

Prologue

Present.

It always happened slowly, but it was easy to miss. As the afternoon hours crept into the evening, the sun began its descent. Its glimmer intensified as it dropped and the blue sky was set ablaze in an explosion of pink, orange, and yellow, painted across the skyline in a brilliant glow. As it descended toward the ocean, the sun cast a beam of light onto the Pacific, its shimmer dancing on the water as it began to disappear below the horizon. In an instant, it was gone.

Then darkness would reign.

Los Angeles, California. The City of Angels.

The night was black—hazy and cold. Storm clouds concealed the moon and the rain poured down relentlessly.

Library Tower's massive frame loomed over the downtown skyline, blurred and murky through the clouds. Seventy-three floors stretched upward a fifth of a mile, 1,018 feet above street level. Its architectural design was both circular and square, a cool gray with clear teal windows, an epic cylinder with rectangular outcroppings and a spiked roof, topped with a glass prism crown.

Five figures stood on the roof, just below the helipad: three adults and two teenagers. The group huddled around a frail girl who was lying on the cold, wet concrete.

"Well, this is it," said one of the men.

The young girl on the ground, Paria Koplan, said nothing in fear of upsetting her abductors. Another man, Scar, named for the deep and appalling disfigurement that ran down his right cheek, stepped forward and looked down at her. He was a massive individual with jet-black hair and piercing, sunken eyes.

Paria looked at the figures standing around her. The bruises on her neck ached when she moved. She sat up, shivering as the rain slapped her shoulders and dripped down her slender body. It was impossible to miss the fear in her eyes. Her shirt was torn and her damp skirt clung to her legs.

One of the younger men watching was Peter Farag. His head was completely shaved, and the rain pouring down onto his black sweatshirt outlined the rippling muscles underneath. He looked at Paria sitting in a puddle of water, cold and terrified. She was going to get it. She was going to pay. He spat on the ground and glanced to his right, making eye contact with seventeen-year-old Woody Cliffords, the leader of the group.

Woody turned to Paria, glaring. Paria looked at Woody's evil gaze and pretty face. She stood up slowly and took a step toward him.

Scar shoved Paria back to the ground. Paria fell hard on the wet concrete, banging her head. Woody and Peter laughed.

Jumping to her feet, Paria yelled in rage. "Leave me alone!"

She thrust her arm forward to strike Scar. Scar deflected her arm and hit Paria in the face with the back of his fist. She fell down, blood dripping from her mouth, and rolled into a ball. She coughed and gasped for air. Tears swelled in her eyes and her heart

pounded.

Scar stepped forward and knelt down next to her. "Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Do what?" she replied, sitting up, wiping the tears from her face.

"Why did you try to tell someone? Did you think you could get away with it? Did you think we wouldn't find out?"

Paria lowered her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Scar punched her in the face, snapping her head back. He grabbed her by the hair and forced her to look in his eyes.

"Don't play games with me, girl. I know too much," Scar growled.

Paria shivered. "What do you want from me?"

"I just want to hear you say it."

"Say what?" she cried, staring into Scar's frigid, blank face.

Woody spoke up. "Okay, the bitch ain't talking. Dump her."

Scar chuckled as he stood and turned his back to her.

Paria knew what was about to happen and fear pulsed through her body. She leapt off the ground, struggling to fight her pain. Jackson, the heaviest of the group, lunged out for her. Paria darted out of the way and sprinted for the edge of the roof, hearing the sound of her heels slapping on the wet concrete.

Lightning flashed across the sky followed by an eruption of thunder. Rain poured down in thick, heavy drops. Woody huddled into his jacket, pulling the hood over his wavy blonde hair, and nodded to Scar. Scar grinned and pulled a glinting chrome-plated handgun from underneath his jacket. Paria was almost to the edge of the roof when Scar pulled the trigger.

The darkness exploded with a loud crack and a flash of light. Blood splashed across Paria's right leg. She fell screaming and thrashing, but she forced herself back to her feet. She kept running.

Scar looked at Woody, who nodded his head again. The second shot hit Paria between the shoulder blades. She wailed and stopped, the pain overtaking her. A third shot tore through her shoulder, sending her toppling over the railing and plummeting to her death. The thunder muffled her scream.

"How do you like that shit?" Peter muttered to Woody.

Woody smiled and walked over to where Paria had fallen. He shook his head, amused. Scar came up behind him.

"What do you think?" Scar asked.

"Nice work," Woody turned to face him. "That should take care of everything, but we need to get back home now. Peter and I have school tomorrow. It's kind of late." Woody chuckled to himself as he and Peter walked away from the scene and headed for the stairwell door.

"I didn't think it would happen this way," Peter said, scratching at his goatee.

"Shit," Woody said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. "It was going to happen no matter what."

Woody paused, and looked back for a moment.

"Come on, it was cool to watch," Woody said.

"Hell yeah, it was."

The two laughed and headed for the elevator.