

## Against Her Will

### Part I Death

#### Chapter 1

#### **Mona**

*Saturday, September 7*

*11:30 a.m.*

*Heavenly Place Funeral Home*

The family stood around me as the casket was lowered to the ground. Their black clothes matched their bleak faces as the gray clouds gathered, ready to burst. Babies screamed, and children whispered. My mother-in-law cried loudly, anchored by her two sons, and my father-in-law stood nearby nervously, his hands shaking.

The priest mumbled a few trite words as I remained frozen in shock. My stomach was in knots with a large lump in my throat; I held back tears, wanting it to be over.

"How are you holding up? Can I do anything?" said a familiar voice.

I turned to see Marilyn in a slim black suit, smiling slightly. She hugged me, and I almost crumpled in her arms.

Marilyn held onto my arm as people threw dirt over the coffin. I shuddered, knowing this was the final moment in which they would acknowledge his death. The police said Jonathon had died on the way down from Eternity Falls, indeed a name for disaster. He skidded, then lost control as the bike plummeted forcefully down the mountain. Had it been the brakes again? Or the operator? Jonathon had been a skilled rider, having completed thousands of miles on that e-

bike. I hated that piece of machinery, with its efficient brakes and Euro-made mechanisms that failed to break the fall and prevent him from going over the trail's edge.

Just a few days ago, I'd been setting up Jon's funeral. I'd almost fainted at the funeral home when they'd asked how he was to be buried, the wording on the prayer cards, the photo placed on the casket, and the type of flowers for the altar.

Now I stood there, taking it all in, and wondered how I was going to manage, since Jon had been my rock. Unfortunately, I still had to handle the reception after the funeral.

Thank goodness for my sister Marilyn, who'd arranged all the details. She'd found the Heavenly Place Funeral Home, with its green lawns overlooking the ocean waves. I was barely hanging on by a thread, unable to understand the circumstances of his death, let alone manage the aftereffects.

The day it happened was a blur. I'd hurried to get to the police station, verify Jon's identity, then proceeded to begin the funeral-planning process. He was so skilled at traversing those trails. How could one bump in the road lead to death? It hadn't been his time, and didn't make sense. Someone had to be accountable.

I noticed most of the family gathered here, except for my estranged niece, Chelsea. Someone had called her, and Chelsea had said she might show up for the reception. But it was a big if.

Chelsea hadn't been around for ten years, so it would be no big deal, just another disappointment of past rejections and ignored attempts. It didn't matter to her that we'd raised and adopted her when her father had gone on military duty in Afghanistan. But she was a Mason.

As I stood there trying not to cry, I felt someone tap me on the back.

"I'm so sorry. It's so sudden. How are you doing?" I looked back at my weepy best friend, Shelby, with relief. She had always been there at my darkest moments.

Sprinkles of rain fell on our heads, and the priest said his last words before the downpour. If I shed tears, I would probably fall apart right here. I just wanted it to be over so I could go lie down in my bedroom alone.

Would this ever end? I reflected on Jonathon's sister Molly's eulogy in St. Edwards Church just an hour ago, when she'd remembered his generosity and his brother Pete's admission of Jonathan's strength and determination. Why hadn't they let Jonathon know how they'd felt about him before he'd passed away? They were waiting for him to die before they coughed up their admiration. It was all too sad and frustrating. No one understood that I just wanted it to end, because my heart was breaking.

I sensed that my world had changed forever. It struck me that I was single now that my partner was gone. No one to drink a margarita or watch the latest sci-fi movie with. The night he died, I stared into the darkness for a long time, tossing and turning, eventually falling asleep, then waking up to the ceiling crashing down on me. I realized it was just a bad dream, sought his hand for reassurance, but noticed the empty side of the bed. I screamed and started a crying fit that finally put me to sleep. I'd woken up red-eyed and heavy-hearted, my pulse racing.

What would life be like now? Someone nudged my shoulder, and I came back to reality. Marilyn whispered that it was time to leave the gravesite and put together the reception.

"Are you all right? Do you want to cancel?"

