

Part One

IN THE DARK

Chapter One

A SMOKY FOG pressed on her brain. How long had she been there? She stirred, weighted in the darkness, trying to free herself from unseen shackles.

A sound in the distance. Repeated at intervals. The chiming of a bell?

Was she dreaming?

Her thoughts fractured. Then—reverse diving, swimming up in her mind. Breaking through a shell, rocketing over the bend...

She opened her eyes.

A bright white ceiling. All lights snapped on to full wattage. The smell of bleach emanating from the firm pillow under her head.

She tried to swallow, but the saliva burned her throat. She shifted her head.

She was in bed. But not her own bed. At least, she didn't think it was her bed.

Starched white sheets. Scratchy. Her hands felt heavy when she lifted them.

She tilted her head again.

Something pinched her arms. Tubes: thin and clear. The end

of one punched between two knuckles of her hand. Everything tethered to various machines that beeped and whirred about her.

Past the thick bandages squeezing her arms, squares of white acrylic tipped her fingernails—all save her thumbs, broken to the quick.

She considered these details for half a minute, looking about in a daze.

I'm in—this is... She strained for the word, then latched on: a hospital. Yes. She was in a hospital.

Why am I in a hospital?

A tickle ignited in her throat, and she coughed. Hard. She moved her hand to cover her mouth when something released, and the machine next to her exploded in a series of alarms.

The sliding of doors, a gasp of wind. A large nurse in green scrubs lowered a plastic rail beside the bed and bent to inspect her. She clicked buttons on the machine, touched the tube in her hand. Then the nurse leaned close, so close that two silver studs winked at her from the woman's earlobes.

"Hi there. My name is Theresa," the woman said in a slow, loud voice. "I'm your nurse. Can you understand me?"

She nodded.

"Can you speak?"

She coughed again, dislodging stale air. "Yes."

"How do you feel?"

She searched her body for clues. She felt heavy as a stone. A whirlwind threatened to suck her in. "Dizzy," she managed.

"Okay. Try to take a few breaths."

She did. The room slowed, and then stalled. Her stomach picked up. She drew a settling breath.

"Better?"

"Yes."

"Would you like some water?"

She nodded and closed her eyes. When she opened them, the nurse held a clear plastic glass in one hand and pressed a nearby

button with the other, lifting the bed in a series of rattling clicks. She shakily accepted the water and Theresa tilted the rim to her lips. The water had cooled to room temperature, sliding down her throat and into her stomach.

She thought she had drained it all, but when she released the glass, it remained half full.

“Better?” Theresa asked.

She nodded.

“Do you know where you are?”

She nodded again. “Hah—hospital.”

“Good. Do you know your name?”

She stared at the woman, and the moment stretched between them. It was there, just beyond her mental reach. The answer. *Her* answer.

“Do you know your name?” the nurse asked again, more intently.

Oh God. What’s happening? She felt hot, winded. Afraid. *What nightmare is this? What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I remember?*

Panic squeezed her throat.

“Shhh, you’re okay.” Theresa reached down and clasped her shoulder through the web of wires and tubes. “The important thing is that you’re awake. The rest should come back. Just try to relax and I’ll call the doctor, okay?”

She fell back into a wave as darkness slammed over her as solidly as a coffin.

Someone peeled open her eyelid. White light shot into the back of her skull. Darkness again, and then light exploding in her other eye.

Warm breath plumed over her face before everything snapped into focus. It was a man, one eye obscured by the

light, the other peering at her intently. "Hello, I'm Dr. Porter," he said with grave authority. He was in a long white lab coat, gray shirt, and striped tie. "You were in a car accident and sent here to New York Presbyterian Hospital. Do you understand me?"

She nodded.

"Good. Your nurse tells me you were feeling dizzy earlier. How do you feel now?"

She considered. "Not dizzy?"

"Okay. Does your head hurt at all?"

She tried to lift her hand to show him the point of pressure, but her limb fell like a paperweight. "On my eye."

"Left? Right?"

"Right."

"Okay." He studied her. "Can you tell me your name?"

My name. My name. Panic stirred. She thought hard and caught the first letter: V. It began with a V. "Begins..." she began, but her voice slurred. *Is this how I sound?*

"Good," he said encouragingly. "Try again."

"Begins with..." She drew in a breath and forced the rest out, "...with V."

"Your first name begins with a V?"

She nodded.

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "Well, it's a start. I guess 'Jane Doe' won't cut it anymore. Maybe Veronica Doe?"

There. She caught it. "Vickie!" She drew a breath and blew it out. "My name is *Vickie*."

