

A movie poster featuring a close-up of a young woman's face with light brown hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the viewer. She is positioned behind a mirror that is severely shattered, with numerous sharp, jagged cracks and fragments of glass visible. The mirror is set within a dark, ornate wooden frame. The overall lighting is dim and moody, with a blueish tint. The text is in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

Анатолий Шигапов

**THE PREDATOR IN THE MIRROR
THE RETURN**

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MIRROR THE RETURN**

«Автор»

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Шигапов А.

THE PREDATOR IN THE MIRROR THE RETURN /

А. Шигапов — «Автор», 2026 — (THE PREDATOR IN THE MIRROR)

When the war is over, the scariest part is realizing the enemy wasn't out there-it was inside you all along. Alice Wood has finally found a family, but peace turns out to be an illusion. The past she thought was buried returns in the form of a man whose face haunted her worst nightmares. Her father, believed dead for fifteen years, steps out of the shadows to warn her: Harrison has escaped. And he's not alone. They're being hunted by someone they never expected-Harrison's son, raised on hatred and driven by a single goal: to destroy everyone with the last name Novak. But what if behind the mask of an enemy hides a lost child, just like them? What if the only way to survive is to welcome into the family the very person who swore to kill you? The second installment of a psychological thriller about how blood doesn't make you family. Choice does. And this choice could cost them their lives.

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THE PREDATOR IN THE MIRROR THE RETURN

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To my sister.

Since childhood, you've loved stories like this-dark, twisted, where a mystery lurks around every corner and the answer waits on the final page. You taught me not to fear the darkness, but to search for answers within it. You were my first reader, my harshest critic, and my warmest support.

This book is for you. Thank you for always believing.

From the Author

Dear Reader,

This story wasn't born from a desire to write a bestseller or from cold, calculated literary ambition. It was born from questions that each of us has asked ourselves in moments of silence: who are we? Where did we come from? What makes us a family-blood, or something more?

I've often thought about how little we truly know about those closest to us. We live side-by-side, breathe the same air, but inside each person is an entire universe we never suspect. Deep within, secrets are kept-fears, hopes, memories that no one ever shares. And sometimes those secrets break free, shattering everything we thought was unshakeable.

This book is about such secrets. About how the past catches up with us at the most unexpected moment. About how people we thought were lost return. About how hatred, absorbed since childhood, can turn into love. And about how hard-and how necessary-it is to forgive.

There were moments in my life when I felt utterly lost. When it seemed there was only darkness and not a single ray of light. And in those moments, I was saved by people. Not heroes from books, not fictional characters, but ordinary people-with their weaknesses, fears, doubts. They were just there. Holding my hand. Telling me everything would be okay. And I believed.

I tried to instill that belief in my characters. Alice, Lina, David, Miranda, Alex, Victor-they all carry a piece of those who once helped me. A piece of my family, my friends, my teachers. They make mistakes, they fall, they betray, but in the end, they find the strength to rise again. Because there are those beside them who will help them stand.

I don't want to teach you how to live. I don't know the right way. I only know that nothing matters more than feeling needed by someone. That there are people who will wait for you, even when the whole world turns away. That family isn't those you're bound to by blood, but those who are willing to shed their blood for you.

This book is full of pain. There is death, violence, betrayal. But there is also light. Because without light, there is no darkness. Because only by passing through hell can you appreciate heaven. Because only by losing do we begin to value what we have.

I wrote this story for those who have ever felt alone. For those who have lost loved ones and didn't know how to go on. For those searching for themselves and not finding. For those afraid of the dark, who didn't believe dawn would come.

It always comes. Always. Even when it seems the night will last forever. You just have to live until morning. Live and see the first rays of sun touch the treetops. Live and understand you are not alone.

If, after reading this book, you hug your loved ones-I will consider my mission accomplished. If you call someone you haven't heard from in a long time-I will be happy. If you forgive someone you couldn't forgive for so long-I will be proud.

And if you simply close the book and think about something important-then it was all worth it.

Thank you for being with me. Thank you for your time, your emotions, your life, which you shared with me on these pages.

Remember: as long as there are those who love you, you will never be truly alone.

With gratitude and hope,

Anatoly Shigapov

Chapter 1. One Year Later

«Time doesn't heal. That's the biggest lie we tell ourselves to survive. Time just hides the pain deep under the skin, where it pulses, waits, gathers strength. And then, when you least expect it, when you've almost convinced yourself it's all over, it bursts out-and tears you apart all over again.»

From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

New York greeted the morning with its usual gray sky. The rain had been drizzling for three days straight, turning the streets of Manhattan into endless mirrored corridors reflecting taxi lights, storefront windows, the faces of passersby hurrying about their business. The city lived its own life-loud, bustling, indifferent. The city didn't notice that for one person, time had stopped exactly one year ago.

Alice sat in her office in the federal building in Lower Manhattan, staring blankly ahead. An open case file lay before her-another kidnapping, another missing child, another family whose life had shattered in an instant. A year ago, she would have attacked it with fury, with desperation, with that uncanny ability to climb into a criminal's mind that made her the best profiler in the department.

Today, she just stared at the photo of a little girl with pigtails and felt nothing. Emptiness. A cold, scorched emptiness inside.

«Alice.» Marty appeared in the doorway with two cups of coffee. He always appeared just like that-unexpectedly, but right on time. «You didn't sleep again?»

«I slept,» she answered, taking the coffee. Her hands trembled slightly. «Four hours. Luxury.»

«Four hours isn't luxury, it's a disaster.» Marty sat down across from her, studying her face intently. «You look like a ghost. When did you last eat?»

«Yesterday, I think.»

«Alice, you can't do this. I know it's hard, but...»

«Marty,» she interrupted, «back off. Please. I'm working.»

He sighed but didn't argue. Over the year, he'd gotten used to these conversations. Used to her detachment, her silence, the way the department's best agent had turned into a shadow of herself. The higher-ups looked the other way-Alice Wood meant too much to the FBI to be written off for «temporary difficulties.» But Marty knew: if this continued, she wouldn't last much longer.

«Alright,» he said, getting up. «I'll be downstairs if you need me. And Alice... maybe see a doctor? Not our guy, a real one?»

«I will,» she lied.

He left, and Alice stared out the window again. Rain streaked down the glass in murky rivulets, blurring the city's outlines. She thought about how exactly one year ago, on this very day, she'd sat on a park bench and watched Lina disappear into the gray haze. A year. A whole year of silence.

No letter, no call, no sign. Lina, Miranda, Alex-all gone, dissolved like morning fog. Sometimes at night, Alice would wake up screaming-dreaming they were dead, that Harrison had found them and killed them, that she'd never see them again. And sometimes she dreamed of David. He'd be standing on the swings in the old garden, smiling, and then the swing would break, and he'd fall into the fire.

She kept his note in her breast pocket, pressed against her heart. The paper was worn at the folds, the words almost erased, but she knew them by heart: «I love you all. Take care of each other.» They hadn't. They'd scattered in different directions like cockroaches fleeing the light.

Suddenly, the phone on her desk buzzed. Alice looked at the screen-an unfamiliar number, encrypted, with an international code she didn't recognize. Her heart skipped a beat. She grabbed the receiver.

«Hello?»

Silence. Then a quiet, barely audible whisper:

«Alice... it's me.»

She caught her breath. Lina.

«Lina? Oh God, Lina! Where are you? Are you alive? Are you okay?»

«Quiet,» her sister's voice was tense, frightened. «Don't speak loudly. I can't talk long. Listen carefully.»

«Yes, yes, I'm listening.»

