medication is what's holding you back. It's blocking your memories.”

“So, it could be true. . .” I let my words fade. Could Vega be right? Had my father been drugging me for years?

“What could be true?”

I told Vega about what happened when I was a little girl. He listened intently, allowing me all the room to cry and talk. When I finished, he simply hugged me. He hugged me like no one in the world could reach me. His arms were steel, encasing me like the fortress of a castle. I was protected from the world.

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“I'm going to fix this,” Vega said. “I'm going to make it right. You deserve better.”

“How?” I asked. I didn't even know what I was being protected from. I had one memory that I knew all along was real. That was it. The rest was a mystery. The rest was as tangible as fog on a muggy night.

“I declared war already. Now, I have to finish it. Set you free. Give you back your life.”

“What do you mean you declared war? How?”

War? What the hell is he talking about? There's no war.

“By not killing you.”

I rubbed my temples. My head was starting to hurt. “I have a headache. I don't want to talk about this anymore.”

“You're probably going through withdrawals.”

I glanced at him and then shut my eyes. “How can you be so sure about all this? What makes you an expert on my father and what you think he's doing?”

“Poppy, I told you before that I'm good at what I do. But you have to remember things for yourself. Anything I tell you, you're going to doubt or question. It has to come from within. You have the answers; you don't need me to give them to you.”

“But you think I need you to save me? I spent eighteen years with my father; he could have killed me at any point, but he didn't. What makes you so sure I need saving?”

“You still think I'm the monster chasing you, and that's all right. I don't blame you. Like I said, the answers have to come from you. And when they do, which they will, you'll see him for the man he truly is.”

I stood up and paced the room. “If what you're saying is true, then why not call the cops? Wouldn't that be the right thing to do?”

Vega chuckled and shook his head. “Think about what you're asking. What do you think would happen if I called the cops? You think they're going to come rushing in here to save you? You think they're just going to take my word for it and go arrest the people after you?”

“Not the people. The person. And we both know who that person is. It's you,” I said as I walked back to him. “I can see right through you. You're trying to fill my head with all this shit to make me confused.” I threw a finger in his face. “You want me to believe you so you can keep me trapped here. It's not going to work. I don't believe you! You're fucking with my mind!”

I threw my hands into my hair and grabbed the roots. I had enough of the mind games. My head was killing me. I couldn't take it anymore. The games had to end. My father had been there for me for eighteen years. I had known Vega for a week, and he kidnapped me to get me here. He was a crazy fucking stalker, and this was his attempt to get me to stay willingly.

I wasn't going to fall for it. It was bad enough that I let my guard down and slept with him. Vega put on the nice guy act. He was smooth and convincing, and I got roped in.

I'm a fucking idiot!

“Poppy, I know this is hard to imagine, but I'm telling you the truth. The things I know—”

“Fuck you,” I spat. “You're a sick, twisted son of a bitch, and I'm not falling for your games. I'm leaving.”

“Where do you think you're going to go? We're surrounded by fifty-plus acres of dense forest. I followed you for quite some time before taking you, and I know you're not an outdoor enthusiast. You can't even stand it when you get dirt under your nails.”

Vega leaned back with a smug expression on his face. He thought he had me cornered. As if his natural fence would me in. Keep me contained. Keep me tethered to him.

“Fuck you!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. Blood rushed to my head, making my cheeks blaze with anger. “I'm fucking leaving!”

I turned and ran to the front door. It wasn't locked or bolted or nailed shut. Vega didn't move. He sat lazily on the couch like I was making an empty threat. He honestly expected me to yank open the door and freeze like a house cat who had never stepped a foot outside in their life.

But I didn't. I ran. I ran over the vast expanse of open grass and into the trees. I threw myself through bushes and thick debris. I ignored every thorn and puncture as I decided to take my chance in the forest again. We were alone this time. He didn't have anyone to come capture me. Vega would have to hunt me himself.

There was no plan in my head other than getting as far away from him as possible. That was my only goal. If I died there, hidden beneath a layer of decaying leaves, eaten by wild animals, and consumed by the earth around me, I would take it. It was better to die by my own hand than that of another.

I slowed down after a few minutes. The sun was hanging high in the sky. Every so often, it would light up a patch of earth like it was lighting my way out. There were no sounds around me. No feet pounding, giving chase. Vega wasn't yelling my name and waiting for a response or noise to give away my position.

It was just me and nature. Squirrels chatted and scampered from tree to tree, and birds sang songs to each other from within the canopy. The trees were still; there was no breeze to ruffle leaves or make treetops crack from dancing.

I walked in the direction of the sun, following its beams. And when there was no room for the rays to reach me, I followed the sound of distant water. My bare feet were numb, making walking more sustainable.

As I pushed through a thicket of overgrown bushes and closely knit tree trunks, the water I had been hearing appeared. It was a wide, shallow stream with smooth gray and black rocks jetting up from beneath the surface and ruffles of small waves tumbling over the tops.

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I crouched down and splashed the cold water on my face. I wasn't sure which way to go as I looked up and down the stream. Do I follow it downhill? Do I cut across and keep moving the same way I was going?

Where the hell am I going?

Which way was north, south, east, and west? I had read enough books as a kid to have some idea of how to figure out the cardinal directions. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The sun was overhead now. Twelve o'clock. I knew that much. Moss grows on the north side of a tree. I looked around but didn't see any moss.

It wasn't dark enough to see the north star, and I didn't have anything to make my own compass. Besides, I wasn't even sure which direction would lead me out of that hell hole. After a short debate, I decided to follow the stream. The trees might get thicker if I keep going deeper, but the stream might lead to a lake or the ocean. Then again, there could be a highway right on the other side of the trees, only a few miles away. There were no guarantees which one would set me free.

I followed the stream. It seemed better to have a landmark I could focus on at all times. A way to keep track of where I was and where I had been. The stream kept me moving in the same direction. I didn't want to run the risk of walking in circles in the trees.

My feet were soggy, and my toes were bright red from the water. I walked on the bank of the stream, an inch deep in the water, so I didn't leave footprints in the sand for Vega to follow. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that he would be looking for me now. It had been a couple of hours since I ran off.

Vega wouldn't be able to resist a hunt like that. He was probably itching for one. Eager to be on the prowl. The hunt was what gave him a thrill. He enjoyed the hunt as much, if not more, than the capture. I could see it in his eyes. The way they darkened when he reminisced over watching me. The way his mouth twitched with a restrained smirk. The way his breathing increased just a hair.

The sun was over my right shoulder, slowly disappearing behind the treetops. It would be dark soon. I dreaded the thought of having to stay in the woods overnight. I had no supplies. I stopped moving and stood still. The water rushed over my ankles, making trickling noises as it bubbled over the rocks in front of me.

“Did I make the right choice? Is starving or freezing to death a better option than warmth and a full belly with Vega?” I asked out loud.

A rustle in the bushes beside me caused me to jerk. My heart raced, waiting for Vega to spring up and yell, “Gotcha!” But to my relief, it was just a chipmunk taking off in the opposite direction.

I exhaled the breath I was holding in. I had to keep moving. Staying in one place would leave me vulnerable to Vega. I was going to keep moving until the sky was a dusty blue and the sun was almost gone. Then, I would find a place to tuck myself into for the night and start again in the morning.

POP!

A burst of dirt and debris exploded right next to me. I flicked my head in the direction of the sound when I was suddenly blindsided and knocked off my feet. I went tumbling forward into the water. My face smashed against the rocks, and I inhaled a huge gulp of water as I attempted to scream.

Everything happened so fast. I was lifted out of the water and dragged through

bushes. A body wrapped mine, yanking me to the ground, and a hand swiftly covered my mouth before I could make a sound.

“Shh,” Vega whispered. “Don't move, and don't say a fucking word.”

I looked up at him, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking off into the distance. His stare penetrated the trees, his lips thin and stiff. He was barely breathing. I could feel his chest slowly rise and fall against my back.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“Shh,” he demanded. Vega's neck tightened as he swallowed, and his eyes squinted to look deeper. He slowly pulled a gun out from his waist and said, “There you are, motherfucker.”

He lined up his eye with the sight and pulled the trigger. Off in the distance, a man let out a yelp, and then there was silence. Vega scanned the forest for a few more seconds before saying, “We have to move.” He grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet. “This way.”

He started to move, but I dug my feet into the ground. “Wait a second,” I said as I grabbed his wrist and forced him to stop. “What the hell is going on? Who did you just shoot? Is he dead? Why did he shoot at me?”

“We don't have time for this right now. We need to go.” He yanked me along, taking long strides. “We can talk about it after we're someplace safer.”

It was hard to keep up. My feet stumbled over sticks, and my legs felt weak and shaky, making it feel like I was going to collapse at any moment. Vega seemed to notice my struggle. He quickly swooped me into his arms and carried me.

“Can we talk now?” I asked.

“Poppy, there's no time. I need to get you out of here.”

“You killed whoever that was, didn't you?”

Vega didn't answer.

“What if you killed an innocent person? Maybe he was a hunter and got confused?”

“He was a hunter, alright, but he wasn't hunting for game, Poppy. He was hunting you.”

“Vega—”

“There are people trying to kill you, Poppy. You might not want to believe it, but it's true. I think this should be the nail in the coffin for you to understand that. I don't know how much clearer I need to make it.”

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“How do I know you didn't set this up? Maybe this was part of your plan? Take me. Trick me. Save me. Keep me for yourself because I'll think you're some kind of hero.”

Vega let out a half-hearted laugh. “Yeah. There it is. You got me. You figured out my master plan. I'm just making an elaborate scheme to get you to fall in love with me. Look at you. A regular Nancy Drew.” He shook his head as his fingers pressed against my skin tightly. “For someone who is so fucking smart, you're really ignorant.” He was silent for a moment, then said, “Look, I get that this whole thing is hard to comprehend, but I need you to trust me. If you don't let me do what I'm good at, you will die.”

“I thought you said killing people is what you're good at? When did you expand your talents?”

“This isn't a joke, Poppy. I'm trying to fucking save your life. The people after you aren't like me. They don't give a shit if you've done nothing to deserve this. But I do. So, let me protect you.” I stared at him, debating his level of honesty. Trying to feel out the lies and the myths of his motives. “Enough with the interrogation. We have to keep moving.” Vega kept his eyes straight ahead as he walked us through deep brush with razor-sharp prickles and paper-thick leaves.

We reached a small clearing, blocked by several thick trees and plenty of greenery for coverage. Vega placed me down gently and began to look me over. “Were you hit? Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” I said, tugging my arms free.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

He took a broad step back and glanced around. “We can't go back to my place. They know where we are now, and they'll be watching it. We'll have to stay here tonight.”

“Here? But we're in the middle of nowhere.” My eyes wildly scanned the forest around us.

“You seemed pretty okay with spending the night outside when you thought you were alone.”

“That was before someone shot at me. What if whoever did this sends someone else while we're sleeping? Or what if that guy is alive and tries again?”

“You don't need to worry about that guy. He won't,” Vega said sternly as he started to gather the loose wood around us.

“How can you be so sure?” I wrapped my arms around my body as a cool breeze began to pick up.

“Because he won't. And it's going to take a day or two for that piece of shit's boss to realize his man is gone.”

“Who? Who are you talking about? Do you know these people? Who the fuck are you, and how many of you exist?”

“To put it simply, we're all acquainted one way or another. There aren't many of us, but enough that there are options for people who need to get rid of someone.”

“Get rid of someone? You mean kill someone.”

“We need to start a fire to keep you warm,” he said, evading my question. His eyes began to shift around the ground.

Vega walked the perimeter of where we were, gathering sticks and debris for a fire. He dug a small hole with his hands and built a fire. He kept feeding wood into it until it was large enough to spit out some warmth. I sat on the ground beside the flames, holding out my hands to feel the heat.

“Why did you dig a hole for the fire?” I asked.

“It keeps the flames low just in case someone is out there looking for us. But it also helps block the fire from the wind.”

I rubbed my hands over the flames and leaned my face closer. “That makes sense.”

“See, I called it. You're not an outdoor kind of girl. You're lucky you're stuck out here with me.” He cut some fresh branches off the pine trees and layered them on the ground. After making a thick forest bed, he sat down and patted the open spot next to him. “Come sit here. The ground is too cold; you'll never warm up like that.”

I glared at him and spat, “I'm good.” I was a ball of emotions. Anger, sadness, and fear were all swirling around my body. I didn't know which one to grasp and lean into, but anger seemed to be the one that was the loudest.

“You're still shivering.”

“Because you threw me in the water like an asshole. Probably another tactic to make me weaker.”

“Just stop already. I don't know what else I have to do to prove to you that I'm not here to hurt you.”

“You kidnapped me. Or did you forget that part?”

He angled his head and sighed. “No, Poppy, I didn't. The asshole who sent that guy to put a bullet in your head kidnapped you.” Vega pointed out into the dark forest in the direction of the sniper. “I'm not behind any of this.”

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“What do you mean? That doesn't make any sense. I woke up in that dungeon at that factory. At the factory you own.”

Vega closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as he said, “I saved you from that trunk. I didn't put you in it.” He ran his hands over his head and looked down at the ground. “I was with Dylan when they grabbed you. I didn't realize your father had actually hired someone else. I made a stupid mistake and took my eyes off you for five minutes.” His head drooped heavily against his chest. “I should have never taken my eyes off you. None of this would have happened.”

I got up off the ground and went to sit next to him. “You need to tell me everything. I have to know.”

“I can't. I can tell you what I did, but I told you before the answers need to come from you. That's the only way you'll see the truth. You won't believe me if I tell you.”

“Fine. Then tell me what you can. I want to hear it.”

Vega went on to tell me that after he killed Dylan he went to look for me. He saw the footprints and tracked them to the edge of the road. Muddy tire prints led away from the gala, so he followed them. Lucky for him, I came to in the trunk and made enough noise for the other men to pull over and check on me.

When he saw the abandoned car with the trunk lid open, he knew he had found the right vehicle. Vega said he then went on a hunt of his own. When he came upon us in the forest, I was already out. One of the men was carrying me, and the other was making a joke about raping me first and then getting the job done. Needless to say,

Vega and I were the only ones who came out of that forest alive.

“If that's true, why wait so long to tell me?”

“I wanted you to remember on your own. I didn't want you to think that your memories were implanted by me in some way. You know, like when you think of a memory from when you were a kid. Do you ever wonder if you're remembering it yourself or are you remembering a story someone told you with faux images your mind created?”

“What if I never remember? What if they never come back?”

“They will.” Vega wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me in. “I know they will.”

“How can you know?” I asked.

“Because nothing is lost forever.”

Chapter Fourteen

Poppy

“You need to get some sleep,” Vega said as he adjusted himself on the pine bedding.

I was sitting up, watching the embers of the fire flicker against the pitch-black background. “Someone did just try to shoot me, you know? You honestly think I'll be able to sleep?” I picked up a stick off the ground and twirled it between my fingers.

“Not all of us are used to this type of danger.”

“That's the keyword there.Tried.They tried to shoot you, and they failed.” Vega

rested his arms behind his head as he looked up at the sky. “And just so you know, I'm not used to this either.”

I let out a laugh and said, “Yeah, okay.”

“I'm serious. Normally, I'm the one on the other end of the barrel. I also make it quick and painless. But you get this kind of drama with asshole hack jobs.”

I threw the stick into the fire and watched the flames devour it. Vega was so passive about what happened. He was acting like it wasn't a big deal because I didn't get hurt. Was his life that fucked up he could diminish the severity of someone trying to kill me?

“Can I ask you something?”

“You can always ask. I just can't promise you an answer,” Vega said.