I shook my head as I realized the large group would descend upon my home. Many were walking toward their cars as the clouds dumped rain. I opened my umbrella as the water soaked through my shoes. But I didn't care.

"Let's get this over with. I think I can deal with all this if I have my glass of pinot gris," I said.

But then I remembered I only had some cheese trays and bottles of wine in the refrigerator. It would have to do.

Marilyn smiled and guided me to the car. I closed my eyes as she accelerated to sixty miles per hour, hoping to beat the hungry crowd. We turned into the driveway in a matter of minutes, and I saw a white truck parked in front of my oceanfront home.

"I hope you don't mind that I ordered a caterer—thought it would be easier for you. They'll do everything—set the tables, arrange the flowers, prepare the food, and clean up," said Marilyn.

I sighed.

"Perfect...what would I do without you?"

We hurried inside, and Marilyn directed the staff to the kitchen.

I excused myself and headed for my bedroom. I slipped into the adjoining bathroom and noticed the dark purple circles under my eyes and that my cracked lips needed some gloss. A lump settled in my throat. How would I be able to read my soliloquy about Jonathon?

I glanced at the pictures on my bureau of us together—at Disneyland in our matching shirts, at the Hohensalzburg Fortress in Austria eating a three-course meal, strolling the beach in Santa Monica, riding our bikes, and stopping for a picnic lunch. We were always smiling, happy

to be together visiting somewhere for the first time and experiencing it like newlyweds. Flashes of memories floated around me as I recalled the years of our marriage reflected in the photos and the keepsakes around the room. A buffalo sculpture from Catalina Island, an origami horse that Jonathon created for me, a jasmine-scented candle commemorating our anniversary, a black pearl ring from a trip to Hawaii, and a book of poetry from a debut author. All unique and perfectly chosen during our special times together. A tear rolled down my cheek, and I wondered how I would get through this day. I fluffed my hair, changed my shoes, and decided there was only one way to cope.

I entered the living room and my stomach growled at the sight of a long table with trays of fresh fruit, crab and shrimp, hot canapes, Swedish meatballs, cheese, and crackers. The smell of delicious food filled my nostrils as I lifted a lid from the serving dish, realizing I hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours. A young waiter with a man bun in a dark gray uniform handed me a glass of white wine from a silver tray, his eyes downcast. Just what I needed.

"Ms. Turner said to bring you some pinot gris," he said shyly.

I murmured thanks and sipped the crisp, tart wine, gazing out the living room windows beyond the expansive patio and white beach to the roaring ocean. I would miss sitting beside the firepit with Jonathon and enjoying the warm breezes and the crash of waves.

I heard the doorbell ringing and saw my sister answering the door. The guests, drenched from the sudden rain, rushed in, filling the high-ceilinged room, sitting on the spring-green couches and flowered chairs, congregating at the food table and exclaiming over the new Disney animated painting collection. I wondered if my estranged niece would show up. But only Jonathon's relatives poured in, comforting his forlorn parents, leaving me to grieve alone.

I smiled, seeing my publicist Tina walking towards me, along with Shelby and Marilyn in a protective circle.

"I'm so glad you're here now," I said as we all pushed together in a group hug.

"Who's that?" said Shelby.

A young woman entered the room in a long black sweater dress and boots, her golden hair touching her shoulders. Her surprised grandparents and cousins beamed in recognition, and they exchanged warm hugs and kisses.

"How convenient for her to show up now," said Marilyn.

"It's Chelsea," I said.

"The long-lost niece?" said Shelby.

"Chelsea--a younger version of you," said Tina.

I watched her chatting with the clan, wondering if she would acknowledge me. I waited patiently, sipping my wine. Suddenly, my eyes caught hers. Chelsea broke through the crowd, advancing toward me. My inner circle scattered. My stomach clenched as she gave me a quick hug and little pecks on each cheek.

"Hello, Aunt Mona. So-so-sorry for your loss, it must be so painful," said Chelsea.