«He's back.»

«Who?» Alice asked, though she already knew the answer.

«Harrison. He found us. Found Miranda. We're in danger. I don't know what to do.»

«Where are you?»

«Don't ask. It's safer this way. But we need to meet. There's a place. Do you remember the old house? The one that burned down?»

«Yes.»

«Near there, there's a forest ranger's lodge. Father built it for hunting long ago. It's still standing. Come in three days, at sunset. And don't tell anyone. If Harrison finds out...»

«I understand. Lina...»

«What?»

«I missed you. I missed you so much.»

A snuffle came from the other end of the line.

«Me too, sister. Me too.»

The connection ended.

Alice sat for a long time, holding the phone to her ear, listening to the dial tone. Then she slowly placed it back on the receiver. Her hands were shaking so badly she had to clench them into fists.

Harrison was back. And her sister was calling her.

She stood up, walked to the window. The rain had stopped, and a weak ray of sun was breaking through the clouds. For the first time in a long while, Alice felt something like hope ignite inside her.

She would find them. She would protect them. Whatever it cost.

Chapter 2. A Grave Without a Name

«Cemeteries are strange places. They are full of silence, but in that silence, you can hear the voices of all who have ever left. They are full of peace, but beneath every stone beats the pulse of unfinished stories. I stood before the grave of the man I thought was my father, and suddenly understood: death is not the end. It's only the beginning of a new lie. And when the ground beneath your feet starts to move, when skeletons you yourself buried in your memory crawl out from under the headstones, all you can do is run. Or stand and fight.»

From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

Seconds stretched endlessly, like molten sugar hardening into bizarre shapes. Lina looked at Alice as if she'd spoken in a foreign language-perhaps a dead one, the language spoken only by ghosts. Her eyes widened impossibly, pupils flooding her irises, turning her eyes into two black pools. Her face grew even paler than a moment before-if that were possible-and she slowly, as if in a dream, sank to the floor, leaning her back against the cold log wall.

«What did you say?» she repeated in a whisper. Not a voice-just breath, air barely escaping her lungs. «Our father? Philip Novak? He died in the fire fifteen years ago. I saw his body. We all saw it. I stood right there when they buried him. I threw dirt on the coffin. I smelled the wet clay and my own despair. It can't be.»

«You saw what they showed you.» Alice sat beside her, taking her sister's hands. Lina's fingers were icy, like a corpse's, and Alice squeezed them tighter, trying to transfer some warmth. «Harrison staged his death. Used another body, destroyed the documents, covered his tracks. It wasn't hard- in the chaos of the fire, the smoke, the confusion. Who would check? Who would doubt? The head doctor of the clinic said Novak was dead-so it must be true. But Father was alive all that time. Hiding. Waiting.»

«Waiting?» Lina shook her head, the movement so slow, so mechanical, as if she were trying to shake off a hallucination. «For what? What was he waiting for fifteen years? For us to rot in basements? For Simon to go insane with loneliness and start writing books about death? For me to be shot full of tranquilizers and electroshock? What was he waiting for, Alice? Tell me!»

Her voice cracked into a scream, but it wasn't a scream-it was the howl of a wounded animal finally finding the strength to speak. Alice pulled her close, feeling her thin body shake.

«Not for that,» she whispered, stroking her sister's hair. «He was hiding too. Harrison was hunting him. If he'd come out of the shadows, he would have been killed. And us along with him. You think it was easy for him? You think he didn't want to run to you, to hug you, to save you? He did. But he couldn't.»

«How do you know?» Lina pulled back, looking at her with feverish eyes. «Where did you even get this? Who told you? Harrison? He's a master of lies. Maybe it's another one of his games?»

«I met him.» Alice said it quietly, but each word fell into the silence like a stone into water, sending out ripples impossible to stop. «A year ago. After you left. I was in such bad shape I couldn't work, couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Marty made me see a psychiatrist. He found a specialist, said he was the best in the city. I went to an office on the Upper East Side, sat in a chair, and saw him.»

Lina froze. Her breathing stopped. Even the fire in the stove seemed to stop crackling.

«You saw him?» she whispered. «Talked to him? Touched him?»

«Yes. He called himself Dr. Freeman. Said he specialized in post-traumatic syndrome, working with people who had survived violence. I sat there and told him about my nightmares, my dreams, the voices. And he listened and looked at me with those eyes... I didn't recognize them then. I just thought he was an attentive doctor. But then, when I was leaving, I saw a photo on his desk.»

«A photo?» Lina echoed.

«Yes. You and me on the porch. Little. You're sitting with your arm around my shoulders, smiling. And next to us is a boy. A little older. With the same eyes as his. It was him, Lina. As a child. I looked at that picture and couldn't breathe.»

«And you didn't tell me?» Lina pulled away from her embrace, moved back. Something new appeared in her eyes-not pain, not despair, but something cold and heavy, like a tombstone. «A whole year you were silent? Knew our father was alive, that he was somewhere nearby, watching us-and said nothing?»

«I didn't know how.» Alice turned away, hiding her eyes. «I couldn't believe it myself. Thought I was going crazy, that it was a hallucination, that my memory was playing cruel tricks. I went back to that office the next day-it was gone. The neighboring offices were empty, the sign removed, no one knew anything. As if he'd never existed.»

«Or he'd hidden again.»

«Or he'd hidden again,» Alice agreed. «But then, when you disappeared, when I was alone, I started searching. Went through all the archives, all the databases, all the old case files. And I found it. Philip Novak didn't die in 2005. He changed his name, his documents, his appearance. Lived in

different cities, worked as a psychologist, helped people. All that time, he was nearby. Watching us. Knowing our every move.»

«How do you know he was watching?» Lina squinted.

«Because I found proof. Photos, reports, records. He hired people to watch you in the clinic, David in New York, me. Miranda when she was found. Alex when he was hiding. He knew everything. He was waiting.»

«For what?»

«For the right moment. When Harrison would be weak, when we'd be ready. When he could help without putting us in danger.»

Lina closed her eyes. Tears streamed down her cheeks-large, heavy, slow. They fell onto her lap, onto the floor, and in the silence of the lodge, their drops sounded like heartbeats.

«So I have a father again,» she whispered. Her voice was hollow, like from a deep well. «And I don't even know whether to be glad or hate him. Because if he'd come out earlier... if he hadn't hidden... maybe David would be alive. Maybe I wouldn't have spent ten years in that hell. Maybe everything would be different.»

«And maybe we'd all be dead,» Alice answered quietly. «You think Harrison would have let us live if he'd known Father was nearby? He would have destroyed everyone. Without hesitation.»

«I don't know what to think.» Lina opened her eyes, looked at her sister. «I don't know what to feel. Inside, there's such emptiness... such weight... It's like I'm back in that basement, alone again, waiting for death again.»

«You're not alone.» Alice took her hands. «Hear me? You're not alone. We're together. And we'll find him. We'll ask him. We'll learn the truth. And then we'll decide what to do.»

«And if the truth is too terrible?»

«It was already terrible. We survived it. We'll survive this too.»

They sat in silence, each digesting the news that turned everything upside down. The lodge was cold, and Alice threw more wood into the small stove. The fire crackled, casting dancing shadows on the walls, and those shadows seemed alive-they moved, breathed, watched.

«Where is he now?» Lina asked, staring at the fire.

«I don't know. After that meeting, I tried to find him, but the office was closed and Dr. Freeman vanished. As if he'd never existed. I checked all the morgues, all the hospitals, all the police stations. Nothing.»

«Or he hid again.»

