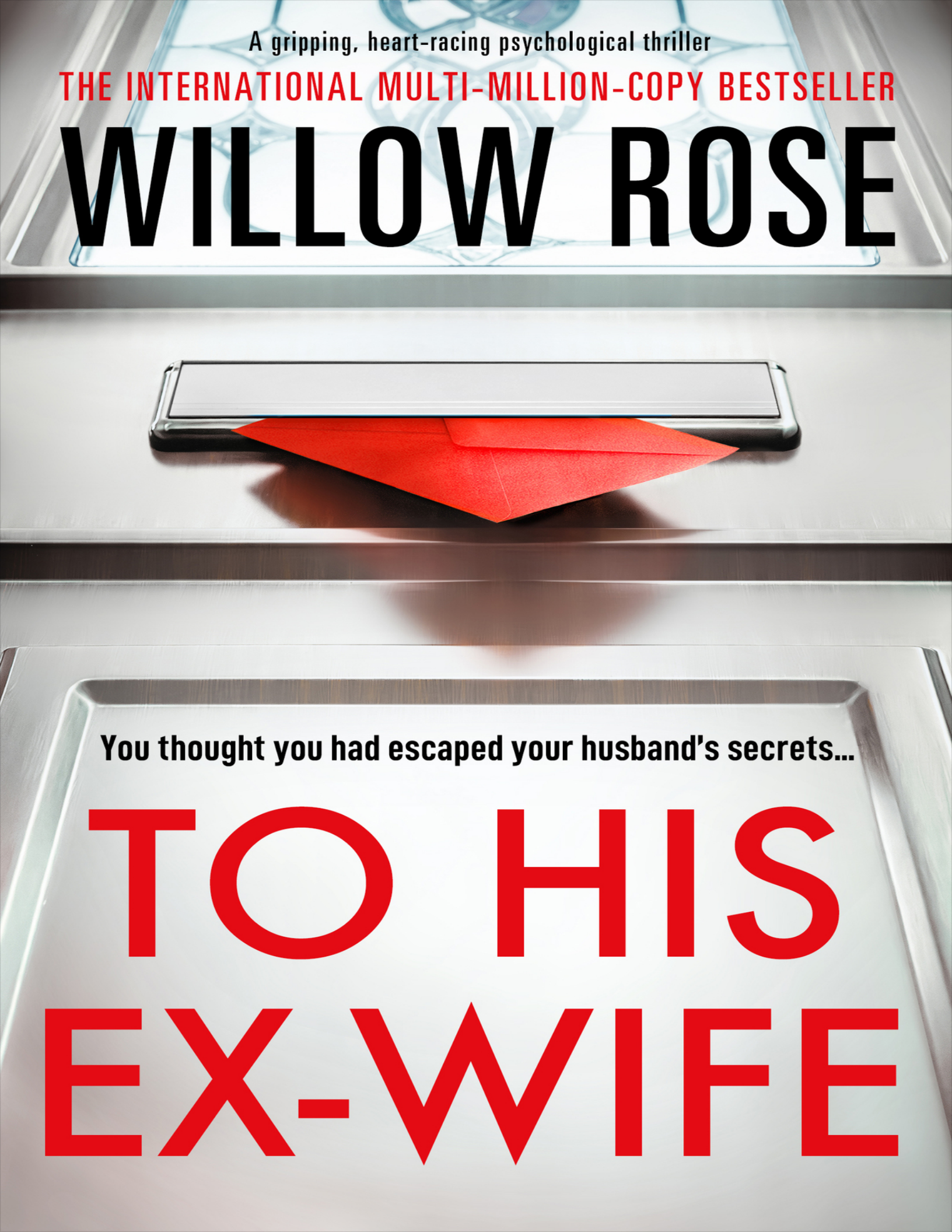
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To Her New Husband
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PROLOGUE

I’m trapped in a nightmare. The steering wheel is like a wild animal, fighting against my grip as the car plunges forward, heading straight for the dark, murky depths of Tampa Bay. My mind is a complete blank—I have no idea how I ended up here, or what happened in the crash. All I can think about is the water rising, the seatbelt digging painfully into my hips and shoulder, and the terrifying feeling that my time is running out. Everything else is just a blur, but this one thing is crystal clear: I’m going to die, and it’s going to happen soon. The man I loved put me here. It’s all my fault for trusting the one person I shouldn’t have.

Water comes flooding in through the open window, a powerful rush that’s getting worse by the second. It’s a full-on deluge, and already up to my waist. My hands dart to the seatbelt, fumbling for the release, my fingers scrambling to find the plastic button.

Won’t release.

I push harder.

Nothing.

The seatbelt has tightened up, a reaction to the crash, but my mind is a blank as the water rises further.

“Help!” I scream, though no one can hear me. My voice bounces inside the car, trapped like me.

Metal creaks and groans as the pressure increases. I’m going down faster now. My purse is floating up from the floor, and everything is spilling out—my lipstick, wallet, and phone. My phone is still on, and I try to grab it, but it slips right through my fingers and sinks to the bottom. Twenty

seconds have passed. Maybe thirty. How long until my lungs give out? Three minutes? Five?

I tug hard on the seatbelt, twisting my body to try and break free. The belt cuts into my wrists, scraping off skin and causing me pain. I can see my blood mixing with the water, but it's not my main concern right now. The fear of being trapped is overwhelming, and I keep pulling at the seatbelt, desperate to escape. The dashboard lights are still shining. It's pitch black outside the windows, so I have no idea where I am or how far down I've sunk. Am I twenty feet underwater? Thirty? I can feel the pressure building up, and my ears are popping. As the water level rises, it reaches my chest, and I instinctively arch my back, trying to stretch toward the roof to keep my torso dry for a few more seconds. At the same time, my fingers frantically continue pushing at the belt clasp, pressing, pulling, and twisting, but no matter what I do, it just won't budge. I whisper softly, my voice quiet, no longer loud and frantic, just a desperate plea to anything that might hear me, the universe, the seatbelt, anyone who could possibly listen.

The water hits my shoulders. It's rising faster now, or maybe time is stretching out, making each second an eternity of terror. I crane my neck back, chin pointing to the roof. The water touches my throat, slides along my jaw. I think of people I love. My parents' faces float before me. My ex—no. I push that thought away.

Not him. Not now.

The car's roof is just a few inches above me. My nostrils widen, trying to grab every last bit of oxygen from the air. Water touches my lip and I quickly close my mouth, trying to breathe slowly through my nose.

Then the passenger window implodes with a muffled thump. Glass shards dance through the water like deadly confetti. The pressure difference sends a fresh surge of water over my face. I involuntarily gasp for air, but it's a mistake. Water rushes into my mouth, catching me off guard. I try to cough it out, but there's no escape—it just gets forced back into my face. Now, my nose is barely above the water's surface, and I'm struggling. As I sink, the saltwater stings my eyes, making them burn. The dashboard lights in front of me start to blur and distort, like they're being seen through a thick layer of glass.

The pressure builds in my ears, painful and insistent. My body betrays me. Dying is not peaceful like they say. It's violent. It's my body fighting against itself, wanting to breathe what will kill it.

The lights on the dashboard flicker a couple of times, allowing me to see the face that has appeared. Blurred edges, indistinct features, but I know him. I'd know him anywhere.

He smiles, reaching for me. His hand passes through the water, touches my cheek. I want to recoil but can't move. His lips move, saying something I can't hear. I don't want to hear. The sensation in my chest reaches its highest point, then gradually starts to disappear. The burning feeling loses its intensity and becomes less sharp.

My last memory is strangely vivid: it's the realization that I should have anticipated this moment all along. I should have known.

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ONE

I rip through the surface of consciousness with a violent gasp. My body convulses upward, spine arching off the mattress. I'm not underwater. Not trapped. I'm in my bedroom, alive, but my lungs still burn like I've swallowed half the bay. Sweat, not saltwater, drenches my skin. It's the sheets twisted around my legs, and not seaweed holding me down.

My heart hammers against my ribs. I press my palm against my chest, feeling its frantic rhythm. Thud-thud-thud-thud. Too fast. Can't slow it down.

"Just breathe," I whisper to the empty room. My voice sounds wrong. Raspy. Used up.

I kick at the sheets until they release me. My nightshirt clings to my skin, soaked through. The air conditioning raises goosebumps along my arms. Cold sweat. Hot fear. I'm a mess of contradictions.

Moonlight slits the blinds, painting silver bars across my bed, the floor, my trembling hands. I squint at the clock on my nightstand. The red numbers glare back: 3:17 a.m.

"Not again." The words escape before I can catch them.

Same dream. Same car. Same water filling my lungs. Same death that isn't death.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, feet searching for the solid reassurance of the floor. The wood feels cool against my soles. Real. I'm anchored now. Here, not there.

My throat feels raw, like I've been screaming. Maybe I have. But the house remains quiet around me. I haven't woken anyone up. Thank God.

I run shaking fingers through my hair, pushing damp strands from my face. The back of my neck is soaked. I need water—the irony isn't lost on me—need to wash away the phantom taste of salt and fear.

"It's just a dream," I tell myself, but the words sound hollow. Dreams don't leave your wrists feeling raw. Dreams don't make your lungs ache hours after waking. Dreams don't come back, night after night, adding new details each time.

Like the face. His face. Watching me drown.

A floorboard creaks somewhere in the house. My head snaps up, eyes wide, scanning the darkness beyond my bedroom door. Nothing moves. Just the normal settling of an old house. That's what people always say, isn't it? Just the house settling. Not someone walking. Not someone watching.

My breathing starts to slow. In through the nose, out through the mouth. The therapist taught me this, after it happened. After he happened. Count to four on the inhale. Hold for seven. Exhale for eight.

One-two-three-four. Hold. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven. Release. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight.

The panic recedes, bit by bit, like a tide pulling back from shore. It leaves behind debris—trembling hands, racing thoughts, the lingering certainty that something is wrong.

I reach for the glass of water I always keep by my bed. The water slides down my throat, washing away the imaginary salt.

That's when I see it. A shadow where there shouldn't be one. A dark figure standing in my doorway.

My muscles lock. The glass slips from my fingers, hits the edge of the nightstand, rolls. I don't hear it fall. Can't hear anything over the sudden roaring in my ears.

The figure doesn't move. Perfectly still. A silhouette cut from darker darkness. Tall. No features I can make out, just the suggestion of shoulders, head, the straight line of a back.

"Who's there?" My voice cracks on the question.

No answer. No movement.

"Lily? Is that you?"

No answer. It can't be her. She'd say something.

I blink hard, eyes stinging with fear and the remnants of sleep. When I open them again, the doorway is empty. The shadow-person gone.

Did I imagine it? Another part of the nightmare bleeding into reality?

I stare at the empty space where the figure stood, trying to convince myself it was never there. A trick of moonlight and blinds. A shadow cast by the dresser or the coat hanging on my closet door. But my dresser hasn't moved. And I never leave clothes hanging out.

I strain to hear any sound in the house. The hum of the refrigerator downstairs. The tick-tick-tick of the hall clock counting seconds. The soft whisper of the AC through the vents. Nothing unusual. Nothing human.

My fingers find the edge of the comforter, gripping until my knuckles go white. I don't want to get up to check the house. Don't want to walk the dark hallways, testing doors and windows. What if I find something? What if I don't?

Which would be worse?

I reach for my phone, needing its light, its connection to the outside world. My hand pats the nightstand but finds nothing. Where did I…? Then I remember: in my dream, the phone floating away in the sinking car. But that was just a dream. My real phone should be here.

I turn on the lamp instead. Light chases shadows into corners, under furniture. My phone sits on the charger on my dresser. I must have put it there before bed. A normal, forgettable action buried under the drama of the nightmare. The drawer to the dresser is locked safe, the key hidden in my sock drawer so Lily doesn't find it. It's where I keep *her* letter. It sits there clouding my judgment, causing these dreams, I'm sure…

I never went to meet her.

I ignored her warnings.

And nothing has happened since…

I should get up. Check the house. Be an adult about this.

But I can't make my body move from the bed.

"No one's there," I say aloud, testing how the words feel. They feel like a lie.

My boss, Robert Stone, would laugh at me. Call me hysterical. Women and their imaginations, he'd say in that patronizing tone he reserves for female colleagues who show weakness. His son would have—no. I promised myself I wouldn't go there any more.

I lie back down, eyes fixed on the doorway. The sweat on my skin has dried, leaving me chilled. I pull the covers up to my chin like a child afraid of monsters under the bed.

Sleep won’t come again tonight. I know this with absolute certainty. I’ll lie here until dawn, watching that empty doorway, listening to the normal sounds of my house, trying to convince myself that I’m alone.

But the feeling of being watched doesn’t fade. It settles over me like another blanket, heavy and suffocating. I keep my eyes open as long as I can, fighting against exhaustion.

Just before I lose the battle, I see movement again at the edge of my vision. A shadow sliding along the wall. Not in the doorway this time. Closer.

I turn my head sharply.

Nothing there.

Nothing but the certainty that something is very, very wrong.

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TWO

As I cut through the strawberry, the knife moves smoothly, and I savor the quiet of the activity, the feeling that I'm in control of the sharp tool in my hand. The fruit lies on the cutting board, its red color glistening in the morning light. I carefully arrange the slices on Lily's plate, spacing them out evenly in a fan shape. The kitchen is spotless, every surface clean, despite the turmoil that filled my dreams last night. The memories of water and darkness try to resurface, but I push them aside, focusing on the present moment. I glance at the clock, noting that it's 6:45 a.m. Lily should be down for breakfast soon. The kitchen's orderliness is a comforting distraction, a reminder that some things can be orderly, even when my mind is a jumble of unsettling thoughts. I finish preparing breakfast; I've been up since 4:30, unable to fall back asleep after that… incident. Not that I would call it a shadow-figure to anyone. They'd think I was losing my mind.

Maybe I am.

The eggs sizzle in the pan. Two for Lily, scrambled soft with just a touch of cream. One for me, though my stomach still feels hollow from fear rather than hunger. I slide the spatula beneath the edges, folding them gently toward the center. Perfect. Something I can manage when everything else feels so fragile. I put out glasses, one with orange juice for Lily and one with water for myself. As I set the pitcher down, it leaves a ring of condensation on the counter, which I quickly wipe away. I don't like marks or disorder, especially not now when everything else feels so uncertain. It's hard to control much of what's going on, but I can at least keep our space tidy and organized. As the toast springs up, it gives me a bit of a scare,

probably more than it should. My hands are shaking a little as I put the toast on our plates. I've got wholegrain for both of us, but I'm pretty sure Lily is going to complain about it—she always does. On her toast, I spread a thin layer of almond butter and add just a teaspoon of honey, trying to be careful about it. With her big interview coming up, I know it's really important for her to be eating well and taking care of herself.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs breaks into my thoughts, and I notice they're coming slowly, as if each step is a struggle. It's no surprise, really—Lily's never been much of a morning person, and it seems she's inherited that trait from her father. As she walks into the kitchen, she says "good morning" in a quiet voice. Her long black hair is messy and falls around her face. She's wearing a big Tampa Bay Lightning shirt that's slipping off one shoulder. When I look at her, I'm reminded of her mom, Alice—they look so much alike, it's surprising. Sometimes it even takes my breath away. Lily is eighteen now, but in that moment, I see a lot of her mother in her.

"Good morning," I say, trying to sound calm and collected, keeping my tone steady. "Did you have a good night's sleep?"

She lets out a quiet grunt, her expression unchanging, as she slips onto the barstool beside me. The dark circles under her eyes are noticeable. I wonder if she's haunted by the same nightmares that I am, but we've never discussed it. As I pick up her plate from the counter, a strange sensation washes over me, like a sudden wave of dizziness that makes me feel like I'm tumbling backward into a dark, suffocating nightmare. My hand wavers, and for a moment, I'm not sure I can hold on. The plate remains steady, but Lily's eyes are on me, and I know she's seen the faint tremble in my fingers—she always sees everything.

"You okay?" Her question is wary, assessing.

I place the plate in front of her, carefully positioning the fork. She gives the food a skeptical look.

"I don't really feel like eating," she says.

"Come on, you should eat something. It's going to be a big day."

I sit down next to her and pick up my fork, even though I'm not really hungry either. "You know, protein is good for your brain, and you're going to need it when you meet with the counselor to go over your whole academic plan."

Lily picks up a slice of strawberry and looks at it carefully, as if it might hold some kind of secret.

“I already know what to say, Emma,” she says. “We’ve talked about this before.”

“I’m aware,” I say, trying to sound calm as I chew, the taste of the egg unappetizing in my mouth. “I just want to make sure you’re ready.”

“Because preparation is everything, right?” There’s an edge to her words, sharp enough to cut. She looks at me directly for the first time this morning, the expression in her dark eyes reminding me so much of her father, it causes me to look away. “Did you prepare for your job? For marrying my dad? For what happened after?”

