

# WHEN THE STARS *Go Silent*

TANISHA DHANMEHER



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S t o r i e s   M a t t e r

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For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,  
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

[www.BlueRoseONE.com](http://www.BlueRoseONE.com)

[info@bluerosepublishers.com](mailto:info@bluerosepublishers.com)

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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## PREFACE

Every story begins with a question. When the Stars Go Silent began with one of my own: What happens when we lose the thing we're fighting for? When everything we've worked for comes crashing down, and the world seems to fall silent, as if it's waiting for us to give up?

Vecna's journey is one of discovery, not only about the dark forces that shape her life but about the inner strength we all possess, even when we believe we have nothing left. This book takes you through a maze of emotions—grief, anger, fear, and, ultimately, the understanding that the darkness we face is sometimes the very thing that reveals the light.

The story was inspired by the fragility of human connections and the idea that sometimes, we must lose everything to find what truly matters. It's about the moments of silence that come after a storm, and how those moments, although uncomfortable, often hold the keys to our deepest truths.

As you turn these pages, I hope you see yourself in Vecna's struggle—the desire to know, to understand, to fight for the truth. Her story is both deeply personal and universally human, a reflection of the battles we all face.

when we're on the edge of everything we know,  
searching for something more.

So, as you read, remember this: The stars may go silent,  
but they will always return. And so will we.

## FOREWORD

When I first sat down to write *When the Stars Go Silent*, I knew it would be a story about loss of love, loss of self, and the elusive search for truth. What I didn't expect was how deeply it would shape me as a writer, and how it would touch the lives of those who read it.

This book is not just about a girl named Vecna, navigating her darkest hour. It's about all of us the moments when life leaves us broken, when everything seems lost, and when the noise of the world drowns out the voice inside us. But it's also about the fight to overcome, the fight to be heard, to understand that silence doesn't mean the end. Sometimes, it's the beginning of something far greater.

In these pages, you'll find love and betrayal, secrets and revelations, and the journey of a young woman who learns that even in her darkest moments, she is never truly alone. *When the Stars Go Silent* reflects the resilience within us all. The fight to hold on to who we are, even when the world tries to take that from us.

I invite you to join Vecna on her journey not just through the twists of a suspenseful plot, but through the emotions and battles we all face as we search for the truth that lies within us.

May you find your own star in the silence.



# DEDICATION

To the ones who fall into darkness, searching for the stars that seem so far away. To those who have lost themselves in the silence yet still find the courage to rise. This book is for those of you who have felt the weight of the world on their shoulders yet continue to reach for the light.

May you always remember that even when the stars go silent, they never truly fade away. The light is still there, waiting for you to find it again.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing *When the Stars Go Silent* has been an incredible, transformative journey, and it wouldn't have been possible without the people who stood by me every step of the way.

First and foremost, to my family my mom and my sister thank you for being the constant pillars in my life. To my mom, whose love and unwavering strength have guided me through every storm, you are my heart. And to my sister, for believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself, for being my rock and my safe place. Your faith in me is the reason I continue to write and push forward, no matter the challenges.

To the writers and creators who inspire me thank you for showing me what it means to dig deep, to pour raw emotion into every word. Your work has shown me that the most difficult stories are often the most important ones to tell.

Lastly, to the readers thank you for taking this journey with me. For embracing the darkness, the mystery, and the truth in these pages. Your connection with this story makes it all worth it.

This book is a part of me, but it's also a part of all of you. Thank you for believing in me and in this story.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Tanisha Dhanmeher! I've always had a thing for stories whether it's messy, complicated love, the kind of loss that shakes you, or the fierce power of self-discovery. Writing is how I make sense of it all, and *When the Stars Go Silent* is my way of sharing the wild, emotional ride that comes with it. I write to get under the surface, to explore the hidden depths of what makes us tick. So, if you're ready for a suspenseful journey filled with twists and turns, come along I promise it'll be one hell of a ride!



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# CHAPTER I

## THE RISE OF VECNA

Power isn't just about what you have. It's about what they think you have.

And I mastered that game long ago.

I stared at my reflection in the tall mirror, the dim golden lights casting a soft glow on my skin. My hair curled like untamed waves, wild yet deliberate. My lips painted in the deepest shade of crimson curved into a smirk as I tilted my chin up. Confidence wasn't a feeling; it was a weapon. And tonight, I was sharpening it.

I had come too far to doubt myself now.

I am Vecna D.

The name that lingers on their tongues.

The face they can't look away from.

The mystery they will never solve.

And tonight, I was about to give them something to talk about.

I reached for my dress, a silk masterpiece that draped over my body like it had been stitched onto my skin. Deep-cut, high slit, bold. Made to be noticed. But the thing about being noticed is that it only works if you make them crave more.

I stepped into my stilettos, exhaling slowly, grounding myself in the moment. No matter how many flashing cameras I faced, how many murmured my name like a prayer, there was always that one second before stepping out the second where I reminded myself that none of it mattered.

Fame was a game.

And I had no plans of losing.

The moment I walked in, the air changed.

Cameras flashed. Heads turned. I didn't need to scan the room to know they were all looking at me. Whispering. Admiring. Judging. The weight of their attention was something I had grown used to, but tonight, it felt different.

I walked like I owned the world because tonight, I did.

The bass of the music pulsed under my skin, the scent of expensive champagne and designer perfume thick in the air. Everything here was money and power, wrapped in fake smiles and glittering dresses. People wanted to be seen. Wanted to be remembered.



But the only face I remembered that night was hers.

She wasn't looking at me the way the others were. There was no admiration, no intimidation, just curiosity. As if she was trying to figure me out, peeling back the layers without permission.

She was leaning against the bar, dressed in black, a glass of something dark swirling in her hand. Her hair fell over her face, and for a second, I thought she was smirking.

Intriguing.

I moved through the crowd, slowly, deliberately. She didn't look away, didn't falter. When I reached the bar, I leaned in, my voice just loud enough to be heard over the music.

"If you're going to stare, at least buy me a drink."

She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed but amused. "You're used to people doing things for you, aren't you?"

I let my lips curve into a smile. Bold.

"I'm used to getting what I want."

She took a slow sip of her drink, studying me. "And what do you want?"

I tilted my head, pretending to think. "Right now? A name."

She let a pause stretch between us, letting me wait,  
making me chase just a little.

Then, finally, she leaned in, her lips close to my ear, and  
whispered

“Rih”

## CHAPTER 2

# WHEN TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

I had spent years perfecting my presence. The way I moved, the way I spoke every glance, every breath was calculated to keep people guessing. Make them want more but never give them enough.

But *Rih*?

*Rih* wasn't guessing.

She wasn't trying to figure me out.

She was watching me, like she already knew.

I hated it.

I loved it.

She leaned against the bar, fingers tracing the rim of her glass, completely unaffected by the storm I had walked in with. The world behind me still buzzed with music, laughter, people desperately trying to belong. But here, in this space between us, it was different. It was quiet.

She didn't ask my name. Didn't act like she had been waiting her whole life to meet me.

And that's why I wanted her.

I slid onto the barstool next to her, letting my fingers brush the stem of her glass. "Rih," I said, testing the name on my tongue. "Pretty."

She smirked. "So, I've heard."

Cocky.

I liked that.

I signaled to the bartender, ordering something dark, something strong. The same as hers. I took a sip and let it burn down my throat before turning back to her.

"You don't look like the type to hang out at parties like these," I said.

She tilted her head. "And what type do I look like?"

"The type that doesn't get impressed easily."

Her lips curved slightly, as if to say I was right. "And you? You look like the type that's used to being the most interesting person in the room."

I laughed. "Am I not?"

She didn't answer. But the way her gaze flickered down trailing over my lips, my collarbone, the way my dress clung to me, that was an answer enough.

I leaned in, letting my breath tickle her ear. “You’re staring again.”

She exhaled a soft laugh. “And you like it.”

*Fuck.*

She was right.

I reached for her drink, lifting it to my lips, taking a slow sip before setting it back in front of her. Watching her. Testing her.

She didn’t break eye contact. Didn’t flinch.

Instead, she took the same glass, the same sip. Her lips on the same spot mine had just touched.

I felt the heat in my veins, a slow, intoxicating burn.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

She didn’t ask where.

Didn’t hesitate.

She just took my hand.

The moment the door shut, everything else disappeared.

She pressed me against the wall, fingers tangled in my hair, lips crashing into mine like she had been waiting for this, like we both had.

There was no hesitation.

No small talk.

No holding back.

I gasped as her hands roamed over my body, rough and desperate, like she wanted to memorize every inch of me. I pulled her closer, nails digging into her back, pulling her into me until there was no space left between us.

Her lips trailed down my neck, slow and deliberate, setting fire to every nerve she touched. I tilted my head back, letting out a breathy moan as she bit down, just enough to leave a mark.

*Fuck.*

This wasn't just lust.

It was hunger.

I flipped us, pressing her against the bed, pinning her wrists above her head. She smirked up at me, completely unafraid, completely in control even when she wasn't.

"You like being in charge, don't you?" she whispered, her breath warm against my skin.

I smiled, dragging my nails down her arms, my lips hovering just over hers. "You have no idea."

She pulled me down, her mouth meeting mine in a kiss that was nothing short of a fucking storm.

And just like that, the night disappeared into heat and shadows. When the sun bled through the curtains, reality settled in.

Her arm was draped over me, her breathing slow, steady. I watched her for a second, memorizing the way her hair spilled over the pillow, the way her lips were slightly parted, the way her fingers still lightly clung to me.

She looked peaceful. Untouched by the world outside this room.

For a second, I thought about staying.

Forgetting everything else.

But then I remembered who I was.

What I wanted.

I slid out of bed carefully, reaching for my dress, my heels. As I fastened the strap around my ankle, I felt her shift behind me.

“You’re leaving?”

Her voice was husky, laced with sleep.

I turned to her, smirking. “You knew I would.”

She watched me for a moment, eyes unreadable. Then, she smirked back. “Yeah,” she murmured. “I did.”

I leaned down, pressing a slow, lingering kiss to her lips just enough to make her want more.

Then, without another word, I walked out the door. And I didn’t look back.

## CHAPTER 3

# A LOVE WORTH DYING FOR

I wasn't supposed to see her again.

That was the rule.

One night. No attachments. No names written in ink, just whispered in the dark before vanishing into silence. That was how I kept control and how I made sure no one ever got close enough to matter.

But *Rih*?

She was already under my skin.

And I hated it.

It started with a text.

Unknown Number: Was that supposed to be a goodbye kiss?

I stared at the screen for longer than I wanted to admit, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. I could've ignored it. Deleted it. I pretended it didn't exist.

Instead, I typed:



Me: Who is this?

A response came almost instantly.

Unknown Number: Cute. You know exactly who I am.

I smirked. Of course, I did.

Me: You're stalking me, *Rih*?

Rih: Please. If I wanted to stalk you, you'd never see me coming.

I didn't reply.

But I didn't delete the chat either.

A week passed before I saw her again.

The city was buzzing, music spilling into the streets, lights flickering like electric dreams. I was at another party, one of the endless, meaningless events I attended because fame demanded it. My dress clung to my body like a second skin, my heels clicking against marble floors as I moved through the crowd, collecting stares like they were currency.

Then I felt it.

That gaze.

*Hers.*

I turned my head slightly, my eyes locking onto her across the room. She wasn't trying to hide the way she was looking at me.

Like she had already decided I belonged to her.

I lifted my drink, smirking over the rim.

She raised an eyebrow. Challenge accepted. “You gonna keep staring at me all night?” I murmured when she finally reached me, her body closed, her perfume slipping into my lungs like a drug.

She chuckled, her fingers grazing my wrist. “You’re the one who came back for more.”