«Or he hid again,» Alice agreed. «But I think he's somewhere nearby. He knows about Harrison. He knows we're here. And he'll appear. He'll definitely appear.»

«What makes you so sure?»

«Because he always appeared. When we were in danger, when death threatened us, when we lost hope-he was there. We just didn't know it.»

Lina was silent, considering her words. Then she slowly nodded.

«Maybe you're right. But now's not the time for him. We need to find Miranda and Alex. And get out of here before Harrison finds us.»

«Are they somewhere safe?» Alice asked.

«Yes. Twenty miles from here, in an old cabin in the mountains. I didn't want to risk bringing everyone here. If Harrison finds this place, at least he won't find them.»

«You did right. We'll go for them at dawn.»

«And tonight?»

«Tonight, we wait. And prepare.»

The night passed uneasily. Alice barely slept, listening to every rustle outside the wall. The wind howled in the chimney, branches scraped the windows, somewhere an owl hooted-and every sound seemed like a threat, the approach of something inevitable and terrible.

Lina dozed but also jerked in her sleep, muttering, curling into a ball as if trying to protect herself from an invisible enemy. Alice watched her and thought about how much pain that thin body contained. Ten years of silence, ten years of loneliness, ten years of waiting for death. And now, when it seemed all was over, the past returned to remind them of itself.

Around three in the morning, Alice finally fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep-deep, black as pitch. But she didn't sleep long. She was awakened by a sharp sound-the crack of a twig under a heavy foot. She sprang up instantly, drawing the pistol that had lain beside her on the floor.

Lina was already at the window, pressed against the wall, peering through the gap between the shutters.

«Someone's out there,» she whispered without turning.

Alice crept to another window, carefully looked outside. Moonlight flooded the clearing in front of the lodge with a silvery glow, making the night almost transparent. At the edge of the forest, in the shadow of an old oak, stood a figure in a dark cloak. The person didn't move-just stood and stared straight at the house.

«He found us,» Lina breathed.

«Wait here,» Alice ordered. «And don't show yourself. No matter what happens.»

«Alice, no!» Lina grabbed her arm. «It could be a trap.»

«It could be. But if it's Harrison, I have to stop him. Here and now.»

She pulled free, silently opened the door, and slipped outside. The night air was cold and fresh, smelling of damp leaves and smoke-from the lodge or a distant campfire. Alice moved toward the figure, trying to step silently, her finger on the trigger.

The distance closed slowly. Ten meters, eight, five. The figure didn't move, and that was the most terrifying thing. It was waiting. It knew Alice would approach.

And when only three steps remained to the oak, the moon emerged from behind a cloud, illuminating the stranger's face.

The pistol wavered in Alice's hands. She froze, not believing her eyes.

Before her stood her father. Older, gaunter, with a gray beard and deep wrinkles cutting his face like the beds of dried-up rivers. But it was him-the man from the photograph, the one she'd seen in the office a year ago, the one she'd thought dead for fifteen years.

«Hello, daughter,» he said quietly. His voice was hoarse, but it held so much warmth that Alice's knees went weak. «I knew you'd be here. I was waiting.»

«Why did you come?» she asked, her voice breaking. «After everything, after so many years... why?»

«To save you.» He stepped closer, and Alice saw he was limping, leaning on a cane. «Harrison is already here. He knows about this place. In an hour, there will be a dozen armed men here. We need to leave. Immediately.»

«Why should I believe you?» Alice didn't lower the pistol. «You abandoned us. You disappeared. You let us suffer.»

«Because I'm your father,» he answered simply. «Because I love you. Because we have no other choice. If you want to kill me-shoot. But first, save your sister.»

At that moment, the door of the lodge burst open, and Lina appeared on the threshold. Seeing the man, she froze, then slowly, as if in a dream, walked toward him, stumbling over roots and stones.

«Dad?» Her voice was thin, childlike, like a little girl lost in the woods. «Dad, is that you?»

«Lina...» He reached out his hands to her, tears streaming down his cheeks. «My girl... forgive me. Forgive me for not protecting you. Forgive me for not being there. Forgive me.»

Lina rushed to him, and they embraced. Alice stood aside, watching the scene, feeling her heart shatter inside. Too much pain, too many lies, too many years of loneliness. And suddenly she understood: all this time, she hadn't hated her father-she'd hated her own helplessness, her inability to change anything. He was just surviving. Like them.

«We need to go,» Father said, pulling back. «Now. The car is in the woods, two hundred meters from here. I'll take you to Miranda and Alex.»

«How do you know about them?» Alice asked, lowering the pistol.

«I know everything,» he answered, looking her straight in the eye. «All these years, I've been watching you. Knew your every move, every danger, every joy. I was waiting for the moment I could help. And now that moment has come.»

«Why not sooner?»

«Because sooner I was powerless. Harrison was too strong, he had people everywhere. Any attempt I made to get close to you could have cost you your lives. I had to wait.»

«And you waited fifteen years?»

«And I waited fifteen years,» he nodded. «Every day, every night. Thought of you, prayed for you, hoped you would survive. And you did. You're stronger than you think.»

Behind them, from the direction of the lodge, shots suddenly rang out-sharp, cracking, tearing the night silence. Shouts, pounding feet, the crack of branches.

«They're here!» Father shouted. «Quick!»

They ran into the forest, toward where an old jeep was hidden in the thicket. Branches whipped their faces, their feet sank into wet grass, but fear drove them forward. Behind them, shots and cries-the attackers were already at the lodge.

«This way!» Father called, pointing to a clearing between the trees.

They burst into a small clearing where an old SUV stood, camouflaged with branches. Father jumped behind the wheel, Alice and Lina into the back seat. The engine started instantly, and the vehicle lurched forward, bouncing over roots and rocks.

In the rearview mirror, Alice saw the lodge burst into bright flame. Fire shot toward the sky, illuminating the forest with an ominous orange glow. And against that fire, dark figures darted-Harrison's men, left with nothing.

«They won't stop,» Lina said, looking back.

«They won't,» Father agreed. «But we have a head start. And a plan.»

«What plan?» Alice asked.

«You'll see.» He looked at her in the mirror, and in his eyes was something she'd never seen before-hope.

The car plunged deeper into the forest, carrying them away from danger, from the past, from everything they'd known. Ahead lay uncertainty. But for the first time in years, Alice felt she wasn't alone. Beside her were those worth fighting for.

Chapter 3. Family Council

«Family isn't those you're bound to by blood. It's those you'd die for. And those who'd die for you. We sat in a cramped forest cabin, five people broken by life, but bound by something stronger than any bond. And for the first time in years, I felt what it meant to be home.»

From the diaries of Special Agent Alice Wood

The jeep tore through the undergrowth, bouncing over ruts and roots. Father sat behind the wheel, peering intently into the darkness lit only by the dim headlights. Beside him, in the passenger seat, Lina stared unblinkingly at his profile, as if trying to memorize every feature, every wrinkle, every strand of gray in his hair. Alice sat in the back, gripping her pistol and glancing at the rear window-watching for the flash of pursuing headlights among the trees.

«How much time do we have?» she asked, forcing her voice to stay level.

«An hour, maybe two,» Father replied without turning. «Harrison's no fool. He'll know we haven't gone far. He has people all over these woods.»

«Where does he get so many people?» Lina turned to him. «He's a fugitive; the police are hunting him.»

«He has money. Lots of money. And connections that don't disappear just because of a conviction. He bought himself a new life, new documents, a new army.» Father sighed heavily. «I underestimated him. I thought after you exposed him, he'd vanish. Instead, he only got stronger.»