The question knocks the air from my lungs. It’s been one year since her father Benjamin went to prison for killing her mother Alice. One year of Lily living with me—her stepmother, not her mother, never her mother—because I was the only option left. It was either me or her grandparents, and she chose me, though she never said why. The choice felt less like affection and more like a strategic retreat; their penthouse condo is all polished surfaces and unspoken rules, while mine at least has the familiar chaos of someone who is also just surviving. She was seventeen at the time and needed a legal guardian. She doesn’t need to stay with me any more, since she just turned eighteen, yet she’s still here. I think she stays because my mess is easier to navigate than their perfection, at least until she leaves for college.

I’m glad she did stay. Her grandparents helped us get this house—co-signed the lease when my credit score was still tanked from six figures of legal debt after Benjamin’s trial. My name was on everything: the mortgage for the lake house he defaulted on, the lawyers he hired, the private investigators who found nothing until it was too late. They all came for me, demanding money after he went to prison. The Stones pay for Lily’s expenses directly—tuition, clothes, the car she drives—but nothing for me. This two-story feels borrowed, temporary. We left the Spanish-style ranch house with the terracotta roof and the bougainvillea that scratched at the windows—the one I thought was ours forever—after the reporters wouldn’t stop coming. Robert Stone arranged it all: a quieter street, a shorter commute, closer to them.

“The counselor will probably want to discuss your personal statement, you know, the part about handling tough situations.”

Lily’s face changes, like a door shutting tight. “I don’t discuss those things with people I don’t know,” she says.

I notice the way her hands move, her fingers tapping out an uneven beat on the counter. It’s a giveaway, a sign that she’s feeling anxious, even if she won’t own up to it.

“They’re not looking for specifics, just how you’ve dealt with tough situations,” I say, trying to reassure her, but she seems lost in her own thoughts, her eyes fixed on some point beyond me. “And you’ve dealt with more than most, Lily. You should be so proud of how far you’ve come.’

“What, from a happy daughter to an orphan?”

She takes a bite of toast, chewing slowly. Testing my reaction. I don’t give her one. Years of advertising have taught me how to sell an image, how to keep my face composed when clients make impossible demands.

One year of being Lily’s guardian has taught me that every conversation is a negotiation, every interaction a potential landmine. She used to leave her door open. She used to come downstairs before I called her. She used to correct my pronunciation of her favorite bands with something almost like affection. Now her bedroom door stays shut until the last possible moment, and she sits across from me at breakfast with her phone face down on the table like a secret she’s keeping, answering in the careful monosyllables of someone who has decided, without announcing it, that I am no longer worth the full version of her sentences. “Our interview for the Josephson scholarship is coming up next week, so let’s make some time this evening to go over your responses and get you prepared.”

Lily’s fork makes a loud scraping sound against the plate. “I don’t have time,” she says, “I’m busy working on my portfolio.”

“The scholarship would cover full tuition, Lily.” I keep my voice steady, reasonable. “Half an hour of practice could make all the difference.”

She lets out a deep sigh, the kind that only a teenager can pull off, and says, “Fine, after dinner.”

I give a slight nod, trying to keep my relief from showing. It’s a small win. Her words can be harsh sometimes, but I know she’s just testing my boundaries. I take a sip of my water, observing her above the rim of my glass. Her shoulders are slumped, her chin tilted in a defensive way. She’s really young, yet somehow, she seems so much older. At eighteen, she’s

already carrying around a heavy load of grief, like a backpack weighed down with stones.

“Mrs. Abernathy thinks your portfolio is really great,” I say. “She believes you have a good chance of getting into RISD.”

Something flickers across Lily’s face, something like pride, maybe, but it’s quickly suppressed.

“It’s fine. Nothing special.”

Her fingers, they’ve finally stopped tapping away, the anxious rhythm that had become so familiar. I’ve stumbled upon the right trigger, the one that brings her to a standstill. It’s her art, the one thing she’s never used as a weapon against me, the one pure and untainted thing that’s managed to survive everything that’s happened between us.

“I’d love to see it when you’re ready,” I reply cautiously.

Lily pushes her half-eaten breakfast away. “Maybe.”

This is the most encouraging response I’ve had in a long time, and I’m eager to build on it, to keep this small spark of connection from fading away. But I’m also aware that I need to tread carefully, not push too hard, or she might withdraw completely, leaving me with nothing. It’s a delicate balance, one that requires patience and restraint, but I’m willing to take that risk, to see where this fragile thread might lead.

As she stands up, she carefully takes her plate to the sink, rinsing it thoroughly—a habit that definitely didn’t come from her dad. It makes me think, what exactly did she pick up from me during that short time her father and I were married, before everything started to unravel?

“I need to get ready,” she says.

I force a smile, feeling like it doesn’t quite fit my face after the long, exhausting night. “The meeting’s at nine, isn’t it?”

Lily nods once, then disappears upstairs. The kitchen feels emptier without her, though she barely spoke. I sit alone at the counter, surrounded by gleaming surfaces and perfect order, listening to the pipes groan as she turns on the shower upstairs. My phone suddenly buzzes, reminding me that I have a quarterly review prep meeting at Stone Advertising at 10:30 a.m. I know Robert is expecting nothing but perfection from my presentation, and Margaret will be scrutinizing every detail. As I look ahead at the rest of the day, I feel like I’m balancing on a tightrope without any safety net to catch me if I fall. But first, I need to get through breakfast. Need to make sure

Lily gets out of the door in time for her meeting with the counselor. Need to keep moving forward one perfect, controlled step at a time.

I rise, rinse my barely touched plate, and begin wiping down the already spotless counter. The repetitive motion soothes me. Clean surfaces. Clean thoughts. No room for drowning dreams or shadow figures or the weight of all we've lost.

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THREE

The revolving door spins me into Stone Advertising's lobby with a whoosh of air conditioning. Cool marble underfoot, gleaming brass fixtures overhead. The receptionist—new, younger than the last one—offers a smile as I flash my ID badge.

"Morning, Ms. Caldwell."

Not Stone. Never Stone, not any more. Not since Benjamin went to prison and the family name became both my shield and my prison. I straighten my blazer and stride toward the elevator, feeling the weight of eyes tracking my movement across the lobby. One year in, and I'm still the subject of whispers. The woman who stayed. The woman who keeps his daughter. The woman who still works for his parents.

The elevator doors slide open to reveal the dramatic atrium that cuts through the heart of the building. Sunlight pours through the glass ceiling, creating a bright column in the center of the space. Around it, the three floors of Stone Advertising rise in concentric rings. It's beautiful. Intimidating. Exactly as Robert Stone intended.

I exit on the middle floor where the creative department sprawls. Open workstations cluster around collaborative spaces, all glass and chrome and ergonomic chairs. Digital screens line the walls, rotating through our current campaigns—athletic wear, luxury cars, a new organic vodka brand. My Tampa tourism campaign slides into view as I pass. White sand beaches, impossibly blue water. Nothing like the dark, murky depths of my nightmare. I look away.

Between desks, creatives huddle over tablets, art directors debate color schemes with designers while copywriters murmur taglines under their breath.

I set my laptop bag down, noting the fresh arrangement of white lilies that wasn't there yesterday. A small card nestles among the blooms:

One year. We appreciate your loyalty. – R.S.

One year since I chose to stay. Since I chose Lily over leaving. Since I decided that keeping what remained of our family together was worth the daily reminder of what we'd lost.

I tuck the card into my drawer without letting my face reveal anything. My colleagues are watching—they always are. Emma Caldwell, once creative director, was married to a murderer, now guardian to his daughter. The office curiosity.

"Caldwell."

Robert Stone's voice interrupts my thoughts. I turn to find him standing behind me, immaculate in his tailored suit, silver hair perfectly styled. My ex-father-in-law. My boss. The man who convinced me to stay when every instinct screamed for me to run.

Did I have a choice?

Not really. But he doesn't know that.

"Good morning, Robert." My voice comes out steady, professional. The voice I practiced in mirrors after Benjamin was arrested. After Lily showed up in court with the smoking gun: A recording on her phone of him admitting to killing his ex-wife and trying to frame me for it.

Robert's eyes—the same shape as his son's, though a different color—scan my face. "Solid work, Caldwell. Hargrove was impressed with the numbers."

Pride flickers briefly. I've learned to take his rare compliments as they come. "Thank you. The focus group data helped us narrow the message."

"Indeed." He steps closer, lowering his voice. "The quarterly review is next week. The board will want to see improvements in the financial projections for your department."

And there it is. Praise followed by pressure. The Robert Stone special.

"We're already six percent above target for the quarter," I say, keeping my tone light despite the familiar knot forming in my stomach.

“Belmont Group is considering pulling their account. Something about wanting fresh blood.” His eyes narrow slightly. “I need numbers that make sure they don’t. We can’t afford losses right now.”

Translation: I can’t afford losses right now. Not with my son in prison for murder and my reputation hanging by a thread.

“I’ll get them today,” I promise. “It will look better with the new campaign direction.”

Robert nods once, crisp and decisive. “Good.” He starts to turn away, then pauses. “How’s Lily?”

The abrupt shift to personal matters in the professional space throws me off balance. “She’s… College counselor meeting today.”

“Margaret wants to see her this weekend.”

It’s a request. It always is with Robert.

“I’ll check her schedule,” I say, though we both know Lily will go. The Stone family maintains its appearances, even now. Especially now. I was surprised when Lily agreed to live with me and not them. She was close with her grandparents until her father’s arrest. Maybe it all reminded her too much of what happened and she needed a fresh start. Maybe she just couldn’t stand seeing her father’s eyes in her grandfather’s face every day. I know it’s hard for me. I miss the man I loved, when I didn’t know who he really was.

Robert walks away without another word, back straight, shoulders squared. I see the slight tightness in his jaw, the way his right hand clenches and unclenches as he moves. Small tells I’ve learned to read over years of Stone family dinners.

Movement in my peripheral vision draws my attention to the glass-walled conference room across the floor and my ex-mother-in-law, Margaret Stone, one elegant hand pressed against the glass, the other tapping her Montblanc pen against the wall in a slow, purposeful rhythm. Her eyes lock with mine, and a chill crawls up my spine.

She’s watching. Always watching.

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FOUR

Night presses against the windows, turning them into black mirrors that reflect our dining room. Note cards spread across the polished mahogany. Application printouts arranged in neat stacks. Two mugs of tea—mine half-empty, Lily's untouched. The scholarship materials for Josephson College form a fortress of paper between us. I tap my pen against the table, and then think of Margaret. When I realize, I stop immediately.

"Let's try the leadership question again," I say, selecting a card from the pile. My voice sounds too loud in the quiet house.

Lily sighs, slumping further into her chair. Her hair is pulled back now, revealing the sharp angles of her face. Alice's cheekbones. Benjamin's nose. A genetic collage of two people who are gone in different ways.

"I already answered that one," she says, but straightens slightly. Professional mode. She learned it from watching me, I realize with a start. This careful composure when discussing important matters.

"The committee might ask it differently. Better to be over-prepared." I glance at my phone as it lights up with an email notification. Robert, still working at 9 p.m. Expecting me to do the same. Or is he asking again about Lily?

"Shouldn't you read that?" Lily asks, eyeing the phone. "It's from Grandpa."

I turn it face down. "It can wait. This is more important." The words surprise me as much as they seem to surprise her. Work rarely waits in the Stone family. To Benjamin, being a doctor was his everything. "Tell me about a time you demonstrated leadership in a difficult situation."

Lily takes a breath, slipping into her practiced answer. “Last year, as editor of the school literary magazine, I faced a challenge when our printing budget was cut by thirty percent. Rather than compromise on quality, I organized a crowdfunding campaign that not only made up the difference but allowed us to increase our print run by twenty percent. This taught me that obstacles can become opportunities with creative thinking and clear communication.”

The answer is polished, perfect. Too perfect. I can hear the hours of rehearsal behind it, the careful construction to hit all the right notes. Leadership. Problem-solving. Positive framing. She’s learned from me too well.

“Good,” I say, making a note on my pad. “But maybe a little less…”

“Robotic?” She raises an eyebrow, a flash of her usual sharpness.

“Rehearsed,” I correct gently. “They want to know the real you.”

Her laugh is short, bitter. “No, they don’t. They want the perfect candidate. The resilient orphan with artistic talent who overcame tragedy.” She picks at a hangnail on her thumb. “Not the girl whose father killed her mother and then tried to frame it on his new wife.”

The words are jagged and raw. We rarely speak so directly about what happened. The facts stay buried beneath layers of carefully chosen language. Tragedy. Loss. Difficult circumstances. Never murder. Never the letters Benjamin sent to me pretending to be from Alice. Never the fear that still wakes me at night from knowing I shared a bed with a murderer. Never the nightmares where I drown the same way Alice did. Or the final letter he managed to send me from prison. At least that’s what I believed he did. Some days I wonder if it was even from him. But then I stop myself. Of course it was.

“Lily,” I start, then stop, unsure what to say.

She shakes her head. “Sorry. That was… let’s just continue.”

I check the next card, trying to reset the moment. “What about your greatest weakness?”

Lily stares at her hands. “I-I don’t know if I can say everything right.”

The admission comes out small, fragile. Not the polished scholarship candidate. Not the defiant teenager. Just an eighteen-year-old girl terrified of failing.

I set the note cards down, surprised by this crack in her armor. For months, she’s been nothing but sharp edges and practiced responses around

me. This vulnerability feels like a gift I'm not sure I deserve.

"What do you mean?" I ask, careful to keep my tone neutral. No pressure. No advertising executive analysis.

"They'll want to know about my mother. About my father." She twists a silver bracelet on her arm, the one she got from her mother when she turned ten. "If I show too much emotion, I'm unstable. Not enough, I'm cold. If I say I miss my dad, they'll think I'm siding with a murderer. If I say I hate him…" She trails off, swallowing hard.

I reach across the table, not quite touching her but close. "You don't have to get everything right, Lily. That's not how this works."

"Isn't it?" Her eyes meet mine directly, something rare between us. "Isn't that exactly how the world works for us now? One wrong move and everyone remembers who we are. What happened."

We're both performing every day. Both carrying the weight of a story we didn't write but must somehow live with.

"Look at me," I say, and wait until she does. Her eyes are dry but vulnerable, walls momentarily down. "You are brilliant and talented and so much more than what happened to your family. The scholarship committee will see that because it's true, not because you said everything perfectly."

Her expression softens slightly. "You really believe that?"

"I do." And I realize I mean it, despite my own daily performance, my own careful curation of every word and gesture. "Perfect answers aren't as compelling as honest ones."

Something shifts between us—a tectonic movement so subtle it's barely perceptible, yet I feel the ground changing beneath us. Not trust, exactly. Not yet. But possibility.

"I'm scared," she admits, voice just above a whisper.

"Me too," I confess, the words escaping before I can catch them. "Every day."

Her eyes widen slightly at my admission. The poised, put-together Emma Caldwell, admitting fear? A small nod acknowledges this gift of truth between us.

"Let's try a different approach," I suggest, pushing the note cards aside. "Tell me why art matters to you. Not the scholarship answer. The real one."

For a moment, I think she'll retreat behind her walls again. Instead, she takes a deep breath and begins to speak. Her voice changes, loses its

practiced edge. She talks about color and light, about expressing what can't be said in words. About the one place she still feels like herself.

I listen, really listen, not planning my next question or analyzing her delivery. Just witnessing this glimpse of the real Lily—the person beneath the grief and anger and perfect college applications. Her mother had been an art lover too. This is the last of her she has left.

Too soon, it ends. She looks at the clock and stands, gathering her papers. "It's late. I should finish my calculus."

"Of course." I don't push for more. This connection between us is too fragile.

I watch her climb the stairs, her shoulders once again taking on their familiar rigid set. The vulnerable moment has passed, but it existed. That's something.

Alone at the dining table, I let my own mask slip. My shoulders slump. My hands shake slightly as I gather the note cards into a neat stack. The professional composure I maintain all day—at work, with Lily, even alone in my own mind—cracks just enough to let doubt seep through.

Am I doing any of this right? Helping Lily heal while dealing with my own trauma? Working for the family of the man who tried to destroy me? Staying in this town and house where I sometimes imagine shadows watching me sleep?

The sensible answer would be to leave. Start over somewhere new. But that would mean leaving Lily, the one person Benjamin didn't manage to take from me. The one person who might, someday, feel like family again.

I straighten the papers one final time, aligning their edges with geometric precision and head upstairs.

I spot the pile of letters shoved through the crack at the bottom of the front door. The mail. Bills. A flyer for a local restaurant. College brochure for Lily. And beneath it all, a cream-colored envelope. I stand there a moment, holding the stack. The mailbox is right outside—I painted it myself in the spring, a deep navy blue that Lily said looked like a bruise. There's nothing wrong with it. No broken latch, no rusted hinge. So why is my mail on the floor?

My hand freezes mid-reach. The handwriting stops my breath. Flowing, elegant script forming my name and address. Handwriting I'd know anywhere, having studied it last year when the letters started arriving. The same script in the letter in my bedside drawer.

Alice Stone’s handwriting. Or at least as close as Benjamin could get it. My fingers tremble as I pluck it from the stack.

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FIVE

I glance up the stairs. Lights glow behind Lily's bedroom door.

The decision is made in an instant: I can't bring this inside. Can't risk Lily seeing it. I step into the night and slide into the driver's seat of my car and close the door, creating a bubble of privacy in my own driveway.