“I didn’t come back for anything.”

“Liar.”

I hated how easily she saw through me.

She leaned in, her lips brushing against my ear. “If you really didn’t want this, you would’ve walked away by now.”

She was right.

But instead of admitting it, I grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the crowd, away from the noise, the flashing lights. We barely made it to the elevator before I pressed her against the mirrored wall, my lips crashing into hers, swallowing her smug little smirk.

She tasted like fire and something dangerously sweet, her hands tangling in my hair, her nails scraping against my skin, pulling me deeper into her, deeper into this.

The doors slid open, and we stumbled into the hallway, barely making it inside my suite before she pushed me against the wall. My breath hitched as her lips trailed down my neck, her hands finding the zipper of my dress, her touch slow, deliberate like she knew every inch of me.

I let her.

Because for once, I wanted to be touched like this.

Like I was something worth remembering. We collapsed onto the bed, our bodies tangled in silk and shadows, the city lights casting soft patterns against the ceiling. Her fingers traced lazy circles against my skin, her breathing steady, unrushed.

"I think you like me," she murmured.

I scoffed, rolling onto my side to face her. "Don't flatter yourself."

She laughed, soft and low. "You think I don't see the way you look at me?"

I didn't answer.

Because she was right again.

Instead, I reached for her, pulling her close, my lips brushing against hers not out of lust, but out of something softer, something I refused to name.

She sighed into me, her body melting against mine.

And for the first time in a long time, I let myself believe that maybe just maybe this was something I could hold onto.

That this wasn't just another night.

That *this was a love worth dying for*.

## CHAPTER 4

# BENEATH THE SURFACE

Love was never supposed to feel this way.

Not for me.

I had spent years perfecting the art of detachment drifting from one touch to the next, never lingering, never allowing myself to want anything more than the high of the moment.

But with *Rih*, everything was different.

Everything was too much.

It had been weeks since that night.

Weeks of stolen glances, of texts that started as playful banter but stretched into long conversations that kept me awake until dawn. Weeks of her.

She was everywhere now.

She knew how to find me, how to slip into my nights like she belonged there. And the worst part?

She did belong there.

I felt it every time I looked at her.

Every time she touched me.

I hated it.

Because I didn't know what to do with it.

We were at my place again, the city humming beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. I was stretched across the couch, a cigarette burning between my fingers, watching as *Rih* wandered barefoot through my apartment, fingers grazing along my bookshelves like she was searching for pieces of me hidden between the pages.

"You don't seem like the type to keep books," she mused, pulling out a well-worn copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I smirked. "You don't seem like the type to assume things."

She flipped through the pages. "This one's about a man so obsessed with beauty and success that he sells his soul for it, right?"

I exhaled smoke slowly, watching her over the rim of my glass. "And?"

She turned to me, her gaze steady, unreadable. "And you remind me of him."

I let out a sharp laugh. "So, what, you think I'm gonna rot from the inside out?"

Rih walked toward me, stopping just close enough that I could smell the faint trace of jasmine on her skin. "I think you already are."

The words should have made me angry.

Instead, they unraveled something in me.

Later that night, we lay tangled in my sheets, her head resting on my chest, fingers tracing invisible patterns along my rib cage. The air between us felt heavier than it should have, like there were things neither of us wanted to say out loud.

"You know," she murmured, "you act like you don't care about anything, but I think you care too much."

I swallowed hard, staring at the ceiling. "That's not true."

She lifted her head, resting her chin on my chest. "Liar."

I turned away, reaching for the pack of cigarettes on my nightstand. She caught my wrist before I could light one. "You don't have to do that."

I glanced at her, surprised. "Do what?"

"Run from this."

I exhaled sharply. "I don't run."

She held my gaze, her fingers tightening around my wrist. "Then prove it."

I didn't know what she meant.

But I felt it. I felt the weight of her words settling into the spaces inside me that I had spent my entire life keeping empty. The thing about *Rih* was that she saw me in a way no one else ever had.

She looked past the carefully curated version of myself that the world adored and straight into the parts of me I had buried beneath ambition and detachment.

And that should have terrified me.

But it didn't. Not yet. Not until I realized that the deeper she dug, the harder it would be to keep her from seeing the parts of me that even I was afraid of.



## CHAPTER 5

# WHISPERS OF DOUBT

Love had never scared me.

It was attachment that unsettled me. Because attachment meant vulnerability. And vulnerability? That was just another word for weakness.

But *Rih* was a storm I never saw coming, and suddenly, I wasn't so sure of my own rules anymore.

It started small.

Little things.

The way she wanted to know me was not just the surface, not just the persona I'd perfected under flashing lights and velvet ropes. She dug deeper, asked questions no one else dared to. And when I didn't answer, she waited, patient but unwavering.

It pissed me off.

It terrified me.

And worst of all? It made me want to answer.

We were at her apartment, the city lights filtering through the sheer curtains, painting soft shadows across

the walls. *Rih* sat on the couch, one leg tucked under her, wearing one of my oversized shirts. Her hair was still damp from the shower, curls spilling over her shoulders, and she looked so effortlessly beautiful it made something inside me twist.

I stood by the window, cigarette in hand, exhaling slowly.

“You do that when you’re trying not to talk,” she said suddenly.

I glanced at her. “Do what?”

“Smoke. Stare out the window. Pretend you’re somewhere else.”

I rolled my eyes, taking another drag. “Or maybe I just like the view.”

She scoffed. “Vecna, you run from everything.”

My jaw tensed. “And you overanalyze everything.”

*Rih* didn’t flinch. She just stared at me, her dark eyes holding something heavy. “Maybe because I actually give a damn.”

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head. “You’re making something out of nothing.”

She stood, crossing the room, stopping right in front of me. Close enough that I could feel the heat of her body, smell the lingering scent of her perfume.

“Am I?” she challenged.

I hated that she could do this. Pull me apart with just a few words, a single look.

“Why does it matter?” I muttered, avoiding her gaze.

“Because I’m trying to be in something real with you, Vecna.” Her voice softened, but there was frustration laced in it. “But I can’t do that if you’re always halfway out the door.”

Something inside me clenched.

She was right.

And that scared the hell out of me.

The night spiraled from there.

One second, we were standing too close, tension thick in the air. Next, we were arguing.

“You think just because I don’t spill my every thought, I don’t care?” I snapped.

“I think you hide,” she shot back. “I think you push people away before they can even try to stay.”

“Maybe people aren’t supposed to stay.”

Rih stared at me like I’d just proven her worst fear. “Is that what you believe? That love is just temporary?”

I looked away. “I think love is just another way to get hurt.”

Her silence was heavier than any words.

When I finally met her eyes, there was something in them I didn't like something fragile, something disappointed.

"You don't get it, do you?" she whispered.

"Get what?"

She let out a bitter laugh. "That I would've stayed. That I—" She stopped herself, shaking her head, as if she realized it didn't matter anymore. "Forget it."

Rih walked away, disappearing into the bedroom, leaving me standing there with a cigarette burning between my fingers and the weight of my own words crushing me. The next morning, she kissed me like nothing had happened.

But I could feel it. The shift.

She was still here, but something had cracked. And I knew, deep down, that cracks only ever got bigger.

## CHAPTER 6

# CRACKS IN THE PERFECT PICTURE

Love was never meant to be perfect.

But for a while, we pretended it was.

Until the cracks became too deep to ignore.

The night started like every other camera flashing, voices calling our names, the weight of the world watching. Rih stood beside me, stunning in black satin, her hand wrapped around mine. To everyone else, we were the perfect couple, untouchable and magnetic.

But something was different tonight.

I felt it in the way her fingers clenched a little too tightly, how her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. She was watching me, waiting for something.

And I... I was everywhere but with her.

The night was a blur of flashing lights and whispered conversations. I worked the room, shook hands,

exchanged fake laughter with industry giants. I could feel Rih beside me, standing close but never with me.

By the time we left, the tension between us was thick enough to suffocate.

Then, the dam broke.

The moment we stepped inside the apartment, Rih threw her clutch against the wall. The sound of it crashing onto the marble echoed like a gunshot.

“Are we going to talk about this or are you going to keep pretending nothing’s wrong?” she snapped, breathless, her eyes burning with something between rage and heartbreak.

I exhaled slowly, rolling my shoulders. “Rih, it was a party. Why are you making this a big deal?”

Her laugh was hollow. “A party? That’s what you call it? Vecna, you ignored me all night! You barely even looked at me!”

I rubbed my temple. “I was working in the room. You know this is what my life is like.”

“And what am I?” she demanded, stepping closer, voice shaking. “A fucking accessory? A trophy you bring along and forget the moment we step outside?”

Her words cut deeper than I wanted to admit.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I muttered, walking past her, but she grabbed my arm, forcing me to face her.

"I'm being ridiculous?" Her eyes were wild, glassy with unshed tears. "Do you even love me, Vecna?"

The question slammed into me like a bullet.

Of course, I did. But saying it? Admitting it now, at this moment, when I knew she was ready to break apart?

I didn't.

Instead, I said nothing.

And that silence my silence was the final crack.

Rih let out a choked breath, stepping back like I had physically hit her. "Wow," she whispered. "I mean... wow."

Then, without warning, she grabbed the nearest vase and hurled it across the room.

It shattered against the wall, shards flying in all directions.

"Say something!" she screamed. "Anything, Vecna! Lie to me if you have to! Just don't stand there like I mean nothing to you!"

"Rih"

But before I could say another word, she shoved me. Hard.

Her small frame against mine, her fists colliding with my chest not to hurt, but because she was desperate.

Desperate for *me to fight for her*.

Desperate for *me to care*.

I caught her wrists, but she struggled against me, fighting me like I was the one breaking her heart.

Maybe I was.

Tears spilled down her cheeks, her breathing ragged. "You don't love me," she whispered, voice cracking. "You never did, did you?"

My grip tightened around her wrists. "Don't say that."

"Then say something else!"

I wanted to.

I wanted to tell her I loved her, that she was the only thing in my life that ever made sense.

But I didn't.

And when I let her go, she stumbled back, wiping her face, nodding like she finally understood.

Like she had finally given up.

"Fuck you, Vecna," she breathed.

Then she turned and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

I stood in the wreckage of our love, the broken glass, the silence, the pieces of her anger still echoing in the air and for the first time in my life, I realized something.

I might have been the one chasing fame.



When The Stars Go Silent

But Rih?

She was the only thing I ever had that was real.

And I had let her go.

## CHAPTER 7

# WHEN LOVE BEGINS TO BLEED

Love wasn't meant to be gentle.

It was meant to be violent, raw, and consuming something that took without asking, that demanded everything from you until there was nothing left.

And right now, it was killing me.

Days had passed since Rih walked out.

I told myself I was fine.

I told myself I didn't need her.

But the empty apartment, the shattered glass I still hadn't cleaned up, and the ghost of her touch on my skin said otherwise.

Everywhere I looked, I saw her.

The scent of her perfume still lingered on my sheets. The half-empty cup of coffee she had forgotten on the counter. The sweater she had left draped over my chair, like she thought she'd be back for it.

When The Stars Go Silent

Except she wasn't.

And I hated how much that realization burned.

I wasn't the type to chase.

I never begged.

I had built walls so high that no one had ever climbed them.

But Rih?

She had broken through without trying.

And now, I was the one bleeding for it.

The club was loud deafening, almost but I could still hear my own thoughts.

I needed a distraction.

So I let myself get lost in the music, in the heat of bodies pressing against me, in the burn of alcohol down my throat.

But even as hands touched me, lips whispered in my ear, nothing felt right.

Nothing felt like her.

And then I saw her.

Rih.

Across the room, her body moving to the music, her head tilted back in laughter. She was beautiful God, she was beautiful but she wasn't alone.

