

I'll never forget January 26th, 2024.
The most memorable day of my life.

Shivering from the frosty air, I turned onto another road as I trudged home from school—a walk longer than it should have been. But my mom has to go to work every day, and my dad—well, he would have driven me.

If he was alive.

I startled, seeing a police car outside my house. I jogged up and opened the front door, which was strangely unlocked.

I stilled when I saw two police officers, three strangers, and my neighbor/family friend, Mrs. Gelia, somberly standing in our living room.

"Mrs. Gelia?" I said unsurely. "What are you doing here?"

A tear rolled down the old woman's cheek. "Oh, Iris," She sobbed.

A woman with startling red hair moved towards me. "Iris, please sit down."

"What? Why? Where's my mom?" I glanced at the time, frantic because my mom should have been home from work.

Somehow I found myself on the couch, with Redhead's hands on my shoulder, eyes staring into mine.

"Iris. Your mom has passed away. I'm sorry."

"What?!" I paled and jerked back. No, this couldn't be happening. Not again—

Mrs. Gelia bear hugged me; after a second I scrambled back to wipe the tears off my face, but really just smeared them.

"What do you mean?" I managed to choke out.

One officer took a deep breath, face grave. "Your mother suffered an allergic reaction today. There was some form of peanuts in her lunch and her epipen was misplaced; she couldn't call for help due to swelling in her throat." He stared down. "I'm so sorry."

This couldn't be real-it couldn't be. I couldn't see feel hear Redhead tell me she was a social service worker-couldn't think when I appeared in a car, how can this be real this is not real please please please please please-

"Iris," I hear, snapping me to the present. I look around. I'm now in a bustling building. I guess I vaguely remember walking out of the car and somehow ending up in this quiet office.

"Iris, listen. This is important." I stare, eyes wide at Redhead, much sterner than before. "Your mother's death wasn't an accident. And neither was your father's."

I gape. "Wha-"

"Iris, no time. *Pay attention.*" Redhead sits down and opens her computer. "Look, we're part of The Witness Protection Program. Your father and mother were involved in a huge mafia scandal. They didn't do anything wrong, but were witnesses to a major crime. It's best if you don't know all the details, for your own safety," she adds when she sees my mouth open with questions.

"Your parents' names weren't always Maria and Jacob Millen. Your father was Lucas Vireno and your mother was Rose Rutina. They testified about the mafia case, something which helped put away a lot of people. They were, subsequently, put at risk; many members of the mafia aimed to kill them for revenge, which is why we placed them into the program. You were born afterwards, which is why you never needed a new identity."

I'm so confused. They were safe, right? Redhead continues.

"Unfortunately, something went very wrong. Your parents were found. *They* were very good at faking accidents, in the beginning. The car crash that killed your father killed others, too, alleviating any suspicion. However, we discovered your mother's epipen was stolen, and peanut oil was placed into her homemade lunch."

Redhead looks dead into my eyes. "Iris, you're next."

I blanch, panic-stricken. Oh gosh, I'm going to die
I'mgoingtodie-

"We've prepared a new identity for you. It will take time to get settled, but now, here's basic information. Your name is no longer Iris Millen-you're Amanda White." She shoves a thick folder at me. "Our agents will take you to the airport. *Hurry.*"

I'm stunned, and get thrust out of my chair and dragged out of the building with rough hands. Tears still stream down my face; some old, and some fresh with the information I've just learned. Were my parents always as scared as I am now?

I hear a yell and tune in to my surroundings, ice cold air and dark wind slapping my face. This does *not* look like the way to the airport. I fearfully glance at the agent holding me- and he glares down at me with hard, wicked eyes.

"Goodbye, Iris Millen," He says, and suddenly my pain pours out of my heart. Oh gosh I didn't think it could get worse but the knife in my chest burns so bad sobadsobad-

I collapse to the ground, my eyes unable to stare anywhere except the man grinning above me. In between silent, unmoving, sobs, I realize that I'm going to die. *Now.*

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And my last.