I curled my arms around my knees and hugged them close to my chest. “How many times have you been knocked out and stuffed in a trunk?”

Vega rolled to his side, facing me. “Never.”

“How many times have you been kidnapped?” I asked.

Vega casually shrugged and shook his no. “None.”

“How many—”

“Okay, I get it,” he said, cutting me off. “I haven't been through any of that.”

“Which means you have no idea how I feel right now. You're a fucking psychopath.

You don't have any feelings," I said blatantly. "Only someone with no soul could be so casual about all of this shit."

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Vega was a lunatic. He showed no emotions because he didn't have any. He didn't seem upset or anxious because he didn't have the ability to feel anything other than selfishness. Fear? None. Empathy? Nope. Happiness? Doubtful. Love? Not a chance in hell.

So what was Vega? Was he a monster? Was he a creature of the night? A Soulless ghoul from the dark side? Because he wasn't human. Fuck, he wasn't even an animal. Because even animals harbor some sort of emotions. They protect their young. They mourn the death of a loved one. Their brains might be small, but their hearts were far larger than the man next to me.

Vega sat up and exhaled a slow breath. He was quiet for a long time, staring at the fire. “When I first saw your picture, all I thought was how innocent you looked. It was hard to believe that someone with the face of an angel could be so callous. Then I learned about what you did. I thought to myself, 'I can do this. She deserves it.' Then, I watched you. I saw the way people looked at you. I saw the way they would smile as you talked. I was torn the night of the gala, but I knew I had a job to do. When I saw you in that red dress, you took my breath away. And when I watched Dylan grab you and saw the fear in your eyes, my entire body stiffened. I killed a man for you, not because of you. I had never felt that level of anger before. And then, when that asshole shot at you, the only thing that flashed through my mind was the pain of a world without you. Call me a psychopath if it makes you feel better, but I don't know any psychopath who would go through the lengths I will to save you.”

I glared at him. My brows angled hard, and my nostrils flared wide. “What do you expect me to do with that, huh? Throw my arms around you, and thank you? You want me to be indebted to you forever because you took someone's life for me? I

didn't ask you to do that. You did that on your own. I don't want to carry that burden.”

“I don't expect you to carry any burden. You're right; I made certain choices. Because I have feelings. I'm not an emotionless zombie. Infatuation, hate, fear: those are feelings. Maybe they aren't the feelings you're used to, but they are feelings.”

“I know they are, but people with real feelings can't kill.”

Vega cocked his head. His jaw slacked, and his eyes narrowed. “My job doesn't define who I am. What I do doesn't make me the bad guy. There are worse people out there than me.”

“Are there?” I asked. My voice held a tone of sarcasm. I was pushing the buttons of a serial killer. A murderer. A hollow vessel of a man being manipulated by the Devil. And I didn't care.

Vega's mouth closed tight. He didn't answer. The flames of the fire turned his skin a deep shade of orange with bright highlights of yellow and gold. And as he stared at me, wordless, yet full of so many things to say, I laid down and rolled away from him.

There was no grace when you murdered people. God wasn't crossing off names in the Devil's playbook. Vega wasn't a missionary giving help to those who needed it. He was a killer. He was the same as the men who were after me.

Life wasn't a giant scale that you could tip by your actions. My life wasn't his to level what he had done in the past. His wrongs would follow him forever. It didn't matter if he saved my life or died trying.

My life wouldn't cleanse his.

* * * *

I awoke to the sound of a crash. It was loud and startling, and it caused me to jump up and grab my pink stuffed bunny for protection. I squeezed it instinctively as if it would ward off any evil that might crawl out of the dark.

My father had promised me it would keep me safe. He said the bunny could stop all my bad dreams. He assured me that nothing could ever touch me as long as I hugged it as tightly as I could. So, I hugged my bunny. I crushed him to the point his little glass eyes looked like they might shoot out of his head.

A second crash disrupted my foggy stupor. The sound of glass shattered off something hard. The wall. The floor. I wasn't sure. A guttural scream broke through the eerie silence that followed the crash. And I hugged my bunny even harder.

Then the scream came again. And again. It was my mother. I had never heard her scream like that before. Her tone was ear splintering-sharp. Sharp enough to break glass. My fear began to drift as my curiosity swelled. I couldn't just sit and suffocate my bunny anymore. I had to go see what was happening. Why was she screaming like that? What was causing her so much distress?

I stood at my door, my bunny under my arm and my hand on the doorknob. My mother was sobbing uncontrollably now. She was saying something under her breath. Whispering sounds that weren't strong enough for me to hear.

The knob was like ice against my small palm. It was hard to turn because of my fear and the weight it seemed to have. I opened the door and tip-toed into the hall. I walked toward her room, slowly plodding my way around creaky floorboards. The closer I got to the room, the louder her voice was. I could make out her words now. They were soft but clear.

“Just do it. Do it already. Why are you waiting? This is what you've wanted, isn't it?”

There was a long pause, and then she spoke again.

“I can't live like this anymore. I hate it. I hate it. I hate you. I fucking hate you!”

I crept closer. The bedroom door was cracked open. The light created a long beam of yellow over the floor and up the wall. It crawled over the ceiling like the lanky fingers of Nosferatu, clawing, scraping, and ripping apart the wallpaper and drywall. But I kept walking. I was drawn to the door. I had to see.

As I poked my head around the corner, I realized my mother wasn't alone. My father was with her. He was standing at the side of her bed with his back to the door. I could see how tense he was. His back was stiff. Every muscle in his neck was protruding, and the veins were thick and moving like worms under the skin. My father was taking slow, deep breaths.

My mother was sitting on the edge of the mattress with her head in her hands, still mumbling. She kept rubbing the side of her face vigorously. Her skin was bright red and shiny. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, and her expression looked like she was in pain: mouth open, gaping for air between slurred words, eyes swollen and red, chest lifting and lowering rapidly.

I was standing still. No one noticed I was there. I was like a shadow being cast against the wall. There but dismissed as unimportant and valueless. I was just another piece of the room that no one cared about.

My father reached out and pulled my mother's hand off her face. She resisted slightly, but she seemed so weak. She couldn't stop him. She couldn't fight him off. She looked like she barely had the strength to stand.

My mother was shaking as my father placed something shiny in her hand. I couldn't tell what it was at first, but as he adjusted her fingers and turned her hand, I could see it was a gun. He guided it to her temple, placed his finger over hers, and then everything went silent.

Slow motion in real life is a thing. Time can slow to the point that everything makes a noise. The air moving through my body was like tides rolling against the sand. The sweat dripping off my father's temples splashed like rain, even though it only hit his cotton socks. My mother's eyelids were as loud as the wind during a storm as she blinked.

Blood sprayed outward, covering the wall and splattering the floor in front of my feet. I could hear the blood as it seeped between the grains of wood. Small droplets soaked into my white socks with lace trim. It was warm and then cold against my skin. The ring from the gun swirled around the room like an eagle. I could feel it blowing the wispy edges of my hair as it echoed in my ears.

And then I screamed.

Chapter Fifteen

Vega

I stared at the back of Poppy's head as she slept. I couldn't sleep. I thought I could, but no matter how much I tried to close my eyes, they didn't stay shut. So, I watched her. I watched her subtle movements: her arms as they twitched, her legs as she tucked them tighter, and her head as it moved in soft jerks like she was interacting with her dream.

I reached out and stroked her hair, which seemed to settle her some. She made a low moan and snuggled deeper into slumber. I rolled over and looked up at the stars. They sparkled between the treetops, going in and out as the branches swayed.

The fire crackled. An ambient sound through the dead of night. It lulled me into a solemn state of being. I was just there. There in the forest. There in the Poppy's life. There in this world that I had no joy being in.

But what choice did I have?

Born into an existence I never asked for. Never wanted. Never enjoyed. And yet, I was fucking good at it. To excel at anything took practice. This was in my blood. Practice helped hone my skills, but the viscous liquid flowing through my veins carried my trade.

Poppy twitched again. I glanced over to see she was still fast asleep. A second twitch made her arm jerk up tight against her ribs. I soothed her thoughts with another stroke of my hand over her hair. Poppy settled back to a relaxed breath and calm muscles.

A twig cracked in the distance twenty yards away or less. It was a delicate break. Not the break of an animal wandering through the dark. The break of a man in boots attempting to be stealthy. I knew it instantly. I had spent enough time hunting to know the difference between paws and feet.

Whoever it was was breathing heavily. Far too heavy to be hidden in the silence despite the darkness that surrounded us. Poppy didn't stir. She was stuck in dreamland, running from her own demons.

I glanced to my right in the direction of the steps. A second and a third step filtered through the trees. The crunch of leaves and the rustle of low branches were getting closer. I slowly reached for the knife on my belt and gripped the handle.

My eyes were on the sky, but my ears were wide open, listening to everything all at once. My heart was a steady thump inside my chest. Nothing about this life excited me anymore. No fight made my muscles tingle. No kill sent adrenaline coursing through my body. These battles were no different than cooking dinner to me. They were as mundane as taking out the trash.

The following footsteps came from the tree ten feet away from me. The unknown man was breathing even harder. I didn't think he knew how loud he was actually being. He was either new or just a low-level hitman with no real skill.

He was behind me now, slinking slowly but screaming with every step. The snap of a twig was as loud as a bomb. Leaves swished like water over rocks in a brook. I held my breath, patiently waiting for the living darkness to make its move.

I felt his hot breath against my head. His breathing raspy in my ear. The smell of black powder wafted over my face. He was going to shoot, and this time, he was going to make sure the shot was good.

I was motionless. My eyes were open, but I couldn't tell if the executioner knew I was awake. I held my breath and waited. I waited for the perfect moment to counter-strike. Cold metal pressed against my temple. That was my cue. My moment. The perfect time to make him regret his decision to come after us.

In one fluid motion, I wrapped my hand around the barrel, twisted hard, and yanked the gun out of his hand. I tossed the gun into the woods and pulled my knife. He had no chance. I grabbed his collar, pushing him back against a tree. His eyes were large and bright as the moon.

“How did you find us?” I asked. “How did you find my home?”

His surprised stare turned into a veered gaze. “It wasn't easy, but everyone leaves traces. Even you.” The man smirked and chuckled.

“Wrong answer. How did you find us?”

“That doesn't really matter.”

“Tell me who.”

“You know I can't do that,” he said as his eyes darted around the darkness, searching for a new weapon. “I'll make you a deal, though. Let me do what I was sent here for, and I'll give you a quick ending. I won't let you suffer.”

I chuckled, my voice a whisper. “You won't let me suffer. That's rich. But it doesn't look like you have much leverage here. You do have a knife to your throat if you

hadn't noticed.”

“And you have a knife to your stomach. I could gut you right now, and it would make no difference to me.” He pressed the tip of his blade in deeper. The sharp edge burned my skin as he twisted it in. A slow warmth began to moisten the fabric. “Take your pick. A quick bullet to the head or your insides splattered on the ground for the animals to eat.”

I thinned my lips and frowned. “I guess you don't understand who you're dealing with. The only trace I leave is bodies in my wake. And you're next.”

The man attempted to pierce my stomach with his knife, but I was too quick. I sliced his throat. A clean, straight wound opened, spilling blood. It flowed down his neck and soaked into his shirt. He dropped his knife instinctively to grab his throat and stop the bleeding. But I blocked him. I held him in place until his body went limp, and he bled out.

I let his lifeless body drop to the ground. I didn't get an answer from him about how he tracked me down. It couldn't have been from one of the men that worked for me. Could it?

Had I fucked up along the way? Did I leave some sort of trace and not notice. Was I getting sloppy?

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“What's going on?” Poppy's voice diverted my thoughts.

“We need to go. It's not safe,” I said as I turned and walked to her. She rubbed her eyes and tried to look around me. “Don't look. You don't need to see that.” I quickly stamped out the fire and helped her to her feet.

We had no time to waste. If this guy and the man I shot were here, there were more not far behind them. I had to get Poppy out of there. I was the only thing protecting her. I was the only thing keeping her alive.

I took Poppy's hand. She tried to pull away and head toward the man on the ground. “What is that over there? Do you see it?”

The fire barely had a glow, and it was hard to make out the lump on the ground. “Yeah, I see it. And we need to go. Now.”

“But—”

“No. We're leaving.” I yanked her along into the blackness, away from the fire and away from the second killer.

“How are we going to see where we're going? It's too dark out.”

“Just hold my hand. You'll be fine.”

I dragged her around trees and through thick brush. My ears were always aware of the sounds around us. I was on alert like prey. I didn't like it. I was never the one being

hunted. I felt a twinge of anger in that situation.

Why am I doing this? Why would I go from being the hunter to being the hunted?

Poppy sniffled behind me. She was crying. I stopped and pulled her around to face me. She wasn't just crying—she was sobbing. Her shoulders were shaking, and her breathing was labored.

“I . . . I can't. . . I can't do this.”

“Yes, you can,” I said. “You have to. You don't have a choice.”

My heart broke instantly. Never in my life had I felt so strongly about the pain she was suffering. I had always been indifferent to emotions. I learned early on how to push away emotions. Any emotion that might make me weak or vulnerable or hinder the objective in front of me.

With Poppy, I felt all of that. Her confusion and fear attached to my body like a parasite looking for food, feeding off me, and sucking me dry. I felt her anger and sadness and mirrored it with anger and sadness of my own. Like a still lake's reflection mirrored the world around it.

But I didn't just feel the negative emotions. I felt emotions I never had the chance to understand. I felt pride for doing the right thing for once. I felt happiness for keeping her alive. And I felt greed to make her mine.

“If we stop, you'll die. It's that simple. We keep moving, and you stay alive. So let's get the hell out of here.”

“It doesn't matter,” she said. Her swollen eyes glazed over as she peered at me. “I remember now. I know why this is happening to me and who is doing it.”

I cocked my head. “You do? What did you remember?” I asked.

“I didn't just remember it. I dreamed it. I lived it. I can see it all. My stepfather wants me dead, doesn't he?”

“Yes,” I said flatly.

“And you. . .” Her voice trailed off as if she couldn't say the words out loud.

“I was hired to kill you.”

“By him?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She ran her hands through her hair and looked up at the sky. “He's been trying to kill me for years, hasn't he?”

“That I don't know.”

“The pills he gave me, they weren't to help me stay sane; they were to keep me from remembering. That's why you wouldn't give them to me.”

“Yes. They clouded your mind. I knew taking them away would bring you some clarity.”

“He killed my mother.”

“I figured that much. I couldn't find the proof, though. As far as the police are concerned, she took her own life.”

“Well, she didn't, and I'm going to prove it.”

“Poppy, it's been a long time now. Any proof is probably gone.”

“I saw him do it.”

“What?” I asked.

Poppy nodded as she paced in a small circle. Her fingers tugged at her lips as she exhaled. “I was there that night. I saw him force the gun into her hand and make her pull the trigger. But it doesn't make any sense. Why kill me now? Why, after all these years?”

“You were pulling away from him, and he could see it. Men like him can't handle not having the control. He could see you distancing yourself, and it scared him.”

“Scared him? I couldn't remember what happened until now. If I hadn't met you, I probably still wouldn't have remembered. I'd be popping those pills like candy, trying to keep the psychosis at bay.”

“That doesn't matter to a man like him. With you close, he could keep an eye on you.”

“I don't know how to handle this. It's like my brain exploded into a million pieces, and they're slowly coming back together. But why? Why kill my mother? I don't understand.”

“I don't have all the answers. I wish I did, but I don't. All I knew, all I could feel from the beginning was that you didn't deserve to die. That's why I took you the way I did. Something drove me to keep you safe.”

Her puffy eyes blinked a few times. She sniffled and ran her wrist under her nose.