And the guy beside her?

He wasn't a stranger.

He was her ex.

The one she swore she was over. The one she told me was a mistake.

And now, he had his hands on her waist, his lips too close to her ear, whispering things that made her laugh.

Jealousy burned through me like wildfire.

It wasn't just jealousy.

It was something darker, something that made my stomach twist and my fists clench at my sides.

I told myself to walk away.

I told myself she wasn't mine anymore.

But before I could stop myself, I was pushing through the crowd, my vision tunneling until all I could see was her and the bastard touching her.

And then, just like that, I was grabbing her wrist and pulling her away.

"Vecna what the fuck?" Rih hissed, wrenching her arm out of my grip as we stumbled into the dimly lit hallway behind the club.

I stared at her, chest rising and falling. "What the fuck are you doing?"

She laughed, but there was no humor in it. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

That shouldn’t have stung, but it did.

“That guy” I seethed, voice low and rough, “That guy was all over you.”

She crossed her arms, jaw tight. “And?”

“And?” My voice cracked with frustration. “You told me he was a mistake.”

Rih’s lips curled into something bitter. “Yeah, well, we all make mistakes, don’t we?”

My stomach twisted. “This is about us, isn’t it?”

Her eyes flickered with pain, rage, something deeper. “There is no us, Vecna.”

Liar.

We both knew that was a lie.

I stepped closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating off her skin.

“Tell me you don’t feel this,” I whispered, fingers brushing her wrist.

She shuddered, her breath hitching for the briefest second before she pushed me away.

“I can’t do this,” she said, voice breaking.

“Rih”

She shook her head. "I love you, Vecna. I love you so much it fucking hurts. But you don't love me. Not the way I need you to."

Her words sliced through me.

I wanted to fight her on it.

I wanted to tell her she was wrong.

But I couldn't.

Because maybe she wasn't.

She took a deep breath, her fingers brushing mine for the briefest second before she stepped back.

"You don't get to be jealous," she said, her voice breaking. "Not when you were the one who let me go."

And then she turned and walked away.

I should have followed her.

I should have begged.

But I didn't.

I just stood there, watching the only person who had ever truly mattered walk out of my life.

And for the first time in my life, I knew what heartbreak really felt like.

(Rih's Apartment)

Rih slammed the door behind her, her breaths coming out in ragged gasps.

Her hands trembled as she reached for the nearest thing a framed picture of her and Vecna and threw it across the room.

The glass shattered against the wall.

Tears streamed down her face as she screamed, the sound raw and broken, the weight of everything crushing her.

She had held it together all night.

She danced. She laughed. She had pretended.

But the moment Vecna grabbed her, the moment she saw the hurt in her eyes, it all came crashing down.

“Fucking hell,” she muttered, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes.

She hated this.

Hated the way Vecna still had power over her, hated the way her heart still ached for someone who couldn't love her the way she needed.

Her fingers clenched into fists, and suddenly, she was throwing things pillows, books, whatever her hands could reach.

She wanted to break everything.

Because maybe if she shattered enough things, the pain inside her would break too.

But it didn't.

It only grew.

And then she was sinking to the floor, hugging her knees, gasping between sobs.

She hated her.

She hated herself more.

Because even after everything, she still wanted Vecna.

Even if it killed her.

And maybe it already was.

*When love begins to bleed, there's no way to stop it.*

*And tonight, they were both drowning in it.*



## CHAPTER 8

# THE LAST KISS

*Love was never supposed to feel like this. Not like a wound that wouldn't heal. Not like a scream stuck in your throat. Not like the sharp edge of a blade pressed against your ribs, waiting for the moment you'd cave. But that's what we were now. A slow, excruciating death in the name of love.*

(Vecna's Apartment)

The air between us was heavy.

Not with the kind of tension that led to soft kisses and whispered apologies.

But with the kind that was destroyed.

Rih stood in front of me, her hands clenched into fists, her breath shaky. She looked at me like I was a storm she had barely survived, like she was standing in the wreckage of everything I had done to her trying to piece herself back together, trying to find a way to breathe.

"I don't want to do this anymore," she whispered.

I swallowed, my chest aching. "Rih—"

She let out a broken laugh, shaking her head. “No, Vecna. You don’t get to talk. Not this time.”

Her voice was shaking.

Her eyes, always so full of fire, were drowning in unshed tears.

I had never seen her this way.

Not like this.

Not so exhausted from loving me.

“You don’t get to tell me you care,” she said, voice raw.

“Not after everything. Not after the way you left me.”

I wanted to reach for her.

But something told me that if I did, she would shatter completely.

“You don’t understand,” I whispered, my voice barely there.

Her lips trembled. “No. I do. I understand too well.”

She took a shaky breath, looking away for a moment before meeting my gaze again.

“You were my world, Vecna,” she confessed, her voice cracking. “I wanted to be enough for you. I wanted to be someone you would fight for.”

Her words slammed into me.

“You were,” I choked out.

Rih laughed bitterly, broken. “No. I wasn’t. You loved me like I was something temporary. Like I was just another part of your life that you could throw away when it got too hard.”

I felt my breath hitch. “That’s not true”

“Then why did you break me?” Her voice rose, her eyes glistening. “Why did you make me fall in love with you if you were just going to rip my heart apart?!”

Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she didn’t bother wiping them away.

I couldn’t speak.

Because she wasn’t wrong.

I had ruined her.

I had left her in the dark, wondering why she wasn’t enough.

I had broken the only person who had ever truly seen me.

And now, I was watching her bleed because of it.

“I wanted you to love me,” she whispered. “I wanted you to choose me the way I chose you every single day.”

Her breath shuddered, and she wrapped her arms around herself like she was trying to hold herself together.

“But you didn’t,” she said, barely above a whisper. “You never did.”

Her words killed me.

Because they weren’t true.

I loved her.

I loved her so much it hurt.

But I didn’t know how to love her the way she needed me to.

And now, it was too late. I took a step closer.

Her body tensed, but she didn’t move away.

I lifted a hand, hesitating before brushing a tear from her cheek with my thumb.

She closed her eyes for a second, leaning into my touch just for a moment.

It felt like a goodbye.

Like she was letting herself feel me one last time before she walked away forever.

Her lashes fluttered open, and our eyes met.

“I hate you for what you did to me,” she murmured.

A tear slipped down my cheek. “I know.”

“I hate you for making me love you.”

My breath shuddered. “I know.”

Her lips trembled. “I hate that even now, after everything, I still want you to hold me.”

Something inside me broke.

I couldn’t stop myself.

I cupped her face and kissed her, hard, like I could pour all my regret, all my pain, all the love I had never been able to say out loud into this one moment.

And for a second, she kissed me back.

For a second, it felt like maybe we could still fix this.

But then she pulled away.

Her fingers touched her lips, her eyes searching mine with something that looked like goodbye.

“This is the last time,” she whispered.

My stomach twisted.

“Rih—”

She took a shaky step back. “You can’t fix this, Vecna. You can’t fix me.”

I felt something inside me collapse.

She turned away, walking to the door.

She didn’t look back.

And this time, I knew.

She wasn’t coming back.

*The last kiss always tastes like regret. And I would spend the rest of my life wishing I had kissed her like it was the first time, instead of the last.*

## CHAPTER 9

# SHADOWS OF GOODBYE

The moment Rih walked out of the door, something inside me collapsed.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't a breakdown. It was something quieter. Deadlier. Like an implosion, like all the air being sucked out of a room, leaving me weightless and gasping for something that wasn't there anymore.

I stood in the middle of the apartment, staring at the space she had just left, my mind blank except for the last thing she said.

"I hate that even now, after everything, I still want you to hold me."

She wanted me to stop her. To fight for her. To love her the way she deserved.

And I just stood there, letting her walk away.

Letting the best thing that ever happened to me become a memory.

I don't know how long I stood there, motionless. Time felt warped stretched too thin and too thick all at once. The room was still alive with the scent of her. The sweater she always stole from me was still draped over my chair. Her mug was still on the counter, lipstick stained on the rim.

Everything screamed at her, but she was gone.

And the silence she left behind was unbearable.

I took a step back, bumping into the edge of the table. The wine bottle from last night wobbled, tipped over, and crashed onto the floor, red liquid bleeding across the wooden surface like a wound that refused to clot.

I swallowed.

I felt nothing.

Then I laughed short, sharp, hollow because of course. Of course, this was how it ended. Of course, I destroyed the one person who ever saw me beyond the chaos, beyond the ambition, beyond the need to be something more.

I destroyed her.

And now, I was left with nothing but the wreckage.

Days passed. Or maybe it was just hours.

The world outside kept moving. I heard the city the honking cars, the distant sirens, the muffled conversations of people who weren't breaking apart.



But inside, everything was frozen.

I didn't eat.

Didn't sleep.

Didn't turn on my phone.

What was the point?

She was my only point.

And I threw it all away.

The first time I called her, it went straight to voicemail.

The second time, too.

By the seventh time, I accepted what I already knew.

She wasn't coming back.

I stared at my phone, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

If I could just say the right thing, if I could just explain,  
if I could just

But what was there to say?

"I'm sorry?"

Too late.

"I love you?"

Not enough.

"Please come back?"

She wouldn't.

I threw my phone across the room, watched it slam against the wall, watched it shatter and still, it didn't feel like enough.

The rage, the grief, the regret choked me, suffocating, unrelenting.

I pressed my hands against my face, breathing in ragged, uneven gasps.

I did this. I did this.

And now I had to live with it.

The club was a blur of smoke, sweat, and strangers.

I let the music crash over me.

Let hands that weren't hers pull me in.

Let lips that didn't belong to her trace my skin.

I wanted to forget.

I wanted to drown.

But no matter how many drinks I had, no matter how many bodies pressed against mine, no matter how much I tried to lose myself in the haze

She was still there.

In my head.

In my veins.

In every goddamn breath I took.

I stumbled to the bar, gripping the edge of the counter,  
my vision spinning.

“Another,” I muttered to the bartender, voice rough.

He glanced at me, hesitated, but poured the drink  
anyway.

I lifted the glass to my lips

And froze.

Because across the room, in the dim neon glow, she was  
there.

Rih.

My breath hitched.

She looked different.

Not the girl I held at night. Not the girl who used to  
trace my jaw with the tip of her finger and whisper that  
she'd never leave.

No, this Rih was someone else entirely.

Her eyes were red-rimmed but cold. Her body was  
pressed against someone else's. A guy.

Not just any guy.

Her ex.

And when she turned slightly, laughing at something he  
said, her gaze flickered up

And met mine.

My stomach twisted.

For a second, I thought maybe, maybe there was something left, maybe she would see me and remember, maybe she'd come back, maybe she still

But then she looked away.

Like I was nothing.

Like I never meant a damn thing to her.

Like I wasn't falling apart while she was learning to forget me.

And that?

That was the moment I felt it.

The weight of real goodbye.

The kind that didn't come with screaming or breaking things.

The kind that didn't come with second chances.

The kind that wasn't just an argument waiting to be fixed.

This?

This was final.

And as the realization settled in, the last piece of me, the part that still believed I could fix this shattered.

I turned away.

Took another drink, And let the last remnants of her drown inside me.

## CHAPTER 10

# THE SILENCE AFTER THE STORM

Success tastes like gold and blood.

The camera's flash. The interviews flood in. The world finally knows my name, the name I fought so hard to carve into the universe. Vecna D. A name that owns the headlines, the billboards, the fucking sky.

And yet

The lights don't feel warm.

The applause doesn't feel loud enough.

The champagne tastes bitter on my tongue.

But I smile. Perfectly. Effortlessly. Like I have everything I ever wanted.

Because isn't this what I wanted?

Isn't this what I left everything behind for?