«And all this time, you were watching us?» Alice's voice was laced with bitterness. «Knew where we were, knew Harrison was hunting us, and did nothing?»

Father was silent for a long moment. Then he stopped the car in a small clearing, cut the engine, and turned to face them. In the moonlight, his face seemed carved from stone-old, tired, but with eyes that still burned with the same fire as in the childhood photograph.

«You want the truth, Alice?» he asked quietly. «The whole truth, with no sugar-coating?»

«I've wanted it for a long time.»

«Then listen. And try to understand before you judge.»

He got out of the car, gesturing for them to follow. The forest greeted them with dampness and silence. An owl hooted in the distance; the air smelled of rotting leaves and smoke-maybe from a campfire, maybe from the blaze they'd left behind.

«Fifteen years ago, when Harrison set our house on fire, I thought I'd lost everyone,» he began, staring into the darkness. «I was the last one out, when I could barely breathe. Strangers found me, took me to a hospital. When I woke up, they told me my wife and three children were dead.»

«But we were alive,» Lina whispered.

«I didn't know.» He turned to them, tears glistening in his eyes. «Harrison forged documents, bodies, everything. He wanted me to think you were dead. So I wouldn't look for you. So I'd disappear from his life forever.»

«And you did disappear,» Alice's voice accused.

«I searched. God, how I searched!» He clenched his fists. «I spent years searching. Hired detectives, traveled half the country, dug through mountains of documents. But Harrison was clever. He changed your names, moved you from place to place, hid you in clinics and shelters. I couldn't find you.»

«And then?»

«Then, about five years later, I accidentally stumbled onto Lina's trail. She was already in 'Safe Harbor.' I tried to get close to her, but Harrison controlled everything. Any move I made could have cost her life. I decided to wait.»

«Wait?» Lina stepped toward him. «You knew I was in that basement, and you waited?»

«I didn't know about the basement.» He shook his head. «I thought she was just a patient. Under supervision, but safe. If I'd known what Harrison was doing to her... I would have killed him with my bare hands.»

«And me?» Alice asked. «Did you know about me?»

«I only found you three years ago.» He looked at her with such pain that Alice's breath caught. «You were an FBI agent, you had a new life, a new family. I thought if I appeared, I'd ruin everything. That you wouldn't believe me, that you'd drive me away. I decided to watch from afar.»

«Watch,» Alice repeated bitterly. «Like a spectator in a theater.»

«Like a father who loves his children more than life itself and would do anything for their happiness.» He approached her, took her hands. «Forgive me, Alice. Forgive me for not being there. Forgive me for not protecting you. But I'm here now. And I'll do everything to save you.»

Alice looked at him, and within her, anger and pity, resentment and understanding, battled. She remembered all her nightmares, all the nights she'd woken in a cold sweat, all the years of loneliness. And beside them-his face, his tears, his plea.

«I don't know if I can forgive,» she said finally. «But right now, we need to think about something else. Where are Miranda and Alex?»

«Twenty minutes from here.» He released her hands and headed back to the car. «Let's go. They're waiting.»

The cabin where Miranda and Alex were hiding was even smaller and more dilapidated than the forest lodge. Sunken into the ground, with a crooked roof and boarded-up windows, it was hidden deep in a ravine, almost invisible from the main path. When the jeep stopped at the entrance, the door flew open and Miranda appeared on the threshold.

She had changed in a year. The hunted look, the emptiness in her eyes from the basement, was gone. She looked older, more confident, stronger. But when she saw Alice and Lina, her face lit up with such joy that both sisters' hearts clenched.

«You came back!» she cried, running to them.

They embraced, the three of them, right there in the middle of the forest under the cold autumn sky. Tears mingled, and no one was ashamed.

«I thought you wouldn't come,» Miranda whispered, clinging to Alice. «I thought we'd never see each other again.»

«We'll always come back,» Alice answered. «Always.»

Alex emerged from the cabin. He walked with a noticeable limp—a souvenir from the wound he'd received a year ago. But his eyes held the same fire Alice remembered from their first meeting.

«Sister,» he said simply, extending his hand. «Good to see you.»

«You too, brother.»

They embraced. Then Alex's gaze shifted to their father, and his face changed—hardened, became wary.

«And who's this?» he asked, his hostility undisguised.

«Our father,» Lina answered. «Philip Novak.»

Alex froze. Then he slowly approached, studying the face before him.

«You're dead,» he said. «You were killed fifteen years ago.»

«I'm alive,» Father answered quietly. «And I want to help.»

«Help?» Alex laughed bitterly. «Where were you when Lina was in that basement? Where were you when Alice was searching for herself? Where were you when Miranda was losing her memory? Where were you when I was killing people, thinking I was alone?»

«I was nearby,» Father answered. «All these years, I was nearby. Watching, waiting, hoping. I couldn't intervene without putting you in even greater danger. But now—now I can.»

«How do you prove that?»

«Nothing,» Father spread his hands. «Only that I'm here. Only that I risked my life to find you. Only that I'm ready to die for you.»

Alex stared at him for a long time. Then he extended his hand.

«We'll see,» he said. «You don't have much time.»

Father shook his hand, and in that handshake was more pain, more hope, more forgiveness than any book could hold.

They entered the cabin. Inside, it was cramped but cozy—homemade beds, a potbellied stove, the smell of dried herbs and old wood. On the table lay a map, covered in markings.

«We've been working on a plan,» Alex said, pointing to the map. «Harrison is probably based somewhere in this area. He has men, weapons, money. Attacking head-on would be suicide.»

«What do you propose?» Alice asked.

«Lure him into a trap,» Alex jabbed a finger at a spot on the map. «There's an old abandoned factory here. Remote, but with several entrances and exits. We could set an ambush.»

«Too risky,» Father shook his head. «Harrison's no fool. He won't go in without scouting first.»

«What if he has no choice?» Lina asked.

Everyone turned to her.

«What do you mean?» Alice asked.

«If we have what he wants more than anything in the world. Father's documents.»

«But we don't have them,» Miranda reminded her. «Someone stole them.»

«I know.» Lina looked at Father. «But *he* doesn't know. We can pretend we have them. Set up a meeting. And when he comes...»

«He walks into a trap,» Alex finished.

«And if he brings his men?»

«Then we have to be ready for anything.»

Father was silent for a long time, weighing the plan. Then he slowly nodded.

«It could work,» he said. «But we'll need weapons. Lots of them. And communication with the outside world in case something goes wrong.»

«I can contact Marty,» Alice offered. «He'll help.»

«Are you sure you can trust him?»

«It's Marty. I trust him like myself.»

«Good.» Father stood. «Then let's prepare. We don't have much time.»

They sat until dawn, hashing out the details. Everyone contributed-Lina suggested escape routes, Miranda sketched the factory layout from memory, Alex assigned roles, Alice planned communication with the outside world, and Father coordinated everything, impressing them all with his knowledge of the terrain and the enemy's psychology.

When dawn finally broke outside the window, they were finished. Exhausted but determined, they looked at each other, and for the first time in years, each felt they were not alone.

«We'll make it,» Alice said. «Because we're a family.»

«Family,» the others echoed.

Outside, the sun was rising. A new day brought new hopes and new fears. But they were together. And that was all that mattered.

Chapter 4. A Sister's Return

«There are meetings that words can't describe. When two souls, separated by years of pain and silence, finally find each other-it's like coming home after a long war. You smell of gunpowder and blood, you're wounded and broken, but the threshold you cross accepts you as you are. And you know-here, you won't be judged. Here, you are loved. Here, you can fall and know you'll be lifted up. Here, you can cry and know your tears will be shared. Here, you can be silent-and that silence will be understood without words. Because they are your family.»