The envelope tears unevenly in my shaking hands. Inside, a folded sheet of the heavy stationery Alice always preferred, and Benjamin used to copy her. And something else—photocopied pages, three of them, stapled together.

I unfold the letter first.

To his ex-wife,

You thought he killed me,
But the person you should fear is still inside your house…

I can barely breathe as I start reading the letter. My heart is pounding so fast, I can't take it. I keep thinking of the letter I had received last year, the invitation to meet "Alice." I had thought it was the beginning of a new, terrifying reality, but when I decided not to go and no further ones came, I assumed it was just Benjamin messing with me one last time.

That letter had been cryptic.

…not who you think I am…
…Ben was right about one thing…

…Lily doesn't know the whole truth…
…meet me if you want answers…

But I'd learned my lesson. That first set of letters had led me on a wild goose chase to touch evidence that implicated me in Alice's murder. And this one was Benjamin trying to do something just as insane. So I'd ignored it. Kept it from Lily.

But this one… it's been a year.

You thought you were so clever, didn't you? Taking my husband, taking my home, and now taking my daughter. Playing the grieving widow, the dedicated stepmother. Such a perfect performance.

But we both know what you really are. A thief. An interloper. A woman who couldn't create her own family, so she stole mine.

I'm watching you, Emma. The mother Lily thinks is dead. The mother she helped kill.

Did you know about her sickness? Did Benjamin tell you about the incidents? Of course not. He protected her, even from you. Read the enclosed notes. See who you're really living with. My daughter isn't the sweet, troubled artist you think she is. She's dangerous. Psychotic. And now she has you in her sights, just like she had me.

I didn't escape. You won't either.

The signature is a perfect replica of Alice's. My lungs constrict, refusing air. I flip to the photocopied pages, labeled as case notes from "Dr. Howard Greene, Adolescent Psychiatry."

Patient: Lily Stone, age 12

Session 23

Patient continues to exhibit disturbing ideation regarding mother. Today expressed belief that "she deserved to die" for "trying to take Dad away." When questioned, patient became

agitated, insisting “she’s not who everyone thinks she is.” Patient’s artistic expressions remain violent in nature—drawings of maternal figure drowning, falling, bleeding.

Recommend increasing medication and considering inpatient evaluation if homicidal ideation continues.

I flip to the next page, my vision blurring at the edges.

Session 27

Patient displayed concerning detachment when discussing mother. Stated “sometimes I imagine pushing her down the stairs” with flat affect. When asked if she would act on these thoughts, patient smiled and said “maybe.” Attempted to explore this statement, but patient became non-responsive.

Increasing concern about patient’s dissociative episodes and potential for harm to self or others.

The third page contains a scan of what appears to be a drawing—crude, violent, unmistakably a woman falling with another figure (smaller, child-sized) standing nearby. Written across the bottom in jagged letters:

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

My stomach turns. I press my hand against my mouth, fighting the urge to be sick right here in the car. This can’t be real. Lily has never seen a Dr. Greene. Benjamin never mentioned any psychiatric treatment. The therapist she saw after her father went to prison—and is still seeing—is Dr. Winters. I scheduled the appointment myself, back when Dr. Foster retired and we had to start over with someone new.

And Alice is still dead.

Right?

But the handwriting… so perfectly Alice's. I look up toward the house. Through a gap in the blinds, I catch a glimpse of movement. Lily's dark hair swinging. Her posture loose, relaxed. Nothing like the disturbed girl described in these "notes."

My phone buzzes in my purse. A text from Robert:

When can we see her? She's not answering any of our texts or calls.

Could Alice somehow be alive after all? The thought forms like a bubble rising from dark water. But I saw the reports. Her car, and her body was found inside it. And Benjamin confessed. He's in prison for her murder. He placed a thin metal shim underneath her brakes so they'd fail her. She drove over the edge of the bridge.

These letters—they have to be from Benjamin. Like last time, he's just trying to drive me crazy, make me miserable, destroy everything. I reported the last one to Detective Ramirez a year ago, stood in his office while he assured me, hands folded on his desk, that Benjamin was being monitored, that the prison had been notified, that there was no way he could send anything to me without their knowledge. But how is he still managing it from prison? And why target Lily—why now, when she's finally starting to stabilize?

The front door opens. My heart lurches as Lily steps onto the porch, hand shielding her eyes as she peers toward the driveway.

"Emma?" she calls. "Are you okay?"

I stuff the letter and notes into my purse with trembling hands, forcing my expression into neutrality. Practice from a thousand client meetings. A thousand family dinners with the Stones. Smile. Look normal. Don't show fear.

"Coming!" I call back, voice impressively steady as I step out of the car. My legs feel like jelly. I clutch my purse tight against my side as I walk toward her.

Lily watches my approach, head tilted slightly. The porch light casts shadows across her face—Alice's cheekbones, Benjamin's nose. Looking for all the world like any ordinary teenager wondering why her guardian is sitting in the car instead of coming in.

I follow her inside, into the warm light of our shared home. The envelope burns against my hip through the leather of my purse. With each

step, I wonder: Am I walking into danger? Or am I the danger, bringing suspicion into this fragile peace we've built? Allowing this silly letter to create a distance between us. To ruin what we have.

Lily heads upstairs. I stand in the entryway, watching her.

Watching for signs of the monster described in those pages.

No. I can't think like that. I refuse to believe any of it.

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SIX

The hardwood floor digs into my hip bone. I shift, adjusting my position against the wall outside Lily's bedroom, but there's no comfort to be found here. The house has settled into its nighttime silence—AC clicking on to reach nighttime temperature, refrigerator humming, occasional creak of wood contracting in the cold. Through the partially open door, I can hear Lily's breathing.

Three hours. That's how long I've been sitting here. My legs went numb after the first hour of listening to her tossing and turning. My back started aching during the second. Now my entire body feels like a poorly assembled collection of parts, none of them quite fitting together any more.

Still, I don't move. Can't move. Not while doubt gnaws at the edges of my mind, a rat chewing through the walls of everything I thought I knew.

My daughter isn't the sweet, troubled artist you think she is. She's dangerous. Psychotic.

The words pulse behind my eyes like a migraine. Earlier, Lily went to shower and I searched her room while it was free. Found nothing but sketches of landscapes, architectural drawings, college brochures—the normal possessions of a talented eighteen-year-old. No violent drawings. No disturbing journals. Nothing to suggest the person described in those "psychiatrist's notes."

And yet here I am. Sitting outside her door like a guard. Or a prisoner.

From my position, I can see just enough through the gap in the doorway. Lily's form under the covers, one arm flung above her head. Her face in profile, slack with sleep. The silver moonlight filtering through her blinds

turns her skin alabaster, her hair ink-black against the white pillowcase. She looks impossibly young. Vulnerable.

Did you know about her sickness? Did Benjamin tell you about the incidents?

Benjamin never mentioned any psychiatric issues beyond the expected grief following her mother's death. Never hinted at violent tendencies or disturbing thoughts. Is this why she's not been sleeping? But then, Benjamin kept so many secrets. The letters he wrote pretending to be Alice. The careful campaign to convince me I was losing my mind, that her ghost was haunting me. Would hiding Lily's mental state be so different from his other deceptions?

Lily stirs in her sleep, murmuring something inaudible. I freeze, holding my breath until she settles again. What does she dream about? Her mother? The day she died? Her father murdering her mother in cold blood? Will she wake soon, screaming? I've heard her pacing her room on the nights I've been up with nightmares. When will that start? How long will she sleep for? Does she know I'm out here? Is she pretending?

I try to remind myself of the girl I've been looking after for the last year; the mornings I've made her pancakes, and her eyes have widened with joy, the discussions we've had about how she'll make friends again and just needs a fresh start away at college. She's innocent. Vulnerable. Still a child. When I first started dating Benjamin, she'd been cold toward me, unaccepting of her new stepmother. But in the shadow of her father's betrayal, we've been becoming close.

The floor beneath me has stolen all body heat through my thin pajamas. I should get up, should try to sleep in my own bed. Should trust that the letter is just another of Benjamin's manipulations, designed to drive a wedge between me and his daughter. Maybe he's jealous? Maybe he just wants to make my life miserable? It could be one of his games that he likes to play. But my body refuses to move, anchored by fear and doubt and a strange, fierce protectiveness that I can't entirely explain.

If Lily is troubled—truly troubled—then my place is here. Watching over her. Not because I fear her, but because she needs someone to see the truth of her, whatever that might be.

But what if…?

The thought forms slowly, reluctantly. What if Alice is alive?

Moving as quietly as possible, I crawl away from my post until I'm safely down the hall. Only then do I stand, muscles protesting after hours of stillness. My purse sits on my dresser where I left it earlier, the cream envelope now hidden in the zippered inner pocket. My hands tremble as I extract it.

Under the soft glow of my phone's flashlight, I examine the envelope more carefully than I could in the panicked moments after finding it. The postmark is clear: Tampa Bay, three days ago. Not from the prison where Benjamin is held. Not from the past, some letter long delayed.

The paper feels expensive between my fingers, heavy and textured. Alice always used this stationery, ordered from a specialty shop in Boston where she went to college. During the trial, Benjamin had admitted to using this same special paper because he knew his ex-wife loved it and it would make it look like it came from her, not him. I had studied this paper and the writings intensely last year. I thought it was over. I thought there would be no more.

I trace the handwriting with my fingertip. The distinctive way she formed her E's, the slight rightward slant of her letters. Could someone fake this so perfectly? Benjamin managed it before, but these letters feel different somehow. More authentic. Or am I just more susceptible now, worn down by a year of raising her daughter, working for her father-in-law, existing in the spaces she once occupied? Worrying that it's all going to be taken away from me? Without the Stone family I would have nothing.

My head pounds with exhaustion. My eyes burn from straining to read in the dim light, from hours of vigilant watching, from unshed tears I refuse to acknowledge.

A sound from down the hall snaps me alert. I stuff the letter back into my purse and listen. Just the house settling. Or my imagination, primed to hear threats in every creak and groan.

I check the time on my phone: 3:42 a.m. In three hours, my alarm will go off. I'll shower, dress, prepare breakfast, wave as Lily drives off to school, head to Stone Advertising. I'll perform the rehearsed normalcy of an actress on opening night. No one will know I spent the night on the hallway floor, consumed by impossible questions.

Someone is lying. Benjamin? Alice? Lily?

Or maybe me—lying to myself about what's happening here, about my ability to handle it alone.

I listen out for Lily. This is what motherhood must feel like—this terrible, beautiful vigilance. This willingness to suffer to keep someone else safe, even when you're not sure from who the danger is coming.

Even when it might be coming from the person you're trying to protect.

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SEVEN

The kitchen clock reads 5:17 a.m. The blue from my laptop screen glows in the darkness, casting my hands in an eerie light as I type: “Alice Stone Tampa Bay bridge accident.” My fourth search of the night. Each time, hoping for different results than I found the first time I did this over a year ago. Each time, finding the same terrible story. My finger hovers over the Enter key for just a moment before I press down, releasing a flood of headlines I’ve already memorized.

BRAKES FAILED IN FATAL BRIDGE ACCIDENT

DR. BENJAMIN STONE CHARGED IN WIFE’S MURDER

I click a link, a *Tampa Tribune* article from six years ago. The same grainy photo of Alice appears—head tilted slightly, that knowing half-smile, dark hair framing her face. Beautiful in that effortless way I could never achieve. Dead for six years. Or so everyone believes.

My chest tightens as I scan the article I’ve read a dozen times before. The words blur together, familiar phrases jumping out: “…car plunged through the guardrail…” “…ruled accidental…”

I glance toward the darkened stairwell leading up to Lily’s bedroom. The house is silent except for the soft hum of the refrigerator and the occasional click of my keyboard.

My fingers twitch slightly as I open a new tab. “Benjamin Stone trial transcripts.” The results are fewer this time, mostly behind paywalls or legal databases. I find a free court record summary and click.

> Prosecution established that defendant Benjamin Stone had the knowledge and opportunity to tamper with victim’s brakes. Defense argued insufficient physical evidence linking defendant to the crime scene. Testimony from Detective Lucas Ramirez detailed…

Lucas Ramirez. The name stands out like it’s highlighted. The detective who was Benjamin’s friend, who arrested me for the murder, but later realized I was innocent. The man who then built the case against Benjamin. The man who put him away. The man who might have answers.

I create a new folder on my desktop, naming it “Insurance Documents.” No one would look twice at such a boring label. My mouse moves mechanically as I take screenshots of the articles, saving each with today’s date and a brief description. My hands tremble slightly as I work, adrenaline pushing back against bone-deep fatigue.

Another search: “Alice Stone autopsy report.” This feels ghoulish, invasive, but I need to know. Need to be certain. The official report isn’t public, but there are news summaries because of the attention Benjamin’s case attracted. I scan them quickly, looking for anything that might suggest a mistake, a misidentification, any reason to believe Alice might still be alive.

“Body recovered three days after accident… Advanced decomposition due to water exposure… Dental records confirmed identity…”

The tightness in my chest spreads to my throat. I take a shallow breath, then another. I already knew this, but it feels good to see it again. They found her body. Identified it. This isn’t some elaborate conspiracy where Alice disappeared to start a new life. She died. Benjamin killed her.

A floorboard creaks somewhere in the house. I freeze, fingers suspended above the keyboard. *One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.* Nothing. Just the house settling. Still, I minimize my browser before continuing, paranoia taking root.

I open a new tab and search for “Detective Lucas Ramirez Tampa PD.” His name brings up several articles—cases he’s solved, a commendation

ceremony three years ago, a charity golf tournament for fallen officers. I find a professional photo: a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair and deep smile lines that contrast with serious eyes. The face of someone who's seen the worst but hasn't let it break him. I remember him from dinners at the house, back when he was Benjamin's friend, his smile and laughter. He was always so kind to me, complimenting my hosting or the food I had cooked whenever our families spent time together.

My cursor hovers over the Tampa Police Department contact page. I haven't spoken to him since Benjamin was sentenced to life without parole. I guess none of us wanted to be reminded of what happened, of our mutual past. But would he talk to me? I deleted his number back then in the hope I would never have to use it again.

I glance at the hallway again, straining to hear any sound from Lily's room. Nothing. She's still asleep.

I click back to the court summaries, scanning for any mention of Lily's involvement in the trial. She brought the video of him admitting his guilt in a fit of anger toward me. I was the one originally on trial. They were building a case against me for the murder of Alice. She brought the smoking gun that took him down. I still remember it vividly. She came to my rescue, taking her own father down in the process. The only parent she had left. That takes serious guts. I owed her big time for that.

So who is trying to come between us? To make me doubt the girl who saved me?

The kitchen suddenly feels too exposed. Windows looking out into darkness, reflecting my hunched form at the table. Anyone could be watching from outside. I close the blinds with a swift tug, then return to my search with renewed urgency.

"Dr. Howard Greene adolescent psychiatry Tampa." The name from those photocopied "case notes" in the letter. This search yields a legitimate-looking professional profile—a real doctor specializing in adolescent trauma and behavioral disorders with an office in Tampa.

If he's real, could the notes be real too?

No. I don't believe this. I'm not being manipulated again.

The clock now reads 6:04 a.m. I've been at this for too long, falling down a rabbit hole of old news and half-forgotten details. My eyes burn. My neck aches from hunching over the screen. But I can't stop. Not until I understand what's happening.

I create a new document, typing “Questions for Detective Ramirez” at the top. My fingers hover over the keys momentarily before I begin:

1. Was there any suspicion that Alice Stone’s body was misidentified?
2. Did Benjamin ever mention Lily having psychiatric issues?
3. Could Benjamin be orchestrating these letters from prison?

I stare at the list, each question more damning than the last. Am I really considering this again? That Alice might somehow be alive?

All I know is that I have to know the truth, whatever it is.

I save everything and close my laptop, plunging the kitchen back into darkness. The decision crystallizes in my mind: I will contact Detective Ramirez tomorrow. I will show him the letter. I will get answers.

As I stand to go upstairs, my legs stiff from sitting too long, another floorboard creaks—closer this time, near the bottom of the stairs. I freeze, straining my eyes against the darkness.

“Lily?” I call softly.

No answer. Just the settling house. Just my fraying nerves.

Right?

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EIGHT

Tampa's Twelfth Precinct is a blocky concrete and glass structure that looks nothing like the sleek police stations on TV. Square windows. Flat roof. American flag hanging limp in the humid air. Nothing dramatic except what's happening inside my chest—the too-fast thudding that hasn't slowed since I parked here twenty minutes ago. Detective Ramirez is in there somewhere. If I could just make myself open this car door.

"Detective Ramirez?" I rehearse aloud to the empty car. My voice sounds thin, uncertain. I clear my throat and try again. "Lucas… how have you been?"

In the stifling air of my parked car, I wonder how else to say it. How am I going to tell him it happened again? That I received another letter? It will bring up everything from our past, everything we've tried so hard to forget. He lost his best friend. I lost my husband. What Benjamin did is unbearable to think about still.