The party is wild, too loud, too fast, too much.

I walk in, and the world shifts around me. All eyes on me.

Cameras flash. Glasses clink. Conversations pause, only to pick up again in frantic whispers.

“That’s her.”

“Vecna fucking D.”

“She’s unreal. Look at her. Like she doesn’t have a single regret.”

I let them stare. Let them admire me. Let them believe I am every bit as flawless as I appear.

Someone slides a drink into my hand. Someone else leans in too close, murmuring something in my ear that I don’t register. The bass thumps through my veins. The air is thick with perfume and sweat and the kind of hunger that has nothing to do with food.

I breathe it in.

I tell myself this is enough.

That this is what I chose.

That this is what I fought for.

So why does it feel so fucking empty?

It’s been months since I last saw her.

Months since that night at the club. Months since our last fight, since our last kiss, since she tore me apart with

## When The Stars Go Silent

her words and walked away with the pieces I couldn't get back.

And now, she's nothing more than a ghost in the corners of my mind.

I don't let myself think about her.

Not when I'm on set.

Not when I'm smiling for the cameras.

Not when the world is watching.

But when the lights go out when it's just me and the silence

She's there.

Her voice.

Her laugh.

Her touch.

The way she looked at me that night like she was breaking and I was the one who did it.

I roll onto my side, staring at the ceiling, exhaling slowly.

"She's fine."

That's what I tell myself.

She's probably moved on.

She probably doesn't think about me at all.

And that's fine.

That's how it's supposed to be.

Another party. Another event. Another night of pretending.

I let someone wrap an arm around my waist. Let another pull me onto the dance floor. Let the world see the version of me they expect the one who is untouched by the past, who is rising, shining, winning.

But then

A whisper cuts through the music.

"Did you hear?"

"About Vecna and Rih?"

My blood runs cold.

My heart stops.

I turn too fast, too sharp toward the voices.

They blink at me, caught off guard.

"Yeah... They broke up. Vecna left her."

"I heard Rih didn't take it well."

"Well, obviously. She was obsessed with her."

"No, dude. I mean like, she really didn't take it well."

The words slice through me, clean and brutal.

I don't move.

I don't breathe.



## When The Stars Go Silent

The room spins. The music dulls into white noise. The glass in my hand slips, shatters against the floor, but I don't even flinch.

"She really didn't take it well."

What the fuck does that mean?

I turn away before they can see my face, before they can see the way my hands start to shake. I need air. I need space.

I step outside, the cold night pressing against my skin. The city glows beneath me, bright and alive.

I should feel powerful.

I should feel untouchable.

But all I feel is something sinking, deep in my gut.

A whisper of something I don't understand yet.

A silence before the storm.

And I don't know it yet but soon, the world is about to shift beneath my feet.

## CHAPTER II

# THE NIGHT EVERYTHING CHANGED

The city was alive, but I was drowning in silence.

The air outside the party was cold, but it wasn't enough to numb the feeling crawling under my skin.

"She really didn't take it well."

Those words wouldn't leave my head.

I exhaled, staring at the city lights, trying to shake the unease curling inside me. This was just guilt. Just exhaustion.

I should go back in.

I should forget about this.

I should move on like I said I would.

But my hands were already pulling out my phone. My thumb hovered over her name.

I had broken her, and now? Now I felt like i was missing a piece of myself! My chest ached. My throat felt tight, my heart said call her but, Rih will not answer my brain said!

I shouldn't call her.

But I did. And in one ring, she answered.

"Vecna."

She was crying.

"Rih?" I whispered, my heart plummeting.

"Vecna, I... I don't know what to do."

Her voice was raw, trembling, and so unlike her.

I straightened. Cold fear dripped down my spine.

"Talk to me, Rih. What's wrong?"

A sharp inhale.

"I feel like I can't breathe. I feel like something is closing in on me, like something bad is going to happen. I—" "Vecna, I'm scared."

I gripped my phone so tightly my knuckles turned white.

"I'm coming to you."

"NO"

Her voice was suddenly firm but broken.

"Rih—"

“You don’t understand.”

A pause.

Then, softer

“Vecna... there’s something I need to tell you.”

A shiver ran through me.

She sounded different now. Not just sad. Not just hurt.

But... desperate.

Like this was her last chance to say something.

“Then tell me.”

She hesitated.

Then

Click.

The line went dead.

“Rih?”

I pulled my phone away. No service.

Panic crawled up my throat.

I called her again.

And again.

And again.

No answer.

By the 300th call, I was already running.

Her apartment door was open.

A warning screamed in my head, but I didn't stop.

"Rih?" My voice barely sounded like my own.

The lights inside flickered. The air was stale, suffocating.

Something was wrong. So, so wrong.

And then, I saw her.

And my world ended.

Blood.

Everywhere.

Dark, pooling around her like a shattered promise.

Her throat slit open.

Her lips parted, as if she had tried to say my name.

The moment my knees hit the floor, the pain tore through me.

"NO!"

My scream felt like it shattered through the walls, through the air, through every piece of me that still existed.

I couldn't breathe.

I crawled toward her, hands shaking, soaked in red the moment I touched her.

"Rih, wake up! Please, please"

My hands gripped her shoulders, shaking her, begging her, pleading with the universe to undo this, to fix this, to give her back to me.

She was so cold.

I pressed my forehead against hers, rocking, sobbing so hard I thought my ribs would snap.

“Please, Rih please, baby, just open your eyes, please”

Her head lolled against me, lifeless.

And that’s when the panic cracked into pure hysteria.

I grabbed my phone, dialing her name like an idiot, like she could answer me, like this wasn’t real.

“No, no, no, please, please”

I gripped her tighter, shaking so violently I could barely see past my tears.

This wasn’t happening.

This wasn’t happening.

And then

Footsteps.

A shadow at the door.

I turned, my blood-stained hands trembling, my vision spinning.

And there she was.

When The Stars Go Silent

Rih's mother.

Standing at the doorway.

Expression blank.

Eyes dry.

Like she already knew.

Like this had been planned.

And that's when I realized

I wasn't just grieving.

I was trapped.

And this?

This was just the beginning.

## CHAPTER 12

# HER BLOOD, MY HANDS

The silence after a tragedy is the loudest sound in the world.

I was kneeling on the cold, blood-soaked floor, my hands trembling, coated in the warmth that once ran through her. Rih's body lay lifeless in my arms, her throat slit open, eyes frozen in an expression of something I couldn't understand fear, regret, a plea? I wanted to believe she was still in there, trapped somewhere behind those wide, glassy eyes, waiting for me to wake her up.

"Rih..." My voice cracked, a whisper of a prayer, but no god was listening.

Her blood was on my hands. Her blood was on my hands.

I couldn't breathe. The walls of the apartment felt like they were closing in, suffocating me with the weight of everything that had just shattered in front of me. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be real.



And then a sound.

I turned my head slowly, my body paralyzed with something colder than fear.

Rih's mother.

She stood in the doorway, silent, still. Watching.

No screaming. No tears. No panic.

Just watching.

The way her lips barely parted, the way her fingers clutched onto the edges of her shawl she knew. She had known before I even got here. She had been waiting for me.

"You... called them," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

She didn't respond. She just... stared.

Then sirens.

Loud. Piercing. Coming closer.

A cold wave of realization crashed over me. This was planned.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. Shadows flickered against the walls as the apartment filled with red and blue flashes of light. My body screamed at me to move, to run, to do something, but I was frozen in place, holding the only person I had ever truly loved in my arms dead, bleeding, ruined.

The door burst open.

Shouts filled the air.

Figures in uniform stormed in. Guns raised. Voices sharp. Commands barked.

“Hands where we can see them!”

I flinched. My breath hitched. My arms tightened around Rih.

“Now, Vecna!”

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t let go.

A rough hand grabbed my shoulder, yanking me back, ripping Rih from my grasp. A strangled scream left my throat as I reached for her, but another officer was already pulling me away, my own blood-streaked hands wrenched behind my back.

“She’s gone, Vecna! Let her go!”

I thrashed. Fought. No. No. No.

The metal cuffs bit into my wrists. My arms were twisted behind me. My legs buckled as they forced me to my feet.

I was still staring at her.

Still watching as they covered her body with a white sheet.

White.

The color of peace. Of purity. Of endings.

## When The Stars Go Silent

I opened my mouth to scream, to tell them I didn't do this, that someone else had taken her from me, that this wasn't how we were supposed to end. But the words died in my throat.

Because no one was listening.

Because in their eyes, I was already guilty.

The cameras flashed as they dragged me outside, the world suddenly too bright, too loud, too cruel.

Her blood was on my hands.

And now so was her death.

## CHAPTER 13

# THE BLAME & JOURNAL OF SECRETS

They say grief comes in waves, but the tide that swallowed me was merciless.

The police station smelled of cold steel and cigarette smoke. The fluorescent lights buzzed above me, too bright, too harsh. My wrists were sore from the handcuffs, my skin still stained with her blood. I could feel the weight of their stares drilling into me detectives, officers, reporters behind the glass. The world was waiting for my confession, waiting for me to fall apart and give them what they wanted.

“Did you kill her, Vecna?”

The detective’s voice was flat, clinical, void of emotion. As if Rih was just a case. Just another file in their endless cabinets.

I lifted my head, my throat raw from screaming, crying pleading. “No.”

A pause. A glance exchanged between the two officers sitting across from me. One of them leaned forward, pushing a folder toward me. The crime scene photos. Rih's lifeless body, her throat slit, her blood pooled beneath her like a final, tragic love letter.

"Your fingerprints were all over the scene. You were found holding her body. You called her over three hundred times before arriving at her apartment. Obsession? Jealousy? Rage?"

My stomach twisted. No. No. No. They were twisting it, turning my grief into a weapon against me.

"I loved her." My voice barely came out. "I would never"

"Then who did?"

I didn't have an answer.

Because deep down, in the parts of my mind I wasn't ready to confront, I knew. This wasn't random. This wasn't just a tragedy.

"She called me before she died." My voice was shaking.

"She was scared. She was trying to tell me something."

The detective tilted his head. "And what did she say?"

"She" My breath hitched. "She hung up."

The silence was suffocating.

“Vecna D the rising star, the woman on every magazine cover now a prime suspect in the murder of her ex-girlfriend.”

The words weren’t from the detectives. They were from the news playing on the TV behind them.

A reporter stood outside the police station, cameras flashing around her, her expression painted with faux sympathy.

“Did fame push her over the edge?”

“Was it love or obsession?”

“What really happened behind closed doors?”

I felt sick. They weren’t mourning her. They were feeding off her.

And me? I was already guilty in their eyes.

The questioning continued for hours. Every detail of my relationship with Rih was dissected, twisted, turned into something ugly. By the time they let me go, the world outside had changed.

My name was everywhere.

I could barely walk to my apartment without being blinded by flashing lights, microphones shoved in my face, voices screaming over each other.

“Vecna, did you love her?”

“Vecna, did you kill her?”

“Vecna, do you feel guilty?”

I kept walking. Kept breathing. Kept breaking.

Inside my apartment, silence wrapped around me like a noose. The air was thick, suffocating. I couldn’t move, couldn’t think.

And then I saw it.

A black leather journal. Hers.

My hands trembled as I reached for it, my breath catching in my throat.

The moment I opened it, the world tilted.

Because this wasn’t just a diary.

It was a confession. It was her truth. And it was the beginning of something far, far darker than I could have ever imagined.

## CHAPTER 14

# FRAMED BY LOVE

The courtroom was suffocating. The air was thick with whispers, judgment, and the weight of a verdict that hadn't even been spoken yet. I sat there, spine straight, hands clasped in my lap, staring at the polished wooden table in front of me, trying to convince myself that I was still breathing.