“But you don't even know me. Why would you do that? Why risk your life for me?”

“It just felt right,” I answered her honestly. There was no reason for putting myself in the line of fire. I had no valid excuse for making that decision. It was just instinct. My gut feelings were stronger than the money being offered.

“What the hell am I going to do?” she asked. Her eyes lifted to mine. Glassy and glazed, it looked like one blink would send a gush of tears down her cheeks.

“I'm going to take you far away from here. Far away from that man. You'll never have to worry again so long as you're with me.”

Poppy shook her head gently. “He's never going to stop looking for me.”

“And I'll never stop being one step ahead of him. I have more than enough money for us to disappear.”

“So that's what my life will be? Constantly running. Forever looking over my shoulder. That doesn't really sound like living, Vega.”

“But you'll be alive. Isn't that what matters more? The alive part?”

“What kind of life is that?” Her jaw went slack as her shoulders slumped in defeat. “I don't want to live like that. That's what my mother was trying to do. She took me from him. I think she was trying to save us both back then. But he found us. He found us, and in the end, he killed her. He won't stop. We'll never live a normal life again.”

“I've never lived a normal life, Poppy.” I stepped towards her and took both her hands in mine. “What do you want to do?”

“I don't want to constantly be running. I don't want to live in fear. I don't want to live a life that's all pretend. Fake names, fake history, fake everything. I want to be me, Vega.”

“There's only one way for that to happen,” I said. “We have to burn his empire to the ground with him inside,” I told her honestly. The only way out was to destroy his world. “I'll kill him for you.”

Poppy's eyes opened wide as saucers. Her lips thinned as she swallowed hard. “No. I won't ask you to do that. I can't.”

“You're not asking. I'm telling you what I'm going to do.”

“He's my father. It's wrong, Vega. Murdering people is wrong.”

“Some people deserve it. That's just a fact. You and I both know he'll kill you the first chance he gets. You said it yourself, he won't stop. I'm giving you the solution, Poppy.”

She threw her hands into her hair and pulled it back tight against her scalp as she groaned with frustration. “And what if that doesn't work, huh? What if he kills you first? Then what?”

“He won't.”

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“He's been doing a pretty damn good job so far.” Poppy looked around in the darkness. “Look where we are.”

“We're here because I refused to do the job I was hired for. I was supposed to kill you, but your stepfather is an impatient man. He couldn't wait. He hired someone else. I'm not the only person who does this kind of work.” I grabbed her hands and pulled her close. “But no one is as good as me. Your stepfather doesn't know the shit storm he has coming down on him.”

“I want to believe you, but it's hard to believe anything right now.”

I smiled as I wrapped my arm around her waist. “Poppy, I'm going to make things right.”

“By killing more people?” She tilted her head to her shoulder and arched a brow. “I think you've killed enough people for me.”

“I'm going to do whatever it takes to give you your life back.”

Poppy's eyelids lowered to half-mast as she asked, “What about you? When do you get your life back?”

“I'm a lost soul, Poppy. There is no life to go back to. I can't be saved.”

“I think you're wrong,” she said. Her small hand came up and captured my jaw. “It's never too late to change.”

Chapter Sixteen

Vega

“The sun will be coming up soon,” I said as I held Poppy's hand and guided her up a short ridge.

“How can you tell? It's dark as fuck out here.” Poppy grunted as she stabilized on the loose debris. “I can't even see my feet.”

I climbed beside her and pointed to a wedge-shaped clearing between the trees. “See the red hue?” She squinted to look. “That's the sun coming up over the horizon. Won't be long now.”

Poppy wiped her hands over each other as she exhaled. “This whole thing is fucked up.”

“It doesn't matter what it is. All that matters is we get out of it.”

“So what's your big plan, huh? We have no car. No food or water. We have nothing. How exactly do we get out of it?”

“I'm a resourceful man, Poppy. You haven't seen anything yet.”

“I've seen enough,” she said as her arms flopped to her side. “I take it we're heading towards the horizon.” Poppy walked past me, her shoulder brushing mine in the process.

I followed her. She needed some space to sort through the shit in her head. It was a lot to deal with. To know someone wanted you dead and that that person was supposed to be family was hard enough, but to also know that same person killed

your mother was too much for her to decipher right then.

Her entire life, every memory, every conversation, every moment was tainted now. She had to reevaluate everything with a fresh pair of eyes. Were there signs? Should she have seen this coming? She couldn't, and no one would have expected her to. Poppy was just a child when her father killed her mother. And he manipulated her into adulthood. How could she ever see his true colors when he hid behind a mask?

“Stop,” I said as we approached the clearing. “Just wait a second.”

“What?” she asked. “Why are we—”

“Shh.” I hushed her as I turned my head to listen.

Poppy was quiet as she looked around nervously. Her fingers anxiously pulled at her lips. I could see her so easily in the dim sunlight. Her eyes were wide, the skin puffy underneath with dark circles from lack of sleep and crying. Her hair was frizzled with sticks and leaves poking out. Her clothing and skin were splotched with dirt, and fuck knows what else.

I listened more intently, but the soft cracking of the sticks stopped. “Alright, I think we're good.”

“Did you hear something?”

“I thought I did, but I don't anymore.” I started to walk forward.

“Wait. What if there is someone out there? How do you know it's safe?”

I looked over my shoulder at her and said, “I don't. But we have to keep moving. There's a place not far from here we can go.”

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“You have another place?”

“I have a lot of places, Poppy. In my line of work, you can never be too careful.”

“Your line of work. You mean killing people.”

“You can call it that if it makes you feel better.”

“It doesn't make me feel better.”

“Then why split hairs over it?”

Poppy walked by my side, her eyes on the ground. “Because the truth matters, Vega,” she said.

“I remember the name of every single person I've been hired to deal with. Did you know that?” I asked.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me? What do you want me to say? You want me to tell you how proud I am of you?” She let out a condescending chuckle. “Give me a fucking break. As if knowing their names lessens your guilt.”

“I'm not ignoring my guilt, Poppy. I know what I've done. What I'm telling you is I haven't forgotten them. They live inside me in some sick way I can't explain or understand.”

“The lives you stole. And you're right, it is sick.”

I cocked a brow as I reached out and grabbed her wrist. I swiveled her around so she was facing me. “Poppy, I know you don't understand it, but this was my life. It's all I've ever known. It's who I was.”

“Was?” she asked, her tone full of disbelief.

“Yes. I'm not that person anymore. I can't be. Something changed inside me.”

“You had an epiphany? Was there some sort of miracle that woke you up? Was it killing Dylan in a bathroom at a very prominent function? Or was it being able to shoot a guy from hundreds of feet away? Hm? Was it something else?” Poppy's hand fell to her hip as she tilted her head, waiting for an answer.

“I see what you're doing here, and you need to stop. I know this has been a lot on you, but don't talk to me like that,” I snapped.

“Like what?”

“Like I'm some stupid piece of shit. Like you're better than me. Because you're not. If it wasn't for me, you'd be dead right now.”

“If it wasn't for you?” she asked as her jaw cocked to one side. “So, I need to thank you now?”

“Yeah, you should be thanking me.” I was getting angry. Poppy kept going from warm to cold. She'd seem to appreciate what I'd done one moment, then hate me the next. She wasn't listening to me at all.

I put my life on the line for her. I destroyed my reputation and everything my father built to save her. I don't know what else I can do to prove to her that I'm not who she thinks I am.

“Fuck you,” she barked. “I can take care of myself. You should know that by now.”

“I know that if your father hadn't come to me first, you would absolutely be dead right now.”

“I thought you said something changed you? You sound like you could still kill me if you got mad enough.”

“Yeah. You. You changed me, Poppy.” I grabbed my hair and yanked as I said, “I tried. I tried so fucking hard to do what I was hired for. I tried to kill you, I really did, but I just couldn't pull the trigger.”

Poppy tilted her head as her lips tightened. “I don't think it works that way. You can't spend your entire life being trained for something, do it for years, and then suddenly just wake up thinking it's wrong because you met a girl.”

“I never said I didn't know it was wrong. But I never felt anything before you. You woke up something inside me, whether you want to believe it or not. Things are different now. If I kill anyone, it's only going to be to protect you.”

Poppy blinked a few times. She was thinking cautiously about what to say, what to believe, what to do. There was nothing I could do to make her see that I wasn't the same man anymore. She knew me as a killer, and she might always see me that way.

But I would die for her. I would gladly take my last breath so long as she was safe and no one was left to harm her. That was my goal. I wanted to ensure that she never had to fear for her life again.

She licked her lips and said, “And when this is over, what then? What will you do?”

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“I don't know. Maybe I'll go start a security company or something.” I chuckled and smiled. Poppy didn't smile back. “Too soon for a joke?”

“Vega, I'm having a really hard time with this. My father killed my mother. He hired people to kill me. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

I ran my fingers around the curve of her face, pushing loose hair behind her ear. “You'll find your way through it. You're strong. You'll come out the other side even stronger.”

Her lips twitched with a soft smile. She gripped my wrist and pressed her face into my palm. “I don't know how.” Poppy closed her eyes as she took a deep breath. “My life is ruined.”

“Look at me.” I cupped her face with both hands, forcing her to look into my eyes. “Your life is just beginning. You've been living someone else's up to now. This is where you take yours back.”

“I wish I could believe that.” Poppy's eyes flicked between mine, teary and red. “How do I do that?”

“You start right now,” I said as I leaned in and kissed her forehead. I pulled away and whispered. “Let me help you. I can give you your life back.” I lowered my lips slowly towards hers, wanting to kiss her so badly.

I needed this woman like I needed air. I wanted to breathe her in. I wanted to touch her and taste and devour her. I wanted to fill her body with mine. I wanted her to

scream my name as she dug her nails into the muscles of my back. But what did she want?

Poppy was quiet. Our eyes searched each other for words that neither of us would speak. And then she spoke with action. She pushed up on the tips of her toes and wrapped her arms around my neck. Poppy accepted my kiss. Her head angled to the side, mouth softly opening. She exhaled as I kissed her deeper. Herskin was chilled. The tips of her fingers were like ice against my neck.

“You're so cold,” I said against her lips.

“Then warm me up,” Poppy spoke low, her voice as delicate as the thin blades of grass reaching up between dead leaves for a taste of sunlight. “I want you to make me sweat.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked. “I don't want you doing something you might regret.”

“I won't regret it.” Poppy's words came off a lucid tongue.

I cupped her jaw softly. “Your head isn't in the right space right now. There's no telling how you'll feel tomorrow or the next day. I want you whole.”

“And I want to feel whole. Help me feel whole, Vega.”

That was all I needed to hear. I needed to hear Poppy say my name. I needed her to want me. I growled and lifted her off the ground in one swoop. She curled her legs around my waist as I walked her to the nearest tree. I pushed her back against the rough surface to help hold her up.

Poppy let out a coo as my hard cock pressed her clit. She clenched her thighs tight

and rocked her hips as her tongue slid into my mouth. She tasted like pure ecstasy. Sweet and innocent but with a hint of danger. Maybe she tasted so good because wanting her was wrong. Maybe she tasted so good because having her could get us killed. It was always a thrill to do something you knew you shouldn't.

My cock hurt to be inside her. I was so hard it felt like my dick was going to bust through my pants. I lowered her to the ground slowly. She fought me slightly, but the second I started unbuttoning my jeans, she began to rip her clothes off. Poppy threw her shirt to the ground and kicked her pants off.

My pants fell around my ankles, my cock bouncing to attention at the sight of her naked form. Poppy had sleek legs and a small waist. Her tits were perfect raindrops. The dustypink of her nipples exploded with tiny bumps as a breeze blew between us. She leaned back against the tree with pure desire in her eyes.

She was calling to me. The way her legs rubbed back and forth over each other and her hands wrapped around the trunk of the tree was all I needed to bring the animal to life inside of me.

I gripped her thighs and pulled them around my waist. The tip of my cock hit her entrance, and she moaned before it even went inside. Poppy closed her eyes as she dug her nails into the meat of my shoulders. My cock slipped up between her lips, getting covered in her juice.

I ran my shaft over her clit, drawing out a second moan. It was galvanizing to see the response. Her body shivered as I teased her, making her even wetter. She thrust her hips forward in a way that was pleading for me to be inside. I couldn't resist the temptation of making her wait. Sex was always better when there was play first. The tension would build and build until it finally exploded.

Goosebumps jetted over her skin as my cock massaged her needy button. The longer

I rubbed, the more she seeped her supple juice. She was so wet. So hot. So fucking ready.

I pressed my swollen tip to her warm center and slipped inside. Poppy arched her back hard and bit her bottom lip, tugging it into her mouth. Her pussy clenched around my shaft, squeezing firmly. I gyrated my hips, fucking her fast and vigorously.

It was strange to feel so free. To be so careless, broken, and alive. At that moment, there was no danger or fear. There was no running. There was just us and the raw nature entombing her muffled screams of pleasure.

Poppy ground her hips down, matching my pace. She was ruthless in wanting her release. Her heels dug into my thighs as her breathing became erratically wild, like a lioness hunting down food for her starving cubs. Everything about her was feral. The way her nails raked down my back, and her pupils as they expanded into vast, dark pools. How her nipples beaded hard as diamonds, begging to be nibbled.

I ran my tongue over her rosy flesh and sucked her tit into my mouth. Poppy let out the sexiest moan as she closed her eyes. Her body tensed up. Her pussy bore down on my cock, keeping me inside, and then she came. She came so hard her body shook from head to toe. She squeezed tightly around my waist as I thrust one final time. My cock exploded its lifeblood inside her.

I gently set her on the ground and held her hips until I knew she had her footing. Poppy looked up at me and smiled—a real smile. And I smiled back. It came natural. I didn't have to pretend that I was happy at that moment.

Poppy shivered from the wind. “It's chilly,” she said as she turned and bent over to pick up her shirt off the ground. There was a long, raw scrape running the length of her spine. It was a little oozy and bloody, with bits of bark peppering the surface.

“That must sting.”

“What?” she asked.

I took her by the shoulders and turned her slightly. With gentle fingertips, I traced the scrape. Poppy winced slightly. “What happened?”

“I think you got tree burn,” I said with a laugh. “It's not bad. It shouldn't scar.”

“I don't care if it does.” Poppy reached around her back and felt the wound herself. “Is it bleeding?” she asked, pulling her hand back to look at her fingers.

“A little, but it's not bad. We should clean it, though. The last thing you need is it getting infected.”

Poppy slipped her shirt over her head and pulled up her pants. Her feet were dirty and scuffed up from walking through the forest. I started to unlace my shoes. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Here,” I said as I took them off and passed them to her. “Put these on.”

“Your shoes? Why?”

“Because you need them more than I do. Put them on.”

She slipped her feet inside and giggled. “They're huge on me. I look ridiculous.”

“You look beautiful. It doesn't matter what you have on.”

Poppy grinned shyly as she looked herself over. “You have low expectations of beauty, then.”

“No, I just see what you can't. Beauty is deeper than the clothes you wear or how much makeup you have on. It's not money that makes you beautiful or the kind of car you drive. It's what's in here,” I said as I poked her heart.

Poppy smirked and looked away. “I didn't know you could be so corny.”

I laughed as I wiggled my sock-covered toes in the leaves. “Neither did I. Don't tell anyone,” I said with a grin.

She looked around us and responded. “Lucky for you, there's no one to tell.”

I glanced at the small strip of horizon I could see between the trees. “Come on, we have a ways to go.”

Poppy and I walked for a few hours. I shared stories about my childhood. I told her about my father and how he kept his two worlds as separate as possible. There was the husband and the father, who went to work and came home for dinner most nights. He was there for birthdays and holidays and the family gatherings. My father kept his composure at all times. He never once let his work life spill into his home life.