"I've received a disturbing letter… another letter," I continue to my invisible audience. "It appears to be from Alice Stone, which is obviously impossible. But it contains information about my stepdaughter Lily—psychiatric evaluations I've never seen before. I don't believe they're true. They could be fake. Photoshopped, AI. I think someone is trying to hurt me and Lily. But the doctor seems legitimate."

A patrol car pulls into the lot, sliding into a reserved space near the entrance. My fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

"That sounds crazy," I mutter. "He'll think I'm unhinged."

But what's the alternative? Ignore the letter?

My hand moves to the door handle. Grips it. My arm tenses, ready to push.

I don’t move.

What if Ramirez confirms the notes are real? What if they already have them in the case file? What would that mean for Lily? For me? For the fragile peace we’ve constructed this past year? I could lose everything.

Stop it.

I’m doing it again. Letting these invasive thoughts into my life. They will only end up destroying everything. That’s what they want, whoever wrote the letter. I’m playing right into their hands.

My phone sits in the center console, the precinct’s number already pulled up on the screen. Maybe calling would be easier than walking in. Less commitment. I could hang up if it goes badly. I don’t have to look at his face and be reminded of the past. How Benjamin used to tease Lucas about his handicap or try to get him to let Benjamin buy him new clubs.

No. I’m desperately trying to move on from the past. For me and Lily.

I reach for the phone instead of the door. My thumb hovers over the call button.

But what exactly am I reporting? A letter that might be from a dead woman? Suspicions that someone is trying to manipulate me about my traumatized stepdaughter based on unverified “psychiatric notes”? The fact that I spent last night sitting outside her bedroom like some kind of deranged guardian angel? This didn’t exactly go well last time…

The precinct door swings open. Two uniformed officers exit, laughing about something. Their normalcy—their certainty in their place and purpose—makes my indecision feel even more pathetic.

I drop the phone back into the console and grab the door handle again. This time I actually push, cracking it open an inch. The sounds of the street rush in—car horns, distant sirens, the rumble of a city bus passing by. Real sounds from the real world where people make decisions and act on them instead of sitting paralyzed in parked cars.

“Get out of the car,” I whisper to myself. “Just get out and go in.”

Another police cruiser pulls into the lot, this one parking just two spaces from mine. The officer who emerges is young, dark-haired, walking with the loose confidence of someone comfortable in their authority. He glances my way as he passes, making brief eye contact through my windshield.

Something in his gaze—is it curiosity? Or maybe suspicion?—sends a jolt of panic through me. He knows. He can tell I don't belong here, that I'm hiding something, that I'm not the put-together professional woman my clothes suggest.

Before I can think better of it, I slam my door shut, jam my key into the ignition, and start the engine. The sudden roar feels like my heartbeat amplified. I back out of the space too quickly, nearly clipping a concrete pillar. The officer has paused, is watching me now with keener interest.

I pull away from the precinct, hands shaking on the wheel. Coward. The word beats in time with my racing pulse as I accelerate perhaps too quickly onto the main road. Stupid coward.

What was I afraid of? That Ramirez would laugh at me? That he'd call Robert and Margaret, tell them their daughter-in-law is having a breakdown? That he'd somehow contact Benjamin in prison and tell him I'm unhinged? That Lily should be with her grandparents instead?

Is this all Margaret?

Is that why Margaret is doing it to me? To get Lily back?

A traffic light ahead turns yellow. I should slow down, but instead I press the gas, shooting through the intersection just as it changes to red. A horn blares behind me. My hands clench tighter on the wheel.

"Stupid, stupid," I mutter, turning right at the next corner without signaling. "What was the point of driving all the way here if you weren't going to go in?"

I recognize nothing about this street. Have I turned the wrong way? My sense of direction has abandoned me along with my courage. I pull over, trying to orient myself. The GPS on my phone shows I've been driving away from home, not toward it. A detour to nowhere.

Like my attempt to find answers.

My breathing gradually slows as I sit at the curb. I should go home. Lily will be back from school soon. What if she somehow one day finds that letter? What if she reads what's written about her, sees those awful notes describing her as disturbed, psychotic?

That would destroy her.

The thought surfaces again, impossible to suppress. What if Alice's death wasn't what we all believed?

And what does Margaret know?

I check my mirrors and pull back into traffic, this time following the GPS directions home. My driving steadies as I make conscious efforts to calm myself. Signal properly at turns. Stop completely at signs. Maintain an appropriate speed. Small controls in a world spiraling beyond my grasp.

Maybe I’m overthinking everything. Just like last time. That’s what got me in trouble.

I shudder, remembering how close I came to being put away for something Benjamin had done.

I make the final turn onto our street, the neat row of houses coming into view. Home, with all its complications and questions. I’ve run from the police station like a guilty thing, but there’s nowhere to run from the doubts growing in my own mind.

One thing is certain: I can’t keep sitting outside Lily’s bedroom each night, watching her sleep. I need answers—from someone, somewhere. If not from Ramirez, then perhaps from a more dangerous source.

From Benjamin himself.

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NINE

I’m hunched over my dual monitors, cursor blinking on a half-finished spreadsheet, though my mind is racing miles away. Behind me, through the glass walls of Stone Advertising’s open-plan floor, Tampa’s skyline gleams—chrome and glass marching past a deep blue sky. Normally I’d feel energized by the view. Today I feel pinned to my swivel chair, the weight of that anonymous letter pressing on my chest. Someone is trying to paint Lily as unstable—someone wants me to doubt her. Could it be Robert? Margaret?

A chime sounds as Jason’s team chat lights up. He’s just posted the latest campaign mock-ups and is tagging Laura for feedback. Their praise scrolls by: “Brilliant work,” “We nailed the brief,” “Can’t wait to pitch this.” My own message notification—an alert about ad performance metrics I’m supposed to analyze—goes unnoticed. I dig my fingernails into my palm under the desk, trying to pull myself back to the present, to this dull hum of keyboards and the quiet clink of coffee cups on saucers.

My phone buzzes: an email from the analytics dashboard, numbers flashing red. “Why is engagement down twelve percent this week?” I mutter. I should dive into the data—cross-tabulate by platform, isolate the anomaly. Instead, Lily’s face flickers in my mind, so fragile and pale in sleep, nothing like that girl in the letter’s doctored psychiatric notes. It can’t be real. But the questions echo: Is she the sweet girl I make breakfast for every morning, or the supposedly dangerous child someone’s trying to make her out to be?

At my elbow, Laura leans over, eyes brimming with concern. “Emma, these reports are due by noon. Everything okay?”

I force a nod, swipe my screen back to the spreadsheet. “Yes—on it.” My voice sounds thin, brittle. I type numbers into cells, but my hands shake so badly I nearly crash the formula.

Across the room, Robert strides past my office, phone pressed to his ear, speaking in clipped tones. He pauses, glances my way—just for a second. Then he keeps going, perfectly composed, heading for the glass-walled war room where the big client presentations happen. I used to be the one in there, commanding the slides. Now I’m stuck handling post-mortems, performance reports, social metrics—background work that no one notices until it goes wrong.

Margaret sits nearby in her corner office, silver hair coiled in that impeccable bun, her door half open so she can survey the floor. I can feel her gaze through the glass. Ever since Lily chose me over her, she’s been watching. Always watching. Her perfectly manicured fingers tap against her desk in a steady, silent rhythm—tap-tap-tap—like a countdown. I can’t tell if it’s impatience or something darker.

I pull data from one tab into another, reciting engagement rates aloud to myself: “Eight point two percent above industry standard… eight point two percent…”

My professional training kicks in, drowning out the scare tactics in that letter. I know these numbers. I can prove them. But as soon as I cross-check the final report, the edges of my vision blur, and all I see is Lily whimpering in her sleep last night, nightmares crashing through the thin walls of her bedroom. And the longer I stare at the screen, the more I’m convinced those notes were forged—someone trying to destroy her, and by extension, destroy me.

A soft knock at my office door. I look up to see Margaret slipping inside, her heels silent against the plush carpet. Everyone else avoids her eye—she’s one of the few who still commands that kind of unspoken respect. She closes the gap between us, folding her arms over her cream-colored suit.

“Emma,” she says, voice low enough that only I can hear. “Your numbers… they’re off today.” Not a question, more an accusation. She smirks almost imperceptibly. “Is something distracting you?”

I clamp my mouth shut. The standard line—"Just adjusting to the new workflow"—dies on my tongue. The truth is I haven't slept, haven't stopped thinking about Lily's nightmares or whether that letter came from Margaret herself.

Her eyes narrow. "Has Benjamin been in touch?"

I swallow. "No," I answer, voice catching. "He's not… communicating."

Her lips press into a thin line. "Lily's having trouble again," she states.

My heart lurches. "She's fine," I blurt. "Just college applications stress." Ridiculous—I haven't even started those essays.

Margaret's gaze turns icy. "Benjamin tried to protect her too. Look where that got him." The reference to her imprisoned son hangs in the air like a guillotine's blade.

Before I can respond, she steps out of my office, sliding the door shut behind her. "We will talk, Emma," she whispers so no one else hears. "Soon. Before it's too late."

I watch her go, and when she's gone, I sit back, trembling. My spreadsheets are open, half-complete, the red error alerts still blinking. I can't focus. I have to verify whether Dr. Howard Greene really saw Lily. I need to know who's behind that letter.

I push my chair back and stand, the carpet fibers pressing against my feet. I gather my notes—performance reports, platform analytics, demographic breakdowns—throw them into my bag. Margaret's warning coils in my gut: she knows something about Lily. Something that could undo us both.

I slip out onto the main floor, heels clicking too loudly in the sudden hush. Everyone looks up for a moment, then goes back to their screens. I head toward the records room, where I can dig through client files and old session logs. I'm demoted, working in the shadows—but I'm not defeated. I can't be. Not when Lily's life depends on it.

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TEN

The house key sticks in the lock for a moment before turning. I push the door open, stepping into the cool dimness of the entryway—the narrow hallway, the low ceilings, the faint smell of last night's dinner still caught in the curtains—and feel again the particular smallness of this place, how it holds us the way cupped hands hold water. Still mentally blaming myself for my cowardice at the police station.

From the kitchen I catch Lily's voice—low, careful, the kind of careful that means she's choosing her words. I go still. There are long pauses between her sentences, the kind that belong to a two-way conversation. I find myself cataloging what I know: Benjamin's name hasn't crossed her lips since the sentencing. Back then, even a passing reference would send her out of the room, her chair scraping back before the sentence was finished. I never asked her to stay. Now I'm the one who can't move, listening to the shape of a conversation I can't quite hear, and turning over the thought of visiting him myself—then setting it down the way you set down something too hot to hold. I know I have to go there at some point. I just can't do it. Not yet.

"I don't know if I can keep doing this," she's saying to someone. "It's getting too complicated." Her back is to me, dark hair falling forward as she hunches over her phone, unaware of my presence. I freeze, listening, my purse still dangling from my hand, the letter inside it suddenly feeling heavier than before.

"She's getting suspicious," Lily continues, her voice just above a whisper. "I can tell."

My breath catches. She's talking about me. Has to be.

The floorboard beneath my foot creaks. Lily whips around, eyes widening when she sees me standing there. For a split second, something flashes across her face—guilt? Fear? Then it's gone, replaced by teenage neutrality.

"I have to go," she says into the phone, straightening her posture. "Emma's here." A pause. "Yeah. Later." She taps the screen and sets the phone face down on the coffee table, a casual movement that feels deliberate, hiding the caller ID.

"Hey," she says, voice pitched perfectly normal now. "Didn't hear you come in."

I set my purse and keys down on the small table, moving slowly, giving myself time to compose my face. "Got out of work a little early." I'm lying again. Better than explaining I spent the afternoon circling a police station parking lot like a nervous vulture. "Who was that?"

Lily shrugs, the movement too studied to be genuine. "Just Zoe from school. We're working on a chemistry project together."

I nod, moving into the living room. Lily's textbooks are spread across the coffee table—calculus, English lit, and yes, chemistry. Perfectly arranged, almost like a set designer placed them there. Too perfect.

"That's nice. What's the project?" I keep my tone casual, conversational, while my eyes scan the room. Family photos line the mantel—mostly Lily with Benjamin and Alice from before, a few newer ones with me added to the edges of the family narrative. The house feels suddenly like a stage set, our conversation a script neither of us wrote.

"Just some stuff about molecular structures." Lily tucks her hair behind her ear—a nervous tell I've noticed before. "It's boring, really."

"Due soon?" I settle into an armchair across from her, noticing how she shifts to put more distance between us.

"Friday."

"I thought your chemistry class was working on the periodic table project this month. The one with the creative presentations?" I'd helped her research element facts just last week, spent an evening discussing ways to make xenon interesting to high schoolers.

Lily blinks. Once. Twice. "This is… extra credit."

"For Ms. Hendricks? I didn't think she offered extra credit." Another detail I remember from parent-teacher conferences, another trap I'm setting.

The guilt of my suspicion burns in my stomach, but I can't stop now.

"It's new." Lily's arms cross over her chest. Her shoulders hunch slightly. Defensive posture. "She just started offering it for students who want to boost their grades before college applications."

"That's great. What's Zoe's role in the project?"

"She's…" Lily's eyes dart to the left, to the photos on the mantel. "She's handling the presentation part. I'm doing the research."

I nod again, noting the inconsistency. If Zoe's handling the presentation, why were they discussing how "complicated" things are getting? Why would Lily say she "can't keep doing this" about a simple extra credit assignment?

"Maybe I could help," I offer, watching her reaction carefully. "Chemistry was my minor in college."

"No!" The word comes too quickly, too forcefully. Lily immediately softens her tone. "I mean, thanks, but we've got it under control. Zoe's really good at this stuff."

"Zoe Johnston? The one with the red hair?" I ask, knowing full well that Zoe has blonde hair. A test.

Lily nods. "Yeah, that's her."

Lie.

My stomach tightens. Who was really on the phone? What are they planning that's "getting too complicated"? Is this connected to the letter somehow?

I glance at Lily's chemistry textbook, noticing now that it's closed, no notes or worksheets visible despite the supposed project discussion. The spine doesn't even appear cracked. A prop, not a tool.

"Well, let me know if you change your mind about that help." I stand, moving toward the kitchen. "I was thinking of making pasta for dinner. Sound good?"

"Actually, I already ate." Another lie—there are no dishes in the sink, no fresh food smells in the house. "And I really need to get back to studying. Got a calc test tomorrow."

Her calculus textbook is open on the coffee table, but I'd bet my next paycheck she couldn't tell me what page it's turned to.

"Sure, no problem." I keep my voice light. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

Lily gathers her books carefully, stacking them in order of size rather than subject. Her movements are too controlled, her casualness too practiced. She's hiding something significant.

Or am I overthinking things again?

"Thanks." She stands, phone gripped tightly in her hand. "I'll be in my room."

I watch her retreat up the stairs, her footsteps quick but measured, like someone trying not to appear as if they're running away. When I hear her bedroom door close, I let out a breath.

The living room suddenly feels empty, haunted by the conversation that just happened and the one I overheard. I move to the coffee table, touching the spot where her phone had rested face down. Who was she really talking to? What can't she "keep doing"? And why am I suddenly the "she" that conversations stop for?

Margaret's words echo in my head.

I can't let them get to me.

She's just being a teenager, having secrets like everyone else. It's perfectly normal.

I glance at the family photos on the mantel. In the center, a smiling Lily at nine, flanked by Benjamin and Alice. Alice's hand rests on Lily's shoulder, her smile perfect for the camera. But looking closer now, I notice something I hadn't before—the slight distance between mother and daughter, the almost imperceptible stiffness in Alice's smile.

Was it always there? Or am I seeing patterns that don't exist, creating conspiracies from normal teenage secretiveness?

The house feels suddenly unfamiliar, filled with shadows I can't quite define. Upstairs, Lily moves around her room—footsteps too heavy for homework, too purposeful for aimless teenage pacing. She's doing something up there, something that has nothing to do with chemistry projects or calculus tests.

And I'm afraid to find out what it is.

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ELEVEN

I've been sitting at my desk for nearly an hour, legal pad before me, pen hovering over the yellow paper. The lamp casts a pool of light, leaving shadows to gather like spectators. I've written "Dear Benjamin" three times. Crossed it out three times. How do you begin a letter to your imprisoned husband who tried to frame you for a murder he committed?

"Benjamin," I write finally, no greeting, just his name. Direct. Unadorned. Like the prison where he lives now.

"I need answers that only you can provide."

Too vague. I scratch it out, press the pen harder into the paper.

"I received a letter. It appears to be from Alice."

My hand shakes slightly, forming uneven letters. I've had no sleep for two days now. The words blur then refocus as I blink hard.

The handwriting matches hers perfectly. Inside was information about Lily—psychiatric evaluations, session notes from a Dr. Howard Greene. The notes describe violent ideation, specifically toward Alice.

I pause, tapping the pen against the paper. How much should I reveal? This is the man who tried to make me look unstable enough to have murdered his ex. The man who nearly succeeded.

But he's also the only person who might know the truth about what happened the night Alice died. If he can finally be honest with me.

“These notes suggest Lily had homicidal thoughts about her mother.”