But was I?

The world outside had already decided. Vecna D the rising star, the woman who had everything was a murderer. The cameras had caught my downfall in real-time, my face plastered across every news channel, every headline, every whispered conversation in dimly lit bars.

"Fame to infamy how the golden girl became a killer."

"Did jealousy drive Vecna to murder?"

"The tragic end of a toxic love story."

I clenched my fists.

They didn't know anything.



The prosecutor stood up, his voice sharp and cold. "Your Honor, the evidence is clear. Vecna had the means, the opportunity, and the motive. The victim, Rih Malhotra, was found covered in blood in her own apartment. And the last person to see her alive?" He turned to me, his lips curling. "Was sitting right there."

A murmur rippled through the courtroom.

My lawyer shifted beside me, whispering a reminder to stay calm. But calm had left my body the night I found Rih.

I swallowed back the bile rising in my throat.

I needed an escape from the walls closing in, from the world that wanted to see me burn.

My fingers grazed the leather cover of Rih's journal on my lap. It had been allowed as evidence, but I had fought for the right to keep it close. Because in those pages, she was still here.

I flipped it open, my hands desperate, my heart even more so.

### **April 3rd**

*"I don't know what I'd do without Vecna. She drives me insane sometimes, but when she holds me, everything fades. I think I was always meant to love her. Maybe I loved her in a past life too."*

*I pressed my lips together, my vision blurring.*

**June 17th**

*“She kissed me under the rain today. I laughed because it felt like one of those dramatic movie scenes she’d roll her eyes at. But she just pulled me closer and said, ‘Maybe some clichés are worth it.’”*

My fingers tightened around the edges of the book.

The courtroom, the whispers, the accusations they all faded for a second. Because in these pages, we were still us.

But the voice of the prosecutor shattered it all.

“Your Honor, we have a witness.”

My breath caught in my throat as the doors at the back of the courtroom swung open.

And then I saw who walked in.

The floor beneath me disappeared.

No.

Not them.

## CHAPTER 15

# THE TRIAL OF A BROKEN HEART

The courtroom doors swung open, and my breath turned razor-sharp.

No.

No, it couldn't be.

But there they were stepping inside with slow, deliberate steps, like a final nail being driven into my coffin. My blood turned ice. Someone who should've never been here. Someone who had no right to be in this courtroom, standing there like a ghost from a past I couldn't outrun.

Rih's mother.

Her eyes found me, hollow and burning all at once. The way she looked at me like I was the very thing that had stolen the light from her daughter's world made my stomach twist. I had seen that look before. On mothers who had lost their children. On women who stood at funerals with clenched jaws and shaking hands,

swallowing back their grief so they wouldn't collapse under its weight.

I had seen that look the night I found Rih in a pool of her own blood.

She walked past the rows of spectators, past the murmurs and gasps, until she stood at the witness stand. The prosecutor approached her, his voice smooth, controlled.

"Please state your name for the court."

"Mira Malhotra." Her voice was quiet but steady.

"Ms. Malhotra, do you believe your daughter's death was a murder?"

A pause.

Then, in a voice that was sharp enough to slice through bone, she said, "Yes."

The courtroom erupted. Gasps, whispers, the sound of camera shutters clicking. My nails dug into my palms as I stared at her, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I wanted to scream. To tell her I was innocent. To tell her I had loved Rih more than anything in this world.

But she wasn't looking at me.

She was staring at the journal in my hands.

"You were close to your daughter?" the prosecutor continued.

Mira's lips pressed together. "She told me everything."

"Everything?"

A slow nod. "About Vecna. About their fights. About how she felt like she was losing herself in that relationship."

A sharp pain shot through my chest.

"She told me she was scared," Mira said, her voice breaking now. "Scared of how much she loved Vecna. Scared of what that love was doing to her."

I shook my head, my vision blurring. No. That's not how it was. That's not the truth.

But the jury didn't know that. The world didn't know that.

And Mira Malhotra was painting the perfect picture of a tragic love story that turned deadly.

"Do you believe Vecna had a role in your daughter's death?"

Mira exhaled shakily. Then she turned her gaze back to me, and for the first time since she entered the courtroom, she really looked at me.

"I think Vecna was the only thing my daughter ever loved enough to die for."

A deep silence fell over the room.

I felt like the walls were closing in, like the air had been stolen from my lungs.

The judge cleared his throat. “We will reconvene tomorrow. Court is adjourned.”

The gavel slammed against the wood.

But I barely heard it.

Because as I sat there, Mira Malhotra’s words carved themselves into my skin like a wound that would never heal.

And I realized no matter what the truth was, no matter how much I screamed my innocence I was already guilty in the eyes of the world.

## CHAPTER 16

# EVIDENCE

The door to my apartment creaked open, but the silence inside was suffocating. It was as if the walls themselves were mourning, whispering the ghosts of what once was. The place still smelled like jasmine and cigarette smoke, ambition laced with desperation but it no longer felt like mine.

I shut the door behind me and leaned against it, exhaling shakily. The world outside was burning with my name Vecna D, the prime suspect. The rising star who fell from grace. The lover was accused of murder.

I had been questioned for hours, forced to relive that night again and again until the images were seared into my brain like a wound that refused to heal.

Rih's lifeless body.

Her blood.

The way her hand had been curled, as if she was reaching for me in her final moments.

I pressed my hands against my face. I didn't kill her. I wasn't the monster they thought I was. But none of that

mattered now. The world loved a villain more than a victim. And to them, I was the perfect suspect.

I moved through my apartment in a daze, my heels clicking against the cold floor. Every step felt heavy, like I was dragging the weight of my grief behind me. I wanted to drown in my bed, disappear beneath the sheets, and forget that the world existed. But instead, I found myself standing in front of Rih's journal.

The same one I had taken from her apartment after the police let me go.

It sat on my nightstand, its cover worn, the edges slightly frayed. A piece of her, left behind.

My fingers trembled as I reached for it.

I wasn't sure why I hesitated. Maybe because I already knew that whatever was inside would ruin me. Maybe because I was terrified that her truth would be something I couldn't bear to face.

I flipped it open.

And then the words swallowed me whole.

"I don't know who I am anymore."

"I used to think love was supposed to make you feel alive, but with Vecna, it's different. It's an obsession. It's fire that burns too fast, too hard. And I don't know if I can survive it."

My breath hitched.



This wasn't love.

This was fear.

I turned the page, my pulse pounding.

"She doesn't see it. The way she breaks me. The way she leaves and comes back like I'm just a place she can return to whenever she feels lost."

"I want to hate her, but I can't. I never could. And maybe that's why this will destroy me in the end."

The air in my lungs turned razor-sharp.

This wasn't how it was. This wasn't the truth.

Was it?

I could barely process the words as I flipped through more pages, searching for something anything that would make this make sense.

And then, near the end, I found something else.

A page with just one sentence.

"If anything happens to me, it wasn't an accident."

My heart stopped.

The world tilted.

I reread the words over and over, my hands gripping the journal so tightly my knuckles turned white.

This wasn't a suicide note.

This was a warning.

Something cold and sharp crawled up my spine.

I needed to go back.

I needed to go to Rih's apartment.

The night was deathly quiet when I reached the building. The police tape still clung to the doorframe like a scar, but I stepped over it, pushing the door open.

The place was just as I had left it cold, abandoned, haunted. The faint smell of blood still lingered in the air.

I moved through the space cautiously, my fingers tracing over the furniture, the broken glass on the floor. My mind was spinning, replaying the words from her journal.

"If anything happens to me, it wasn't an accident."

Rih knew.

She knew something was going to happen to her.

Which meant... someone had planned it.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to move toward the bedroom.

And that's when I saw it.

Something I hadn't noticed before.

A small, barely visible piece of paper wedged beneath the nightstand.

My heart pounded as I crouched down, reaching for it with shaking hands.

The moment I pulled it free and unfolded it, my blood turned to ice.

It was a torn page from Rih's journal.

And on it, in shaky handwriting, were the last words she had ever written.

"He knows. He's coming for me. If I don't make it if you're reading this, Vecna, run."

A deafening silence filled the room.

And then

A creak.

From behind me.

I spun around, my breath catching in my throat.

The apartment was empty.

Or at least, it was supposed to be.

But for the first time since I had stepped inside, I felt it.

I wasn't alone.

A shadow shifted near the doorway, and a presence cold, heavy, suffocating filled the space.

And that's when I knew.

This wasn't just about proving my innocence anymore.

Someone wanted me dead, too.

## CHAPTER 17

# THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

The air turned thick, suffocating, as I stood frozen in Rih's apartment. My fingers clenched around the note, the ink smudging slightly from my grip. My breath hitched, my heartbeat slamming against my ribs like a desperate prisoner trying to escape.

Someone was here.

I wasn't alone.

The shadow in the doorway remained still, but I could feel the weight of its presence. It was watching me. Studying me. Like a predator waiting for its prey to make the wrong move.

A metallic taste filled my mouth I had bitten my lip without realizing it. Move, Vecna. But I couldn't. Fear had wrapped itself around me like chains, rooting me to the floor.

And then

A whisper.

Low. Almost imperceptible. But it was there.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

My body went rigid.

The voice was distorted, unfamiliar. It wasn’t my paranoia. It wasn’t my grief playing tricks on me. It was real.

I turned around so fast I nearly stumbled, my eyes scanning the room, the corners, the darkened spaces where shadows bled into each other. No one.

And yet, the feeling of being watched intensified.

Panic clawed at my throat. I took a shaky step back, the wooden floor creaking beneath me. My fingers curled into fists. Think, Vecna. If someone was here, they hadn’t attacked me yet. Which meant either they wanted me to leave... or they wanted me to stay long enough to see something I wasn’t supposed to.

A slow realization slithered down my spine.

Rih hadn’t just died.

She had been hunted.

And now, so was I.

I forced myself to move, my steps careful, calculated. I needed to get out. I needed air, space I needed to think. But as soon as I reached the doorway, a sudden noise stopped me.

A thud.

Something falling. Something deliberate.

My pulse skyrocketed as I turned my head, my eyes landing on the nightstand. The journal I had left there had fallen to the ground. The pages had fanned open.

No. Not just fanned open.

A page had been ripped out.

My stomach twisted. Someone had been here before me. And they had taken something.

I took a step toward it

And then the door behind me slammed shut.

I jumped, spinning around, my breath shattering into fragments.

The room was still empty.

But now, the sense of danger was unbearable.

I bolted.

I didn't care about evidence, about tiptoeing around a crime scene. I just ran. Through the apartment, down the stairs, out into the cold night air. My lungs burned, my body trembled, but I didn't stop. Not until I was far enough, hidden in the alley next to the building, my back pressed against the rough brick wall.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my hands shaking violently as I reached for my phone.

I needed to call someone. The police? No. They already thought I was guilty.

Then who?

Who could I trust?

My fingers hovered over the screen, indecisive.

And that's when my phone vibrated.

An unknown number.

A lump formed in my throat as I stared at it. Don't answer. But I couldn't help myself. Slowly, I pressed the call button and lifted the phone to my ear.

Silence.

And then

"She found out too much. Now it's your turn."

A shiver of terror shot through me.

The call ended before I could react.

My body went cold.

I wasn't just being framed.

I was being hunted.



## CHAPTER 18

# THE GHOST THAT FOLLOWS

The city was alive, but I felt dead inside. The neon lights, the distant honks, the murmurs of strangers passing by none of it reached me. I was drowning in the silence between the chaos.

I kept walking, my feet moving on their own, my mind spiraling into a black hole of thoughts. The phone call still echoed in my ears. She found out too much. Now it's your turn.

Who were they? What had Rih found out before she died? And why were they coming after me now?