From the diaries of Lina Novak

The morning after the sleepless night dawned cold and clear. The kind of morning that only comes deep in the forest in autumn, when the air is crisp as a bell and every sound carries for miles. The autumn sun crept slowly over the tops of the ancient pines, painting the forest in shades of gold and crimson-the red of maples, the gold of birches, the deep green of firs-but in the tiny cabin lost in all this splendor, no one noticed the beauty. Everyone was too deep in their own thoughts, their own fears, their own hopes, that thick, syrupy mix of emotions called waiting.

Lina stepped onto the porch first. She'd always loved watching the sunrise-even in the clinic, even in the basement where sunrise existed only in her imagination. Now that she could see it for real, it had become a ritual, almost sacred. She stood, inhaling the fresh, slightly frosty air, feeling the chill creep under her thin jacket, raising goosebumps on her skin. Birds called to each other in the distance, and the air smelled of decaying leaves and smoke-maybe from a fire, maybe just the scent of autumn itself, that particular smell of decay that is both sad and soothing.

She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to warm up, but the cold had already seeped inside, settled in her bones, reminding her of all those winters spent in a concrete box without windows. Then she felt something warm and heavy settle on her shoulders-someone's blanket, smelling of lavender and home.

«You'll freeze,» Miranda said, sitting down beside her on the step. She wore a thick sweater, her hair loose and already being tossed by the wind, strands blowing across her face. «You always forgot

to dress for the weather. I remember as kids, you'd run outside barefoot in the snow if something caught your interest. Mom would yell and scold, and you'd just laugh and keep running.»

Lina smiled, pulling the blanket tighter. The smile was sad, but warm.

«Do you remember childhood?» she asked, turning to her sister. «Not what they told you, not what you saw in nightmares, but the real thing?»

«In fragments,» Miranda answered, looking at the forest. Her eyes were calm, but deep within, a spark glowed-the same spark that had died in the basement and was now reigniting. «Like a puzzle slowly coming together. Sometimes at night, before sleep, a picture comes-a swing, sunshine, someone's laughter. Sometimes a smell-lilacs, fresh bread, Mom's perfume. I cling to those feelings, afraid to lose them, afraid they'll slip away again. But the more I remember, the more I realize we were happy. Before all this horror.»

«We were,» Lina agreed. Her voice trembled. «Father... he was a good father. Loving. Caring. Despite all his mistakes, his obsession with work, not always being there. I remember him pushing us on the swings-wooden ones, old and creaky. We'd squeal with delight, begging, 'Higher! Higher!' and he'd laugh and say we'd grow up and fly away. I remember him reading us bedtime stories-he had this voice, deep and calm, that made you feel warm and safe. I remember him teaching us to swim in the lake-holding us up while we flailed our arms and legs, then suddenly letting go, and we'd swim. By ourselves. For the first time.»

«And I remember you teaching me to read,» Miranda said, tears in her voice-not bitter, but bright, grateful. «I was about five, couldn't remember the letters, confused 'b' and 'd', got angry, cried, threw the books. But you'd sit with me for hours, showing me pictures, making up stories where each letter was a character. Remember? 'A' was an alligator, 'B' was a bear, 'C' was a cat. You said, 'If you learn to read, you'll open up a whole world.' I didn't understand then, but I remembered. And later, in the basement, when I'd look at the walls and see letters forming words, I'd remember you. Your voice. Your patience.»

Lina studied her for a long, searching moment. Miranda had changed-it was obvious. The meekness, that constant readiness to shrink away, to hide, to disappear that had been there in the basement, was gone. The emptiness in her eyes, that terrifying absence of life that was more frightening than any wound, was gone. She looked older, more confident, stronger. A year of normal life-with care, with attention, with love-had done its work.

«You've become different,» Lina said. «Stronger.»

«I had to,» Miranda shrugged, but there was no indifference in the gesture, only acceptance. «When you've been through something like that, you have two choices: break, or become stronger. I was on the edge, many times. I wanted to die, honestly. I thought it would be easier not to exist than to feel that pain every second. But Alex... he wouldn't let me break.»

«Alex?» Lina raised an eyebrow, studying her sister's face. «You've grown close?»

«He was there when I was at my worst.» Miranda looked away, but a blush crept onto her cheeks-not from the cold. «When I'd wake up screaming at night, when I couldn't breathe from the nightmares, when it felt like the walls were closing in again-he was there. Just sitting, holding my hand, silent. Sometimes he'd tell me about his childhood, about how Harrison broke him. About how he survived, how he hated, how he dreamed of revenge. I'd listen and realize: I'm not alone. My pain isn't the only pain in the world. There's someone who feels the same.»

«Do you love him?»

The question hung in the air, transparent and sharp as the autumn air. Miranda blushed deeply, to the roots of her hair.

«I don't know,» she admitted softly. «Maybe. It's so strange-to love after everything that's happened. Sometimes I feel like I've forgotten how to feel. Like inside me, there's just emptiness, scorched earth where nothing grows. And other times, my heart feels like it'll burst with tenderness

when he's near. I'm afraid of this feeling. Afraid it's deceptive, that it's just gratitude, that I'm confusing one thing with another.»

«That is love,» Lina smiled. «When you don't know what you're feeling, but you can't be without the person. When you're afraid of losing them, but even more afraid to admit it. When you think about them every minute, even when you're trying not to.»

«How do you know?» Miranda looked up at her. «You said you never had anyone.»

«I did.» Lina looked away. «A long time ago. Before the clinic. A boy from a nearby town, handsome, daring, a couple of years older. We met in secret, hid from our parents, wrote each other notes. I thought it was forever. Then the fire happened, and I ended up in the basement. He came at first, tried to get through, but Harrison drove him away. Then he stopped coming. I don't know what happened to him. Maybe he's alive, maybe not. But the feeling remained. That same one-when your heart aches, even after many years.»

They were silent, gazing at the forest. In the distance, the sound of an engine-a car, far away, maybe on an old logging road. The sound faded quickly, dissolved into the morning silence, but left a residue-anxious, sticky.

«What about you?» Miranda asked, turning to Lina. «Is there anyone now?»

«No.» Lina shook her head. «After everything, I can't. I tried, honestly. In Canada, while we were hiding, there was a man, a local, kind and caring. He courted me, brought flowers, said beautiful things. And I'd sit there thinking: why? Why is he doing this? What does he want from me? When he tried to kiss me, I almost threw up from fear. I close up, Miranda. Every time someone gets close, a defense mechanism kicks in. I'm scared.»

«Of what?»

«Of losing again. Of being alone again. Of being betrayed again. Of him turning out like Harrison, like the orderlies, like everyone who hurt me. I don't know how to trust. At all.»

«No one will betray you,» Miranda said firmly, taking her hand. «We're here. We're with you. Always. And if you ever meet someone who truly wants to be with you-we'll help you believe. And if he turns out to be the wrong one-we'll help you drive him away.»

Lina looked at her, tears shining in her eyes.

«Do you really think so?»

«I know.» Miranda squeezed her hand. «Because you're my sister. And I'll never let anyone hurt you.»

They embraced, and in that hug was more warmth than all the campfires in the world could provide. Two women who had survived hell, found each other, and clung to each other like the only anchor in a stormy sea.

The cabin door opened, and Alex stepped onto the porch. He was limping more than usual-the result of exhaustion, sleepless nights, and maybe a cold coming on. But his eyes shone with that special light that appears when you know those you love are near.