The pen tears through the paper on the word “homicidal.” I start a new sheet, pressing more gently this time.

I need to know: Were these psychiatric evaluations real? Did Lily see Dr. Howard Greene? Did she have violent thoughts about her mother? Or did you write this letter to manipulate me, to drive a wedge between me and Lily? Could your mother have written it?

Too direct. Too accusatory.

I crumple the page, start again. The growing ball of discarded attempts sits by my elbow—a physical manifestation of my frustration.

“Something isn’t right,” I write. “Margaret made a comment about Lily ‘having problems again.’ What does she mean by that?”

Better. Less direct but still clear in what I’m asking. I continue writing, the words coming faster now, more urgent.

I’m responsible for Lily now. I need to know if I should be concerned. If there’s something in her past, in her psychological history, that I should be aware of. I know you hate me, but I also know how much you love your daughter.

My gaze drifts to the framed photo on my desk. Lily and me at Clearwater Beach last summer, three months after Benjamin’s conviction. Her smile looks genuine there, rare and unguarded. My arm is around her shoulders, both of us squinting slightly in the bright Florida sun. We look happy. Normal. Like people who haven’t been shattered by murder and betrayal. We’re a unit now. It’s us against the world.

I turn back to the letter.

If you ever cared for me at all, if there’s any shred of decency left in you, tell me the truth. Not for my sake, but for Lily’s. If she needs help, if she’s struggling with something I don’t understand, I need to know. I’m the only person she has left.

The last line feels like both truth and manipulation. I am all Lily has left. But I'm also using that fact to appeal to whatever paternal instinct might remain in Benjamin. To extract information he's kept hidden. Even if it is that he knows who wrote the letter.

I add one final question, the one that's been haunting me since I received the letter:

"Is there any chance that Alice could be alive?"

The question looks absurd written out in black ink on yellow paper. Of course, she isn't alive. There was a body. A funeral. Benjamin confessed. But the handwriting on that letter, so precisely hers. The details about Lily that only someone close to her would know.

I sign the letter simply, "Emma." Not "Love." Not even "Sincerely." Just my name, floating alone at the bottom of the page like a solitary island.

The envelope sits ready on my desk. I copy Benjamin's prison information from an old document—his inmate number, the correct mailing address for the prison where he's serving life. My handwriting is neat, professional. Nothing in the precise letters betrays the turmoil inside me.

I fold the letter, slide it into the envelope. Lick the seal—the taste bitter and metallic on my tongue.

This is madness. I'm reaching out to the man who tried to kill me. The man who gaslighted me for months, who sent me fake letters from his "dead" wife to make me think I was being haunted.

Can anything he says be trusted?

But what choice do I have? Detective Ramirez isn't an option—I couldn't even make myself approach him. Robert and Margaret know something they're not telling me. And Lily… Lily is a mystery I can't solve without more information.

I reach for my desk drawer where I keep stamps, then pause, hand hovering. If I send this, there's no going back.

But if he tells me the truth, if he confirms the psychiatric evaluations are real, what then? Do I confront Lily? Take her to a new therapist? Watch her even more closely than I already am?

It still doesn't answer who is trying to manipulate me.

The photo on my desk catches my eye again. That day at the beach was good. Real. Lily laughed when a wave caught her off guard. She helped a child build a sandcastle. She wasn't faking those moments of connection.

She's a good kid. I know she is.

I close the stamp drawer without taking one.

The letter sits completed on my desk, addressed but unstamped. Not quite committed to sending, not quite abandoned. Like me—suspended between action and inaction, between trust and suspicion, between the security of not knowing and the danger of truth.

I open the bottom drawer of my desk instead—the one with the lock, where I keep important documents. The letter slides inside, joining my passport, birth certificate, and the police reports from Benjamin's arrest. Evidence of my life. Evidence of his crimes.

I lock the drawer, pocket the small key.

Not tonight. Maybe not ever. But I can't throw it away either.

Outside my office window, a branch scrapes against the glass—just wind, just an ordinary night sound. But I startle anyway, peering into the darkness beyond the reflection of my lamp-lit face. Is someone out there watching? Alice's ghost? Benjamin's conspirators? Or just my own fear, projected onto the ordinary shadows of the night?

I should sleep. Should check on Lily. Should do anything but sit here staring at my own hollow-eyed reflection.

But I remain frozen, key in hand, letter locked away but not forgotten.

I think of Lucas. Not the detective—the man who once leaned against our kitchen doorframe at one of Benjamin's dinner parties, loosening his tie, laughing at something I'd said while our spouses argued cheerfully over the wine. His wife Karen had gone pink-cheeked and loud by nine o'clock. Benjamin had matched her glass for glass. Lucas and I had drifted to the back porch without quite meaning to, talking in the easy way you do with someone else's husband when everyone is a little drunk and the night is warm and nothing means anything yet. He'd told me about his father. I'd told him about my sister.

Then I remember something I'd overheard at work.

Lucas had separated from Karen not long after Benjamin's arrest—I'd heard it through the particular grapevine of a scandal.

It seems he's lost a lot too.

I turn the key over in my palm. Lucas still thinks of me as someone worth protecting. That might be exactly the kind of door I need to walk through—not the back way, not with a warrant or a confrontation, but the front door, the one marked friend.

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TWELVE

Bayshore Coffee sits twelve miles from the police precinct. Far enough that no one from Detective Ramirez's department will wander in accidentally. I chose it carefully, the way I choose everything now—calculating risk, mapping escape routes, trying to appear normal while my world crumbles beneath my feet. The letter is inside my purse as I push through the door, bell jingling overhead like it's announcing a casual visit and not what might be the beginning of the end. I finally managed to reach out to him this morning on Facebook Messenger and we agreed to meet somewhere neutral.

The café smells of burned espresso and cinnamon. Early morning light slants through venetian blinds, cutting the space into horizontal strips of brightness and shadow. My eyes adjust, scanning past the barista, past two college students hunched over textbooks, past a man in a business suit talking too loudly on his phone.

There. Back corner booth. Detective Lucas Ramirez.

It feels better than I thought to see him again. His hair needs a trim, and his suit is one day past fresh—the kind of rumpled that comes from cases that follow you home, that sit across from you at dinner while your wife pretends not to notice and your kids ask why you're not eating until the day when you stop talking completely and separation is the only natural result. I wonder how his children have been since the divorce. Miguel is twelve now, or close to it—I remember Lucas mentioning a birthday party he'd had to miss for a double shift, the way his jaw tightened when he said it. Gabriel

would be nine. The dark circles under Lucas's eyes tell the story of a man working too many hours. He is still handsome, though. Strikingly so.

He looks up as I approach, and something moves across his face that I can't quite name.

"Emma." He stands, and he pulls me into a warm hug. "It's been forever."

"Lucas." My voice comes out steadier than I feel as I slide into the booth across from him, my stomach still fluttering from the warm hug I didn't expect. "Thank you for meeting me. How are the boys?" I ask. "Still doing soccer?" He blinks, recalibrating. Whatever he expected me to say, it wasn't that.

"Karen and I—" he starts, then stops. "They're good. Yeah, still soccer." A pause follows, and he says: "You said it was urgent." His voice matches his appearance—worn around the edges but solid at its core.

I nod, hands already reaching for my purse, fingers trembling just enough to make the zipper stick. "Yes. I received this two days ago."

The envelope looks smaller in the daylight, less threatening. I slide it across the table, watching his face as he takes it. His eyes flick from the envelope to me, assessing.

"You said on the phone this appears to be from Alice Stone." He doesn't open it yet. Just holds it, turning it over once.

"Yes." My throat constricts. "The handwriting. It's unmistakably hers. I'd recognize it anywhere. The paper too, the same texture. Just like last year."

He leans back in his chair, and something shifts in his face—a slight, perceptible tightening around the eyes. His coffee sits halfway to his mouth, forgotten.

"Emma." He sets the mug down too carefully, like a man buying himself a second to think. The silence between us thickens. "Surely it's not real?" I watch as he opens the envelope. His eyes scan the letter once, then again more slowly. His face gives nothing away—professional neutrality perfected over decades of hearing the worst from people. When he unfolds the photocopied "therapy notes," a tiny furrow appears between his eyebrows. "Tell me why you think this is genuine," he says, looking up from the paper.

I lean forward, lowering my voice. "The handwriting matches perfectly—the way she makes her E's with that little extra loop. The stationery is the

exact brand she always used—and that Benjamin used. And these therapy notes.” I swallow hard. “I searched for Dr. Howard Greene. He’s real. A child psychiatrist in Tampa.”

Ramirez nods slightly, eyes returning to the letter. “When you called, you asked if Alice’s body might have been misidentified.”

“Is it possible?” The question comes out more desperate than I intended.

He sets the letter down, folding his hands on the table. Strong hands, I notice. Working hands with a small scar across the right knuckles.

“We’ve been through this, Emma. Bodies that go into Tampa Bay don’t always come out intact.” His voice remains clinical, matter-of-fact. “Currents are strong. Marine life is active. But in Alice Stone’s case, the evidence was conclusive. Dental records matched.”

I nod, remembering it from what I have read.

“Time of death was consistent with the accident,” he continues. “I’m strongly convinced it was Alice Stone we recovered.”

The word “recovered” hits me hard. I’d been holding onto some irrational hope, some impossible scenario where Alice had somehow survived and was now tormenting me from the shadows.

“Then Benjamin?” I push the question through a throat that feels too tight. “How is he managing this from prison? Maybe someone else is doing it for him?”

Ramirez considers this, tapping one finger against the table. “Mail from inmates is monitored. He’d need an accomplice on the outside.” He pauses. “Do you have any idea who might help him?”

“I received another letter. After the trial. I assumed it was from Benjamin,” I say. “Someone wanted to meet. I didn’t go and ignored it.”

“Could be the person helping him, perhaps?” Lucas says. “Do you have any idea who it might be? An old friend? A family member?”

An image flashes in my mind: Margaret Stone at yesterday’s meeting, pen tapping against her notepad, asking pointed questions about Lily. “I’m not sure,” I say carefully.

He studies my face, reading something in my hesitation. “What about Lily? Where was she when you received this?”

“At home.” I feel a flare of defensiveness at Lily’s name entering the conversation. “She doesn’t know about it.”

Ramirez nods slowly. “And how has she been? Any unusual behavior?”

The question catches me off guard. “She’s-she’s eighteen. Graduating soon. Going through college applications. Living with her father’s second wife because her mother is dead and her father is in prison for killing her mother. What would normal behavior even look like?”

His expression softens almost imperceptibly. “Fair point.”

We sit in silence for a moment as he re-reads the letter. The coffee shop noises fade into the background—espresso machine hissing, muffled conversations, spoons clinking against ceramic.

“These therapy notes,” he says finally. “I don’t recall them from the case file.”

“So they’re fake?” Relief floods through me.

“I’m not saying that.” He chooses his words carefully. “Just that they weren’t part of the evidence presented. Could be new. Could be fabricated. I don’t remember Ben ever mentioning things like this to me, and we were close, as you know. Though we rarely discussed the kids in huge detail…”

I lean back against the booth, suddenly exhausted. Nights of minimal sleep catching up all at once. “What do I do? If someone’s trying to make me believe Lily was involved in her mother’s death?”

“You want my advice?” Ramirez reaches for a napkin and wipes his lips. “Don’t file an official report yet. This could be nothing—a cruel prank from someone who followed the case. Or it could be something more concerning. Only time can tell. Document anything unusual, just in case.”

I stare at him. I never really knew if we fell out of contact because he sort of blamed me for what happened with his best friend, or if he just couldn’t look at my face any more. “You’ll help?”

“I’ll make some quiet inquiries.” He taps the therapy notes. “Starting with Dr. Greene. See if Lily was ever his patient.”

“Thank you.” The words feel inadequate.

“And you can call me anytime, Emma. Day or night.” Ramirez gathers the letter and notes, returning them to the envelope with careful movements. He hesitates, then slides the envelope back to me. “Keep this somewhere safe. Somewhere Lily won’t find it.”

I nod, tucking it back into my purse. We both stand, the meeting clearly over. But as I turn to leave, Ramirez speaks again.

“Emma?” His voice stops me. “I always had questions about Benjamin’s confession. Things that didn’t quite add up.”

My heart stumbles in my chest. “What things?”

He shakes his head slightly. “Just inconsistencies. Details that changed between statements. Might be nothing. Killers lie all the time.”

But his eyes tell a different story. There’s doubt there, hidden beneath years of professional detachment. Or is it simply a man having a hard time believing in his best friend’s ability to commit murder?

“Call me,” he says, “if anything else comes up.”

I walk out into the sunlight, clutching my purse against my side. I feel relief wash over me. Ramirez didn’t laugh at me; he doesn’t think I’m crazy. And best of all, he is there for me. I’m not alone in this.

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THIRTEEN

I sit at my office under the harsh strip of fluorescent light, blinking against the glare of my laptop screen. The hum of the overhead AC mixes with the distant clatter of keyboards and low murmur of voices. My head still throbs from three hours of sleep and from the early morning talk with Detective Ramirez—his questions about Benjamin's confession keep echoing in my skull. I flex my neck, trying to release the tension knotting my shoulders.

On my desk, a half-empty ceramic mug teeters atop a leaning stack of quarterly reports. The coffee inside is lukewarm and unbearably bitter, its stale aroma drifting through the cramped partition walls. I haven't had time to refill it between emails, Slack pings, and more revisions than I ever thought a single PowerPoint could require.

"Emma, hey—are you okay?" Jonah's voice cuts through my haze. He peeks inside, his tie loosened, sleeves rolled up to reveal ink-smudged wrists. Next to him, his widescreen monitor flashes a rainbow of cells in a gargantuan spreadsheet. He looks as tired as I feel.

I force a smile. "I'll live," I say, brushing my bangs out of my eyes. "Just juggling the Belmont campaign revisions and… a few family things."

Jonah nods, empathy in his dark eyes. He rummages in his desk drawer and produces a cellophane-wrapped dark chocolate bar. "Need a brain break? I could use one myself."

"Sure," I tell him, accepting the bar. The wrapper crackles as I tear it open, its bittersweet scent offering a brief lift. I nibble at the corner, savoring the smooth cocoa taste as Jonah swivels back to his desk.

I turn back to my screen and dive in: tweaking the engagement metrics slide, smoothing out the colors on a bar graph, double-checking the projected retention curve. I toggle between ten open tabs—email, Slack channels, the social-media dashboard—tapping and scrolling faster than is humanly comfortable. The numbers blur together, lines and percentages dancing before my eyes.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, jolting me. I fish it out—Lily's name lights up the screen. I take a breath, steady my voice. "Hey, sweetheart."

On the other end, Lily's voice trembles. I imagine her small frame, curled in her bedroom or possibly hiding behind the door after school. "Emma, I-I don't want to meet Grandma Friday," she blurts, her words stumbling. "She's been pushing me to visit Dad in prison. I can't do that. I just… I can't."

My heart twists. I pull my legs up under the desk, hugging my free arm around my ribs. "Okay," I whisper, rocking on my seat. "I understand. I'll let Grandma Margaret know you're not up for it." I swallow hard, bracing my voice against the tremor. "Thank you for telling me."

"Thanks," Lily replies softly, and the line goes dead. I press the phone to my chest, trying to hold back the lump rising in my throat. My chest feels constricted, every breath too tight. Carefully, I slide the phone back into my pocket.

When I close my laptop—more sharply than necessary—the lid slams down with a final click. The glow of the screen disappears, and suddenly the silence in my office is deafening. The hum of the AC, the rustling of papers, even Jonah's distant laughter all feel accentuated, as if the world has paused around me.

I gather my things, steeling myself, and step out into the hallway. The carpet muffles my footsteps as I make my way toward Margaret Stone's office. Along the corridor, framed award certificates and glossy family portraits line the walls. Occasional greetings from passing colleagues feel muted, as though I'm moving through a dream.

Before I even see her door, Margaret's signature scent—jasmine mingled with something metallic—drifts down the corridor. She sits behind a gleaming mahogany desk in an office that looks like it belongs in a magazine spread: Persian rug underfoot, cream silk curtains framing the city view, and a glass carafe of water with crystal tumblers on a silver tray.

Diplomas and tasteful family photos occupy every inch of visible wall space.

Margaret's silver hair is swept back into its tight, familiar twist. Her cream silk blouse is pristine, charcoal pencil skirt tailored to perfection, and a Montblanc pen taps rhythmically on her leather-bound notepad as I step in.

"Emma," she purrs, her tone honeyed. "Just the person I wanted to see. Please, come in."

My heart pounds. I cross to her desk, smoothing the front of my blouse, though I know it's wrinkled from worry. "Margaret, Lily called. She doesn't want to come Friday."

Margaret's pen stops. She inclines her head slightly, blue eyes cool and assessing. "Really? But—" She pauses, the single word loaded with expectation.

"She doesn't want to see him," I cut in softly. "You need to respect that."

"But it's her father… she has to see him at some point," Margaret protests, voice even but unwavering.

"She's scared," I say, forcing calm into my own voice. "Please don't push her to visit him right now. She's the one who testified against him—she carries so much guilt. Plus, she's got that big interview with Josephson next week. We can't have her distracted."