I reached my apartment, hesitating before unlocking the door. My breath was shallow, my hands clammy. I knew I wasn't alone in this anymore. Someone was watching me, controlling the game from the shadows, and I was just a pawn in whatever twisted plot they had woven around me.

Still, I stepped inside, locking the door behind me. The room felt colder than usual, the kind of cold that seeps

into your bones and stays there. I turned on the lights nothing out of place. But that didn't mean I was safe.

I moved carefully, checking every corner, every shadow. Paranoia or survival instinct? I wasn't sure anymore.

And then I saw it.

On my kitchen counter.

A piece of paper.

My stomach dropped as I walked toward it, my hands shaking. The note was written in red ink, the letters jagged, rushed.

"Not everything is as it seems."

I sucked in a breath, my pulse hammering against my skin. My gaze flickered to the door locked. The windows shut.

Someone had been inside.

A chill ran down my spine.

I grabbed the note, my fingers gripping the paper too tightly as I turned it over. The back was blank, but the message was clear. This was a warning.

I couldn't stay here.

I rushed to my bedroom, shoving necessities into a bag—my phone, cash, a hoodie, anything I could grab. My mind was racing. Where would I go? Who could I trust?

And then

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I froze.

The sound was soft, almost hesitant. But it made my skin crawl.

Slowly, I stepped closer to the door, peering through the peephole.

No one.

The hallway was empty.

My throat tightened. I wasn't imagining things.

And then my phone buzzed again.

Unknown Number.

I hesitated, then answered.

Nothing.

Just breathing.

Then, in a whisper

"You can run, Vecna. But you can't hide from the ghosts."

The call ended.

My blood ran cold.

I wasn't just being watched.

I was being hunted.

## CHAPTER 19

# TRUTHS LEFT UNSPOKEN

I didn't sleep. How could I? The walls of my apartment felt like they were closing in on me, the silence more deafening than any scream. Every shadow stretched too long, every noise made my heart lurch. The note. The call. The feeling that someone was waiting for me to break.

But I wouldn't.

Instead, I did what I should have done the moment I found Rih I started searching for the truth.

Her journal sat in front of me, open, pages worn from how many times I had flipped through them. It was no longer just words it was a puzzle, and I was missing too many pieces.

Rih had been afraid before she died. That much was clear.

But of what? Of who?

My fingers hovered over the pages as I traced the ink, the last things she wrote before she took her final breath. Or before someone took it from her.

“I keep hearing footsteps outside my door. But when I check, there’s nothing there.”

“I tried telling my mother, but she just tells me I’m imagining things.”

“Vecna doesn’t believe me either. Maybe I am losing my mind. Maybe it’s all in my head. But I swear... I feel it. Someone is watching me. Someone waiting.”

My breath hitched.

This wasn’t paranoia.

This wasn’t some twisted hallucination.

Someone had been following Rih.

And now, they were following me.

I clenched my fists. I wasn’t going to be another victim.

I grabbed my jacket, shoved the journal into my bag, and headed for Rih’s apartment. If there were answers, they were there.

The moment I stepped inside, the air felt different. Heavy. Cold. As if the room still carried the weight of what had happened.

The crime scene tape was gone, but I could still see the faint outline of where she had laid, the dried stain on

the wooden floor a cruel reminder of the night everything changed.

I swallowed back the emotion clawing up my throat. I had to focus.

I started searching desk drawers, cabinets, anywhere she could have hidden something. But it wasn't until I reached her closet that I found it.

A small box. Locked.

I didn't think. I grabbed a shoe and smashed the lock open.

Inside, there were only two things.

A flash drive.

And a photograph.

I picked up the picture first. My blood ran cold.

It was of me and Rih, taken months ago. But we weren't alone.

In the background, blurred but unmistakable, was a figure.

A man. Watching us.

My hands trembled as I turned it over. There was something written on the back.

"You should have never left me."

A chill ran down my spine. This wasn't about Rih.

## When The Stars Go Silent

This was about me.

And whoever had done this wasn't finished yet.

## CHAPTER 20

# A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD

The moment I stepped into my apartment, a chill settled deep in my bones. It wasn't just exhaustion, or fear, or grief it was something else. A feeling I couldn't shake, as if I were being watched.

I locked the door behind me and leaned against it, trying to steady my breath. My mind was still stuck in Rih's apartment, in the eerie silence, the shadows in the hallway, the undeniable presence of someone else.

And then there was the flash drive.

My fingers curled around it as I pulled it from my pocket. It felt cold, almost unnaturally so, like it carried something far darker than just files. A warning. A confession. A ghost from the past I wasn't ready to face.

I slid into the chair at my desk, my hands shaking as I plugged it into my laptop. A single file appeared. A video. No name, no date. Just a blank, silent icon staring back at me.



I hesitated.

Every instinct screamed at me to stop. That whatever was on this drive wasn't meant to be found. That pressing play would be crossing a line I could never come back from.

But I had already lost too much.

I clicked on the file.

The screen flickered, and then Rih.

She was sitting in her room, her hair a mess, her face pale, her hands gripping the edge of the bed like she was holding herself together. Her breathing was shallow, uneven. Dark circles shadowed her eyes.

She looked... broken.

"If you're watching this," she whispered, "it means something happened to me."

My stomach twisted.

"I don't know how to say this, but... Vecna, I was never crazy. Someone's been following me. Watching me. And now, I think they want to hurt me."

A sharp pain lanced through my chest.

No. No, no, no.

I clutched the desk, my nails digging into the wood. Why didn't she tell me this before?

“I thought it was just my mind playing tricks on me. I thought maybe I was just losing myself after you left. But it’s real. I can feel them. I hear them at night, whispering, waiting. And I”

A loud bang.

Rih jumped, her eyes darting toward the door.

“They’re here.”

The screen cut to black.

I sat there, staring at my laptop, my body frozen in place.

Silence pressed in from all sides.

Then the realization hit me like a wrecking ball.

She knew.

She had known she was going to die.

She had tried to warn me.

I shot up from my chair, my heart hammering so hard it hurt. My breath came in ragged gasps as I staggered back, my mind spinning.

Rih wasn’t just scared. She was being hunted.

And now, I was the only one left to find out the truth.

## CHAPTER 21

# THE SECRETS LEFT BEHIND

Three days.

That's all I have.

Three days to prove I'm not a murderer. Three days to prove I didn't slit Rih's throat. Three days to prove that the woman I loved the only person who ever truly knew me didn't die at my hands.

And yet, as I sit here, staring at the flickering screen in front of me, I wonder if the truth even matters.

Because the world has already made up its mind.

She Tried to Warn Me

I press play on the video again. The grainy footage of Rih's face flashes across the screen. Her eyes are swollen, red-rimmed, desperate. I can hear the tremble in her voice.

"Vecna, if you're watching this... please, you have to"

Static.

Just like that, the video cuts out.

She was going to tell me something. Something huge.  
Something that could change everything.

But someone who knew I would find this video made  
sure I'd never hear the rest.

I exhale, pressing my palms against my temples.

I need to get out of here.

As soon as I stand up, I hear it.

A creak.

Right outside my apartment door.

I don't move. I barely breathe.

Slowly, I reach for the baseball bat near my desk and  
creep toward the peephole.

Nothing.

But the silence isn't comforting. It's suffocating.

I know I'm not alone. I've felt it for days now. The  
weight of unseen eyes. The whispers that vanish the  
moment I turn around.

They're watching me.

Because I know too much.

I grab Rih's journal, stuff it into my bag, and pull on my  
coat. If they think I'm scared, they're dead wrong.

I won't stop until I know the truth.

Even if it kills me.

I need answers.

I start at the last place she was seen alive, The Black Lotus Hotel.

The lobby is dimly lit, the scent of stale perfume and cigars hanging in the air. The receptionist barely glances up when I approach.

"Can I help you?" she asks, bored.

"I need to see your security footage from two weeks ago."

She scoffs. "We don't share that kind of information."

I slide five crisp \$100 bills across the counter.

"Make an exception."

Her eyes flick to the money, then back to me. She exhales, then pulls out a laptop.

"Ten minutes. That's all you get."

I fast-forward through the footage, my pulse hammering.

And then there she is.

Rih.

She's pacing in the hotel lobby, arguing with someone.

A woman.

I freeze.

It's Rih's mother.

I press play, watching the scene unfold.

Rih is shoving an envelope into her mother's hands.  
Money.

Her mother doesn't take it. She grabs Rih by the wrist.  
Hard.

Rih's face twists in pain. She's pleading.

But her mother? She's furious.

Then, the footage cuts to black.

"Fuck," I whisper, gripping the laptop.

"What the hell is this?" Mira's voice startles me. She just arrived, breathless.

I turn the screen toward her. "Look."

Her face pales. "Oh my God. What if"

My phone buzzes.

A new email.

No sender. No subject.

Just an attached image.

I clicked it.

It's a photo of my apartment door. Taken minutes ago.

A message follows.

"Stop digging. Or you'll end up like her."

## When The Stars Go Silent

I feel my heartbeat in my throat.

This isn't just about proving my innocence anymore.

Someone wants me dead.

And I have three days left.

## CHAPTER 22

# THE WALLS ARE CLOSING IN

Three days left.

Three days until the court decides whether I walk free or rot in a cell for the rest of my life.

But the closer I get to the truth, the closer death breathes down my neck.

Because someone with power, with reach, with blood on their hands wants me to stop.

And now, they've made it clear.

If I don't, I'll be next.

I deleted the email. Burn the laptop screen into my memory. Whoever sent it is watching me. They know where I live.

I grab my bag, shove the journal inside, and leave my apartment.

The moment I step outside, the city feels different. Darker.



Every shadow on the sidewalk feels too long. Every car parked too close. I keep my head low, moving fast.

I need to go somewhere safe. But where the fuck is safe when your own life is a target?

I dial heena. She picks up on the first ring.

“Where are you?” she asks, voice tight with urgency.

“Nowhere safe,” I mutter.

“Meet me at my place. Now.”

I don’t argue.

Heena’s apartment is small, but it’s safe. For now.

The moment I walk in, I toss the journal onto the table and exhale. “We need to go through this. Every single page.”

Mira nods, grabbing a flashlight. “Start from the beginning.”

I flip open the worn leather cover, my fingers brushing over Rih’s handwriting.

“There are things I can’t say out loud.”

I swallow hard and turn the page.

*“I see their faces in my sleep. I know what they did. I know what they made me do. And if I tell Vecna, she’ll never forgive me.”*

My hands tremble. heena’s eyes flick to mine.

“What the fuck does that mean?” she whispers.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.” But my chest feels tight.

What was Rih afraid to tell me?

I flip through more pages, my pulse pounding. Then

A date. The night before she died.

*“I have to meet her. She won’t stop until she gets what she wants.”*

I run my finger over the words. Mira leans closer.

“Who’s ‘her’?”

My stomach twists.

I already know the answer.

Rih’s mother.

My head pounds as I piece it together. Rih was scared.

She was trying to protect me from something from someone.

I reach for my phone. My hands are shaking.

I dial a number I never thought I’d call.

Rih’s mother picks up after one ring.

“Vecna,” she says, her voice sickeningly calm.

“You knew,” I whisper. “You knew she was going to die.”

Silence.

Then a soft chuckle. *“Oh, sweetheart. You have no idea what you’re playing with.”*

My jaw clenches. “You”

“Walk away,” she interrupts. “Before you end up just like her.”

The line goes dead.

Heena grabs my arm. “Vecna. What the hell just happened?”

I look at her.

And for the first time, I finally understand.

This isn’t just a case. It’s a cover-up.

And I was never supposed to find the truth.

But it’s too late to stop now.

## CHAPTER 23

# FINAL PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

They don't want me to know.