«Alice wants everyone inside,» he said, stopping in the doorway. «News from Marty. Looks like Harrison's surfaced.»

«Bad news?» Lina asked, rising.

«Mixed.» Alex shrugged. «But better to know now than to wonder.»

They returned to the cabin. Inside, it was warm, smelling of herbs and pine resin. Alice sat at the table with her laptop; a secure communication channel flickered on the screen. Father stood beside her, studying the map spread out on the table. His face was focused, but his eyes held the same tension as everyone else's.

«Marty confirmed it,» Alice said, looking up. Her voice was steady, but Lina knew her sister well enough to hear the metallic edge. «Harrison is indeed in this area. He has a base in an old hunting lodge, about thirty kilometers from here, right here.» She pointed to the map. «About ten men, well-armed, trained. These aren't random thugs; they're professionals. Mercenaries.»

«Ten against five,» Alex whistled, studying the map. «Not bad odds, considering we're on our turf and they're strangers.»

«We have the advantage of surprise,» Father added. «They don't know we're here. Don't know we're aware of their plans. And they don't know we have inside information.»

«What plans?» Lina asked, peering at the map. «What does he want?»

«He wants us all,» Alice answered. «Not just to kill. To destroy. Wipe us off the face of the earth. According to what Marty relayed, he thinks we ruined his life, and now he wants to ruin ours. Slowly. With relish.»

«He was always a sadist,» Lina said quietly. «I remember the way he looked at me in the clinic. How he smiled when they hurt me. For him, suffering is an art.»

«Then we can't afford to lose,» Alice said firmly. «Because losing for us wouldn't just mean death; it would mean something worse.»

«So we attack?» Alex asked, patting the grip of his pistol.

«No.» Alice shook her head. «We don't attack. We lure them into a trap. Right here.» She pointed to a spot deep in the forest. «An old quarry, abandoned, with one road in and one road out. If they go in there, it'll be hard to get out. Marty will call in SWAT; they'll block both exits. And we'll be inside, as bait.»

«So we're live bait?» Miranda clarified. «They'll see us and come?»

«They'll see what they want to see.» Alice smirked. «The papers Harrison is looking for. We'll make a dummy set, leave them in the car, and hide. They'll take the bait.»

«And if they don't?»

«Then we have a fight. Open, honest, no tricks. But I hope it doesn't come to that.»

Silence descended. Each was lost in their own thoughts, but the thoughts converged on one point-tomorrow might be their last. The last dawn, the last sunset, the last breath.

«I want to propose a toast,» Miranda suddenly said. Her voice trembled, but she pulled herself together. Everyone looked at her in surprise. «We don't have wine, but we have water. Clean, from a spring, real. I want to drink to us. To finding each other. To being a family. To the fact that, no matter what happens tomorrow, we did this right. We didn't give up. We didn't betray. We were together.»

She raised her mug of water. In the light of the kerosene lamp, the water seemed golden, like the finest wine. The others followed suit.

«To family,» Alice said, her voice steady as never before.

«To family,» the others echoed.

They drank the water, and at that moment, each felt truly not alone. That behind them was a wall that couldn't be breached. That ahead was a light that couldn't be extinguished.

The night passed uneasily. No one slept-they all sat by the stove, listening to the wind howl outside and sharing stories from their lives. It wasn't just conversation-it was a ritual, a passing on of memory, a strengthening of bonds that would have to withstand the coming battle.

Alex spoke of the years of wandering after escaping Harrison. Of living in the forest, eating roots and small game, fearing people, waking every night from nightmares where the past caught up with him.

«I thought I'd go crazy,» he said, staring at the fire. «Loneliness is a terrible thing. When you have no one to talk to, when every sound seems like a threat, when you start hearing voices-your own, but foreign. I talked to the trees, the birds, the wind. They answered me. I know it sounds crazy, but it saved me.»

Lina spoke of ten years of silence. Of how she learned to live without words, how she read lips, how she understood people by their movements, their glances, their breathing.

«The worst part wasn't the silence,» she admitted. «The worst part was hearing. Hearing them discuss my death, make plans, laugh. I'd lie in my cell and listen to them deciding how much longer I had to live. That was worse than any torture.»

Miranda spoke of recovering her memory. Of piecing herself back together bit by bit, learning to trust the world, fearing she'd wake up one day and remember nothing again.

«Alex taught me not to be afraid,» she said, looking at him with such tenderness that everyone's heart clenched. «He said, 'Memory is a house. Sometimes doors close, but they don't disappear. You just have to find the key.'»

Alice spoke of searching for herself. Of becoming an FBI agent, searching for missing people, not knowing she was searching for herself. Of meeting David, loving him like a brother, losing him.

«He was a light,» she whispered. «In the darkest darkness, he was a light. And when he left, I thought the light had gone out forever. But you... you lit a new one.»

And Father listened and wept. Wept, understanding how much pain life had caused them. How many years they'd been apart, how much suffering had been their lot. And in every breath, every tear, was a plea for forgiveness he dared not speak aloud.

Toward morning, when the sky outside began to lighten and the fire had burned down to red embers, Lina approached Alice. The sisters stood at the window, watching the first rays of sun pierce the fog.

«I want to tell you something,» Lina whispered. «Something I've never said. Not even to myself.»

«What?» Alice turned to her.

«You saved me. Not when you pulled me out of the clinic. Not when you found the documents. But earlier. In childhood. You were my protector. When Mom died, when Dad was lost in his work, when Simon withdrew and noticed nothing-you were there. You held my hand when I was afraid of the dark. You told me stories when I couldn't sleep. You said everything would be okay, and I believed you. Because you never lied.»

«I don't remember,» Alice whispered, her voice trembling.

«You don't remember because your memory was erased. Harrison took more than your name-he took your past. But it happened. You were always my sister. Not by blood-by heart. By choice. By love.»

«I remember,» Alice suddenly said, her eyes widening. «I remember.»

«What?»

«Everything,» Alice smiled through tears. «I remember our house. I remember the garden with apple trees. I remember us playing hide-and-seek, and you always hiding behind the old oak, and me pretending not to see you so you'd be happy. I remember you crying when you lost your first tooth, and me promising the tooth fairy would bring you a gift. I remember your laugh-clear as a bell. I remember you.»

They embraced, pressed against each other, and in that hug was more pain and more happiness than any single human life could hold.

Outside, the sun rose over the forest, bathing the cabin in golden light. A new day was beginning. The most frightening day of their lives. But they would face it together. Because they were family. And that was all that mattered.

Chapter 5. Father's Secrets

«Every person carries secrets capable of destroying not only their own life but the lives of those they love. I thought that by burying the truth deep inside, I would protect my children. I was wrong. The truth always finds a way out. And when it does, it hits harder than any blow. Because with the truth comes understanding: all those years, you lived a lie you created yourself, just to avoid facing your own weakness.»

From the diaries of Philip Novak

The sun had climbed high, but the cabin was steeped in a thick, viscous twilight. Rags stuffed into the cracks kept out the daylight, leaving only the stove to cast reddish, pulsing reflections on the

log walls, creating bizarre shadows that danced in time with the breathing of those gathered. Those shadows lived their own life-writhing, reaching for the people, enveloping them as if to strangle them, to take them into the abyss from which they'd crawled. All five sat around the roughly hewn table, cluttered with maps, ammunition magazines, remnants of a meager breakfast, and crumpled sheets of paper covered in hasty notes. Tension hung in the air, thick and sticky as pitch, ready to ignite at the slightest spark-a careless word, a sudden movement, a heavy sigh.