Margaret arches a perfect brow. "I merely suggested it might help her, given our family circumstances. But of course, the interview is paramount."

I press my palms together, feeling the dry fabric of my blouse. "Could we focus on preparing her scholarship materials first? We can talk about the visit later."

Margaret's eyes narrow for a beat.

"Is she still seeing Dr. Winters twice a week?" Margaret asks, settling into one of the chairs as though she has every right to know.

I've never mentioned Lily's therapy schedule to her grandmother. "Yes," I manage, heat rising in my cheeks. "She finds it really helpful."

Margaret taps her pen against her lip—tap, tap, tap. "Dr. Winters is quite lovely, but adolescent trauma can require specialized expertise. With our family history, Lily might benefit from someone who understands deeper intergenerational wounds."

My throat closes. “She’s doing well with Dr. Winters, Margaret. But I’ll keep an eye on it.”

Margaret’s lips curl into that practiced, unsettling smile. “Of course. We all want what’s best for her. And don’t forget—the anniversary of Alice’s death is coming up. That could be especially triggering for a young girl.”

I nod once, briskly. “I will. Thank you.” Relief and frustration war in my chest as I back away. Before she can add anything more, I leave, my heels clicking rapidly on the polished wood floor.

Back at my office, I collapse into my chair, the leather squeaking under me. I tuck my phone beside my keyboard and stare at the black screen of my closed laptop. Jonah passes by, gives me a worried glance, and I offer a small, shaky wave. He hesitates, then moves on.

My gaze drifts to the framed photo of Lily and me on my desk—her grin wide, my arm around her shoulders. I feel that smile slipping away, replaced by dread.

Questions swirl in my mind: What exactly did Detective Ramirez imply about Benjamin’s confession? Could there be more evidence yet unspoken? And what other secrets lie behind that polished facade Margaret maintains so effortlessly?

I reach for my phone again and open my contacts. Detective Ramirez’s name stares back at me. Part of me wants to call right now—to demand answers, to share my fears, to find some clarity in the legal haze. But another part echoes Margaret’s admonition: protect Lily, keep her safe from turmoil.

My finger hovers over Ramirez’s number. I close my eyes, inhale deeply, and let my breath out slowly. The sun slants through the blinds, painting horizontal lines on my desk. The Stone family’s silken facade has cracked again, and I’m left wondering how deep the fractures run—and whether I can keep Lily safe from the fallout.

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FOURTEEN

Water fills my lungs but I'm not drowning. Not yet. Alice stands in my doorway, her black dress plastered against her body, hair dripping onto my bedroom floor. Water pools at her feet but her eyes are dry, accusatory. Her pale finger extends not toward me but past me, pointing at something over my shoulder. I turn, fighting against the dream-weight of my body, to see what she's indicating. It's Lily, sleeping peacefully in my bed where no child should be. When I look back at Alice, her mouth opens, releasing not words but a torrent of dark water that surges toward us both.

I jolt upright, a scream trapped in my throat. My heart slams against my ribs like it's trying to escape. The sheets cling to my skin, soaked through with sweat. For a moment, I can't separate nightmare from reality—the darkness of the room presses in, and I still feel water in my lungs, filling the spaces where air should be.

Then my eyes adjust. My bedroom. My bed. No flood. No Alice.

But there's a figure in my doorway.

My breath catches. A silhouette cuts a darker shape from the hallway shadows—straight shoulders, head slightly tilted. Not a dream. Someone is watching me sleep.

"Who's there?" My voice comes out ragged, broken.

The figure shifts, and hallway light catches the edge of a face. High cheekbones. Dark hair.

"It's just me." Lily's voice, flat and low. "You were screaming."

Relief floods through me, followed immediately by a new kind of tension. I reach for the bedside lamp, fingers trembling so badly it takes two

tries to find the switch. Light blooms, pushing back the darkness, revealing Lily fully. She stands exactly where dream-Alice stood moments ago, wearing gray cotton pajamas instead of a dripping black dress. Her hair falls loose around her shoulders, her expression carefully blank.

“I wasn’t screaming.” The denial comes automatically, though I have no idea if it’s true.

“You were.” Lily doesn’t move from the doorway. “Something about water. And my name.”

My mouth goes dry. I can taste it—the metallic flavor of fear coating my tongue. “What time is it?”

“Almost three.” Her eyes track around my room, taking in the twisted sheets, my sweat-dampened nightshirt, the glass of water I knocked over in my thrashing. “You okay?”

The question sounds strange, like it’s more of a social nicety rather than genuine concern. I push myself up against the headboard, pulling the sheets around me.

“Fine. Just a bad dream.” I try to steady my breathing. “Why are you up so late?”

Something shifts in her posture—a subtle tightening of her shoulders, a recalibration. “Couldn’t sleep. Heard you from the bathroom.”

Her bathroom is at the opposite end of the hallway from my bedroom. Would she be able to hear me from there? She’s never noticed my nightmares before, or suggested so.

“Were you working on your psychology paper?” I keep my tone casual, but we both know what I’m really asking. Why was she near my room at 3 a.m.?

“No.” One syllable, sharp as a pin. “I told you, I couldn’t sleep.”

We stare at each other across the darkened room.

“Do you want some water?” Lily asks suddenly. “Since you spilled yours.”

“No, thank you.” The politeness feels absurd in this moment of quiet suspicion. “You should try to get some sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

“There’s nothing on the schedule tomorrow.” Her head tilts slightly, the movement reminding me of her father when he caught me in a lie. “Unless you’re hiding something.”

The accusation hangs between us, wrapped in seemingly innocent words. My fingers dig into the sheets.

“Just a figure of speech.” I force a smile that feels like cracking ice. “Every day is big when you’re applying to colleges.”

Lily’s eyes narrow slightly, but she doesn’t challenge this. Instead, she takes a half step back into the hallway. “Well. Goodnight, then. Try not to drown in your sleep.”

Does she know about my recurring nightmare? Has she been watching me sleep on other nights?

She shrugs. “Just a figure of speech, of course.”

“Goodnight, Lily.” My voice sounds stronger than I feel.

She retreats, footsteps whisper-soft on the hardwood floor.

I don’t move for several minutes. Can’t move. My body feels leaden, pinned to the mattress by invisible weights. The ceiling above me is blank, expressionless, but I stare at it as if it might reveal answers.

Try not to drown in your sleep.

Just a coincidence. A casual comment that happened to hit too close to my recurring nightmare. She couldn’t know about the dream unless she’s been watching me sleep regularly. Unless she somehow orchestrated it. Impossible.

But I can’t shake the image—Alice standing where Lily just stood. Pointing. Accusing. Warning.

I sit up fully, switching on my second lamp so the room blazes with defensive light. Sleep is impossible now. I reach for my phone, checking the time: 3:17 a.m. The screen also shows three emails from Robert Stone, all sent after midnight. The man never sleeps. Like his granddaughter, apparently.

The carpet feels rough under my bare feet as I pad to the bathroom. Cold water on my face doesn’t wash away the unease. In the mirror, my reflection looks haunted—skin pale, eyes hollowed by shadows, hair plastered to my forehead with drying sweat.

I look like a woman drowning on dry land.

Back in bed, I prop myself against the headboard and open my laptop. The blue light hurts my eyes, but I welcome the pain. It keeps me alert as I type into the search bar: “Psychological causes of recurring drowning dreams.”

The results offer the usual dream interpretation nonsense. Feeling overwhelmed. Losing control. Subconscious fears bubbling to the surface.

Nothing about teenage girls standing in doorways at 3 a.m.

It happens before I can stop myself. I'm about to open a new tab when I notice it. Our computers share the same cloud, Lily's and mine, and her search history is sitting right there, open. I click through the recently closed windows.

The tabs spread across the top of my screen. The words "Alice Stone death" stop me cold.

She's been researching her mother's death, reading the same articles I've spent three nights circling back to.

The next tab loads a headline in larger font:

BENJAMIN STONE TRIAL: CONFESSION CAUGHT ON VIDEO BY HIS OWN DAUGHTER

In the photo, Benjamin is being walked out of the courthouse, head down, a hand on his elbow. The orange jumpsuit and handcuffs have made him smaller somehow, like air let out of something.

I press my palm against my chest, feeling the rapid flutter of my pulse. Lily is researching Alice's death. The same day Margaret mentioned the approaching anniversary. The same day I met with Ramirez about a letter supposedly from Alice.

Coincidence? I don't believe in those any more.

I close my laptop and sit in the darkness. Tomorrow, I need answers. Real ones, not internet theories or contradictory news articles. I need to see the bridge where Alice supposedly died. Need to trace the path her car took into the water. Need to understand what happened that day six years ago that has led us here—to nightmares and suspicion and a teenage girl watching me sleep from exactly the spot where her dead mother stood in my dreams.

My eyes stay fixed on the bedroom doorway until morning light begins to filter through the blinds. Even empty, it feels occupied by something I can't quite see. A presence. A question. A threat.

Water may have filled my dream-lungs, but it's doubt that's truly drowning me.

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FIFTEEN

“Personal emergency,” I tell Robert’s assistant over the phone, keeping my voice level. “My aunt fell—she’s at St. Joseph’s, and I’m the closest family.” A beat of silence, the kind that does the work for you. The lie is a good one: a real hospital, a real saint’s name, a real kind of accident that happens to real aunts. She offers sympathy and I accept it. When I hang up, it occurs to me that six months ago this call would have been impossible—there would have been a meeting to reschedule, a presentation to hand off, someone to answer to. Now my calendar is a blank white square. Robert probably won’t even look up from his desk.

Robert’s assistant makes a sympathetic sound and tells me to take all the time I need. I hate lying, even if it’s a small one and no one really cares. There is an emergency, but not the kind that merits flowers from the office. The emergency is six years old, a cold case growing warmer by the hour. The emergency is a girl standing in my doorway at 3 a.m. after I dreamed of her dead mother. The emergency is that nothing about Alice Stone’s death makes sense any more, and I need to see for myself where it supposedly happened.

I hang up before she can ask questions. Robert will be irritated—the Belmont revisions are due tomorrow—but for once, I don’t care. Some things matter more than client presentations and marketing metrics. Like truth. Like survival.

The drive takes forty minutes in mid-morning traffic. I leave after Lily goes to school, slipping out like I’m committing a crime rather than investigating one. The bay gleams to my right as I drive, water sparkling in

the harsh Florida sunshine. Beautiful and deadly. The perfect place to hide a car. A body. A truth.

GPS guides me to a small parking area near the bridge's north end. "Scenic Overlook," the sign proclaims, though there's nothing scenic about my purpose here. I park facing the water, engine off, hands still gripping the wheel. For a moment, I consider driving away. Going back to my carefully constructed life of presentations and scholarship interviews and pretending not to notice a teenager researching her mother's death.

But the nightmare images won't fade. Alice pointing. Water rushing. Lily watching. And the letter. That stupid letter.

I step out into Florida heat that hits like a physical force. Wind whips off the bay, tugging at my hair, carrying the scent of salt and seaweed and petroleum. The bridge stretches before me—a massive concrete structure spanning the blue-gray waters, cars streaming across like blood cells through an artery. Normal people going about normal days. Not standing at the site of a murder.

The path to the bridge is cracked concrete bordered by scrubby palms. My flats slap against the pavement, too loud in the relative quiet away from the traffic noise. Each step feels significant, like I'm walking toward something I won't be able to unsee.

The observation platform juts out, offering views of both the bridge and the expanse of Tampa Bay. Three tourists with cameras stand near the railing, pointing at a dolphin in the distance. I wait until they move on before approaching the informational plaque bolted to the concrete barrier.

It details the bridge's construction, height, length. Nothing about deaths. Nothing about cars plunging through guardrails into waiting water. That kind of information doesn't make the tourist brochures.

I move from the platform onto the pedestrian walkway that runs alongside the bridge. Traffic roars past. The guardrails come up to my waist—solid, imposing.

My hand reaches out, gripping the guardrail. The metal feels hot under my palm, baked by the Florida sun. My knuckles turn white as I tighten my grip, leaning slightly to look over the edge.

Below, the water stretches endlessly, choppy waves refracting sunlight in blinding patterns. The drop is at least seventy feet—a fall that would shatter bones, rupture organs. Even if you survived the impact, the current would drag you under, out toward the Gulf. I jerk back, suddenly dizzy.

This is where Alice died. Where her car somehow broke through these barriers and plummeted into the unforgiving water. I try to visualize it—the car approaching, the moment of impact, the trajectory over the edge. According to the police reports, she'd been traveling at normal highway speed when the brakes failed and she lost control. The car hit the barrier at an angle, somehow managed to breach it, and went over.

Looking at the metal before me, it seems impossible.

I walk along the pedestrian path, examining the section of barrier that must have been repaired after the accident. It looks identical to the rest—no visible seam, no change in color or texture to indicate where Alice's car broke through. They did a thorough job erasing the evidence of her passing. According to the police reports, someone did see the car go over the edge, and they called for help immediately: 911 received the call, where the person stated, "The car completely flew off the bridge and into the water." The call was recorded, but the person remained anonymous, and was never found afterward. It took them three days to find the car and the body. The strong currents had pulled it far away, was the conclusion.

Wind gusts suddenly, pushing against me with unexpected force. My hair whips across my face, temporarily blinding me. For one terrifying moment, I feel myself sway toward the edge. My hands grab the railing, heart pounding. The vertigo hits again—a spinning sensation like my body is already falling while my hands still clutch metal.

Is this what Alice felt in her final moments? This disorienting plunge? Did she know what was happening as the car breached the barrier? Did she have time to be afraid?

I force myself to look down again at the churning water. My nightmares flash before me—water filling lungs, the desperate fight to breathe, the slow fade into darkness. Something tightens in my chest, a phantom pressure. I've been drowning in my dreams for weeks now. Did Alice send those nightmares as warnings? Or are they simply my subconscious processing the growing dread I feel?

Twenty feet ahead, a small memorial has been set up against the inside of the barrier. Fresh flowers in a waterproof container, protected from the wind by the concrete. A laminated photograph weighted down with small stones. I approach slowly, like the mourner I should be but am not.

The photo shows Alice—younger than when I knew her, probably in her twenties. She's laughing at something off-camera, her dark hair caught in

mid-motion around her face. She looks happy. Alive. Nothing like the accusing specter in my dreams.

Someone maintains this memorial. Someone still grieves. I touch the flowers gently—lilies and white roses, expensive and fresh. Not department store flowers. Florist-arranged. Someone with money and taste. Margaret Stone, perhaps? Or did Lily come here without telling me?

I guess I couldn't really blame her if she did. It was, after all, her mother.

I pull out my phone and begin taking photos. The memorial. The repaired section. The view of the water below. The height of the guardrails. Evidence, though I'm not sure what crime I'm investigating any more. I need to speak to Lucas again.

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SIXTEEN

The gates of my old neighborhood rise before me like the entrance to a fortress—twelve feet of ornate wrought iron designed to keep the world out and wealth in. A year ago, I drove through these gates daily, Benjamin beside me, my wedding ring still new enough that I twisted it unconsciously, marveling at the change in my status. Now I approach as an outsider, a widow to a living man, with questions that make my hands shake on the steering wheel. The security booth glows warm in the afternoon sun, a single figure visible inside. I take a breath and press the call button.

"How can I help you?" The voice crackles through the speaker.

"Emma Caldwell to visit the bay overlook."

The guard leans forward, peering through the glass. Recognition dawns slowly across his face—the same guard who used to wave me through with a smile. Now his expression shifts to something more complicated. Pity? Suspicion?

"Mrs. Stone—I mean, Ms. Caldwell." He stumbles over the names, and I feel myself flinch. "I didn't realize. It's been a while."

"Yes." I don't offer more explanation. Don't say I'm here investigating his former resident's death. "Just visiting the overlook. For old times' sake."

He hesitates, glancing at something out of view—a computer screen, probably, checking if I'm on some blacklist. I imagine Margaret Stone's voice issuing commands: The second wife is not to be admitted. The replacement is no longer welcome.

But the gate slides open with a mechanical hum. "Enjoy your visit, ma'am."

The tires crunch on immaculate pavement as I drive through. The gated community unfolds around me—twelve acres of waterfront luxury divided into forty custom homes, each one screaming success through architecturally distinct facades. Mediterranean villas sit beside modern glass structures and colonial manors. United only by their price tags and the people inside who believe themselves untouchable.

I slow as I approach our street. Their street, since Benjamin's parents own the house, and have said they'd give it to Lily when she's old enough. Not that she'll ever live there; I can't imagine she would, but she could sell it and get something else. I shouldn't turn—nothing good can come from seeing the house where my husband tried to frame me for murder and possibly kill me, where he planned the murder of his first wife—but my hands move the wheel anyway, muscle memory taking over. Third house on the right.

The Stone residence. Alice's house first. Then mine. Now empty, from the look of it. No cars in the driveway. No signs of life behind the windows where I once hung curtains, rearranging Alice's choices while feeling her ghost watching disapprovingly.