I inhaled deeply, and my heart fluttered. Chelsea had returned after all these years; now, this stranger stared at me as if the last time we'd seen each other was yesterday. I noticed that slight stutter from her childhood. Her shallow statements hit me like a gut punch. Was I happy to see her?

"I'm okay for now. Please excuse me," I mumbled, unprepared for this awkward moment when my emotions were already about to explode.

But I owed Jonathon, and I needed to acknowledge his death. I nodded at Marilyn, who clinked her glass to quiet the room.

"Thank you all for coming. Jonathon was my best friend and partner for over thirty-five years. He touched so many with his brilliance, charisma, and passion. Unfortunately, his death was sudden, and we were not prepared to accept his passing. But Jonathon left his mark on this world, becoming one of the greatest software designers in history. He worked and played hard, never giving up and striving for more. We'll all miss him deeply," I said, ending my speech abruptly.

But I couldn't contain myself, and tears flowed down my face. My niece reached out her hand, but I kept my arms tightly at my side. Chelsea moved away, blending into the crowd as Marilyn approached me with a tissue.

"Everyone, help yourself to any refreshments. We also have prayer cards; please sign the memory book," said Marilyn.

Soft music played in the background; I noted it was George Winston on the piano, Jonathon's favorite. The room blurred, and I swayed, my feet unsteady, my pulse racing.

My circle gathered around me once again.

"Are you okay?" said Tina.

"Do you need some water?" said Marilyn.

"Maybe you should sit down," said Shelby.

I could hear the guests' muffled voices, dishes clattering, and now the waves outside. I stood there, motionless, staring at the ocean.

"She looks catatonic," I overheard Shelby saying.

I zoned out to the whispering voices, thinking about how I'd never see Jonathon again. A rush of wind and the presence of someone nearby jolted me back to reality.

"Sit down—you're looking pale," said Chelsea, taking my elbow.

I gulped and stared at Chelsea's expressionless face.

"Dave, your lawyer, contacted me. He gave me bad news. About. The will," whispered Chelsea.

She guided me to the back corner of the room, away from the guests. Her words stunned me.

My heart thumped as I felt Chelsea's fury. Her lips curled into a brittle smile.

"Please, don't make a scene. What are you going to do about it?" I whispered back nervously. I didn't know the woman that Chelsea had grown into. The irony of it all—Chelsea coming back after ten years and expecting a considerable inheritance. I felt her rage as she gripped my arm tightly, attempting to hold me up. But my legs wobbled, my heart palpitated wildly, and a layer of sweat washed over me.

"You did this. Not going to get away with it...I'll fight it," Chelsea said, facing me with her back to the crowd.

Their subdued voices blended into the background.



I wanted desperately to get away, fearing her menacing threats as her hands squeezed my arms tightly. Her signature perfume, White Shoulders by Evyan, overpowered me as her face got closer to mine.

“Let go of me. We can talk about this later. It’s about Jonathon today, not you,” I said as a sharp pain ripped through my shoulder.

I broke away from her. Chelsea smiled broadly as she pretended to guide me to the reception table.

The room blurred, and my knees buckled as I fell to the floor. I clutched my chest and screamed.

“Help me—I think I’m having a heart attack.”

“Call 911,” I heard Marilyn say.

But Chelsea was right there, attempting to give me CPR.

“Get her away from me, she’s dangerous,” I yelled.

The group moved in to see what was happening. Fifty pairs of eyes stared down at me. A worried Dave held my hand. Marilyn pressed a cold cloth to my head.

“She’s trying to help you until the paramedics get here. Just relax,” Marilyn said calmly.

But the fear grew stronger as Chelsea pounded my chest. It felt like a jackhammer, and I prayed the EMTs would get here soon.

Shelby slipped a pillow under my head, and I started to pass out.

*I hope I’m not going to die here today. So much work to be done before my book is released.*

“My book...my interviews...can’t let down my fans,” I said softly.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Mason—we’ll take care of everything,” said Tina, holding my other hand. I saw a strange look pass between Tina and Chelsea.

Sirens blared and screamed their welcome.

Wavy lines danced in front of me as the room closed in. I didn’t remember anything after that.