Alice broke the silence first. She looked at her father with a long, searching gaze-the same gaze she used during interrogations on the most dangerous criminals, murderers and maniacs who thought they could fool her. There was no hatred in that look, but no trust either. Only the cold, calculating steel of a professional ready to hear any truth, no matter how monstrous.

«You said you had a plan,» she said levelly, but her voice held that same steel that made criminals' knees buckle. «You said you knew how to stop Harrison. It's time to tell us everything. No holding back, no omissions, no damned paternal concern that cost us fifteen years of hell. We have a right to know what we're getting into. We have a right to choose whether to live or die.»

Father sighed heavily. He sat at the head of the table, slumped as if an invisible burden weighing a whole world pressed on his shoulders. The wrinkles on his face had deepened, sharpened, turning his skin into something like old parchment inscribed with the history of countless deaths and betrayals. His hands, resting on the table, trembled noticeably-a fine, unpleasant tremor he couldn't control. Before him stood a mug of cold tea he hadn't touched. A thin film had formed on the liquid, reflecting the dancing shadows like a murky mirror.

«You're right,» he finally answered. His voice was hollow, as if from a deep, stagnant well where rotten water had accumulated for years. «You deserve to know the whole truth. Even the part I hoped to take to my grave. Even the part that might cause you even more pain.»

Alex, sitting by the window with a rifle across his knees, snorted nervously. He kept glancing at the forest beyond the glass-watching for a shadow, the glint of a barrel. But the forest was silent, too silent, as if frozen in anticipation.

«Sounds like the beginning of a good tragedy,» he said, his sarcasm undisguised. «Just don't tell us it's all our fault. Because, you know, I'm already tired of feeling guilty. My conscience is overloaded.»

«No,» Father shook his head, and the movement held such weariness that everyone's heart clenched. «Only I am to blame. And Harrison. But the roots of this enmity go much deeper than you think. Much deeper than the abyss we've all been staring into.»

He paused, gathering his thoughts, as if shifting heavy stones in the depths of his mind. Then he began to speak, his initially quiet voice gradually strengthening, filling with a strength that seemed impossible to find in that exhausted body.

«You know Harrison and I were colleagues. We studied together, worked together at the clinic, developed treatment methods together. But what you don't know is that we were... brothers.»

The silence became absolute. Even the fire in the stove seemed to stop crackling; even the shadows froze on the walls, listening. Alex stopped breathing. Miranda covered her mouth with her hand. Lina turned white as a ghost. Alice only clenched her fists tighter, bracing for the worst.

«Brothers?» Lina repeated, her voice holding not just disbelief but a plea. A plea for this not to be true. «You're saying Harrison is your brother? That the man who kept me in a basement for ten years, who killed our mother, who destroyed all our lives-is your brother?»

«Half-brother,» Father nodded, and that nod was heavier than any confession. «We had the same mother and different fathers. She married my father when I was five, and a year later, Harrison was born. I remember him as an infant-tiny, wrinkled, colicky. I thought I had a brother, a friend for life. I carried him in my arms, rocked him when he cried. I loved him.»

«And him?» Alice asked quietly.

«He was jealous. Always. From childhood.» Father ran a hand over his face, as if trying to wipe away the shadows of the past. «Jealous that our father loved me more. That I was more successful in school, that learning came easier to me, that I had a talent for music and drawing. He thought it should all have been his. That I'd stolen his life.»

«And when our father died,» Alex continued, already guessing, «he left everything to you?»

«Everything. The house, the land, the money. And most importantly-our grandfather's scientific research. He was a famous psychiatrist, the first to experiment with altering consciousness through creativity. Those developments were worth a fortune. Harrison thought he had a right to them. I disagreed.»

«And that's why he killed our parents?» Miranda whispered, but in the silence of the cabin, her voice rang like a tocsin.

«Not only that.» Father clenched his fists until his knuckles whitened. «He didn't just want money. He wanted my life. My family. My children. He wanted me to suffer the way he suffered, feeling deprived, unwanted, second-rate. He wanted me to know the emptiness that had lived inside him since childhood.»

«But you survived,» Alice noted. «He thought he'd killed everyone, but you somehow got out.»

«Yes. And that infuriated him most of all.» Father allowed himself a bitter smile. «I became his obsession, his personal demon. And for the next fifteen years, all I did was gather a dossier on him. Every crime, every death, every bribe, every connection, every dark deal-it's all recorded, documented, hidden in a safe place. I was waiting. Waiting for the moment I could strike.»

«Where?» Alex leaned forward, a dangerous light igniting in his eyes. «Where are these documents?»

«Where he'd never think to look.» Father allowed himself a faint smile-his first of the conversation. «In our childhood home. The one he burned to the ground.»

«But the house burned down,» Lina objected. «We saw it. I remember those charred walls, that ash.»

«The house burned, but the basement survived. It was built of stone; fire couldn't destroy it. And in the basement, there's a hiding place only I knew about. My grandfather showed it to me when I was ten. Harrison didn't know about it. And all these years, the documents lay there, in an iron box, walled up, waiting for their time.»

Alice jumped up so abruptly her chair crashed over.

«Then what are we waiting for?» she exclaimed, her eyes blazing. «Let's go get them! Now!»

«Not so fast,» Father stopped her, raising a hand. The gesture was commanding, but his hand trembled. «First, it's far, several hundred miles from here. Second, we're being watched. Harrison has surely set up roadblocks on all roads leading out of this forest. He has men, technology, connections. If we try to leave together, we'll be intercepted.»

«And third?» Miranda asked, sensing a catch.

«And third...» Father sighed. «The documents are in a safe that only opens with my fingerprint and voice. A biometric system, old-fashioned but reliable. I have to be there personally.»

Alex whistled and leaned back in his chair.

«Old-fashioned precaution. Your grandfather sounds like he was quite the paranoid.»

«My grandfather was a genius. And he knew the value of what he was protecting. He trusted no one-not his wife, not his children, not his lawyers.» Father spread his hands. «So the plan is simple: we have to get to the old house, retrieve the documents, and hand them over to the FBI. But to do that, we need to distract Harrison. Make him look the other way.»

«How?» Miranda asked, her voice trembling. She already suspected the answer.

«With myself.» Father looked at her with infinite sadness and love. «I'll contact Harrison and arrange a meeting. I'll say I'm ready to give him everything if he guarantees your safety. He won't

believe a word, of course, but curiosity will make him come. Greed will make him come. Hatred will make him come. And while he's waiting for me at the rendezvous point, you'll go for the documents.»

«No.» Alice said it firmly, like a knife cutting through cloth. «No, Dad. That's suicide. You know that. He won't let you live.»

«Probably.» Father shrugged with a calmness that suggested they were discussing tomorrow's weather. «But we have no choice. If we don't get those papers, Harrison will keep hunting. He'll pursue you for the rest of your lives. He won't stop until he's destroyed everyone named Novak. I've waited too long. Hidden too long. It's time to end this.»

«I'm coming with you to the meeting,» Alex declared, standing up. The rifle fell to the floor, but he didn't notice. «Together, we have a better chance. I'll cover you.»

«And who will take the girls to get the documents?» Father countered. «They need protection. The forest could be dangerous. Harrison might have left an ambush.»

«I can protect myself,» Alice retorted, her voice ringing with the steel she'd honed during her FBI years. «I'm an agent, you know. I've been trained. I can shoot.»

«Against a dozen armed thugs?» Alex smirked. «In open woods where every bush could hide a threat?»

