

The background of the page is a light, monochromatic illustration of various flowers, including what appears to be a peony and a gerbera, rendered in a soft, painterly style. The flowers are scattered across the page, with some larger and more detailed than others, creating a delicate and textured backdrop for the text.

CHAPTER ONE

Saverio

“**R**espiratory rate twenty per minute.”
“Pulse one hundred. Blood pressure eighty-five over fifty.”

Bright overhead lights roll by fast. My stomach roils. I retch, swallow blood.

Can't breathe.

“What happened?”

“Hand grenade.”

“Fuck.”

“At his wedding.”

“Where's the wife?”

“Took her to maternity. She's pregnant. Eight months. Water broke.”

“Fuck.”

I try to flex my fingers, to reach for the guy running next to me, but my limbs are useless. Dead weight.

My wife.

I want to speak, to demand they fucking tell me she's all right, but my lips won't cooperate. Around those white moving lights, the edges of the picture bleed red. The ruby darkness creeps in with every laboring breath that rattles my lungs. It doesn't help that I can't see shit through my right eye. I fight that sea of blood that slowly washes in like a tide, but the vision in my left eye turns in and out of focus. Mostly out of focus.

"Primary survey?"

"Right hemothorax. Lacerated wound over the left arm. Multiple gunshot and pellet wounds over the whole body. No obvious fractures."

The voice of the man on my left is clear. "Insert a chest tube."

The ceiling stops cruising. Finally. It doesn't prevent that wave of nausea from drowning me. Several pairs of hands lock on to me, and then I'm hoisted into the air. My back hits a hard surface. There's no pain, at least not the physical kind. Only the agony of not knowing if it's a boy or a girl.

The sound coming from my right is fainter. "I need a FAST and CT thorax. Prepare for an emergency laparotomy."

"Pleural cavity incision made. Proceeding with thoracostomy."

My body is prodded and manhandled.

"Bleeding in right ear possibly due to primary blast injury. Second degree burn wounds on the upper shoulders and back."

Anya.

The whisper refuses to materialize from my vocal cords, so I breathe in her name instead.

"Draining in progress."

“Let’s get him into surgery.”

A quieter, subdued tone reaches inside my dimming consciousness. “This guy isn’t going to make it.”

If I could, I would’ve laughed. The goal was never about surviving. I fucking know I’m dead. I just hoped it would be quick. But if it means Anya made it, I’ll bleed out all over this gurney again.