## Part II Entrapment

### Chapter 2

#### **Mona**

*Monday morning*

*Palm Springs*

I felt groggy, like I’d been asleep for too many hours. My legs moved. I was horizontal, with Pine-Sol-smelling cool sheets covering me.

I blinked and noticed I was in an upscale apartment, not my bedroom. The sweet-perfumed bouquets of roses in bunches of pinks, whites, yellows, and reds decorated a table at the far end of the room and the nightstand. Rays of sun spilled through the light blue curtains onto a blue pebble-patterned carpet.

I saw my clothes draped over an oversized light blue chair and recognized one of my novels, *Mirrored Moments*, on the bookcase near the table. What was it doing here? I kept all my

books in my office bookcase. Once completed, my novels were shelved away or stored in boxes for events or reference guides.

Someone knocked. The doorknob turned, and I heard feminine voices.

They laughed and talked loudly. Someone was breaking in, or they had the wrong room. I sat upright and grabbed the phone from the nightstand.

"Help me... someone is trying to—" my voice elevated to a high pitch.

The door opened. Two young women entered, my niece and another woman in a uniform.

"Are you okay, Aunt Mona?" said Chelsea.

They rushed to my side. Their concerned eyes and the uniformed woman's gentle touch on my arm were an attempt to soothe me.

"Mrs. Mason, let me help you with that. I'm your caregiver. Would you like some water?" she said, putting down the phone.

I frowned and stared at the two of them. Today my niece, with her long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, wore light blue glasses and was dressed in jeans and a white pullover. The caregiver, similar in age and dressed in blue scrubs, smiled and swiftly brought me a plastic cup of water and a straw.

"My name is Bree, and I've just met your niece, Chelsea. She told me what happened and I'm very sorry for your loss. I'm also a big fan of your books."

I sat up straighter and addressed the two women, trying to pull myself together.

"Uhh... I'm not sure what's going on and why I'm here. This doesn't seem like a hotel, and I'm not on a book tour. I feel like I've slept for days and would like to get a shower and a cup of coffee."

"Aunt Mona, I'm so sorry to break the news to you. You had a panic attack, not a heart attack like you thought, and Tina, your publicist, suggested this place for rest and relaxation. We brought you here, and you've been sleeping for thirty-six hours straight after being given a sedative. We were worried that the stress would affect your heart, but a doctor here examined you and didn't think a hospital stay was the answer. But I'm here for you now, and so is Bree, your caregiver," said Chelsea.

It seemed like yesterday's stuttering had suddenly disappeared, and now she had all the right answers.

"It's time for me to see other patients. I'll be back later," Bree said, adjusting my pillows and quickly exiting the room.

Chelsea pulled up a chair and faced me. Her blue glasses magnified her solemn eyes. She clasped my hands, and a tear streaked down her cheek.

"Uncle Jonathon's death took a toll on you. At the funeral, you went into shock, experienced heart attack symptoms, and then fainted. Your publicist, Tina, recommended this place, Peaceful Shelters, in beautiful Palm Springs."

"What? It will be scorching hot here, and I'm a water person—a Pisces. You've been away so long you probably don't remember," I said.

"You'll love it here, and now that Uncle Jonathon is gone, we start all over again and talk things out. And Tina and I feel you need to stay here until you've fully recovered. Stress causes

strange things to happen to the body and mind. I know because I'm a psychologist now," said Chelsea.

Now I'd figured it out. Her doctor's bedside manner appeared, and the words flowed into a rational explanation. No trouble with speaking today. I sat up and stared into my niece's eyes for the first time in ten years and sensed a maturity I hadn't seen when she was still living with us. Of course, she'd just been a teenager then. Her mother's death from breast cancer and her father's abandonment had left Chelsea numb and confused. My brother Bruce had left without warning to take a job in Iraq. It caused her great emotional pain, and she found it difficult to express herself. We had no choice but to adopt Chelsea. We'd always believed we'd treated her like a daughter.