I found out later on that my mother always knew what he did for a living. I didn't know if she was okay with it or if she hated it because she never spoke about it. When I looked back on my childhood, she never flinched or made a face when he was leaving. There was no outward notion that she cared either way. It wasn't until I hit the age of sixteen that my father really opened up to me about his job. He wanted me to know everything. He had been preparing me to take over the family business since I was a kid, but I didn't have a clue.

All the hunting trips, the target practice, the solitude, and the death were all training for my future. He had wired me to kill. To not feel anything when I pulled the trigger. To see death as normal as opposed to a sadness that consumed your soul.

Even with his death, I felt nothing.

“What about you?” I asked. “Can you look back on anything and see the things you missed?”

“You mean like the memory of my father shooting my mother?”

“I mean the little things. Conversations, actions, things that get overlooked when you're submersed in it?”

Poppy looked at the ground as she spoke. “I think so. It's not so much the things my father said. It's the things my mother said. She would make cryptic statements about him. I never knew what she meant, but now I think I do. Like sometimes, she would take her cup of medicine and pull certain pills out. I caught her once and asked her what she was doing. My mother told me that those pills made her sick. I asked her why my father would give her something to make her sick and not better, and she just said, “Because chameleons change color, Poppy.” She exhaled as she kicked a pine cone and watched it bounce off a tree trunk. “She could see right through him. I was just naive.”

“You were a child, Poppy. Kids trust the adults around them. There was no way for you to know what he was doing.”

“Why did he do it?” she asked. “Why would he make my mother sick and kill her?”

“Maybe your mother knew something he didn't want to get out. Maybe your father was afraid of what she could do to him.”

“Like what? My mother wouldn't do anything to ruin his life. I think she just wanted a life of her own.”

I thinned my lips into a soft smile but didn't answer. “His demons go deep, Poppy. He's not just a pharmacist, he's a damn drug lord. Who knows what your mother knew and what she had threatened. It's also possible he was paranoid. Maybe he just thought she was going to talk. I don't know.”

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“Yeah, I guess. It's just hard to rationalize it.”

Poppy couldn't rationalize it because she was a good person. She couldn't understand the twists and turns this type of life takes. You couldn't trust a soul. And anyone you did trust, you only trusted so far. You always had to have your guard up. Always.

But I was pretty certain I knew why her father killed her mother. Her mother was going to go to the feds. She was tired of living a lie. Mrs. Aneska didn't want to live in hiding anymore. She wanted to live a real life. Not a life of corruption and false happiness. The longer she was immersed in his world, the harder it was to get out. There was a point of no return, and Poppy's mother had passed it like the wife of a mobster. There was no walking away.

Poppy's mother was going to come clean to the cops, and her father had to stop it. What better way than to make your wife look crazy and then have her take her own life? It was genius. Fool proof. Simple and clean.

“Here we are,” I said. I pulled a bunch of branches back to reveal a hidden, green jeep. “Our ticket out of here.”

She cocked a brow and crossed her arms over her chest. “Who just has a secret escape vehicle tucked away in the woods?”

“Prepared people, and I do, obviously.” I shrugged my shoulder as I pulled the passenger door open. “You can never be too careful.”

“Regular people don't need to be this careful.”

“If you haven't noticed, I'm not a regular person.”

Poppy climbed into the front seat, rolled her eyes, and said, “I noticed. It was hard not to.”

I got in the driver's seat and dug the key out from its secret spot. I was hoping it would still start. I hadn't come out to start it in ages. I used to do it once every three months, and then it was every six months, and now it was barely once a year. I think I started to overestimate my own security. My own worth among the barbarians. My own strength among the wealthy. My own mortality against my own evil. I had gotten sloppy and failed to be diligent.

“Here goes nothing,” I said as I pushed the key inside the ignition and turned. “Come on, you got this.” The engine bumbled a little but roared to life with a feather of the gas pedal. “Ah, my trusty steed. He never lets me down.” I rubbed the dashboard and ran my hands around the steering wheel.

“Men and their cars. You're all the same.”

“Are we now?”

“Yes. It doesn't matter who you are. You guys talk to your cars like they can understand you.”

“Maybe they can,” I said, shifting the jeep into gear and hitting the gas.

The jeep launched out, ripping through the forest like a bear on a rampage. Debris was kicked up behind us. Deep tread marks stamped the earth like burn scars on skin. There was a tight path for us to follow. The jeep grazed the rough surface of tree trunks and the long branches stretching out like claws.

Poppy gripped the bar above her head as the terrain was uneven, causing her to bounce and shift in her seat. I had one hand on the wheel and one on the shifter as I drove us further away from the terror chasing her.

The wind blew her hair, making it dance around her face. But I noticed that she seemed to look lighter. Her eyes glinted with hope. Her mouth was soft and relaxed. Her knuckles were skin-toned and not white with fear. Poppy was getting soothed by the thought of escape.

And so was I. My plan was to drive her as far away from here as possible. I was going to save her and be her hero. I would be the reason her life flourished and became something it never could before.

A real life. A real experience. Real memories that won't be altered by the magic of persuasion and drugs.

Poppy could finally live.

Chapter Seventeen

Poppy

We drove through cavernous ditches and around thick trees. The tires would lift off the ground as Vega took a sharp corner or as the jeep hit uneven earth. I swayed with the motion and bounced in tandem with each hurdle.

The forest eventually opened up to a dirt road, and I expected to feel a sense of relief. But all I felt was this heavy mass of hopeless anger. My life was nothing but lies. Everything I thought I knew and felt and remembered was a mirage—smoke and mirrors.

“I want to talk to him,” I said.

“What?” Vega asked.

“My father. I want to talk to him.”

“That's not a good idea, Poppy. You know—”

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“I know what you're going to say, but I have to. I need to know why.”

Vega looked at me for a moment, silently gawking at my request. “The why doesn't matter. He's trying to kill you. The man literally wants you dead, and you want to go ask him about it. He'll take that opportunity to kill you right then and there. I won't put you in that position.”

“You're not putting me in any position. It's my choice. Vega, you said you wanted to help me.”

“And I do, but I won't knowingly bring you to your executioner. I can't do that.”

“I refuse to just run away like some coward,” I snapped. “I deserve to know why. Don't you think I deserve to know?”

“Of course I do. But you're not going to get answers by throwing yourself in front of a moving bus.” The dirt road came to an end. Vega took a left onto smooth, even pavement. “I won't do that. All of this would be for nothing if I show up with you like a damn gift, and he kills you.”

“All of this is already for nothing, isn't it?”

“No.”

“No?” I asked, my brows arching high and my mouth twitching at the corner. “How can you say no? Look at where we are. What do we have? Where are we going? We have nothing, and we're running towards nothing.”

“I think it's possible to still find something good when the world is against you.” Vega's lips thinned into a tight line as he glanced in the rearview mirror before hopping onto an on-ramp for the highway.

“You're so full of shit right now. You don't think that,” I said. What good was coming from this? The floodgates opened. Every repressed memory was blown to the surface. I exhaled a long breath as my heart slowed. I thought it stopped completely, but I could feel the faint pulse as I placed my hand against my chest.

“What? What is it?” Are you alright?” he asked.

“I'm fine,” I said, brushing off his concern. “Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but we both know that's a load of shit. There's nothing good in either of our lives.”

Vega was trying to make me feel better. It's what people did when they were watching you suffer. They tell you they're sorry for what you're going through. They try to ease your pain with false promises that things will get better. Life will go on. The pain won't last forever. Blah, blah, blah. It's easy for someone on the outside to rub your back and pet your head and tell you things will be okay. But it wasn't Vega who watched their mother get shot by their father. It wasn't Vega who just woke up to a living nightmare.

“I'm serious.” Vega flicked his eyes to mine briefly, then back to the road. “If you don't find the good, you'll slowly dissolve into something unrecognizable.”

“Says the man whose mother just stopped caring. What good is there in that?”

“You're missing the point.”

“So you think that all of this will lead to what? A pot of gold at the end of the

rainbow.” I rolled my eyes. “That's what I call being naive.”

Vega leaned close to me and whispered. “There's a difference between being naive and seeing what's right in front of you. Maybe you need to look a little closer.”

Look closer at what? I was attacked, abducted, and shot at. We were currently running for our lives. Where the hell was Vega even taking us? What was going to happen when we got there? It didn't matter. I had nowhere to go anyway. I couldn't go home. I couldn't go to work. I couldn't go anywhere in that damn town if I wanted to stay alive.

I was done thinking. The future was hard to imagine. At that point, there was no future for me. It was going to be a life of running. A life of looking over my shoulder at every turn. A life of wondering if the floor creaking, or the sound of footsteps, or the wind was someone coming to kill me.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“We just need a safe place to lay low so I can figure out what's next.”

“Where issafeanymore?” I half chuckled as I lay my head back against the headrest and looked out the window.

“I have olive branches, Poppy. I know where we can go. He won't find us.”

“How do you know that? I've known him my whole life, and I have no clue who that man is.”

Vega reached out and took my hand. He squeezed it gently and gave me a tender smile. “Some people have two faces. Your father is one of them.”

“I think deep down, I always knew that.”

“You felt it, didn't you?”

“I felt something. I'm not sure if that's what it was, but there was always something lingering in the back of my thoughts.”

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“Sometimes your gut knows things your eyes don't want to see, and your brain doesn't want to imagine.”

“I'm naive, aren't I?”

“No,” Vega said quickly as if anticipating the question. “You're not naive, Poppy.”

“Then what would you call me? Ignorant? Stupid? Benighted?”

Vega shook his head sternly. “No. I wouldn't call you any of those things.” His thumb stroked the hard nub of my wrist as he sucked in a quick breath. “Look, you can't blame yourself for anything. Even if you knew every last detail of what he did, you wouldn't have been able to stop it.”

“I could have done something. I could have saved my mother.”

“Your mother was already gone before he killed her. Pulling the trigger only took her body. It might have been a blessing for her, honestly.”

I yanked my hand out of his and twisted in my seat to glare at him. “How can you say that? She didn't deserve to die!”

“That's not what I mean.” Vega patted the air in an effort to calm me down. “What I'm trying to say is that she was suffering. He was torturing her. He stole everything from her. He even stole you. She had nothing.”

My heart hammered inside my chest at the thought. Vega was right. My mother

couldn't ask me for help because I was a child under his spell. As she slowly went crazy, I pulled away from her. I stopped listening to her ramblings because my father told me she was sick. I stopped feeling anxious about her pain because my father told me it wasn't real. I stopped sympathizing with her because my father blamed her for what was happening.

He told me she refused his help. She wouldn't take her medication properly. She pushed him away. He made me believe that if she had just done what he told her to, none of it would have happened.

“I told her I hated her that day,” I said quietly.

“What day? What are you talking about?”

“The day she died. She was in the kitchen, walking around like a zombie and mumbling things to herself. I had gone to get a glass of water because I had a headache and my father had given me some medicine to take. When I went to take the medicine, she slapped it out of my hand and screamed in my face. It was just a scream; she didn't yell anything specific. It was just this guttural screech.” I sniffled as my eyes welled up with tears.

“I asked her why she did that, and she said, 'The devil makes him do it.' I asked her what she was talking about, and she went into this manic episode where she just kept saying it over and over again, 'The devil, the devil, the devil.' So, I told her she was crazy and that I hated her.” I wiped my eyes with the edge of my shirt and looked out the window. “I remember the look in her eyes when I said it. I broke her. Right at that moment, I broke her.”

“She knows you didn't actually hate her. Your mother, my father, they know their own children don't hate them regardless of the things we might have said.”

“What happened with you and your father?”

Vega shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he adjusted and readjusted his hands on the steering wheel. “All I'm saying is that kids say stupid things to their parents all the time. It's normal.”

What was he not telling me?

His chest began to rise and fall rapidly as his eyes grew shifty. He wouldn't look directly at me; his gaze danced around the car. Vega looked regretful, sorrowful. His skin flushed, and his eyes clouded, turning the dark iris into cataracts.

“We didn't see eye to eye on things like most parents with their children. He had a different vision.”

I twisted to face him. “What does that mean? I thought you followed in his footsteps?”

“I did, but I didn't want to do things exactly the way he did. He took unnecessary risks.”

“What about your mom? What did she want for you?”

“I don't know, honestly. She never said. But I sucked in school, barely passing my senior year. I hated sports—”

“I thought hunting was a sport?” I asked with a sarcastic tone.

“You know what I mean. A physical sport. I didn't play football or soccer or baseball. I had no interest in it.”

“Did she know what you and your father were doing?” Vega didn't answer, he just shrugged. “So, what happened between you two?”

Vega's face drooped, his eyes dulling to a matte finish. “She just stopped being my mother,” he said without emotion.

I arched a brow and pursed my lips. “What do you mean?”

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“She just stopped everything. She stopped talking to me. She stopped calling me. I was like a ghost to her. I didn't exist anymore after my father died.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Don't be. It's not your fault. It's my fault my mother abandoned me. I'm the reason she walked away. There's no one else to blame but myself. My mother wanted a son, and instead, she was given a purebred killer. Her baby had died a long time ago, and she knew it.”

Chapter Eighteen

Vega

We drove most of the day, only stopping for gas. Poppy fell asleep about an hour into our journey and barely stirred while I filled the tank. I was taking her far away from this place.

I knew Poppy wanted to talk to her father, but that wouldn't end well. Poppy would never feel a sense of closure from talking to him. There were no answers he could give her that would rationalize what he had done. Her father had killed her mother. Gerard Aneska had drugged his wife, driven her to insanity, and killed her. And then he attempted to do the same thing to Poppy.

He was a cruel and vile man. Gerard didn't deserve to ever call himself her father again. Call me a killer. Call me emotionless. Call me a soulless devil. But what he did to his wife and daughter was far worse than anything I had ever done.

The sun was starting to go down as we pulled into the driveway. The house was set back on the top of a hill. It was a small, rundown cottage with wood shingle siding and peeling gray paint. The salt off the ocean had done a number on the outside. Shingles were missing from the roof, and a few windows were broken. There was a rust-colored hue seeping up from the ground and tinting the base of the house. The bushes were all overgrown. The grass was thick and tall, and bags of trash were piled up against the side of the house. No one had touched the house in years. I would assume the place was abandoned if I didn't know better.

“What time is it?” Poppy asked with a yawn as she lifted her head.

“Six thirty.” I put the car in park and turned off the engine. “We'll finally be able to get some rest, at least.”

“Where are we?” Poppy asked as she rubbed her eyes and looked out the window.

“An olive branch,” I said. “Hopefully.”

“Olive branch, huh?” Poppy peered up at the house through the windshield. “Does this olive branch know we're coming?”

I watched the front window but didn't see any movement. The house was dark; not a single light could be seen. “They will in a minute,” I said. “Come on.”

I climbed out of the Jeep, and Poppy followed suit. We both stood in the driveway for a long moment. We were still, wary, and uncertain of so many things. I was uncertain of the future and how I would set this girl free, and Poppy looked uncertain of the present and what was about to happen.

She followed me up the stone steps to the front door. I pressed my face to the giant glass window but couldn't see inside. The curtains were pulled tight, and there were

no sounds of movement inside. I paused to run my fingers through my hair and brush any loose dirt off my clothes.

Poppy watched me quietly. “Are you alright?” she asked. “You’re white as a ghost.”

“I’m fine. I just. . .” I stopped talking and swallowed my words. “Forget it. I’m fine.”

Poppy’s eyebrow arched high as her jaw crooked to one side in thought. “Whose house is this, Vega?” she finally asked.