That's the only thought pulsing through my head as I sit in the dim light of Mira's apartment, gripping my phone so tightly my knuckles turn white. My heart pounds against my ribs, but it's not fear.

It's fury.

Rih's mother's voice still lingers in my ears, whispering like a curse:

"Walk away, before you end up just like her."

A warning? A threat? A confession?

I don't know anymore. But I do know this

I've had enough.

I've had enough of the whispers, the unanswered questions, the way Rih's name has become a wound no one wants to touch. I've had enough of feeling like I'm

drowning in the unknown while everyone else watches from the shore.

I was framed for her death. They want me to fall in line. They want me to be silent.

They have no idea who they're dealing with.

I don't tell heena everything. I can't.

Not because I don't trust her. But because trust is what got me here in the first place.

Instead, I slip out of her apartment and drive through the empty city streets until I reach the place I swore I'd never go

Rih's childhood home.

It's a house that doesn't belong to her. It never did.

Rih never spoke much about her past, but I knew enough to understand one thing: this place was never safe.

The house looms in the darkness, suffocating in its silence. The porch light flickers, barely alive. The driveway is empty, but I don't let that comfort me.

I pick the lock with shaky hands. It's too easy. Like someone left it that way.

The door creaks open. The air inside is still, untouched, except for something beneath it something cold and rotting. Secrets.

The kind that kill.

A Room That Was Never Hers

Upstairs, I find her room.

Or at least, the room that was supposed to be hers.

But nothing about it feels like Rih.

No posters. No photos. No scattered clothes or messy bookshelves. Just a perfectly arranged, untouched space. Like a museum exhibit. Or a stage.

My breath is uneven as I scan the room. This wasn't where she lived. This was where she was kept.

Then, I see it.

A mirror on the vanity. The only personal thing in the room.

Except it isn't.

Because at the bottom of the frame, there's a small red stain.

I step closer. My fingers tremble as I reach out, pressing against it.

It smears.

Blood.

My pulse stutters. My mind screams at me to back away, but I can't. I won't.

And that's when I see it

A tiny, hidden camera tucked into the corner of the mirror.

My stomach twists. Someone was watching her.

Someone has been watching me.

I ripped the camera out, my breath jagged. My head is spinning. What if - what if this was recording her the night she died?

And then

A noise.

A creak outside the door.

I go completely still.

I am not alone.

I shut off my flashlight and press myself into the shadows, forcing my breathing to slow.

Footsteps. Soft. Calculated. Watching.

Then

A voice.

“You shouldn’t be here, Vecna.”

Cold seeps into my bones.

Because I know that voice.

And when the figure steps forward, into the sliver of moonlight spilling through the window—

My stomach drops.

mira.

She looks at me, her expression unreadable. Her hands are steady. Too steady.

She knew I would come here.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she says again.

And this time, I heard it. The warning. The finality.

The way her words sound like a death sentence.



## CHAPTER 24

# WHEN THE STARS GO SILENT

I was so close. The answers were right there, slipping through my fingers like grains of sand, just out of reach. The truth wasn't as distant as it once was I could feel it breathing down my neck, lurking in the spaces between every whispered threat, every unanswered question.

And yet, I still didn't know who had taken Rih from me.

But now, I knew why.

The weight of that knowledge settled over me like a noose, tightening with every breath.

I sat in the dimly lit interrogation room, my wrists sore from the handcuffs they had taken off just hours ago. The air was thick with anticipation, the silence broken only by the slow, deliberate ticking of the clock on the wall. Across from me sat Mira Rih's mother. The woman who had looked at me once with nothing but hatred and disgust now sat with a blank expression, her fingers tapping absently against the table.

"Tell me," I whispered, my voice hoarse from sleepless nights and unanswered calls. "Why did they kill her?"

Mira's lips curled into a cold, humorless smile. "Because she chose you."

The words sliced through me like a blade.

She leaned forward, her eyes dark, soulless. "You were the reason Rih was never truly theirs. You made her think she could be free."

I shook my head. "What are you talking about?" My voice cracked, but I held her gaze, refusing to let the fear show.

"You think this is about love, don't you?" Mira scoffed, amusement flickering across her face. "You think Rih died because of heartbreak?"

I swallowed hard, my pulse hammering in my ears.

"This was never just about you and her," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "This was about control. Rih was never meant to have a life of her own. She was theirs before she was ever yours. And when she tried to break free when you made her believe she could they decided she had to go."

I felt my nails dig into my palms, my entire body rigid with rage and grief.

"But who?" I demanded. "Who decided that?"

Mira's smile didn't waver. "You already know."

The room was suffocating. My mind raced through every possibility, every name that had crossed my path, every shadow that had followed me since that night.

I knew.

I just didn't want to admit it.

Mira stood, adjusting her coat with eerie composure. "You have three days, Vecna. Three days before the court decides whether you're guilty or not. Three days before the world moves on, whether or not you find the truth."

She paused at the door, tilting her head slightly. "If I were you, I wouldn't waste them."

And then she was gone, leaving me drowning in the silence, in the unbearable truth that Rih didn't just die she was taken.

And someone was still making sure I never found out who.

## CHAPTER 25

# A HAUNTING FREEDOM

The courtroom felt suffocating. The air was thick with judgment, curiosity, and the kind of tension that could break bones. Cameras flashed. Journalists whispered. The world had been waiting for this moment for my fate to be sealed, for my name to be either cleared or condemned.

I stood in the defendant's box, my fingers curled into my palms, nails pressing into my skin. The past few weeks had unraveled my soul, stripped me bare. And now, in the final moment, I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear the words that would change my life forever.

"In the case of Vecna D versus the State..."

My pulse was hammered.

"The defendant has been found... NOT GUILTY."

I didn't breathe. I didn't blink.

For a second, the world stood still.

Then, chaos erupted.

Gasps. Shouts. The sound of reporters scrambling for their microphones, the clicking of cameras capturing the moment my life was decided for me.

I was free.

Someone else had taken the fall.

Jared Stone.

A man whose name barely meant anything to me until now. He was one of Rih's old acquaintances, a man with connections, with secrets. And somehow, he had become the monster in this story. The man who, according to the evidence, had been obsessed with Rih, had been seen near her apartment that night. The man who had left behind just enough of a trail to be framed.

I should have felt relieved.

But all I felt was... wrong.

Jared was dragged from the courtroom in handcuffs, his face twisted in rage, his voice raw as he screamed, "I DIDN'T DO IT! THEY'RE LYING! YOU THINK YOU'RE SAFE, VECNA? YOU THINK THIS IS OVER?"

His words clawed at my spine.

I turned to my lawyer, but he only placed a firm hand on my shoulder. "It's done. You're free."

Free.

I forced myself to move, to walk out of the courthouse as the doors swung open to a blinding storm of reporters.

“Vecna! Do you have anything to say about the verdict?”

“How does it feel to be cleared of murder?”

“Do you think Jared Stone really killed Rih?”

I kept my face unreadable, my heart a stone in my chest. I didn’t know what to believe anymore.

All I knew was that Rih was still dead.

And someone was still watching me.

I packed my bags that night.

I wasn’t staying here. Not in this city, not in this place where every street whispered her name, where every corner had a memory that threatened to break me.

I had to leave.

The world saw me as the woman who had escaped a murder charge, the woman who had lost her lover and walked away unscathed. They didn’t see the cracks. They didn’t see that I was still bleeding.

I stuffed the last of my clothes into my suitcase, my hands shaking as I zipped it shut. I could hear the sounds of the city outside, the life that moved on while I stood still.

A part of me wanted to scream.

Instead, I turned to my nightstand, to the single object I had left unpacked.

Rih's journal.

I ran my fingers over the cover, my throat tightening. I had read every word, traced every letter. There were still secrets inside. Whispers of a past she had never told me. And I knew, deep down, that the full truth hadn't been revealed yet.

I could still feel it.

Lurking.

Waiting.

I closed my eyes, gripping the book tight, before forcing myself to move. I grabbed my suitcase, pulled my coat over my shoulders, and stepped toward the door.

And then

A sound.

A presence.

The distinct, icy feeling of being watched.

Slowly, I turned my head to the window.

Across the street, beneath the dim glow of a flickering street lamp, stood a figure.

Motionless.

Hooded.

I couldn't see their faces, but I felt their gaze.

It wasn't a stranger's gaze.

It was the same one I had felt in the courtroom. The same one that had followed me since the night Rih died.

They knew.

They knew everything.

And they weren't done with me yet.

The air felt heavier.

I took a step back, my breath hitching.

And then, as a car passed between us, they were gone.

I swallowed hard, gripping my suitcase tighter.

I was free.

But I was never safe.

*The truth set me free, but the ghosts of my past still whisper my name. Some endings aren't escapes just another beginning of the unknown.*



## CHAPTER 26

# THE SILENT WHISPER

I wasn't sure what I was searching for anymore. I wasn't sure if I was looking for the truth, for redemption, or just for a way to breathe again. The weight of it all was suffocating, but something in me, something deep and restless kept pulling me forward. I had left the city, the chaos, the spotlight, but nothing was further from my mind than peace. If anything, I had never felt further from it. Every night, I lay awake, staring at the ceiling of my hotel room, trying to piece together what had gone wrong.

It was in the silence of those long nights, in the hours where sleep refused to come, that I started to hear the whispers again. No, not from the people around me. This was something different. A voice. An unknown presence. I kept feeling like I wasn't truly alone.

It all started one morning when I was trying to clear my mind, staring out the window at the sprawling city beneath me. The phone in my hand buzzed. A call. The number was unknown no name, no caller ID. I stared at the screen for a moment, my finger hovering over the

red button. It would be easy to ignore. They always had some kind of scam or random person trying to get my attention. But something... something felt different about this one. Maybe it was the weird sense of déjà vu that crawled up my spine. Maybe it was the pull that told me to answer, even though every rational part of me screamed not to.

I hesitated, then pressed the green button.

“Hello?” My voice was thin, barely audible, betraying the nervousness inside me.

There was a long pause. For a moment, I thought it was a prank or some prankster playing with me. But then, I heard it. A low, gravelly voice, distorted, like they were trying to hide their identity from me.

“You need to listen. If you want to know the truth, you’ll meet me. You’ll find the answers you’ve been looking for. But hurry time’s running out.”

The line clicked. It was over just as quickly as it had started.

I was left staring at the phone in disbelief. My heart pounded in my chest. The phone call was cryptic disjointed, but it felt... urgent. Something gnawed at me, a feeling I couldn’t shake, like a warning shot. The words echoed in my mind, over and over: If you want to know the truth, you’ll meet me.

Who was this person? Was it a trap? Or was this the answer I had been desperately searching for?

I spent the next few hours in a haze. My fingers itched to write something down, to somehow make sense of this call. It was all so overwhelming. But no matter how I tried to distract myself, the words haunted me.

“Meet me.”

I had no idea where or who this person was, but I knew one thing for sure: I couldn't ignore it. I couldn't let this slip away. Not when it could be the key to everything.

## CHAPTER 27

# THE CHASE BEGINS

I couldn't sit still anymore. I was consumed by it. The gnawing feeling deep inside that I was so close so close to the truth. I had to know who this person was and what they wanted from me. I couldn't wait for another call. I had to act.

I started by scouring every inch of my hotel room for any clue, any hint that could lead me to something, anything, that might help. It was ridiculous, I knew. But the desperation clouded my thoughts.

Then, the first sign came.

I was sitting at a café the next morning, nursing my third cup of coffee and flipping through an old, forgotten newspaper I'd found in the lobby. The usual city headlines: murders, scandals, celebrity gossip. But then, there it was.

A small, seemingly innocuous article buried between the ads and local news. It was a single sentence.

"The truth is closer than you think. Find me, and you'll find everything."