I drive past quickly, heart hammering against my ribs. Too many memories surface at once—Benjamin carrying me across that threshold, Lily's cold stare from the second-floor window, the dinner parties where I felt perpetually judged by guests who'd known Alice. The night Benjamin tried to trap me in the hidden basement.

The thought makes me shudder.

The bay overlook sits at the community's eastern edge—a landscaped park with benches and an unobstructed view of Tampa Bay. I park in the small lot and step out into afternoon heat that immediately plasters my blouse against my back. No other cars here. No witnesses to my trespassing into the past.

The path to the viewing area winds through sea grapes and palms, emerging onto a brick-paved terrace with wrought-iron benches positioned to maximize the vista. Beyond a low decorative wall, the bay stretches blue-gray toward the horizon, the distant shape of the bridge just visible to the south. The same bridge I stood on forty-five minutes ago. The bridge where Alice died.

"Beautiful day for the view."

I whirl, startled. A man stands a few feet away, holding gardening shears and wearing khaki work clothes. Older, maybe sixties, with a deeply tanned face that's weathered into permanent creases. His name tag reads "Carlos."

"I'm sorry," he continues, misreading my startled expression. "Didn't mean to frighten you. Just trimming the bougainvillea." He gestures toward an overflowing plant cascading along the decorative wall.

"It's fine." I force a smile. "I was just… remembering."

"You used to live here?" He squints slightly, studying me.

"Yes. About a year ago."

Recognition dawns in his eyes. "You're Dr. Stone's wife. The second one."

My smile stiffens. The second one. Always qualified, always compared. "Yes. Ex-wife, actually. It's just Emma Caldwell now."

He nods, setting down his shears on a nearby bench. "Terrible business, what happened. I've been maintaining these grounds for fifteen years. Never thought I'd see something like that in a community like this."

I turn slightly to look out at the water, unsure how to respond. Does he mean Alice's death? Benjamin's conviction? Both feel like invasions into this carefully controlled paradise of wealth.

"I was working the night before, you know." Carlos's voice drops slightly. "And I saw something."

My heart stutters. I turn back to face him, trying to keep my expression neutral. "You did?"

"I was working late. We had sprinkler issues near the gates." He moves closer to the wall, looking out at the bay. "I remember because it was unusual seeing anyone at the overlook that time of night. Especially with the weather turning bad."

My mouth goes dry. "Someone was here?"

"Oh yeah." His casual tone belies the bomb he's about to drop. "I saw them here—the girl and her mother. In the car. Arguing pretty bad."

The world tilts sideways. I grip the decorative wall to steady myself, the rough brick biting into my palm. "You saw Lily? And Alice?"

He nods, unaware of the earthquake he's just caused. "The doctor's daughter and his first wife. The pretty dark-haired woman. Around ten, ten thirty maybe? On the night before the accident happened at the bridge. It was a Friday, I believe."

Impossible. According to every police report, every statement, every word from Benjamin's mouth, Lily was staying at a friend's house that entire weekend. Not with her mother. Not arguing in a car.

"Are—" My voice fails. I swallow and try again. "Are you certain it was them?"

"Oh sure." Carlos resumes his clipping, apparently oblivious to my distress. "I've worked here since the girl was small. Used to see her waiting for the school bus. And the mother, well, she was hard to miss. Always dressed nice, even just sitting in a car."

"What were they doing? Exactly?" I fight to keep my voice steady.

"Sitting right there." He points to a spot near where my car is now parked. "Engine running. Couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could see them through the windshield. The girl—Lily—she was wild, hands going everywhere." He demonstrates with exaggerated gestures. "The mother just sat there, back straight, looking ahead. Like a statue. Then the girl seemed to calm down, and they drove off."

The blood drains from my face so rapidly I feel light-headed. Lily had lied in her testimony. She wasn't staying all weekend at her friend's house. She was in her mother's car. Arguing. Less than twenty-four hours before Alice drove off the bridge. Why would she lie about that? Because the arguing made her suspicious?

He glances at me, finally registering my reaction. "You okay, ma'am? You've gone white as those clouds."

I can't respond. Can't form words past the roaring in my ears. My grip on the wall tightens until my knuckles match my bloodless face.

Carlos's eyes fill with concern. "Look, maybe you should sit down. You don't look so good."

But I can't move. Can't process what I'm hearing. If Lily was with Alice that night—if they were arguing—then everything I thought I knew about Alice's death could be wrong. Benjamin's confession. The police reports. Lily's own statement that she was at a friend's house.

Lies. All of them.

But why?

"Did you tell the police?" My voice sounds distant, like it belongs to someone else. "When they investigated the accident?"

Carlos shifts uncomfortably. "Nobody asked me. I figured what I saw wasn't important—just a mother and daughter having a fight. Happens in

the best families.”

A mother and daughter having a fight. Hours before that mother supposedly drove off a bridge alone. Hours before brake failure supposedly sent her car into Tampa Bay.

My mind races with implications I don’t want to face. Lily in the car. Lily arguing violently. Did Benjamin know?

“Thank you,” I manage to say to Carlos, though gratitude is the last thing I feel. “This is… helpful.”

He nods, returning to his pruning, unaware that he’s just shattered what remained of my understanding about the night Alice Stone died—and about the girl who now lives in my house, watching me sleep.

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SEVENTEEN

The courthouse smells like floor polish. The harsh lights cast everyone in the same sickly pallor—clerks, lawyers, ordinary citizens seeking justice or at least resolution. I approach the records desk trying to appear confident; as if I belong here, as if I'm not about to excavate the legal grave of my marriage.

"Stone versus Florida," I tell the clerk, a middle-aged woman whose bored expression doesn't flicker. "Case number 47-8321-CR. I'd like to review the complete file." My voice doesn't shake, though my insides tremble like I'm standing on the bridge again, looking down at dark water.

She barely looks at me, fingers already tapping at her keyboard. "Relation to the case?"

"I'm Emma Caldwell. Former Emma Stone. The defendant's wife." Ex-wife, technically, but I don't say that. "I understand the case is public."

Something shifts in her expression—a flash of recognition, perhaps even pity. The Stone case was front-page news for months. Doctor kills socialite wife. Second wife raises orphaned daughter. Tampa's own Greek tragedy.

"ID, please." She examines my license. "Sign here. You'll have access to public records only. Any sealed materials require judicial approval."

I scrawl my signature on the form. Twenty minutes later, I'm installed in a small room off the main records area, surrounded by three heavy banker boxes labeled "Stone 47-8321-CR." The space feels airless despite the aggressive air conditioning. A small table. An uncomfortable plastic chair. A security camera in the corner watching my every move.

My hands shake slightly as I open the first box. The contents are meticulously organized—investigation reports, witness statements, evidence logs, trial transcripts. I skim past the initial police reports, already familiar with the details. The medical examiner's findings. Photos of the car being recovered from Tampa Bay, metal twisted and paint scraped from impact with the barrier.

Then I find it. A thin folder labeled "Witness Statement – Minor." I open it carefully, as if it might bite.

The document inside is typed, formal. Lily Stone, age 12, interviewed by Detective Lucas Ramirez in the presence of her father Benjamin Stone and family attorney, James Whitaker, dated just three days after Alice's death.

I scan the text, heart pounding harder with each line:

> Minor states she was at a friend's house the entire weekend. She left the house Friday afternoon and didn't come back till Sunday morning. States they went to bed at approximately 9:30 p.m. on the Saturday night after completing homework and watching television. The friend's parents confirm this. Witness then states she did not see her mother that evening as Alice Stone had informed her she was going to visit her sister. Minor states she slept through the night and was awakened at approximately 7:15 a.m. by her father informing her that her mother never made it to her aunt's house.

My fingers tighten on the paper, crinkling the edge. This is a contradiction to what Carlos just told me.

Someone is lying. Carlos, with his clear memories and specific details? Was he hired by Margaret to tell me this? The more I linger over Margaret's obsession with me, and wanting to see Lily—her obvious jealousy—the more I wonder if she's taken on Benjamin's mantle in trying to ruin my life…

I set aside the witness statement and dig deeper, looking for anything related to Lily's mental state, any evaluation done during the investigation. Most of the psychological assessments focus on Benjamin—his relationship with Alice, his mental state before and after her death.

Then I find another folder, thinner than the others, labeled simply “Chen Notes.”

Inside are photocopied pages from a therapy journal. Dr. Elaine Chen, child psychologist. Patient: Lily Stone. Sessions beginning two years before Alice’s death. When Lily was just ten years old.

Another psychologist?

My hand flies to my mouth as I begin to read:

Session 17

Patient continues to exhibit concerning patterns regarding mother. Today described fantasies of “making her disappear” when asked about family dynamics. When questioned further, patient became defensive, claiming it was “just a joke.” Patient’s artwork shows recurring motif of solitary female figure isolated from family group[…]

Session 23

Patient brought drawing depicting female figure underwater. When asked to explain, patient said: “Sometimes I imagine her drowning.” Unclear if this represents genuine homicidal ideation or typical adolescent expression of anger. Recommend continued monitoring[…]

Session 31

Increasing concern about patient’s attachment disorder symptoms and capacity for empathy. Today described incident with neighbor’s dog that suggests possible animal cruelty, though patient denied intent to harm. Recommended increased session frequency to twice weekly.

I flip through additional pages, each more disturbing than the last. Then I reach a set of photographs—color copies of Lily's artwork from these therapy sessions. My stomach lurches as I spread them across the table.

Dark, violent images. A woman underwater, hands reaching up toward the surface. A female figure with X's crossed over her eyes while a smaller figure watches from behind a tree. All executed with remarkable technical skill. All unmistakably depicting Alice's death in various forms.

And the dates—these were created years before Alice actually died.

My mind flashes back to my early days with Benjamin and Lily. The coldness I attributed to normal teenage adjustment to a stepmother. The way small items would go missing from my purse, my jewelry box, my bathroom—a lipstick here, an earring there, my prescription sleep medication once. Benjamin always dismissed my concerns: "She's still grieving Alice. Give her time." When everything came down to it, I thought it was him taking my stuff. To create an image of me being totally unhinged. Maybe it wasn't him after all?

Then there was the incident with Milo, the gray tabby cat I'd had since college. Six weeks after moving into the house with her and Benjamin, Milo disappeared for three days. When he finally returned, he was soaking wet, terrified. I found him hiding under our bed, trembling. When I lifted him, water drained from his fur onto the carpet.

Benjamin said Milo must have fallen into the pool. But the pool was covered that week for maintenance.

When I asked Lily if she'd seen what happened, she looked at me with those dark, unreadable eyes and said, "Maybe he wanted to see if cats can really swim."

I'd pushed the memory away, convinced myself I was overreacting. Now it returns with horrible clarity, connected to these drawings of drowning figures, to the note about animal cruelty, to Carlos's account of Lily arguing with Alice the night before her "accidental" plunge into Tampa Bay.

I open my contacts, scrolling to Detective Ramirez's number. He answers on the second ring.

"Ramirez."

"It's Emma." My voice sounds strange to my own ears—tight, controlled, but with an undercurrent of panic. "I need to see you. It's about Lily."

“What about her?” His voice sharpens with immediate attention.

I look down at the therapy notes, the disturbing artwork, the contradictory witness statement. At the image of a woman drowning while a smaller figure watches from safety. I think of Carlos’s description of Lily’s wild gestures in the car, Alice’s rigid posture. I remember Lily standing in my doorway that night, watching me after I dreamed of drowning.

“Have you spoken to Dr. Greene yet?” I ask. A pause. “Because everything that’s in the letter is true…”

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EIGHTEEN

Lucas says he can’t meet me until tomorrow morning, and I don’t want to have any of these conversations on the phone. As I drive back, my mind is splintered with images from those therapy notes. Lily’s drawings of a drowning woman. Carlos’s account of the argument at the overlook. The evidence I never knew existed until today. The courthouse recedes in my rearview mirror, but the truth I discovered there follows me home like a shadow.

Traffic lights blur together. I drive on autopilot, making turns without conscious thought.

The afternoon sun slants harshly through my windshield as I turn onto my street. Everything looks mockingly normal—sprinklers ticking across manicured lawns, a woman walking her golden doodle, a delivery truck idling at the neighbor’s curb. My house sits midway down the block, beige and white and utterly ordinary.

I pull into the driveway, engine still running, and notice the mailbox flag is up. My breath catches. I didn’t leave it that way this morning. The mail comes around noon, and the carrier puts it down after picking up the mail if we’re sending any.

Something is wrong.

I sit motionless, scanning the street for anything unusual. The dog walker has turned the corner. The delivery truck pulls away. No one watches from windows or parked cars. Just an ordinary afternoon in a quiet Tampa neighborhood where terrible secrets live behind pleasant facades.

With a deep breath, I shut off the engine. The sudden silence feels weighted, expectant. I open the car door, step into the humid afternoon air. Each footfall on the concrete driveway sounds too loud. Seventeen steps from my car to the mailbox. I count them to keep my mind from racing ahead to what I might find inside.

The metal door squeaks when I pull it down. More bills. A magazine. And beneath them, a cream-colored envelope. My hand freezes mid-reach.

I realize it has no stamp on it. It was hand-delivered.

I snatch the envelope with trembling fingers, leaving the other mail forgotten in the box. Not here. Not where anyone could see. I retreat to my car, locking the doors once inside. My fingertips leave damp marks on the cream paper. My chest rises and falls too rapidly, oxygen not quite reaching my lungs.

The envelope tears unevenly as I rip it open. Something slides out, falls into my lap. A photograph, face down.

I turn it over and the world stops.

Me. Asleep in my own bed. Head turned to the side on my pillow, one arm flung above the covers. Moonlight from the window casting my face in silver-blue shadow.

I can’t breathe.

Someone was in my bedroom. Someone stood over me while I slept, vulnerable and unaware. Someone took this photo, placed it in an envelope with handwriting designed to terrorize me, and put it in my mailbox.

A sound escapes my throat—not quite a scream, not quite a sob. My hands shake so badly the photo flutters back to my lap. My skin prickles with invisible ants, the sensation of violation crawling over me. I scrub at my arms, trying to erase the feeling of being watched even now, in broad daylight, locked in my car.

Was it Lily? Did she stand in my doorway at 3 a.m. not because she heard me having nightmares, but to document my vulnerability? To remind herself of her power over me?

Or Margaret Stone with her cold eyes and tapping pen? Trying to drive me away? To get their granddaughter back?

I scan the street again, car windows, house windows, the shadow beneath the oak tree at the corner. Nothing. No one. But they’re watching. I know they’re watching.

My phone. I need to call Ramirez.

I fumble in my purse, hands clumsy with fear. The phone slips from my grasp, clatters to the floor mat. I retrieve it, breathing in shallow gasps, and find his number. One ring. Two. *Pick up, please pick up.*

"Ramirez."

His voice, solid and real, eases my panic.

"It's-it's Emma." My voice cracks, unrecognizable.

"What's wrong?" Immediate attention, no preamble.

"There's another letter." Words tumble out, disconnected. "But this time—this time there's a photograph. Of me. In my bed. Asleep. Someone was in my house. In my bedroom. Watching me sleep."

I'm hyperventilating now, vision starting to tunnel at the edges.

"Where are you right now?" His voice sharpens.

"In my car. Outside my house."

"Is anyone else home? Lily?"

"No. School. She won't be home for hours."

"Good. Listen carefully." His voice slows, deliberately calm. "Don't touch anything else. Don't go inside. I'm coming to you. Twenty minutes, max. Stay in your car with the doors locked until I get there."

"What if they're watching?" I whisper, eyes darting to the rearview mirror. "What if they're here right now?"

"Then they'll see me arrive." His confidence anchors me momentarily. "Do you have somewhere you can stay tonight? A friend? Hotel?"

"I—maybe. I don't know." The thought of leaving feels like surrender. But staying feels like suicide.

"Think about it while you wait. I'm leaving now. Twenty minutes."

The call ends. I clutch the phone like a lifeline, my other hand holds the photograph. My own face stares back at me, peaceful in sleep, unaware of the predator in the room. The intimacy of the violation makes bile rise in my throat. Someone stood over me, watching. For how long? How many nights?

I drop the photo like it's burning my skin. It falls to the passenger seat, my sleeping face turned upward like an accusation. Now I do check the locks again, testing each door. Still secure. Still safe, for whatever that's worth.

Twenty minutes. I can hold myself together for twenty minutes. I focus on breathing, on the solid presence of the car around me, on the fact that help is coming.

But the feeling of being watched doesn’t fade. Even here, exposed in daylight, I feel eyes on me. Patient. Calculating. Waiting.

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NINETEEN

Lucas’s unmarked sedan pulls up exactly seventeen minutes after my call. I watch him check the street as he exits his car, scanning nearby houses, taking in my body language through the windshield before approaching. I recognize the assessment of a seasoned cop, categorizing threats, establishing a perimeter of safety. But I also recognize the way he hitches his belt when he’s tired, and the fact that he’s wearing the blue shirt with the tiny white buttons that Karen bought him two Christmases ago.

He’s alone, no backup in sight, but his hand stays near his hip, close to the weapon I know is holstered there. When he reaches my car, I get out, and we hug. It feels warm, safe.