I didn’t answer her; I rang the doorbell instead. I wasn’t sure how I would be received. It could be open arms. It could be a slap, and then the door slammed in my face. It could be unanswered, and a call to the cops. I had no idea. It might not even be the same owner anymore. Maybe I’ll be met with a confused stranger, and then what?

The door opened a crack. I saw a set of weathered, blue eyes peeking out from the dark interior. I exhaled a slow breath and then forced an awkward smile.

“Hey,” I said. That was all I could muster out. I didn’t expect the door to open, and I was surprised it did.

There was a gut-wrenching silence as her eyes shifted around my face. “What are you doing here?” she asked, her voice cold. I was a stranger to this woman.

“Good to see you, too, Mom,” I said.

Poppy’s eyes widened, and she took a small step backward. The door opened as my mother glared at me. She looked so much older than the last time I saw her. I hadn’t seen her since my father’s funeral twelve years ago. Time had not been kind to her. But why would it?

Her entire world had been uplifted and twisted into something unrecognizable. She had become a hermit with no family. I could smell the scent of stale cigarettes and alcohol wafting out from inside.

“Why are you here, Vega?” she demanded. Her eyes moved between me and Poppy. Her thin fingers with knobby knuckles clutched the door frame as if to hold herself upright.

“Can we come inside?” I asked. My heart was breaking. To see what I had done to this woman. To see the pain I had caused her. It hit hard.

My mother's lips thinned and pulled tight as she stepped to the side. She grunted instead of answering the question. I went in first, and Poppy followed closely behind me. “Close the door,” she said with an icy tone as she turned her back to us and walked deeper into the house.

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My mother's feet shuffled over the wood as we followed her to the kitchen. She coughed a few times as she opened a cupboard and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She leaned against the counter, sparked a cigarette, and took a long, slow pull. Smoke curled out from her mouth like gray ribbon as she stared at me.

Her eyes were glassy. Thin, red veins crept out from the corners, stretching for the deep black pits of her pupils. She stared at me, emotionless on the outside, but I could feel the weight of our past all around us. Her lips wrinkled as she sucked the end of the cigarette. The blazing ember on the tip sizzled and popped as it burned.

“It's been a long time. How are you?” I asked.

Poppy stayed close, her hands balled up against her chest nervously. I could feel how nervous Poppy was. Her body was stiff, and her breathing was shallow but quick. She didn't know my estranged mother was my olive branch. It was the only place I could think of where no one would find us.

My mother gave me a side-eyed look as she took the teapot off the stove and began to fill it in the sink. She didn't say a word. The cigarette dangled off her bottom lip as she took out three mugs and placed a teabag in each. She lined them up on the counter and flicked the head of ash into the sink.

“This is a nice place you got here,” I said. I was trying to get some sort of response out of her. Anything. I hated the silent treatment. I always had.

My mother grunted as she looked back at me and then moved her gaze to Poppy. “Who is she?” she asked. Her voice was soft, almost motherly, but I could hear the

accusatory undertones. Where did she come from? Why is she with you? What did you do?

“This is Poppy.”

“Poppy? Is that your real name?” my mother asked her as she looked up at her under hooded eyes. “Sounds made up.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Poppy answered. “My name is Poppy Aneska.”

My mother froze her movements, keeping her eyes on the counter. “Did you say, Poppy Aneska? Like Aneska Pharmaceuticals?”

“Yes,” Poppy said. “My father owns it.”

My mother cocked her head over her shoulder with a sneer on her face. “What the hell is a girl like you doing with my son?”

“Excuse me?” Poppy asked.

“Why would a girl from a wealthy, prominent family be hanging around with someone like him?”

“Mom, come on. Can you be a little less abrasive?”

“Oh, I'm sorry, Vega. Let me start over.” My mother turned to face Poppy head-on, her back straight and chin up high. “My name is Marcella Lobos. It's a pleasure to meet you.” She turned to me and gave a fake smile. “Is that better? Does that have your seal of approval? You want me to pretend like we're a loving, caring family, too?”

“Mom, please. I didn't come here to start an argument or open up old wounds.”

“Then why did you come here, Vega?” My mother grabbed the edge of the sink tightly. Her bulbous knuckles turned white as she leaned over the sink.

“I came because I need your help.”

“You do look like shit.” Her brows dropped hard into the bridge of her nose as her gaze moved around my face and body.

I looked down at my dirty clothes and stained hands. “Yeah, it's been a long couple of days.”

“What did you do now?” she asked. My mother quickly threw up a hand and said, “You know what? I don't want to know. I did everything I could to avoid this. I moved; I changed my name; and yet, here you are.”

“Mom, we just need a place to stay for a day or two, and then we'll be on our way. That's it. I'm not here to cause any trouble.”

“You got involved with the wrong people again, didn't you? I knew this would happen. This is why I left. This right here.” My mother pointed at me with her cigarette perched between two fingers. “I warned you, Vega. I warned you. But did you listen? No. You couldn't be bothered. You thought you knew it all. But I fucking warned you.”

“Mom, please. It's not what you think.”

“Oh no? You said the same thing before, and look what happened. Your father was killed because of you. And now you want me to just let you waltz right back into my life and ask me for a favor? This type of favor? I've spent the last twelve years hiding

because of your choices, and trying to forget the past.”

I hung my head and stared at the floor. “Mom—”

“No,” she growled. “You don't get to do this. You ruined my life, Vega. You stole everything from me. This life stole everything from me. I lost a husband and a child because of it. So don't expect me to jump around for joy when you show up at my door.”

My gaze jumped to Poppy. She was trying to read the situation and figure out what had happened between us. She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. I shrugged a shoulder.

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“Can we do this later? We're really exhausted and just need to get some sleep.”

My mother took another long drag of her cigarette, blowing the smoke straight in my direction. “And you want to stay here?”

“If that's alright with you, yes.”

“Do I have a choice?” she asked. Her jaw went crooked as she tapped her cigarette against the edge of the sink. The hot ash dropped into the basin, sizzling into silence. “Because it doesn't seem like I do.”

“I'm asking you for help.”

“You're not asking me for help because you need me. You're asking me because you have nowhere else to go.” She turned on the water and doused the cigarette. “You can use the spare room. It's the last door on the left down the hall. There's extra sheets and blankets in the closet. Shower if you feel like it. I want you gone in the morning. I'm going to bed.” My mother waved a defeated hand and walked off, leaving us alone.

Poppy looked up at me and gave me a slack smile. “That wasn't awkward at all.” She giggled softly. “So, that's your mom? Pleasant.”

“Yeah. Not what you expected?” I asked.

“That was definitely not what I expected. Not that I had any preconceived thoughts because I didn't expect to be meeting your mother.”

“She wasn't always this way. But she's had a tough life. She has her own demons.”

“Don't we all?” Poppy asked. She walked around the table and took a seat. “So, this is where you grew up?”

I opened my eyes wide and shook my head. “No. I grew up a couple of towns over. This is where she moved after—”

“Your father died?” Poppy asked.

“After she lost everything,” I answered. I sat at the table with her and wrapped my hands around my head. “We need to keep moving. We can't stay here long. I've already caused her enough pain. I can't cause her any more.”

“We're safe here, right?” Poppy leaned forward and touched my shoulder.

“We're not safe anywhere.” I lifted my gaze to hers. “Not yet.” I exhaled a stressful breath and frowned. “Let's get cleaned up and just get some sleep. I'm so tired I can't think straight right now. Tomorrow I'll be able to see more clearly.”

Poppy nodded in agreement. We found the spare bedroom. The room was hoarded with stuff: stuffed animals, clothes, shoes, and baby toys. There was an old crib against the left wall and a twin-sized bed against the right. I had to climb on top of a pile of junk to get to the closet and retrieve the blankets.

The shelves, the ceiling fan blades, and the corners of the room were all covered in a thick layer of dust. Cobwebs decorated the cracked and peeling crown molding like Hell's ivy. My mother really had spiraled into someone I didn't recognize. Her home was a disaster. She didn't care about anything, even herself.

I sifted through the clothes on the floor and found some that looked like they could fit

Poppy. "Here, these should work for you."

"Whose clothes are they?" she asked.

"I have no idea. But they have tags, so they're new."

Poppy took the outfit from my hands to examine it. "It looks like it's new from twenty-five years ago."

"It's better than nothing, right?"

"I guess," she said.

"You can go shower first."

She gave me a gentle smile and then went back into the hall. Poppy showered, and then it was my turn. The water felt good. I didn't have any clean clothes, so I wrapped myself in a towel and went back to the spare room.

"Nice towel," she said.

I looked down at my waist and smiled. "I don't have any extra clothes, but I'm sure we can find something in this mess."

"I'm sure we could, but why rush it?" Poppy asked. She reached up and ran the pads of two fingers down my chest. Her fingers danced across the top of the towel and back to my navel. "Come here," she said as she rolled onto her side to face the wall, and patted the mattress.

I wasn't going to say no. She was inviting me in willingly. The way her eyes turned sultry and she bit her lip made my cock jerk. I slipped into the bed, curled up behind

her, and molded my body around hers. Her ass fit perfectly into the dip of my hips. Her back rested against my chest as the top of her head snuggled under the curve of my jaw.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:29 pm

Poppy's skin was warm, and her breathing was slow but deep. She pulled my hand up between her breasts and braided our fingers together. I could feel her heartbeat against my palm, drumming a steady rhythm. I rubbed my thumb up and down the center of her chest, drawing circles between her cleavage.

She inhaled a deep breath as her pulse began to quicken. Poppy's fingers tightened around mine and then loosened, tightened and loosened, she repeated the cycle over and over. Her ass began to rock back and forth, massaging my dick.

My cock was growing hard as she kept rubbing. I was ready to take her without question. Permission had been granted as she glanced over her shoulder and looked up at me. Her eyes said everything I needed to know. Poppy wanted me. She was begging for me to take her again. To soothe her troubled mind with a taste of the freedom I could give her.

I glided my hand down her belly and slipped my finger into the trim of her pants. She bit her lip and lifted her hip to help make it easier to pull them off. Poppy opened her legs as my fingers moved to her inner thighs. I could already feel the heat of her pussy and I hadn't even touched her yet.

The tip of my index finger teased her pussy. I softly caressed the folds, smearing her silky juice all around. She was dripping wet. Her body was rocking harder and with more intensity as my finger circled her clit. Poppy groaned. I needed her to stay quiet. There was only a thin wall between our room and my mother's.

“Shh,” I hushed into her ear.

Poppy looked back at me as she sucked her lips into her mouth with a nod. "I'll try," she whispered.

I ran the tip of my dick up the crack of her ass. I was rock hard and ready to fuck her. I slipped my finger into her heat. Her pussy was so fucking tight. I fingered her a little, working her body up, and getting her ready for the main course.

My cock was swollen and eager to feel her. The tip of my dick was slippery with precum and my shaft was so firm, I could see every vein. Poppy laid her leg over my hip as she twisted so she could kiss me. I slid my hand under her shirt and squeezed her tit, pinching her nipple and rolling it between my fingertips. She cooed the sexiest little coo. I swiftly swallowed her moan with a kiss. My tongue swept into her mouth, tasting and licking.

Poppy kissed me back as she drove her fingers into my hair and tugged at the roots. "Fuck me," she quietly said against my mouth.

I didn't need her to repeat herself. I thrust my cock into her warm heat, pushing all of my length in until her ass hit my base. I steadied myself, pausing to let her body adjust around my girth. Her walls tightened, bearing down on me as she arched her back.

I slowly began to gyrate my hips, pulling out and then pushing back in. Poppy's fingers tickled my nape, then raked up my scalp and deep into my hair. She ripped at the roots, yanking to the point my scalp burned. But I liked it. I enjoyed the twinge of pain. It made me feel alive.

A growl escaped my throat as her wet pussy slicked my shaft with each thrust. I fucked her hard but slow. Her breathing became labored, and she started to moan. If we were anywhere else, I wouldn't care how loud she screamed, but in my mother's home, I couldn't have it.

I didn't know why I felt the need to silence her. Maybe it was because I still respected my mother. Maybe it was because no matter how old I got, my mother would always have a higher level of power. It felt wrong to let our inhibitions be heard.

I covered Poppy's mouth with my hand to silence her pleasure. She groaned against my palm, her moan delicate yet strong. My heart stilled in my chest as her eyes closed and her back bent hard. Poppy's hips rocked with mine, forcing my cockso deep inside her body my swollen tip hit the back wall of her pussy, making her scream into my hand.

I fucking loved it. I loved the way her body moved with mine. I loved the way her skin glistened and the lump in her throat bobbed with every thrust. I loved the rosy color of her skin and the goosebumps prickling across the back of her neck like rows of tiny mountains.

Poppy grabbed the outside of my thigh as I fucked her from behind. Her right leg was splayed over mine. I could see my cock as I split her lips apart with each pump. She dug her nails into my leg as the orgasm swiftly took control. Her entire body began to shake and her pussy clamped down around my length as she moaned.

My own release came quickly behind hers. I thrust inside her a couple more times. My stomach clenched, and my balls drew up tight. The orgasm swept through me like electricity, making every hair stand on end. I came hard and fast. My cock jerked and twitched inside her pussy, spilling its life blood.

We lay in silence. Our breathing was in sync. Chest to chest rose and fell in unison. Her gaze softened as sparkles fired off inside her pupils. Poppy's skin glistened with a sheen of sweat, and her muscles went slack.

“Wow,” she breathed out.

“Yeah. Wow is right,” I said.

Her fingers were tangled in my hair, but we didn't unwind ourselves. We lay like that in the small bed, our bodies still connected. Her smooth back pressed against my chest as her breathing leveled out and she drifted off to sleep. I slipped carefully out of the bed and began to sift through the piles of clothes in the room, searching for something to wear.

I dug through two piles, but only found women's clothing. A stack of boxes against the wall contained broken, dirty toys and miscellaneous items like hair brushes, glassware, and potholders—nothing I could put on. Another stack of boxes was hidden under a pile of stuffed animals and baby dolls. I pulled out one of the boxes and opened it.

The scent hit me first, stopping me instantly. It was sandalwood and citrus. I held my breath for a moment, then pulled out a shirt from inside the box. I brought it to my nose and took a second breath. I then pulled out another shirt and a pair of pants and smelled them, too. I wanted to be certain, and now I was.

These are my father's clothes.

My mother had kept a box of my father's clothes. After all these years, she hadn't parted with them. I thought she had thrown everything away. At his funeral, I asked her if I could look through some of his suits, and she told me she burned everything. Those were her actual words. 'I burned all his shit.' And I believed her.

She lied to me.

I poked through a couple more boxes and found a bunch of my father's things: his books, his daily planner from the year he died, his leather gloves, and his glasses. I put on one of his shirts and a pair of pants. It felt oddly comforting to smell his

cologne and wear his clothes. It had been years since I had smelled his cologne. I had forgotten about it entirely, but knew what it was the second it hit my face.

I climbed back into bed. Poppy made a muffled groan as she rolled over to face me. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. I had never thought about what it would feel like to share a life with someone. Never thought about what it would feel like to share thoughts and feelings. Never thought about what it would feel like to love someone.

A sense of calmness filled me with Poppy in my arms. She was safe there. Nothing could reach her. No one could hurt her. And I drifted off to sleep feeling complete. It was the first time in years that I slept without having a nightmare. I actually slept through the night. I didn't wake up once. Not once. Usually, I wake up a few times in a cold sweat. Not tonight. Not with Poppy in my arms.

Tonight I slept like a damn saint.

Chapter Nineteen

Vega

I woke up feeling peaceful—a peace I had never felt before. There was less weight on my chest than most mornings, and I carried half the burdens I was used to. It was a strange feeling not to harbor all the resentment and anger of a man who didn't deserve to live.