"Okay, Vickie. Do you know today's date?"

Her confidence melted. No. She didn't know the date.

"That's okay. What about the month?"

She glanced at the window. Snow blew past the frost-bitten glass. "December?"

The doctor followed her gaze. "Clever. Yes. How about the year?"

Worn gears clicked in Vickie's mind. She studied the doctor as she answered. "2010?"

He blinked, but his expression gave nothing away. "No, Vickie. It's 2013."

Her heart fell. Something was very, *very* wrong.

The doctor held up one long finger inches from her eyes. "It's all right. You're doing fine. Just try to follow my finger, okay?"

It moved to the right, then left. Up and down.

"Good, good. Can you puff out your cheeks?"

She looked back at him. What?

"Like this." He pinched his lips and blew. His cheeks inflated like two balloons. She followed him. "Good. Now stick out your tongue."

She closed her eyes and opened her mouth, and he examined her for several seconds. "Can you smile at me?"

She did.

"Bigger. Like this." He grinned like a circus clown.

Vickie smiled so enormously she suspected he could see her molars.

"Great. Can you frown?"

She tried to pinch her eyes together, but had trouble.

"Try again," he said.

She did.

"Hmm." He picked up a chart, jotted a few notes.

"What?" she asked him.

"Could be several things. Perhaps some neuropathy, but maybe..." He leaned closer to inspect sections of her face. Her forehead. The sides of her eyes. Around her lips. "Have you had any Botox recently?"

She stared at him blankly.

"Injectable fillers? Wrinkle minimizers?"

There was a long pause. Theresa called from a machine. "You know. Botox? Restylane? Juvéderm?"

“I don’t know...” *What are they asking me? What do they mean?*

“Here, in the nasolabial folds...” He touched the skin between her nose and mouth. “There’s slight bruising inconsistent with your other injuries. And you’re having difficulty moving some sections of your face. But your epidural hematoma wouldn’t account for this type of maxillofacial nerve paralysis...” He scrutinized her again. “It’s a bilateral pattern more suggestive of a recent series of facial injections.”

His words bled together. *Injections. Facial fillers. Is he asking if I purposefully injected something into my face? Why would I do that?*

He must have seen her frustration, because he said, “It’s okay. We’ll worry about that later. Vickie, I need you to think back—”

A sudden movement silenced him. Doors slid open, and an unfamiliar voice crackled. “Is she awake?” A man’s face punched into her vision. Two-day stubble. Rimless glasses. Brown, flat hair. He was waving a form. “Great! I need her to sign this confidentiality agreement...”

But the nurse intercepted him. “Sir, I’ve already told you—”

“Yeah, yeah. If she could just sign this...” He clicked a pen. “It’ll only take a second...”

Dr. Porter snapped the form from his hand, pointed to the door. “Either you leave or I call security.”

He shot the doctor a look of warning. “Do you even know who I represent?”

“I know exactly who you represent, and I don’t care. You have two seconds to leave the ward or we’ll kick you out. Understand?”

The man sighed. He snapped his pen, glumly abandoned the paper. “Fine. Have her read it over. And you can tell Mr. Post yourself—”

“Out!” said Theresa, pointing a threatening finger. After he slunk out the doors, Theresa returned to the bed and whispered

to the doctor, “I wish it were Jack Post coming here instead of that lawyer. God, don’t you just *love* his movies?”

Dr. Porter studied the various screens that glowed with fluctuating numbers and percentages. “Sure. That’s probably why he makes more money than the rest of us put together.”

Vickie watched them with some detachment, when something knocked behind her lids. “Ooh.” She groaned, closed her eyes. “My head...”

Dr. Porter redirected his attention to her. “Are you having a headache? How would you rate your pain? On a scale of one to ten?”

She opened her eyes and saw him pointing to a laminated poster of cartoon faces, each etched with mounting levels of pain. She considered, then pointed to the little red face with lips caught somewhere between a straight line and a downturn. “Maybe five?”

“Moderate to severe pain?”

She nodded and then peered closer at the images. Two words labeled her chosen face. *Dolor fuerte*.

She knew these words. They meant “strong pain.” But how did she know that?

Her mind gripped in a vise of pain. The doctor spoke to her again, explained future tests, procedures, and steps to be taken. Everything blurred. The nurse gave her two small pills and the rest of the water. After downing the pills, Theresa arranged her pillows—stiff from the plastic beneath the case—and helped her settle in.

When the nurse left, Vickie realized she still didn’t know how she got there. She only knew her first name.