I still remember the day we had a falling out. It was because of the drugs, bad companions, and late nights partying, which took a toll on everyone. The screaming, harsh words, ranting letters, and then Chelsea's mysterious disappearance from our lives proved to be a nightmare. I'd waited many agonizing years for this day, knowing what my niece had put the entire family through. She'd never called or acknowledged holidays or birthdays. It was as if she had disappeared off the face of the Earth. So much pain and wasted tears, wondering if my niece was coming back, haunted me.

I stared at Chelsea and wondered why she had come back after all these years. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, straining to see her features more clearly.

"What are you talking about? I'm fine. Besides, I can't be forced to stay here."

Chelsea patted my shoulder, gave me a tissue, and tucked the sheets in tighter.

"At the funeral, you were in no condition to make decisions. Everyone could see that, and we were all very concerned about you. You needed to be in a safe residence with amenities and medical attention if necessary. There was no way you could be alone, and I thought, as Tina suggested, that this would be the best place for you."

I wanted to scream. How were my publicist and niece now in charge of my health?

"And I still don't understand why I couldn't recover at home, take a few days off, then go on my book tour? There is so much to do. It's because of the will that I'm here. You're punishing me."

"You need to stay here because of your condition. Now I'm going to go find out about your breakfast."

Her face darkened, and Chelsea marched out of the room without looking back.

I shivered. Holding me against my will? It scared the hell out of me.

What condition? I should have listened to Jonathon when he'd told me to put together my will and advanced directive.

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I desperately needed my phone. I had to find my purse, then I could call someone. Not Tina—I couldn't trust her anymore. I remembered that look right before I'd passed out. She was in cahoots with Chelsea. They'd cooked up something to keep me here.

Marilyn would know what to do. And Shelby would be honest about what exactly had happened at the funeral. Pulling back the stiff sheets, I planted a foot on the ground. It made me feel dizzy and light-headed. Moving forward was like a chore. Lifting my feet felt like lifting rocks, but I had to hurry and grab my purse from the chair before anyone returned. I huffed and

puffed with little energy and wondered why I couldn't move fast enough. Had they given me some heavy drugs?

Sweat poured down my forehead, and it took a full seven minutes to get to the chair. My purse lay underneath my clothes, and I stumbled from the chair to the bed, clutching the heavy leather bag. Footsteps and laughter sounded outside the door. *Must hurry.* I tossed the purse underneath the covers as the door flew open. I exhaled and slumped into the pillow as Chelsea and Bree breezed in with coffee and a tray of cereal, blueberries, and toast.

"We've brought you a light breakfast and coffee as requested. And I have your pills and chart. The doctor should be here to see you soon," said Bree, plumping my pillow and cranking up my bed.

I plastered a smile on my face. Better to appease them now, or else be stuck in this place forever. I wiggled myself upright, shoving the purse down between my legs. If I could only reach my phone, I could call someone to release me from this prison.

I grasped the coffee and took a sip of the hot brew.

"I'm so sorry that I just got up and left. We got off to the wrong start. After all these years, I want to catch up on everything," said Chelsea, moving closer to the bed.

Bree placed the pills and a cup of water near me.

I wanted to be agreeable, yet was suspicious of the meds. Would they make me drowsy, compliant, and weak? How could I avoid taking them? The young woman in front of me seemed nice, and I remembered that she was a fan. But she was not the enemy, and it was Chelsea that I needed to deal with.

"Bree, can I have a moment with my niece? I promise I'll take these pills. Also, I want you to have a copy of my latest book, *Celestial World*. I'll contact Tina to bring you a copy, and I'll autograph it for you," I said.

Bree blushed and smiled broadly, her dimples becoming more prominent. I knew that we could be good friends if I played the favorite author card.

"Sure, Mrs. Mason, I'll leave you two alone, and I'm looking forward to reading your new book. I'll pop in later to make sure you've taken your meds and have you meet the Peaceful Shelters team," said Bree, closing the door behind her.

I wondered about Chelsea's intentions. How had I gotten here? And why was she involved? Our family had been torn apart when Chelsea left. I blamed myself now that Jon was gone. We'd disapproved of her lifestyle—getting into a rough crowd where drugs were used.