Poppy had somehow given me a new birth. I was a new man, being reborn into the same body. The scars of my past would never go away, but they would fade, and I could make up for them. I could repent for all my sins and become something better. I finally had something worth keeping.

I rolled to my side to find Poppy's spot empty and cold. I pushed up onto my elbows and rubbed my eyes. I blinked several times and looked around the room, but she wasn't there. I took a deep breath and sat up completely, letting my feet sink into a soft pile of clothes and blankets on the floor.

I rubbed my head and ran my hands down my face as I gathered myself. I went into the hall and walked down to the kitchen, avoiding the stacks of books and piles of newspapers. I heard movement in the kitchen and found my mother looking out the small window above the sink.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Is it good?” she asked as she turned to face me. She was holding a mug in her hands as she glared at me with dark eyes. “Because from where I’m standing, I just see a hurricane sweeping through.”

“Right. The hurricane is me. Got it.” I closed my mouth and shifted my eyes to her mug. “Is there more coffee?” I asked.

My mother jerked her head towards the coffee pot beside the fridge. “Mugs are in the cabinet right above it. Help yourself.”

I opened the cabinet and took out a mug. I could feel my mother's eyes on me as I filled the mug with coffee. She was staring through me, her eyes piercing every organ like a serrated blade. “What?” I asked.

“I see you were nosing around my personal stuff.” She snapped her chin at me as her eyes ran over my clothes.

I looked down at myself and held out both arms. “And I see you lied to me when you said you burned everything.”

“Grow up, Vega. I didn't mean literally. Although, maybe I should have.” My mother's lips pursed tight as thick lines creased across her forehead. “When are you leaving?” she asked harshly.

“As soon as possible. Where's Poppy?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I don't know. Bathroom, probably.”

I looked down the hall to see that the bathroom door was closed. I relaxed slightly and took a sip of the fresh coffee. “What are you doing, Mom? What is all this?” I asked, referring to all the crap she had stuffed in her home.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. I don't like seeing you live like this. You deserve better.”

“How dare you? Who the hell do you think you are? You show up out of nowhere after a decade and think you have any right to tell me how you think I should be living. How I live is none of your damn business.”

I took a slow sip of coffee. “I'm sorry, Mom. I really am. But look at all this?” I looked around the messy kitchen at the piles of newspapers and stacks of junk mail. Dirty dishes, dusty cans of food, and trash were scattered across the counters. Tupperware and trinkets, old framed pictures of my grandparents, and my mother as a child were piled up between everything else. My mother had become a hoarder.

“This is my home, Vega. Don't you dare come in here on your fucking high horse and judge me. After everything that happened, you have no right.” My mother threw her finger in my face and waved her arm. “I didn't ask you to come here. I didn't ask for your opinion. You can get the hell out.” She pointed to the door with a stiff arm.

“Mom, I'm not trying to upset you. It's just that this isn't you. You used to keep the house spotless. I remember you making me scrub the entire kitchen floor in our old house once because I spilled soda, and you were afraid it would attract ants if I missed a spot. This place is a disaster.”

“A lot of things have changed in ten years, Vega. I'm not the same person I used to be. I'm not the mother you remember.”

“Mom—”

She waved a limp hand as she hung her head. “Just go, Vega. Get the hell out of my house.”

“Don't worry, I'm leaving. I didn't plan on staying.” I chugged the rest of my coffee and slammed the mug down on a small, open space of the counter. “Poppy!” I called out as I started down the hall. “Poppy,” I said again loudly and then knocked on the bathroom door. “Time to go.”

There was no answer. Just silence.

“Poppy?” I pounded on the door harder. “Hey, we need to go. You almost done?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

Silence.

I jiggled to doorknob. It was locked. “Poppy!” I yelled as I hit the door hard with an open palm. “Come on, this isn't funny. Open the door.”

Nothing.

“Jesus, Vega. Things don't change much, huh? You still have that asshole attitude. I wouldn't answer you either if you talked to me like that.”

I gave my mother a side-eye look and said, “This is your last chance to open up, or I'm breaking this door down.”

“Don't you even think about breaking my door!” my mother yelled as she took a few steps into the hall.

“Poppy, did you hear me?” I pushed my ear to the door, listening for any movement. Maybe she was in the shower and couldn't hear me yelling at all. But there was no noise. Not a sound. “Okay, I'm coming in. Move if you're behind the door.” I shoved my shoulder against the door and pushed. The door didn't budge.

“Vega! I told you not to break it!”

“I'm going in!” I yelled back. “I'll pay to have it fixed!” I took a step back and charged forward, using all my strength. The door popped open with a loud crack.

“You bet your ass you're going to pay for that! Well? You feel better now? Did you

freak her the hell out?" my mother asked as she stormed down the hall. "Did he frighten you, Poppy? He does that sometimes."

"Fuck," I said under my breath. "Did you see Poppy this morning at all?"

"No. Why?" She poked her head over my shoulder and looked inside the bathroom.

"Because she's gone." The bathroom window was wide open. I stuck my head out the window and realized my jeep was missing. "God damn it," I said.

"What?" my mother asked.

"My car is gone, too. She must have taken it."

"Smart girl. She knew to get far away from you."

"That's not why she took it. She's not running from me; she's running towards someone else."

My mother let out a laugh of disbelief. "Yeah, okay. You keep telling yourself that. Who did she ditch you for?"

"Her father."

My mother smiled as she leaned against the door frame. "Sounds to me like she's running away from you. That's what girls do when they're scared and want to feel safe. They go home. They look to their father for protection."

"You don't get it," I said as I faced my mother. "Her father hired me to kill her. I'm trying to save her."

My mother's eyebrows dipped into the bridge of her nose. "You really think I'm going to believe that? Come on, Vega. You don't save people. You're a murderer. You let people die just like your father."

"I'm trying to save her. I want to make things right."

"If you're supposed to be saving her, why would she run back to the man who wants her dead? It doesn't make sense."

"Because she wants answers." I took a deep breath, trying to maintain control over my emotions.

"Don't we all," my mother said.

"I don't have time for this right now, Mom. Where's your car keys?" I asked.

She eyed me as her lips turned paper-thin. "No. Absolutely not. I'm not giving you my car."

"Mom. Please. I need to find her before she gets herself killed."

"It's her father, Vega. I highly doubt he'd kill her."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

“He's trying to kill her. That's how we ended up here. I've been protecting her from him.”

“Can you, for once, just once in your lifetime, tell me the truth?”

I closed the gap between us and took her by her arms. Staring into her eyes, I arched my brows and said, “I swear to you, it is the truth. Her father is a bad man. He's worse than me. Worse than Dad. Worse than anyone I have ever met in my life. Please, Mom. I need your help. She has my gun.”

My mother pulled herself free and walked past me. “And I'm guessing my cell phone, too, because I can't find it this morning. I thought I misplaced it, but I think I'm wrong.”

“Maybe you did. You have a lot of junk, Mom.”

She looked up. Her eyes were glossy and full of tears. “Do you know why I came here after your father died?” she asked. I shook my head. “This is where I grew up. This was my childhood home. I feel safe here, Vega. I couldn't stand to be in that house after—” My mother cut herself off and looked down at her feet. “I had to remove myself from everything. I couldn't handle the thought of losing you, too.”

“Mom, I'm not Dad. I'm not going to kill myself. And this isn't living. You're hiding behind mountains of garbage. This isn't healthy for you. When this is all done, I want you to come live with me.”

My father had broken. Something inside his brain had flipped. No one saw it coming.

He seemed fine. No signs of depression. No clue that he had a battle raging inside that he would lose.

We came home to find him hanging from the rafter in the basement. No suicide note. No explanation. He was just gone. I was eighteen. It fractured our family, and it changed both of us. My mother and I were never the same.

“No, Vega. I can't.” My mother shook her head as she looked around. “This is my home.”

“It doesn't have to be. I still have the cabin. We can start over. I'm not that person anymore. I've changed. Poppy changed me. I'm done with that life. I swear.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I want to believe you, Vega.”

“Don't just want to believe me, believe me. She has my gun, and she's going to try and kill him. But she won't do it. He'll kill her first. I need to stop her. Please.”

My mother's eyes danced between mine. She sniffled and shook her head. “Okay. I'll help you. The keys are hanging on the wall by the front door. But be careful. Don't go getting yourself killed.”

I kissed the top of her head and smiled. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I'll be back for you soon. Then we can start over. We can find the life we both deserve.”

“I'd like that.” My mother wiped the tears off her cheeks. “I'd like that a lot.”

I moved for the front door when my mother called out, “Vega!” I stopped and looked back over my shoulder. “You look just like your father in that outfit.”

I didn't respond. I only gave her a loving smile. It was a compliment. It made me feel

good. My mother saw my father in me. Despite what he had chosen to do with his life, a part of my father was still a good man. It was the part my mother was seeing. The part she gave her life to. It was the man she met as a young girl. It was the man she fell in love with and the man who loved her back.

She wasn't seeing the killer. She wasn't seeing the emotionless murderer. My mother wasn't seeing the man who abandoned us without warning. My mother wasn't seeing all the pieces that made my father a monster. I was grateful for that. I was happy she could still find something beautiful in something so evil.

And I was going to hold true to my word. I was going to start over with her. We were going to have a fresh beginning and find that bond a mother and son should have. I couldn't replace all the years I stole from her. I couldn't rewind time and give her back ten years, but I could give her the future.

My mother deserved it. She deserved to live in a world where her son was just that—a son. And maybe there would be a wedding and grandchildren one day. I wanted to give her all of that because my mother had earned some normalcy in a life she had no control over.

Chapter Twenty

Poppy

I sat in the parking lot, staring up at the building. The sun sat behind the tall, gray cement structure with black-tinted windows, and its arms were bursting out of the sides of the building like the sky was exploding in the background.

It was two in the afternoon when I reached the office park. My father was probably still tucked behind his desk on the fourteenth floor, maniacally scanning the different research papers laid out for him. That was his routine when he wasn't traveling

around the world. He would spend most of his day in the lab, and then in the afternoon, he would go through the other work he had ordered or the results from testing on something he was experimenting with.

I had always thought my father was out to cure cancer or Alzheimer's or some disease you might inherit. I thought he had a deep desire to fix the sick. To earn a Nobel Prize in medicine for some incredible discovery. What a gut punch it was to learn how corrupt and evil he actually was. My father was manipulating people. He was testing his drugs on them, on me, on my mother. We were his guinea pigs.

My hands tightened around the steering wheel. I had never felt so angry and betrayed. I didn't deserve this. My mother didn't deserve it. I thought he loved me like a daughter. Tears threatened to drown me where I sat, but I forced them away. Despite the hurt and the pain of everything I had learned about what he had done to me, nothing hurt worse than feeling like I had lost my father, too. My mother was gone, and for a long time, my father and I only had each other. That was gone now, too. I had no family.

But I wouldn't give that man one more ounce of my sadness. He killed my mother, then let me cry on his shoulder. My father consoled me with hugs and smiles and memories of our life when I was little. He stole my childhood from me and comforted me without remorse.

I could see it now. I could see the plastic smile of a man who didn't care. I could see the lackluster gleam in his eyes and feel the memory of a forced hug and fake embrace. He never loved me. He never loved my mother. He just loved having homegrown lab rats at his disposal.

A flood of adrenaline surged through my muscles as rage took over. The anger went deep, striking a nerve and setting it ablaze. I threw the door open and stormed to the entrance with heavy steps. My lids were thin, eyes heavy, throat scratchy and dry as

my nostrils flared. My hands were balled at my sides into tight fists. My stomach was coiling up into knots. I wanted answers. I needed to know why. Why did he do this to us? Why not just leave if he hated us so much? Why choose the two people who loved him more than anything else in the world?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

The double doors split open, allowing me easy access. The woman behind the desk, Vanessa, looked surprised to see me and smiled. “Oh my god, Poppy. How did you get here? Your father has been looking all over for you since you took off. He said things got a little. . .” Her voice trailed off as she glanced around, looking for the right words. “Unstable. You know, like your mom. And that you ran off. He's going to be so happy you're here. Let me call up.” Vanessa reached for the phone, but I stopped her.

He told people I was crazy and disappeared? Really?

“No, don't do that. I know I worried him, and I feel awful about it. But I'm feeling better, and I want to surprise my father, so shh,” I said as I held a finger to my lips. “Don't let him know I'm here. Okay?”

Vanessa grinned and nodded. “Of course. I won't say a word. I'll call Bill to let him know. This way, you can sneak right in there, and he won't see you coming.”

“Perfect,” I said with a bright smile. I walked behind the desk and gave her a hug. “It was good to see you.”

“You, too. Your father is going to be so happy. He's been really off. I'm sure he's just been so worried about you.”

Yeah. Worried.

I forced a soothing smile and said, “I'm sure he has been. I put him through so much. Thanks again, Vanessa, for keeping my arrival quiet.”

“Absolutely. I wish I could see your father's face when you walk through his door.”

“I'm sure it'll be a shock,” I said as I got in the elevator and pushed the button for his floor. It was four in the afternoon. Everyone was busy finishing up their work for the day, so the elevator was empty, and the halls were quiet. I didn't see anyone.

As I approached the security guard for my father's area of the building, he gave me a wink and a smile. “We weren't sure we'd see you again. Your dad didn't say much, but it sounded like it wasn't good.”

“It got dicey for a bit. I made some really poor decisions, but I bounced back.”

“He told us things were tough at home.”

“Yeah. I feel terrible that I put him through this. I really want to surprise him and make it up to him.”

“Well, I'm really happy to see you.” Bill patted my arm. “And I bet he's going to be happy, too.”

“Thanks. Can I?” I asked as I pointed to the locked door.

“Absolutely.” He pushed the buzzer, unlocking the door to the lab area.

“Good to see you, Bill. Tell Linda I said hello.”

He gave me a nod as I walked through the door, which closed automatically behind me. The lab tables were buzzing. Employees in long, white lab coats, wearing face shields and goggles, were focused on their end-of-day tasks. No one turned their head as I walked by. Not a soul paid attention to me. I was certain they heard the door and felt the breeze as I walked past, but it was too close to the end of the day to get

sidetracked.

My father's office was in the back of the room, tucked in the corner. His name was tacked to the door in gold letters. I stood outside the door for a moment before knocking. My mind was suddenly a jumble of thoughts and emotions. There was so much I wanted to say. So much I needed to get out. But then what? What happens after I say what I need to say? What happens after the confrontation?"

The doorknob was cold against my palm as I held it. I turned it slowly and pushed the door open cautiously. "Did we forget how to knock?" my father asked. His face was buried in paperwork, lit up by his computer screen. Before I could say anything, he said, "Doesn't matter anyway. Can't you see I'm busy? Get the hell out."

"I don't think I'm going anywhere just yet," I answered.

My father's gaze jumped from the papers to my face. His eyes were huge as saucers, and his mouth was partially open in shock.

"Surprised to see me?" I asked.

"Poppy," he said. "Wh—what are you doing here? How did you—how did you get here?" he asked, his words stuttering out. He was so stunned to see me that he could barely speak.

"I drove here. Just like I usually do. Aren't you wondering where I've been? I've been missing for a couple of weeks now. Surely, you want to call the cops and let them know I'm still alive."

"Of course. Absolutely. And I will. But first—" My father got up swiftly from his desk and walked around to meet me in the center of his office. He held his arms out to embrace me like a regular father would. His smile was so fake it made me sick.

Everything about him made me sick. The shock in his eyes, the wrinkles on his forehead as he tried to figure out what was going on, the way his eyebrows arched in thought, and his lips as they curved upwards, held a twitch of anger and frustration.

