

Chapter One

The Passenger List

Leona

Raya's eyes are wide with excitement, but she doesn't notice what I do. That deep, throaty laugh. For some reason it raises the hair on the back of my neck.

Where have I heard that before?

When I hear it a second time, it triggers a memory from my childhood — one I would prefer to forget.

It's a few days before our parents are killed in a horrific car crash. It isn't unusual for him to be at our house, but something feels different. Maybe it's the way he looks at Mom.

My younger sister is pulling me toward the elevators so we can tour the cruise ship. It's our first vacation together. After years in foster care, we can finally relax and have fun. I hope. I crane my neck for one last peek toward the crowded bar.

"Leona... Leona!" Raya's fingers tap my shoulder.

I blink and smile at her.

She smiles back, her face flushed and expectant. "Where should we go first?"

I shrug. "You decide."

Still holding our passports, it strikes me how much we look alike — golden-blond, short-cropped hair; high cheekbones; large gray-blue eyes. Despite our three-year age difference, we could be mistaken for twins. The only real difference is the twinkle in Raya's eyes, while mine are dull with the weight of being her protector for too many years.

"Let's start at the top and work our way down!" she says, hitting the button for the deck labeled *Spa*.

The elevator softly whirs as it stops on each deck. I fumble with my bag, trying to put away the passports before we get off. But when the zipper finally opens, a journal spills out. Before it hits the floor, I catch it and shove it back in. Suddenly my heart is racing like I just ran a marathon. I've never kept anything from Raya before, but I'm not ready to share our mother's diary. She knows I have it, but she's always understood it's my special connection to Mom.

Distracted by the commotion around us, Raya doesn't notice. I let out a deep breath as the doors open to a dimly lit lobby filled with soft instrumental music and the scent of jasmine.

By the time our cabin is ready, my legs ache from exploring the ship. Although my stomach is growling, we decide to save our appetites for dinner in the formal dining room. Instead, Raya turns on her phone so we can look at the pictures she's taken. We settle on the balcony, a warm breeze hinting at perfect weather for a Caribbean cruise.

Opening the photos app, the first picture shows the two of us in front of the limo with our house in the background. Our arms are draped around the driver, who is smiling tolerantly.

Giggling, Raya says, "He was kind of cute!"

I take the phone from her hands. "I know. All you did was flirt the whole ride into the city."

Several shots show Manhattan as we drove through traffic on the way to the cruise port. We had never been to the city, so it was exciting to experience the hustle and bustle, even from a car window.

"Here's our first look at the cruise ship!" Raya grabs her phone back and swipes through the next few pictures. We study the selfies she took with the ship behind us.

Then she stops and zooms in on one of the photos. "Weird... that guy looks like Uncle Liam."

The hair on the back of my neck prickles again. The laugh from earlier echoes in my childhood memories. Now I understand why it made me uneasy.

Raya holds the phone out, pointing to a spot behind us. "Wouldn't it be crazy if he was on this cruise? We haven't seen him since Mom and Dad died."

I recognize his six-foot frame and muscular build. And his face. My stomach drops. It's not just his face — it's the way he's looking at us. Like he knew we'd be there. For a moment, I wonder why Aunt Keres isn't with him. They were always together back then. Did something happen between them? The knot in my stomach tightens.

I make a show of holding the picture closer and studying it. Then I say, "Nah. That doesn't look anything like him. You were too young to remember him anyway."

Raya's face scrunches up the way it always does when she thinks she's right. "I was six, and I remember him coming around a lot. Sometimes he'd visit with Aunt Keres, but mostly he came by himself. Toward the end..."

Feeling my eyes mist, I hurry back inside. "I'm going to unpack before we go to the Lido Deck for the farewell party." My hands shake as I hang up my clothes. There are over three thousand people on this ship. But only one who could drag the past back with him.