"Aunt Mona, are you okay? You should eat your breakfast. I understand you must be sad and overwhelmed. And we have a lot to talk about. I picked up your second book in the Universe trilogy, *Mirrored Moments*, when I was in rehab a few years ago. While I was there, I realized what went wrong and that we needed to make amends. But first, you've got to get better," said Chelsea, raising an eyebrow and smiling brightly.

I realized now that Jon was gone, I needed her friendship. Maybe all she wanted was to return to the family.

"I'm fine, just trying to wrap my head around these past few days. It's so overwhelming. And you're here for me now, and that's very comforting. Once I get out of here, we can have a fresh start. Where are you working and living now?"

Chelsea stared at me with a blank look and just smiled.



She took my hand in hers and spoke slowly.

"First, you must rest. You've had a lot to deal with—the funeral, the new book release, and your illness, which you haven't addressed. I knew you had heart problems and signs of extreme sleepiness when I was a kid, but this recent attack worries me, your colleagues, and your friends. You displayed it at the funeral, and it scared everyone. You seemed out of control, similar to a breakdown. But don't worry about anything else, because I don't want to upset you. After a few days, we can tour Peaceful Shelters, their amenities, and your neighbors. We have so much time for that—"

The door squeaked, and I perked up.

"Mona—I want to introduce you to some people who want to help you."

I recognized Bree's voice. They came together like a brigade in their white coats and official badges. Their antiseptic smell contrasted with my hot body odor.

"Hello, Mona. I'm Dr. Chip Denton; this is Dr. Margaret Stone, and you've met Bree." And you must be Chelsea; there's such a resemblance," said a sandy-haired man with perfect teeth and complexion.

*At least he's nice-looking.* Margaret's tag said psychologist, and she looked very stern in her oversized black glasses and A-line haircut. Of course, Bree was always friendly and cheerful.

"She had an attack, which could have been a panic attack or heart issues. I hope you can figure out what's wrong with her. After all, she's got an upcoming book tour," said Chelsea.

I cleared my throat.

"Nice to meet all of you. I'm not sure why I'm here, and maybe you can tell me. My book tour can wait because my publicist, Tina, can handle everything in my absence. Besides, I'm not

planning to be here long. I have to get home. Now, what is the diagnosis?" I said, looking directly at the two physicians.

"Well, we need more time to examine you and determine a proper prognosis. From the report from your niece, you were unsteady on your feet, very anxious, experienced chest pain, thought that you had a heart attack, and then you fainted," said Dr. Stone.

The four people around her shook their heads in agreement and shared the chart in front of them.

"You know my husband died very suddenly, which is very upsetting. Why can't I be at home?"

"The EMTs said maybe you had a panic attack, or possibly a breakdown. With everyone concerned about mental health these days, we thought the best thing to do was to get you away from all the memories of Jonathon," said Chelsea.

I locked eyes with my niece.

"And why Peaceful Shelters?" I've never heard of this place before."

Dr. Denton approached me and touched my arm gently.

"Your publicist, Tina, said she wanted to keep everything quiet due to bad publicity. And Peaceful Shelters is the best place. You'll love it here. Many celebrities and well-known people stay here to escape the harsh media."

I started to cry, not just because my husband had died, but because it seemed very overwhelming. I just wanted a moment of peace to sort things out. I discovered a way for them to leave.

"It's just that I miss Jonathon, and it's all just getting to me. I need some time alone."

"We just wanted to let you know that we're all here for you, any time of the day or night.

I see you still didn't take your pills," said Bree.

I took the pills and held them in the side of my cheek, pretending to swallow. I'd spit them out later. Their bitter taste nauseated me.

Chelsea squeezed my arm and looked at me with sympathetic eyes, unlike the day of the funeral.

The four people quickly exited the room. I promptly spit out the pills in a tissue.

I wiped my teary eyes, determined to get out of here. My leg touched the leather bag, and I reached under the covers to open it.

"Must find my phone. Get out of here," I muttered under my breath.