

CHAPTER ONE: The All-Seeing Eyes

Paul Reid died in the snow at seventeen. The day of his death, he told a lie—and for the rest of his life, he wondered if that was what killed him.

"Don't worry," he said to Mike Hibbets, the only adult in New York City who'd ever cared about him. "I'm coming back."

Pop Mike ran the New Beginnings group home, where Paul lived. He didn't believe the lie. And Paul told himself that it didn't matter.

"Does your face hurt?" The old man leaned on his desk in the New Beginnings main office.

Paul twisted his pewter ring, a habit that announced when something was bothering him. His face did hurt—especially his swollen eye.

As did the ribs he hadn't been able to protect two days earlier, when he hit the ground, balled up, in a Hell's Kitchen alley while four guys stomped him until they tired of it. He'd tried to shield his face, where damage might show forever. But he fared just as poorly at that as the afternoon sun cast a beat-down shadow show on a brick wall and a girl stood nearby and cried.

Paul had little to say, and no one worked a silence like Pop Mike. His nickname had once been "Father Mike" due to a talent for sniffing out guilt that rivaled any priest's. He asked the New Beginnings kids to drop that name so potential donors wouldn't confuse his shelter with a religious operation. There's no God to lift us up—we rise or fall together, he taught them. So they compromised and shortened it.

"Five foster homes, three group homes, some street life in between," Pop Mike said.

"So?" Paul couldn't look him in the eye.

"So no one makes it through that without survival skills, which you have. And you've found a place here for four years, and now you're just up and leaving."

The desk was a relic of the building's days as a school, a general hospital, and before that, a mental hospital. Its round wood edge was uneven and worn, as if the many kids trapped in this chair over the years had stared it away, varnish and all.

Paul shifted in the chair, his side one big ache. He hated hearing his life recited as if it were recorded and filed somewhere, which it was.

The winter wind forced its way through the gaps between the cockeyed window sash and its frame. A storm was due.

Outside, the fading daylight illuminated the wall of the adjacent building. A cartoon-ad peacock, its paint battling to hang onto the decaying brick, peddled a variety of Pavo fruit juices.

"New Beginnings matters to you." Rumor was, Pop Mike could go weeks without blinking. "Look how you tried to save Gonzales."

"I told him to run for help. He just ran." Paul had practiced this conversation— how it would play out. Pop Mike wouldn't mind that he was leaving. If he did, Paul wouldn't sweat it.

Yet he was unable to face the man.

The painted peacock smiled despite its sentence of death-by-crumbling. Its tail, gathered in one fist, bent outward in offering. The feathers ended in a once-vibrant assortment of bottles spread above the Pavo slogan like leaves on a branch of a shade tree: "Wake up to the rainbow! Wake up to your life!"

Decades of sun and rain had rendered the flavors unidentifiable in the grime and washed-out hues. Paul could only guess at grape, apple, orange, and watermelon.

"You could apply for our Next Steps program—work your way to an equivalency credential."

Paul didn't bother to refuse that one again.

Pop Mike followed his gaze. "The all-seeing eyes."

"What?"

"The peacock. In some Asian faiths, it's a symbol of mercy and empathy. In others, it's the all-seeing eyes of the Almighty. What that one sees, of course, is a customer."

"It's time for me to go." Paul touched his fingers to his eye, which flared in protest. "This is how New York chose to tell me." He prodded the bruise to see if he could make it hurt more. He succeeded.

Pop Mike reached across the desk, took hold of Paul's wrist, and gently pulled his hand away from his face. He didn't let go until he was convinced Paul wouldn't do it again. That was the only way he could keep Paul safe from himself.

"Please," he said. "That's the one word I have left. It won't work, but I'm saying it. Please."

Paul twisted his ring.

Pop Mike took in the beaten-up backpack at Paul's feet, the military-surplus coat thrown over the back of the chair. "Where are you going?"

"Away. I'll let you know when I get there."

Wake up to your life, said the peacock.