«I have Marty.» Alice pulled out her phone, waving it. «He'll bring in SWAT. As soon as we signal, they'll be here in twenty minutes.»

«They'll take an hour to get here, after everything's over,» Alex countered. «You know how bureaucracy works. First confirmation, then authorization, then deployment. Harrison won't wait.»

«Enough!» Lina slammed her fist on the table so hard the mugs jumped. Everyone fell silent, staring at her in surprise. No one expected this outburst from quiet, silent Lina. «We're a family, or what? We decide together. No one walks into certain death alone. No one sacrifices themselves for others. We'll make a plan that works for everyone. Period.»

Father looked at her with pride. Tears glistened in his eyes.

«You're right, daughter. Forgive an old man. I'm used to deciding everything alone. Used to carrying this burden alone. But now I have you. And that... that's the greatest happiness of my life.»

They bent over the map again. The next few hours flew by in an instant. They discussed details, drew diagrams, assigned roles, argued until they were hoarse, then made up. Alice contacted Marty on a secure channel and got coordinates for a SWAT team ready to move at the first signal. Alex checked every weapon, every round, every knife. Miranda, who had a surprising talent for orienteering, plotted three possible routes to the old house-primary, secondary, and emergency.

Lina sat in the corner, silently watching them. In her mind, her own plan was forming-a plan she hadn't mentioned to anyone yet. A plan that could cost her life. But if it worked, it would save them all.

When darkness fell and deep blue twilight crept into the cabin, Father announced:

«We move at dawn. Alice, Alex, and Miranda go for the documents. Lina and I stay to distract Harrison.»

«Why Lina?» Alice tensed. «Why not me? I'm better trained.»

«Because Lina knows this area best.» Father looked at his daughter. «She spent a lot of time here while you were in hiding. She knows every path, every ravine, every shelter. And because I trust her most of all.»

Lina met her father's gaze and gave a barely perceptible nod. She knew what he was planning. And she agreed.

The night passed uneasily. No one slept-all prepared for the coming day, which could be their last. Alice checked her gear for the hundredth time, arranging it meticulously, almost obsessively. Alex sharpened his knife-long, terrifying, with a black handle-the blade glinting in the kerosene lamp light like a serpent's tongue. Miranda sat in the corner, whispering a prayer, tears streaming down her cheeks. And Father wrote farewell letters-just in case. He knew he might not return.

Lina stepped onto the porch. The night was cold, starry, the kind you only see deep in the forest, far from city lights. Thousands of stars burned in the black velvet sky, and they seemed to watch her, waiting, judging. She looked at the sky and thought of David. How he loved to look at the stars, could lie in the grass for hours and tell her stories about constellations. How he was probably watching from somewhere above now, waiting for them to finish what they'd started.

«Can't sleep?» a voice came from behind.

Lina turned. Alex approached. He was without a jacket, in just a shirt, and the silvery moonlight fell on his shoulders.

«Can't,» she answered. «Too many thoughts. They swarm in my head like bees, giving me no peace.»

«I understand.» He stood beside her, lit a cigarette. The red glow flared in the darkness like a tiny distress signal. «I can't sleep either. Remembering everything that happened. Everything I did. Everyone I killed.»

«It wasn't your fault, Alex.» Lina turned to him. «Harrison made you that way. He broke you, like you break toys. You weren't responsible for your actions.»

«It doesn't matter.» He shook his head. «I'll answer for them anyway. To God, to myself, to those I killed. If I survive tomorrow, I'm going to the police. Turn myself in. Tell them everything.»

«You will survive.» Lina took his hand. It was warm, alive. «We'll all survive. Because we're together.»

«What makes you so sure?» He looked at her with a long, searching gaze.

«Because we are strong. When we're together, we are strong. Harrison is alone; he has no one but mercenaries who'll abandon him at the first sign of danger. But we have each other. That's our greatest weapon.»

Alex looked at her, then nodded.

«You know, Lina, you're a lot like Father. The same determination, the same faith in better things. And the same willingness to sacrifice yourself.»

«I hope it helps us tomorrow.»

«It will.» He squeezed her hand in return. «It will definitely help.»

They stood on the porch, gazing at the stars, silent. In that silence was more than in any conversation.

Morning came too quickly. Gray, cold, with a light drizzling rain that had started at dawn and seemed like it would last forever. They ate their last breakfast-without appetite, food sticking in their throats-checked their gear one last time, and exchanged glances. In each look was a promise: «I'll come back.»

«We meet here in two days,» Father said, addressing Alice. «If we're not here in two days, it means everything went wrong. Then call in SWAT, get the documents, and go as far as you can. Don't look for us.»

«We'll be back,» Alice said firmly. «All of us. You hear? All of us.»

They embraced in farewell. Alice, Alex, and Miranda got into the old jeep, and the engine roared, shattering the morning silence. The vehicle disappeared among the trees, carrying them toward the unknown.

Father and Lina remained by the cabin. The rain drizzled, making them shiver, but they stood under it, watching after the departed.

«Well, daughter,» he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. «Time to call my dear brother. Time to end this dance that's lasted fifteen years.»

Lina nodded and pulled out the satellite phone. The screen glowed in the gray morning light like a tiny beacon.

Chapter 6. The Hunt Begins

«The hunt is not merely pursuit. It is an art form with its own rules, its own rituals, its own aesthetic. The predator savors every moment of the chase, every second of the victim's fear. He relishes their helplessness, their attempts to hide, their despair. But the most terrifying moment of any hunt is when the victim stops being afraid and becomes the hunter. When eyes full of terror become eyes full of resolve. When trembling hands clench into fists. On that day, two brothers, divided by hatred and blood, finally came face to face. And the forest held its breath, knowing that blood would be spilled-old, bitter blood, soaked in years of grievances.»

From the diaries of Philip Novak

The satellite phone in Lina's hands felt heavier than it actually was. Much heavier. As if all the pain of the last fifteen years, all the tears, all the hatred, all the hopes were concentrated in that small plastic rectangle. She stared at the screen, where the number her father had recited from memory appeared-an encrypted, protected number known only to a handful of people in the entire world. Harrison's number. The number of the man who had stolen her childhood, kept her in a concrete box for ten years, killed her mother, and tried to kill her father.

«Are you sure?» she asked, looking up at her father. Her voice was quiet, but it no longer held that childish tremor that used to appear at the mere mention of that name. Only cold resolve remained. «If we make this call, there's no going back. We'll be crossing the Rubicon.»

«There was no going back from the day he set our house on fire,» Father answered. His voice was calm, but his eyes burned with a cold fire-the same fire that had been fueled for fifteen years by the hope of justice. «From the day I crawled out of those flames and realized I'd lost everything. From the day I swore he would answer for every tear, every moment of pain, every death. Make the call, daughter. Let this dance finally end.»

Lina pressed call. The rings stretched endlessly-one, two, three, four... Each ring reverberated in her chest like a heartbeat, like a clock ticking down the last seconds of their old life. On the fifth ring, someone answered.

«I'm listening,» Harrison's voice came through the speaker. It hadn't changed in a year-that same velvety, insinuating timbre that made goosebumps crawl up Lina's skin. The same voice she'd heard through the walls of her room for ten years, giving orders to the orderlies, discussing new «treatment methods,» laughing at her silence. The same voice that whispered in her nightmares: «You'll never speak again. You'll never leave this place. You'll rot here, and no one will remember your name.»

«This is Lina Novak,» she said, forcing her voice not to tremble. It came out better than she'd expected. «I think you remember me.»

A pause on the other end. So long that Lina thought the connection had been lost. Then laughter-quiet, pleased, predatory.

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