“I'm just so surprised and relieved to see you. I had no idea where you were, Poppy, or what happened to you. I think I'm just in shock right now.”

I grunted as I stepped away from his embrace. He gave me a wary look. I kept my back straight and my neck long as I moved past my father and walked to the giant window beside his desk.

“You're so full of shit, Dad. You were never worried. You did this.” I looked out the window and crossed my arms over my chest. “What I don't know is why. Why did you do it?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

“Poppy, I have no idea what you're talking about. I've been going crazy since you went missing. I've been looking all over for you. What happened?”

“You're such a liar,” I snapped.

“Poppy, I swear, Honey. I'm serious. I was terrified something bad happened. It really made me think of your mother. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you.”

I cocked my head over my shoulder and glared. “Just shut the fuck up. You hired someone to kill me. You actually hired someone to take my life. Tell me why? I would have just left if you had asked me to. I was planning on leaving anyway. I was just waiting for the right time. But you wanted me dead? Really, Dad? Who the hell are you?”

“How dare you make these accusations! I'm your father,” he snapped angrily as his face reddened. “Why would I want you dead? That just doesn't make sense.”

“Because I know what you did.” The reason was simple. I was the link between him and my mother's death. I could turn his world upside down. He had become paranoid. Fearful that I might remember one day and destroy his world. Well, he was right.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” My father cautiously walked around the other side of his desk, his eyes stagnant as they fixed on me. “Are you taking your medication, Poppy? Because you're not making sense. Those are strong allegations to make about your father. You should be careful.” He rested his hand on the top of his desk and placed the other in his pocket. “Let's take a second to calm down. Alright?”

He pressed the tips of his fingers into the wooden top as he watched me.

“Calm down?” I asked as I whipped around. “You think I'm fucking crazy? I'm not crazy. I know I'm not fucking crazy. And neither was my mother. You did that to her. You fucked with her mind.” I poked my temple with my finger and sneered. “And then you killed her.”

My father's jaw stiffened as his teeth clenched. “You don't know what you're talking about.” His voice was low and threatening. “I suggest you stop before you really dig yourself into a hole.”

“I remember all of it. And you're going to pay for what you did. I promise you, I won't let you get away with it. I just want to know why? Why did you do that? Why did you take her from me?” My voice began to rise as my emotions took over. All the sadness and loneliness and loss I felt from the years without my mother came out. “She was my mother! My mother!” I yelled as I slapped my chest. “And you took her from me!”

My father held up his hands and flicked his eyes to his chair. “Can I sit?” he asked calmly.

I just glared at him. My jaw locked up tight, and my teeth ground against each other. “Why did you do it?” I demanded.

My nostrils flared wide as my hands turned to fists. The sharp edges of my nails dug into my palms, but I didn't flinch at the pain. It felt good. It was a release. It kept me grounded and stopped me from leaping across the room to strangle him to death.

My father tilted his head as if he felt some form of compassion for my pain and distress. “Look, Pumpkin—”

“Don't fucking call me that,” I barked.

He held up a hand and nodded. “Poppy, I don't know where you're coming up with this, but you're wrong. Why don't you sit so we can talk? Tell me where you've been.”

“No. I came here because I wanted answers,” I said through my teeth as I snarled. “Tell me everything. I deserve the truth.”

My father slipped into the chair, relaxed back, and steepled his fingers together. He tapped his outstretched fingers to his mouth as he peered at me. “Let's say you're right. Say I did kill your mother. What the hell are you going to do about it?” A thin smile began to take shape on his lips. “You're just as crazy as she was. No one is going to believe you over me.”

“We both know I'm not crazy.” I pulled Vega's gun out from behind my back. “I think you need a little motivation. Why did you kill my mother?!” I screamed.

My father held up both hands. Yet, I didn't see any fear in his eyes. There was no remorse or regret. He just looked empty. “Come on now, there's no need for this. Put the gun down, Poppy. You want answers. I get that. You lost your mother at a young age, and it's hard for you to come to terms with it. But this isn't the way to do things. That gun doesn't change anything.”

“Maybe not right this minute,” I said. I held the gun firmly in both hands and walked closer. “But maybe if I place it right between your eyes, you'll remember the truth like I do.”

My father didn't flinch. Not one muscle trembled with fear. His eyes didn't widen with shock. Instead, his mouth tightened, and his hands clenched. I could see the thick vein in his neck as he swallowed.

“You think holding a gun to my head is going to change something?” His lids lowered, and he arched one of his brows. “You have a lot to learn.”

“Why did you do this to me? Why couldn't you just let us go?” The gun was shaking in my hand as I aimed it right at his head.

“Because I don't lose anything, including you and your mother. I'm the one who decides if you can go. Not you. Not your mother. Me. And when she took you without telling me, when she dared to leave the country without my permission, she sealed her fate.”

“You did it because of control? That's it? You killed my mother and tried to kill me, all because you wanted to keep us under your thumb?”

He bobbed his head from side to side. “That's a part of it. Your mother was also trying to destroy everything I worked for. I put too much into this to let that whore of a mother of yours fuck it all up. She was going to go to the cops. I couldn't have that.”

My jaw fell open, eyes darting between his. “You're a monster.”

“No, Poppy. Monsters hide in the dark. I've been out in the open the entire time.”

“You haven't been out in the open. You've just been parading around in a costume, but I see you now. And I'm not going to let you get away with this. You need to pay for what you've done.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

“Pumpkin, I already got away with it.” My father smiled as he tilted his head tauntingly. “The police think your mother killed herself, and guess what? They're going to think the same for you, too.”

I let the gun drop to my side as I grinned. “No, they're not.” I pulled the phone from my back pocket and showed him the running recording.

My father bared his teeth, and without warning, he jumped from his seat and lunged forward, trying to grab the gun from my hand. I attempted to move out of the way, but he tackled me to the ground.

We wrestled for the gun. He was grabbing it, and I was trying to pull it away and keep control of it. My father was grunting and growling and mumbling as we rolled around on the ground. I was doing my best to not let go. If he got the gun from me, there was no doubt in my mind that I'd be dead. I was going to turn his world upside down with his own admission.

I felt a hard thud to my stomach, which knocked the wind out of my chest. I tried to take a deep breath but couldn't. My lungs were on fire, and my stomach muscles were clenched tight. I looked down to see the end of a knife sticking out of my gut. The gun was no longer in my hand. I didn't even know where it went.

My eyes were frozen on the knife protruding from my stomach. Blood began to seep through my shirt. The warmth trickled down my skin, cooling to an icy chill as it hit the trim of my pants. The tips of my fingers softly touched the edge of the handle. I didn't know if I should pull it out or leave it in place.

“You stabbed me,” I said, ruminating.

“What the hell did you think was going to happen, Poppy? You show up here and threaten my livelihood, and I'm just supposed to allow it? That's insane.”

“You actually stabbed me,” I said softly.

My father scoffed as he tapped the end of the gun against his palm. “I didn't stab you. You stabbed yourself. You stopped taking your medication, and your illness just grew out of control. You went AWOL, your delusions began to rage, and you ended up stabbing yourself.”

“They won't believe you.”

“Oh no? You don't think they'll believe a doctor? You don't think they'll believe someone who donates thousands of dollars a year to the homeless and food banks? You think they're going to believe you instead? They're going to believe someone who has schizophrenia? Someone who has a family history of mental illness?” He angled his head and softened his brows. “Come on, Poppy. Don't be so naive.”

I didn't say a word. My eyes kept drifting to the gun as my father stalked around his office, talking, berating, and sadistically laughing at my expense. I was angry. I was so fucking angry. He had ripped my entire life out from beneath me. This man had come in, manipulated my very existence, and then set it on fire.

“Everything I've done for you. Everything I did for your mother. Neither of you ever appreciated what I could give you. I was trying to hand the world to you on a silver platter, and instead, you were going to walk away from it.”

My lip curled high as I snarled, “You think I care about your fucking company? You experimented on us! You killed my mother! I don't give a fuck.” I had enough of his

bullshit. I wasn't going to let my father shame me into feeling bad or guilty. "I was a child. And you took the only thing that mattered to me. I needed my mother, and you decided I didn't. That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair, Pumpkin." My father casually swung the gun around in the air. "Sometimes people have to do things that might seem unreasonable. But I did it for you." He smirked and winked. "She wasn't good for you. Look at what I had to give you." My father tilted his head and squinted. "And you fucked that all up. All you had to do was take your medicine and do what I asked of you. Now you get nothing."

My father came closer and pointed the gun in my direction. "Your mother tried to ruin me. I took care of that really quickly. I won't let you ruin me, too."

"Fuck you," I barked. "You're weak. You're a weak fucking man."

"Am I?" He pressed the gun to the center of my forehead. "You want to rethink what you're saying?"

"You're a pussy. You couldn't handle my mother, so you killed her."

He pressed the barrel of the gun deeper. "I think shutting you up is the best option." I heard the hammer click as he pulled it back.

"Then fucking do it," I said.

I lifted my chin high and closed my eyes.

If he was going to kill me, then I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing my fear.

I wasn't going to beg him for my life.

Chapter Twenty-One

Vega

I hit the highway and floored it. The speedometer danced between seventy and eighty miles an hour until the road went straight. After that, I didn't bother looking down. I had to find Poppy. She wasn't safe out there on her own.

I racked my brain about where she could have gone. Poppy had one thing she was dead set on: confronting her father. She was either going home or to his office. The more I thought about it, the more I realized she wasn't going home. Her father was most likely at work. He was a man who lived for his work, not for his family.

I was lucky there wasn't a cop in sight. I was able to make it to Aneska Pharmaceuticals in an hour. The tires screeched as I whipped into the parking lot. I didn't bother trying to park all neat and tidy after I spotted my jeep tucked in a spot against the side of the building. I slammed on the brakes and threw my mother's car into park.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

My heart was in my throat. Poppy was inside with the man who wanted her dead. He killed her mother. It wasn't a stretch to think that he had it in him to kill her himself with his own bare hands.

The doors slid open to the foyer. A woman sitting behind a desk straightened her back as her body stiffened. "Can I help you?" she asked. She looked startled, taken aback by my sudden appearance.

I ran my hands through my hair and tried to look calm. I didn't want any trouble with these people. The secretary and the security guard were just normal, everyday people doing a job. They were probably unaware of what their boss was doing and what he was capable of. People like her father know better than openly mixing their legal business with their black-market dealings.

"I need to speak with Mr. Aneska."

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked. The woman began to type on her keyboard as she stared at her computer. "I don't see anything on the calendar."

"I don't, but this is important."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't do that. You need an appointment."

"So, give me an appointment."

"Mr. Aneska has next Friday available—"

“No,” I said. “This can't wait. I have to speak to him right now.”

The woman pushed her short black hair behind her ear as she glanced at the security guard. “Sir, unfortunately—”

“You don't understand,” I said sternly. “I need to see him right now.” I started to move towards the elevator. “This is important.”

“Sir, you can't.” The secretary jumped up from her seat. “Jeff, stop him!” she yelled.

“Excuse me, Sir! Stop right there!”

I slammed my thumb against the button, trying to open the elevator. I scanned the area, looking for the stairs. The security guard ran up behind me and gripped my shoulder. He yanked hard, causing me to spin around.

I held up my hands, palms out. “Look, I don't want to hurt you.”

“Vanessa, call the cops,” The security guard said as he looked me in the eyes. “Buddy, you need to go.”

“Don't call the cops, Vanessa,” I responded. “You don't need to do that. I'm just going to go talk to Gerard and then be on my way. There's no reason to bring the cops into it.”

“Time to go, Buddy,” the security guard said, digging his fingers into my shoulder as he attempted to guide me out.

I reacted. I wasn't leaving. There was no way in hell I was going anywhere without Poppy. I took the security guard by surprise. He wasn't prepared at all for a man like me. I grabbed his wrist, twisted his arm, and flipped him around. Without a chance to

fight back, I had the guard's own gun pressed to the back of his head.

“I don't want to hurt you,” I said. “Just do as I say.” I took the guard's handcuffs and cuffed him and the secretary together. I then locked them inside the utility closet. “Sit tight. I'll make this as quick as possible.”

They looked terrified but settled into the closet without too much resistance. I really didn't want to have to kill either of them, so I was glad the security guard didn't fight me at all and that the secretary didn't get a chance to call the cops. She froze instead, remaining completely silent.

I took the stairs instead of the elevator to the fourth floor. I wanted to avoid having the doors open, which would have made me vulnerable to whatever was on the other side. Stealth was the best way to approach this rescue mission.

My heart was racing, and adrenaline was fueling my body. I was terrified that something had happened to Poppy already. If Gerard hurt her, if he laid a single finger on her, I'd kill him where he stood without pause.

I might kill him anyway. The world would be a better place without that man poisoning it. After everything he had done to Poppy, after all the lives he destroyed over the years, after all the people he probably killed, I'd be doing everyone a favor.

As I reached the top of the stairs, I slowed down and walked more cautiously. The thick, blue metal door had a small glass window. I stayed off to the side, took a quick peek through the window, and saw another security guard sitting behind a small desk.

He had his head down, looking at his phone. There was a set of double doors with a key card slot for entry. The walls and floor were crisp white. Not a spot of dirt or dust could be seen. There was a scent in the air that reminded me of the hospital: bleach and latex.

I tightened my grip around the gun. The guard downstairs was weak and pliable. He didn't think his job was worth dying for, so he gave up easily. I wasn't sure how this guy would react.

I threw the door open and stormed into the hall with the gun aimed right at him. His eyes opened wide, and he sat still for a brief moment before his training kicked in, replacing his initial response of fear with action.

The second guard attempted to reach for his gun, but I was on him before his oily fingers could grab it. I aimed the gun at his face and said, "I'll have your brains splattered on the wall behind you before you get a chance to pop one off on me. Be smart about this. Hand it over."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

The man's eyes beaded with anger, and then his entire body folded with resolve. He sighed heavily with defeat. There was no point, and he knew it. He could never draw on me before I put a slug in his brain. I could guarantee he didn't love his job enough to risk his life. Most people don't.

“Slowly,” I demanded, aiming the gun at the tiny space between both eyes. The guard did as he was told and carefully took the gun out using two fingers around the butt. “Good man,” I said as I took it. I tucked it into my waist as I looked around. “Is Gerard back there?” I asked.

The guard looked over at the door and nodded. “Yeah, but I'm not letting you in there.”

“You don't have to let me in. I can let myself in.” I smugly grinned as I waved the gun towards the door. “Don't overvalue yourself.”

“You don't have a keycard. And that door is made to withstand a grenade.”

I looked down at the man and smiled. His brow lifted, and he pulled his face back as I breathed down his neck. I leaned in, making the guard even more uncomfortable. “Look what I found,” I said, plucking the card off his neck. “I'll just let myself in.” I flicked the edge of the keycard against his nose. “Now, get in that closet over there.”

He did as he was told, walking to the closet and stepping inside. “This is crazy,” the security guard said.

“Sit,” I demanded. He followed my directive and sat on the floor. “Give me the

handcuffs.”

“For what?” the guard asked as he touched them softly.

“Just do it.” I pointed the gun at him. The man hung his head as he unclipped the handcuffs and gave them to me. I locked one tightly around his wrist and the other to a pipe in the closet. “Like I told your co-workers downstairs, I don't want to hurt you or anyone else. I just need a few minutes with Gerard.”

I closed the door and left him sitting in the dark. I slid the card through the slot. The light turned green, and the metal lock slid back. I pulled the door open, anxious, nervous, and excited to find Poppy and get the hell out of there.