It hit me like a lightning bolt. My stomach lurched. My mind raced. It was the same message. But how?

I stared at the article, tracing the words with my finger. The paper seemed old, like it had been placed there deliberately, just for me to find.

I looked around the café, my pulse quickening. No one was paying attention to me. No one even noticed the strange, cryptic message staring back at me. But I couldn't ignore it. I felt like I was being pulled, dragged by something greater than me.

I scribbled the note in my phone. The truth is closer than you think. I had to meet this person. But where? How?

Over the next few days, I received more. Another note slipped under my hotel door. A voicemail, the same voice from the first call:

"If you're still looking, come to the old theater on 6th Street. You'll understand when you get there."

It was maddening. Every time I thought I was close, something else came. Each note, each voicemail, each cryptic message added another layer to the puzzle.

But I couldn't stop. This was it. I felt it deep in my bones.

## CHAPTER 28

# THE ENCOUNTER

The old theater loomed in front of me like a haunting relic, its once vibrant marquee now faded and cracked. The last vestiges of its glory days clung to the decaying walls, as if the theater itself were unwilling to let go of the past. But I didn't come here for nostalgia. I wasn't interested in the ghosts that haunted this place. I wasn't interested in the memories it held.

I was here for something far more dangerous. Something far more urgent.

I didn't know what to expect when I got the message. I never did. Whoever this person was, this shadowed figure who had sent me cryptic notes, dropped secret messages in newspapers, and left me breadcrumbs to follow—I had no idea who they were or what their game was. But I was done asking questions. I was done sitting around in the dark, waiting for answers that might never come.

They had called me. They had dragged me into this labyrinth of deceit and lies. Now, it was time to see this thing through.

The air was thick with anticipation as I stood before the doors of the theater. I didn't waste time on hesitation. I pushed them open, stepping inside. The smell of dust and rot hit me, the remnants of a place long forgotten. It felt like walking into a tomb a place where things were meant to stay buried. But not tonight.

I didn't care how eerie the place felt. I didn't care about the whispers of the past or the chill that crept up my spine. I was no longer the girl who had once been trapped in a cage of her own making. I was different now. Harder. More determined.

I moved swiftly through the darkened lobby, the floorboards creaking under my weight. The faint light from the streetlamps outside barely reached through the cracked windows, casting long, distorted shadows across the floor. I could hear the faint hum of a broken chandelier, its flickering light casting eerie shapes on the walls.

The place was empty. Or so it seemed.

I reached the theater entrance, the old velvet curtain still hanging limply, its once-rich color now faded and tattered. It looked like a stage set for a tragedy, the kind that had been played out for far too long, with no one left to care for the actors or their fates.

I stepped into the main hall, my heart pounding in my chest, but I didn't let it show. Not here. Not now.

The room was vast, the seats long abandoned, their worn-out fabric telling stories of a thousand forgotten performances. The air was heavy with the scent of mildew and age.

But then, I heard it. A whisper. A sound too soft to be the wind. A voice.

“Vecna...”

I froze, my pulse quickening. The voice was low, almost a whisper, but it was unmistakable. It wasn’t in my head. It was real.

I spun around, my eyes scanning the room. Shadows danced on the walls, playing tricks on me. For a moment, I thought it was all in my mind just another illusion, another game to pull me in further. But I know better now.

“I know you’re here,” I called out, my voice steady, despite the storm raging inside me.

There was no answer at first. Then, from the corner of the room, I saw the flicker of movement of a shadow, barely noticeable, slipping between the rows of seats.

I didn’t wait. I rushed toward it, the silence broken only by the echo of my footsteps. My hand reached for the flashlight in my pocket, and I clicked it on, the beam cutting through the darkness like a knife.



It landed on a tall figure, draped in a dark coat, their face obscured by the shadows. The figure froze for a moment, then turned to face me, stepping slowly into the light.

"You came," the voice said again, colder now, almost as if it were testing me.

"I didn't come for a meeting. I came for answers," I retorted, my voice sharp. "Who the hell are you?"

The figure didn't answer right away. Instead, they studied me, their gaze penetrating, as if weighing my every move, my every word.

"That's the question, isn't it?" they finally said. "Who am I? But you already know, don't you, Vecna? You've known this whole time."

My blood ran cold.

"I don't know anything," I snapped, frustration bubbling to the surface. "All I know is that you've been playing me leading me through your little game, leaving me breadcrumbs like a trail. And I'm done following."

The figure stepped forward, closer, just out of reach.

"You're not done yet," they said, their voices like ice. "This isn't the end, Vecna. This is just the beginning. You're too deep in it now. You can't walk away."

I clenched my fists, the weight of their words sinking into me like a thousand pounds of guilt and rage. I wasn't about to back down. Not now.

"Tell me what you know," I demanded, my voice harder now, like steel sharpening against stone.

They didn't immediately respond. Instead, they stepped closer, almost as if they were savoring the moment.

"You've been looking for the truth, haven't you?" they asked, their tone mocking. "But the truth isn't what you think it is. It's more complicated than that. And it's not something you're ready for."

I shook my head, anger rising. "I don't need your riddles. I need facts. I need proof."

The figure laughed softly; the sound hollow in the emptiness of the theater.

"You think you're ready for the truth?" they said, their eyes glinting with something I couldn't quite place amusement or perhaps something darker. "You've been searching for it your whole life, but you've been running from it all along."

I couldn't breathe for a moment, the words hitting too close to home. Had I been running from the truth? Had I been blind to what was right in front of me?

But then, as quickly as it had come, the feeling passed. This wasn't the time for doubt. This was the time for answers.

"What do you want from me?" I demanded, my voice steady again.

"I want you to understand," they said softly. "I want you to see what's been right in front of you all along. And then, maybe, you'll know what to do next."

The figure stepped back into the darkness, their form blending with the shadows once again. "But you won't find that here," they said, their voice echoing through the empty theater. "You must look beyond this place, Vecna. Beyond the lies. Only then will you find the truth."

And with that, they were gone.

I stood there, frozen, my heart pounding in my chest. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what any of it meant. But I knew one thing for certain: this encounter was no accident. It was a message. And it was only the beginning.

The truth was out there, buried beneath layers of lies and deception. And I wasn't going to stop until I had uncovered every piece of it.

I turned and walked away, my mind racing, every thought, every instinct pushing me forward. The journey wasn't over. It was just the beginning.

## CHAPTER 29

# THE BEGINNING OF THE END

I had the truth in my hands now, pieces scattered across my mind like fragments of a broken mirror. But it wasn't enough. Not yet. It wasn't going to be enough until I could see the whole reflection, the image in its entirety. Until I could understand what the hell had happened. I wasn't some clueless pawn anymore. I wasn't going to let them make me the villain of this story. I wasn't going to let the world decide who I was based on their lies. No this was my fight. My story. And I was going to take it back.

I didn't even bother checking into another hotel. My need to work, to understand, consumed me. I needed to be somewhere I could think clearly, somewhere I could let my mind run wild without interruption.

The moment I stepped into the dingy hotel room, I knew what I had to do. I didn't waste time on unnecessary luxuries or comfort. I slammed the door shut behind me and immediately went to the corner of

the room, pulling out my duffel bag from the floor. The contents spilled out across the bed: the photographs, the notes, the evidence, everything I had gathered. And there, sitting in the corner of the room, untouched, was a whiteboard I had purchased that morning. It wasn't much, just a cheap one, but it was enough.

I grabbed it, placing it on the wall in front of me. The faint light from the lamp flickered as I grabbed a marker and began to draw the first line, a line that connected one point to another, linking things together that I had kept separate for far too long.

The weight of it all hit me in that moment. The pieces weren't just scattered across the room; they were scattered across my mind. I had to bring them all together. I couldn't sleep until I did.

I started with the basics: the photographs. The people. The names. The faces I had seen in those pictures, people from my past, people from the life I had tried so hard to escape. And the more I stared at them, the more familiar they became. Each one of them was a thread in this tangled web I had fallen into, some pulled tighter than others, all of them connected in ways I hadn't understood.

I connected one photograph to another, sketching lines between them. Two people in the same place. A phone number. A conversation. A meeting that was never supposed to be seen, never supposed to be known. I

added more lines, more connections. The whiteboard slowly started filling with shapes, names, and words. At first, they seemed meaninglessly random. But soon, those random dots began to make sense. I kept staring, obsessing. My hands shook, but it wasn't fear. It was anticipation. I was so close, so damn close to seeing the whole thing, to understanding how deep the rabbit hole went.

I pulled out the map next to the one I had found crumpled in the corner of the theater, tucked behind a chair like it had been waiting for me to find it. I didn't know why I had kept it at first. I didn't know why it felt so important. But as I unfolded it on the floor in front of me, I realized it was a blueprint more than just a map of the city. It was a guide. It showed the locations where key events had taken place. The places where people had crossed paths, where conversations had happened, where things had gone wrong.

I placed the map on the floor, then stood up to begin marking it. One by one, I started circling the locations of the bars, the hotels, the offices. I marked down the streets where I had seen those familiar faces, the places I had visited without understanding what they meant. I crossed off a few that didn't matter anymore. I added more details.

The timeline began to take shape. I had the photographs, the notes, and the map. I was pulling everything

together. Piece by piece. Line by line. I was creating something bigger than I could have ever imagined, something that would make people look at me and see the truth instead of their own illusions.

But this was no longer just about revenge. No, this was about clarity. About proving everyone wrong. I needed the truth. I needed it because without it, I was just as lost as the rest of them.

The hotel room felt smaller as the whiteboard grew larger. More names. More lines. More connections. I could feel the tension rising in my chest as I dug deeper into my work. Each discovery led to another. A name in a photograph. A name in a note. A name that didn't match the face. I started seeing the cracks in the story that had been fed to me, and the more I dug, the more everything started to unravel.

I found a phone number written on the back of one of the photographs, a phone number I didn't recognize. It had been jotted down in a hurry, probably not meant to be seen. But I had seen it.

I didn't hesitate. I picked up the hotel room phone, dialed the number, and waited. My breath was ragged as the line connected.

"Hello?" a voice answered, but it wasn't anyone I knew. It wasn't even a voice I had heard before.

I didn't waste time on pleasantries. "Who are you?" I demanded. "What do you know about me?"

There was a silence on the other end. Then, the voice responded, low and calm. "I know what you're looking for, Vecna. And I know you'll never stop until you find it."

The words chilled me.

"I'm close," I said. "I can feel it. I'm close to everything. So don't you dare think you're the only one who knows what's going on."

I hung up.

The phone call left a lingering weight in the room. It didn't answer anything, but it confirmed everything I had already suspected. Whoever this was, they were watching. They knew I was getting closer to the truth.

But that didn't matter. I was never going to stop. I couldn't.

The night dragged on. I worked relentlessly, my eyes growing tired but my mind sharp. The pieces were finally falling into place. I could feel it in my veins, in my blood. Everything I had been through, everything I had lost, was converging in this one moment. And soon, it would all be mine.

I couldn't stop now. Not when I was so close.



But there was something else. A deeper realization, one that hit me like a ton of bricks. I couldn't do this alone anymore. I had been carrying this weight for so long, but it was time for the world to know. They needed to see what I had seen, feel what I had felt. I needed to bring the truth to light. I wasn't going to let anyone else control this story.

I looked at the whiteboard one last time, my finger tracing the lines, the names, the locations. This wasn't just a game anymore. This was war.

And I was ready for it.

But even as I stood there, my heart pounding in my chest, my mind racing with the answers I had uncovered, I knew this was just the beginning. I had everything I needed, but there was still more to uncover. There was still more to fight for.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and stood tall.

The world wouldn't see me coming. But when I return, I will burn everything down. And they would finally know the truth.

*Because I'm coming back.*