I was hit by an explosive white light. I had to blink a few times to adjust to the brightness. It was what I would expect if you died and went to heaven. A light so bright it was blinding but also heavy enough to actually take your breath away.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw the room come alive. People were buzzing all over like bees around a hive. They were dressed in the same shade of white as the walls and the floor. No one looked up at me. They were all too occupied with their beakers and syringes. I glanced to my right and saw precisely what I needed.

Perfect.

I grabbed the fire alarm and pulled. The lights began to flash, and the alarm was so loud it vibrated my chest. The lab workers all looked up and around, and like perfect little ants, they began filing out of the room.

I moved through the maze of lab tables, looking for Poppy. I didn't see her anywhere, but I knew she was close. I could feel her. I could smell her sweet scent and sense her heavy heartbeat. My senses were peaked like a wolf on the hunt. I didn't have to see

her to know she was here.

A door in the back of the room had her father's name on it. I could hear loud voices and faint, muffled growls. I tested the doorknob, but it was locked. The voices inside were becoming louder and more distressed. Anger. That was the most prevalent tone coming from inside.

Poppy screamed as I heard a smack. I didn't hesitate; I kicked down the door with one hard thrust. The door flew inward. Pieces of the frame splintered and exploded in different directions. My pupils opened to the size of saucers as I took in what was happening.

Poppy was on the floor on her knees. Her lip was bleeding, and her eyes were all puffy from crying. She was holding her stomach, and there was a large splotch of blood around her hands. The end of a small knife was poking out between her fingers.

He stabbed her. He fucking stabbed her!

Gerard was standing over her with a gun in his hand. . .Mygun in his hand. He had several scratches on his face, as if she had attacked him like a wild cat eager to disappear into the darkness.

“Leave her alone!” I yelled as I lifted the gun in my hand, aimed it at her father, and pulled the trigger.

Gerard's eyes enlarged as he stared at me in shock. The room held a silence so thick it was deafening. My ears were ringing, and the subtle vibration from the bullet exploding out of the barrel was working its way up my arm.

There was a void around Poppy and her father that was filled with blackness. It was as if they were illuminated by a bright light, and the rest of the room was covered

with black drop cloths. I could only see them.

Poppy was peering at me. Her skin glistened with fresh tears. She was shaking her head as her entire body folded over. Relief washed over her as she watched the gun her father was holding fall to the floor. Poppy scurried back, her eyes never deviating from her father.

Gerard didn't say a word. His eyes glazed over as he looked at me. His hand came up to touch his chest. Gerard pulled his hand away and looked down. His fingers were covered in fresh blood. He tapped his fingertips together, smearing the blood back and forth. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

His eyes moved back to mine, then down to his daughter. The glaze turned chalky and dull as his legs gave out, and he dropped to the ground like a ton of bricks. I knew the fire department and the police were on the way because I had pulled the alarm. We had to get out. I needed to grab Poppy and leave before it was too late.

I looked down at Poppy. She was trembling as she pushed herself up off the floor. Our eyes met. Poppy's expression went from satisfied to stone still. Her eyes settled on my stomach. Her pupils expanded, and her mouth fell open.

"Come on, we've got to go while you still have the energy," I said. "I have to take care of that wound."

"Vega," she whispered as she pointed.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

“What?” I asked as I looked down. To my surprise, there was a giant puddle of blood at my feet. My shirt was soaked through, and my stomach was beginning to throb. “Fuck.”

I touched my stomach, feeling the wound. There was a small hole to the right of my naval that I could feel with the pad of my finger. All the adrenaline that had been rushing through my veins disguised the pressure and pain as nerves and anxiety. I didn't feel the bullet. I didn't notice Gerard aim the gun and pull the trigger.

But as the reality set in, I began to feel lightheaded and woozy. The light in the room started to dim and brighten as my body grew weak. My vision was going in and out of focus. I attempted to take a step forward, but my knees buckled, sending me to the ground. Poppy darted to my side, grabbing me by the elbow to help me stay upright.

“Oh my god, Vega, you've been shot.”

“Is he still alive?” I asked as I tried to focus on Gerard.

His body appeared limp and lifeless. But you never knew. People could possum just as good as the animal itself. Poppy shook her head. “I don't know, and I don't care. We have to get you some help.”

The alarm was still blaring; its obnoxiously high pitch pierced my eardrums and sent daggers into my brain. My stomach was beginning to hurt. The adrenaline was slowing down now that her father wasn't a threat anymore.

“We need to go. I have to get you out of here.” I attempted to rise to my feet, only to

quickly drop back down to my knees.

“No, no, no,” Poppy said. Her eyes were as large as saucers, and there was a panicked tone to her voice. “Stay with me, Vega. Stay with me.” She began to look around and yell, “Help! Someone help!”

I was trying to speak, yet nothing came out. It felt like my mouth and lips were in motion, but no words manifested. I attempted to push myself up, but my muscles wouldn't budge. My shoulders drooped, and my entire body collapsed to the floor.

Poppy was yelling as tears began streaming down her face. She looked frantic. But that was all I could tell because I couldn't hear her anymore. I was watching her scream with no sound. Her mouth was wide open, and the look on her face was just pure devastation.

The sharp pain in my gut had disappeared. I was numb all over. It felt like the only thing I could move were my eyes. I looked all around, trying to get Poppy's attention. She was fixated on my stomach. Poppy was pushing both her hands against my belly, her skin now pale white with fear and splattered with my blood.

My eyelids began to blink heavily, staying closed longer each time. And then there was nothing. My eyes closed, leaving me in darkness. I didn't feel the gunshot anymore. I didn't feel the need to get away. I didn't feel the fear for Poppy's life. There was just a casual nothingness that set me at ease.

The nothingness was a calm that could blanket a roaring ocean into lulling waves. The turbulent vortex of my life had suddenly just stopped. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I felt nothing. And for the first time in a long time, I felt peace.

My heavy heart was as light as a feather. The boulders that were usually carefully balanced on my shoulders were gone. The intense burn that would sear my throat

daily disappeared.

What was this calmness that took over? Where was the world around me?

I listened intently, trying to force in the sound. It was faint, but it was there. I could hear voices in a flurry around me, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I focused harder, trying to fucking find out what was happening outside of the darkness that had taken over.

“What do you mean?” I heard Poppy say. It was the first real, audible voice. “No. Keep trying! No! You're wrong! Keep going!”

“I'm sorry, there's nothing more we can do,” a man said. I didn't recognize his voice at all. “Is there someone we can call for you? A family member, maybe?”

“No,” Poppy said, her voice trembling. “There's no one left.” I could hear the tears in her tone. She was crying. But why was she crying? What was happening? Why couldn't I move?

“I really am sorry.”

“Can I have a minute?” she asked with a sniffle.

“Take all the time you need.” The man's voice faded as if he were walking away from me. I was so confused. Who was Poppy talking to? Why couldn't I open my eyes? What was he sorry for?

I felt a delicate touch against my hand. It was more of a sensation than a touch, similar to when your arm falls asleep and you try to wiggle your fingers. You can barely feel them, but it's just enough to know they're starting to wake up.

It hit me in the last few fragments of time I could put together, the very last explosions of electricity from one nerve to the next. . .

I died for her.

I gave my life for the only woman I ever loved.

And she was worth it. I would die a million times to protect her.

Epilogue

Poppy

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

Life is a funny thing. For the majority of my life, I watched the world through rose-colored lenses, only to have everything burn around me. I was gifted a name that opened doors. I was handed money and power. But it was all for a price.

Evil didn't have boundaries. It didn't have morals or ethics or feelings. Evil could wear a smile. It could sit next to you at dinner and give you a hug on your birthday. Evil could come in the form of family.

That evil had taken everything from me. My childhood. My mother. Vega. All of it was gone because of the man I had once called father. Sadness and despair had a new meaning. I thought I knew pain, but I was wrong.

“I'm sorry, there's nothing more we can do.” Those are the words that kept replaying in my head.

I refused to take that as an answer. Nothing was final. The doctor had left me alone with Vega's body. He was on the table, his arms at his sides, eyes closed. He looked peaceful. As if he were just asleep.

God, I wanted him to just be asleep. I wanted him to blink his eyes open, sit up, and hug me. But I knew that was never going to happen. My father had taken the very last thing in my life that had any meaning. He couldn't help himself. At the end of my father's life, he was still able to steal from me.

I reached out and softly brushed the side of Vega's face with the back of my hand. His skin was cool to the touch. “I'm so sorry,” I said quietly. “I'm so fucking sorry, Vega. This is all my fault.”

The stab wound was throbbing, but it wasn't as bad as it looked. The knife my father used was only a few inches long. He didn't hit any major organs. I just needed the area cleaned and a few stitches. Vega had paid the ultimate price. Not me. I got out basically unscathed.

My fingers traced his eyebrows and down the bridge of his nose. I ran my fingers through his hair and over the shell of his ear. Vega was still. Silent. And yet I could feel him. I felt his presence and his warmth. I felt his arms around me. I felt his skin against my skin. I felt his lips on the back of my neck.

"I can't do this without you," I said. "I don't know how."

I could hear his voice inside my head. "This was how it was always going to end. God had a plan. This was his plan. None of this is your fault."

Tears streamed down my face. "It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair, Red. But this is the hand we were dealt. Now, go live the life you deserve."

I wiped my eyes as I swallowed every bit of sadness and tried to be strong. "I don't want to live a life without you."

A warm breeze circled my ankles and then moved up my legs. It wrapped me like Vega was holding me tightly. "You'll never be without me. A piece of me will be with you forever." The warm air tickled my ribs and then danced over my belly.

Then it was gone. Vega was gone. Whatever piece of him that had stayed behind was now released. I felt the weight in the room lighten, and the air grew cold. I cried hard. I let out all the sadness with a flood of tears.

I stormed out of the room. Throwing the double doors open, I slammed my shoulder into one of the nurses. I didn't stop to apologize. I just kept going. The police were waiting for me in the lobby, but I put my head down and walked right past them. I was done.

None of this was fair. Why did it always seem like I was the one losing? How could I live any kind of life when everything I loved had been taken from me? What purpose did I serve?

I thought about killing myself. It was a brief flicker of a thought, but it crossed my mind. After what I had been through, it didn't seem strange. It almost felt reasonable. But it didn't get any headway and remained a dark thought that just flashed through my head. I wasn't going to kill myself. That would mean my father had won. He wasn't going to win.

Instead, it felt like more of a fuck you to my father if I lived a long life. He probably didn't really care either way, but it gave me something to focus on. Live happily and let my father suffer in hell.

It wasn't until Vega's funeral that I learned what kind of man he had been. He was a giver. He donated to charities and spent time at the public pool, giving kids free swimming lessons. He paid for two homeless shelters to be built and worked at the food bank in his free time. The number of people who came out to pay respects was unbelievable.

I think he tried to make up for all his own darkness. Every sin he had, he tried to cancel out with something good. He lived his life on a scale that he tried to keep balanced. There were laughs and tears the day he was buried. I truly saw Vega, the man.

If you could describe a funeral as beautiful, his was. Flowers were everywhere, and

his casket was rich mahogany with gold fittings. As it turned out, Vega had already paid for his entire funeral. He knew that he lived a high-risk life, and he knew that it could be cut drastically short.

He acted like a man of the night, a wolf who descended into the darkness and was only seen as a shadow. But he was so much more than that. He was a light, a beacon of hope. He was everything.

I tossed a small handful of dirt onto his casket in the grave. His headstone was made of black granite. His name was chiseled onto the front with swooping calligraphy and Roman numerals for dates. It was fitting and stuck out like a sore thumb in the field of brighter headstones.

The crowd of people dispersed. I was left alone, staring into the hole at a box partially covered with dirt. I didn't know where I was going to go after all this. It had only been a few weeks, and I felt utterly lost.

What was this pain? What was this hurt? What was this feeling that had a death grip on my soul?

It was love—love for a man I only knew for a short amount of time, love for a man who only knew my sadness and pain. He didn't know my laughter, and I didn't know his. He didn't know my excitement, and I didn't know his.

But I did know the depth of his love. I know he loved me because he died for me. I know he loved me because he chased me into the fire, and only I emerged from the ashes. And through that, I learned the weight of my love for him.

My life would no longer be the same. My love for him was not superficial or misguided. Love didn't have rules. I loved Vega. And Vega loved me. That was all that mattered. Tears continued to fall freely off my cheeks and into the dirt on his

casket. They were absorbed easily, as if Vega was pulling them inside to keep with him for eternity.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:30 pm

I gently touched my stomach. Love had a way of living on, of creating life so it didn't die in darkness, of giving even when it had to take. Vega was going to live on. I drew slow circles over my belly where our child was growing.

"I'm going to make it count," I said out loud. "I'm going to make every moment count."

* * * *

I dropped the keys into the palm of Tony Daniels, the top real estate agent in the county. "Here you go," I said. "Time to move on."

"That's not always a bad thing," Tony said with a smile. "Between the facility and the house, you can finally build your dream home."

"Build? No. I'm going to go find a little place off the grid. I've had enough of being in the spotlight." I shook his hand. "Thanks for all your help."

"If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to call."

"I appreciate that. Thanks again." I smiled and climbed into my car. I looked up at my childhood home one last time and then drove away.

I sold everything: the facility my father owned, the house, the condo in Bali, the beach house in Hawaii. I didn't need any of that. And I didn't want it. It took me about a year to liquidate all of it. It was a weight off my shoulders. I was officially free. Free from the burden of being an Aneska. Free from having my father's crimes

quietly follow me for the rest of my life. Free from my child having a dark shadow looming at every corner.

I was going to carry on Vega's name. The love of my life will never be forgotten. I legally changed my name to Poppy Lobos.

I glanced in the back seat to see our son sleeping soundly. He was three months old now, and all I could see was Vega. His eyes were the same shade of hazel. His hair was jet black and thick as moss on the trunk of a tree. He had the same little dimple when he smiled and the same serious face when sleeping.

I drove for hours until we finally reached the long, desolate road I remembered. Vega's cabin was tucked out of sight. The windows were dark, and it looked much less welcoming than the first time I was there.

I opened all the doors and windows before I brought our son in. I thought it would smell musty because no one had been there, but to my surprise, there was a letter on the table.

Poppy,

The pass code for the alarm is seven-one-four. I stocked the fridge and had James cut enough firewood for you and the little one to last the winter. If you need anything, I'm just a text away. Vega would be so proud of you—actually, I know he is. And I'm proud of you, too. I would love to get to know my grandson when you're ready. I want to do right by my son. I hope you give me the chance.

—Marcella

Her number was written at the bottom of the page. Marcella hadn't just stocked the fridge. The woman had the entire place cleaned from top to bottom. I picked up the baby's car seat and carried him inside. I was blown away by what his mother had

done for us. The fridge was full of fruits and vegetables. There was meat in the freezer and boxed and canned goods in the pantry. She had even stocked baby formula, diapers, wipes, and clothes for the first two years of his life.

I took out my phone and sent her a thank-you text. It was more than I could ask for. She quickly wrote back that it was her pleasure. I was desperately trying to think about what Vega would want. They didn't have a good relationship. But this woman had lost her husband and her son. Did I really want to take her grandson from her, too?

People can change. Vega's mother was the only family my son had besides me. I didn't want to give up that connection. She could tell my son stories about his father as a child. She could fill his little mind with memories and a version of his father I never knew.

And that's what I wanted. I wanted our son to have an image of his father in his mind. Because Vega was right, he would always be with me. His life would live on in our son.

Vega wasn't really gone at all. I saw him looking back at me through our son's eyes.

And that was more than enough to make my heart full.

Life isn't meant to be perfect. It's our scars that make us who we are.

Wear them proudly.