“Emma. I’m here now.”

“Thanks for coming, Lucas. I know you have a lot on your plate too.”

“Do you have the photograph?”

I nod, pointing to the passenger seat where it lies face up. He pulls a latex glove from his pocket and slips it on before reaching past me to retrieve it. His expression doesn’t change as he studies the image, but something in his eyes hardens.

“When was this taken?” he asks.

“I don’t know exactly. That nightshirt is new. Within the last two weeks.” My voice sounds distant, detached, like it belongs to someone else. “I live alone with Lily. No one else should be in my bedroom.” The memory surfaces before I can stop it—Lily in my doorway that night, her face pale in the dark. I was wearing that shirt. My stomach tightens. But

then I think of the letters, the psychiatric evaluations, and the logic falls apart. Lily wouldn't send those. Not about herself.

He nods once, slides the photo into an evidence bag. "We need to check your house. Do you have your keys?"

The walk to my front door feels like crossing a minefield. Each step deliberate, my eyes scanning for threats that might lurk behind familiar bushes or garden ornaments. Ramirez stays slightly behind me, his presence reassuring despite the circumstances.

The lock turns with a familiar click. I hesitate, suddenly afraid of what waits on the other side of the door.

"Let me go first," Ramirez says, gently moving me aside. He draws his weapon, holding it low against his leg as he pushes the door open. "Stay here until I clear the entry."

I wait, heart pounding against my ribs, as he moves efficiently through the downstairs rooms. His footsteps fade and return, professional and methodical.

"Clear down here," he calls. "Come in, but don't touch anything yet."

I step inside my own home feeling like an intruder. Everything looks exactly as I left it this morning—coffee mug in the sink, Lily's calculus textbook on the counter, my reading glasses on the side table. Ordinary objects rendered sinister by the knowledge that someone has violated this space.

Ramirez stands in the center of the living room, eyes tracing the ceiling corners, window frames, bookshelves.

"No signs of forced entry on any doors or windows," he says, holstering his weapon. "I need to check upstairs. Would you show me which room is yours?"

The stairs creak beneath our weight as we ascend. Each step brings us closer to my bedroom—the place that suddenly no longer feels safe. My arms wrap around my torso without conscious thought, an instinctive attempt to shield myself from invisible eyes.

"This is my room," I say, stopping at the doorway. The space looks innocent in afternoon light—pale blue walls, white bedding, silver picture frames on the dresser. But knowing someone stood here, photographed me at my most vulnerable, turns the familiar room threatening.

Ramirez enters first, his movements precise. He checks the windows, their locks, the sightlines from neighboring houses. Nothing is disturbed.

No forced entry. He moves to the closet, opens it carefully, examines the contents, the corners, the ceiling.

“When did you last change your bedding?” he asks, studying the rumpled sheets.

“Yesterday morning.” My voice sounds small in the room that no longer feels like mine.

He nods, circling the bed, gaze traveling upward to the walls, the light fixtures, the ceiling. He stops, focusing on something above the headboard.

“There’s a vent there,” he says, pointing to a small rectangular grate directly above where my pillow sits.

“It’s the air return,” I say. “For the HVAC system.”

“The angle though… let me just try something…”

Ramirez reaches into his pocket for a small flashlight. Standing on the edge of my bed—his shoes carefully placed on the wooden frame, not touching the bedding—he shines the light into the vent.

“There’s something there.” His voice changes, becomes harder. “Something that shouldn’t be.”

My stomach drops. “What is it?”

Instead of answering, he pulls out a pocketknife and carefully loosens the screws holding the vent cover in place. The metal grate comes away in his gloved hands, revealing the dark space behind it. The flashlight beam illuminates something small and black nestled among the dust.

“Camera,” he says, his tone clinical. “Small wireless unit. Positioned for a perfect view of the bed.”

The room tilts sideways. My knees buckle, forcing me to grab the dresser for support. A camera. Above my bed. Watching me sleep. Watching me change clothes. Watching me cry into my pillow on nights when the weight of everything becomes too much.

“How long?” I manage to whisper. “How long has it been there?”

“Hard to say.” Ramirez pulls an evidence bag and a pair of tweezers from his pocket. With careful movements, he extracts the device from its hiding place. It’s tiny—no bigger than a lipstick tube—with a small glass eye that catches the light. “These units can run on battery for weeks. Or be hardwired into your electrical system.”

I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly aware of my body in a way that feels unbearable. The violated feeling intensifies, crawling across my skin like insects I can’t brush away. I’ve been exposed. Watched. For how

long? While sleeping? Dressing? During private moments no one should witness?

“Who?” The question comes out broken. “Who would do this?”

Ramirez carefully bags the camera, seals the evidence. His eyes meet mine with professional compassion. “Someone with access to your home. This wasn’t installed from outside. The positioning is too perfect—they knew exactly where you sleep, how to angle for the best view.”

My mind races through possibilities. No one else has been here since we moved in. We don’t have a cleaner; we could never afford one. Margaret Stone has never been to this house. Robert visited once, for a dinner that ended in stiff politeness and unspoken tension. Benjamin is in prison.

“I need to take this in,” Ramirez says, holding up the bagged camera. “See if we can pull footage, check for fingerprints. But Emma—you need to consider your safety here.”

I shake my head, already knowing what he’s going to suggest. “I’m not leaving.”

“At minimum, change your locks today,” he insists. “All of them. And please re-consider staying elsewhere until we figure this out.”

“No. And please don’t tell anyone.”

Ramirez sighs, a sound that carries the weight of too many victims who didn’t listen. “Then we need to set up some protection for you. I’ll have a patrol car drive by regularly. And I want you to text me morning and night—just so I know you’re okay.”

I nod, grateful for his concern but knowing it’s not enough. Not nearly enough against whatever is happening here.

“One more thing,” he says as we descend the stairs. “This level of surveillance, combined with the letters and photos—this isn’t casual harassment. This is calculated, methodical. Someone is deeply invested in terrorizing you.”

“I know.” My voice steadies slightly. Fear is giving way to something else—a cold, hard anger. “But why now? Ben is in prison. Is he trying to get out?”

I pull the folded pages from my bag—photocopies of the psychiatric notes, Lily’s drawings paper-clipped to the back. I hold them out to him. “These were part of the case file. You’ve seen them.”

It isn’t a question. He takes them, and something shifts behind his eyes.

“Then you know she isn’t stable. You’ve known.” I let that sit between us for a moment before I say the name I’ve been turning over for weeks. “Margaret Stone. She has money, she has lawyers, she has every reason to want Lily back under her roof and me out of the picture entirely.” I study his face. “You know her. You’ve been a friend of the family for many years. You’ve played golf with Benjamin and been at dinners at the Stone penthouse. Could she do something like this?”

Lucas, his brows furrowed in thought, skims through the pages in his hand. The weight of his gaze lingers on the words, and I wonder what conclusions he’s drawing from the psychiatric notes and Lily’s drawings.

“I have seen these before,” he confirms, his voice measured. “But your insight about Margaret Stone, it adds a new layer to consider.”

I watch as his expression shifts, a subtle tightening around his mouth that betrays a deeper contemplation brewing beneath the surface. The quiet ticking of a nearby clock fills the space between us, a reminder of the urgency in untangling the twisted web of surveillance and manipulation that surrounds me.

His eyes meet mine with newfound intensity. “The timing, the meticulous nature of this harassment—it all points to an intentional effort to destabilize you. To drive you away.”

A chill runs down my spine at his words, a confirmation of what I’ve feared all along.

“So you agree it might be her?”

Ramirez stops at the front door, his expression grave. “That’s what we need to find out. And quickly.”

After he leaves, I stand in my living room, arms still wrapped protectively around myself. The house feels different now—not a sanctuary but a stage where unseen eyes watch from hidden corners. I move through each room, scanning ceilings, vents, light fixtures, wondering what other secrets my home contains.

And underneath the fear and violation, a determination takes root. I won’t be driven out. I won’t be the next victim in this twisted family drama. Whoever the person is who is doing this—they’ve underestimated me.

I reach for my phone and search for locksmith services. The first step in reclaiming what’s mine.

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TWENTY

The locksmith drives off just as the afternoon buses rumble past the curb. Four hundred dollars for locks that might as well be paper—keys heavy in my hand, little symbols that can't keep out the real danger if it's already inside. I glance at my watch: two hours until Lily pulls in. Just enough time. In my bedroom I swap jeans for a charcoal pencil skirt and ivory blouse—armor for what comes next. In the mirror my face is drawn tight with resolve instead of fear. Good. Fear never got me answers.

* * *

The elevator feels slow, but at the top the doors open into familiar warmth: marble floors, light spilling through floor-to-ceiling windows. This is the Stone penthouse, Margaret's refuge above the city.

I find her in the living room, kneeling by a low table, scissors in hand. A soft cascade of orchids and peonies drapes across the surface. Petals and soil litter newspapers she has applied underneath to protect the rug, and the late afternoon sun gilds her silver hair. She looks up, smiling, the portrait of domestic ease—the proud mother-in-law pruning her floral arrangements.

"Emma." Her voice is smooth as silk. "What a nice surprise."

"I was nearby," I say, landing lightly beside her, one hand on the back of the chaise. "Thought I'd pop in for a chat." I crouch and straighten a wilting bloom. "This is beautiful. You've always had a knack for color."

She tilts her head, pleased. "Thank you. It's good to see you. Iced tea?"

I nod and stretch out on the sofa, uncrossing my legs just so. She disappears into the kitchen, and I let my gaze drift to the photos lined up on the credenza: Margaret and Robert at a gala, Benjamin in his crisp white coat, and Alice smiling, Lily perched on her hip. A carefully curated family story. I trace the edge of a frame with my eyes, then drink my tea when she returns with it.

We settle into easy chatter—Lily's progress with her college applications, the new art exhibit downtown—while I watch Margaret's expression soften with each anecdote. When she pauses to refill our glasses, I lean forward.

"You mentioned last week something about Lily's therapy, when you insisted on sharing family history. You said we needed to talk. I've been wondering what you meant. You sounded… concerned."

Her hand freezes. She sets the kettle down. "I only meant that families have pasts that aren't always neat in a scrapbook."

I let that hang. Then, in the same gentle tone, I add, "I got a photograph yesterday in the mail—a snapshot of me asleep. Alice's handwriting was on the envelope. I assumed it was a mistake. But then Lucas came over and found a camera—in my bedroom." I pick up my glass, tracing the rim. "And then I thought: you know more about this family's secrets than anyone. If you ever wanted to tell me something—anything—now would be the perfect moment."

Margaret's lips twitch. For a heartbeat I see vulnerability behind her poise. She lowers herself onto the sofa beside me. "Emma, I would never—"

"Wouldn't what?" I keep my voice soft. "Protect Lily? Keep her safe? I know you'd do anything for her." I set the glass down and look her full in the eyes. "But someone did watch me. Plus, who else could know Alice's cursive so exactly? Perhaps it was a friend of yours who thought—"

A soft knock interrupts us. Robert stands in the doorway, arms folded in a dark navy suit that says better-than-you without words.

Margaret tenses. I rise to my feet beside her.

"Emma." Robert's voice is measured. "May I have a word?"

Margaret glances at me, a silent plea.

I smile, still warm. "Of course." I step aside and let him close the distance between us.

He guides me toward the hallway like a parent teaching manners. Once the door clicks shut behind us, his tone drops. “Family matters belong to family channels, Emma. If you suspect foul play, call the police. Go through proper steps. Margaret is in no state to… Losing her son was hard on her, Emma.”

I lean into the closure of the door, fingertips brushing its edge. I understand what he is saying. Don’t bother Margaret with silly accusations and your paranoid ideas. It’s the last thing she needs right now.

“Detective Ramirez already removed the camera. I filed my report this morning.”

He pauses, brow furrowed. “Then the investigation is underway. Please let it run its course.”

I meet his gaze evenly. “I intend to.” My voice holds just enough steel to convey that I won’t be ignored.

He offers a curt nod. “Good.” He seals my promise with a glance that says more than words. Then he adds: “Some stones are better left unturned.”

I tuck my hands into my skirt pockets and turn back toward the living room. Margaret hasn’t moved from her flowers. She’s leaning over the vase with both palms flat on the table, and I notice that her shoulders are trembling slightly—just slightly—the way a building trembles before it gives. When she hears my footsteps, she straightens, but not all the way. The inch she can’t recover tells me everything.

She looks up. The smile she gives me is the smallest I’ve ever seen from her.

I brush a petal from my sleeve. “This was a lovely visit, Margaret.” I keep my voice even. “My door is always open, if you ever want to talk more about Lily.”

She nods, smoothing her skirt around her. “I will, dear.”

I head for the elevator, heels clicking over marble, already planning my next move. Some games are won with a whisper, not a shout.

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TWENTY-ONE

Onions sizzle in olive oil, releasing their sweet-sharp scent into the kitchen. My hands move through the familiar motions of dinner preparation—chop, stir, season—while my mind replays the meeting with Margaret. The flash of something in her eyes. Robert's warning. Despite how emotional she was, I still think she's behind the letter. Who else would do this? Who else could?

I focus on the mechanical task of making risotto, the stirring helping to calm my mind. Lily sits at the kitchen table, calculus textbook open, pencil scratching against graph paper. Her dark hair falls forward, shielding her face as she works. From this angle, she looks exactly like Alice—the same elegant slope of neck.

"How was school?" I keep my tone light, normal. As if I haven't spent the day discovering hidden cameras and meeting her grandmother wanting to ask her if she put it there. As if Detective Ramirez didn't just remove surveillance equipment from above my bed.

"Fine." Lily doesn't look up from her equations. "Mrs. Abernathy wants my portfolio sketches by next Friday."

"That's coming up quick." I add stock to the rice, watch it bubble and absorb. "Are you ready?"

She shrugs one shoulder, a gesture so teenage it almost makes me forget the therapy notes describing violent fantasies, along with the drawings of drowning women. "I guess. Just need to finish the architectural series."

"You're very talented." I mean it. Despite everything, her artistic skill is undeniable. I think of the courthouse file—those disturbing drawings also

showed remarkable technical ability. Talent channeled toward darkness. And young kids can like horrifying stuff. It's actually very normal and doesn't make them psychotic murderers.

We fall into silence—me stirring, her calculating. The normalcy feels surreal after everything that's happened. I wonder if she notices the new keys on my keyring, sitting on the counter where I dropped them. If she senses the change in me since discovering the camera. If she knows I've been to the courthouse, seen the evidence, talked to Carlos.

"I changed the locks today," I say casually, testing the waters. "Left a set of keys for you by the door."

Her pencil pauses momentarily. "Why?"

"I lost mine." Another lie. I've become too good at this—the casual deception, the pretending. Just like the Stones.

"Hmm." She resumes writing, seemingly uninterested. But her grip on the pencil tightens.

I add mushrooms to the pan, the earthy scent rising to meet the sweet aroma of onions. My mind races through approaches—angles, gentle probes, ways to learn more without tipping my hand. I opt for straightforward honesty.

"Lily," I say, voice measured as I stir the risotto, "do you ever think about the night your mom died?"

Her pencil halts mid-equation. Shoulders hitch toward her ears, spine snapping straight. Then, deliberately, she presses the graphite so hard I hear it score the paper.

"Why?" Her question is flat, bereft of warmth.

"I was thinking about her today," I admit. "About how tough that must have been for you."

"Checking if I am still broken?" The edge in her voice cuts sharper than the kitchen knife.

I shake my head, stirring more vigorously than the recipe calls for. "No—well, not exactly. I just realized we've never really talked about what you remember." I tilt my head toward her. "Or what you felt afterward."

She sets her pencil down with precise care. "I don't remember. I was at Zoe's for a sleepover that weekend. Dad called in the morning to say Mom never made it to Aunt Sarah's."

The same line from her official statement slides out with rehearsed ease. I think of Carlos describing her frantic gestures in the car—could he be

wrong?

“That must have been awful,” I say softly. “Getting that call.”

“Why now?” Her chair scratches as she turns to face me, eyes narrowing. “After all this time?”

I shrug, spooning a ladle of stock into the rice. “Like I said—I’ve been thinking about her. About that night. And… I was wondering if you ever talked to someone after. You know, a therapist? Like Dr. Winters?”

Her breath catches. The room feels ten degrees colder.

“A therapist?” she repeats, disbelief in her tone.

“Yeah,” I say, sliding the pan off the heat. “Did you ever have one when you were younger? After your mom died?” I meet her eyes. “It’s okay if you did. I just want to understand. You don’t have to hide it.”

Lily’s jaw tightens. She pushes her textbook aside, careful but forceful. “I saw one for a few months. Dad thought it’d help me talk about… everything.”

I let the silence stretch, then lean forward. “That must’ve been hard. Did it help?”

She looks away, brow furrowed. Finally, she shrugs. “At first, no. But after a while, I felt… lighter. Like someone actually heard me.”

A gentle relief warms me. I scoop a spoonful of creamy risotto and taste it. “I’m glad you had that support.”

Her shoulders relax a fraction. “I guess.”

I smile, stirring the last of the stock into the rice. “That’s good to hear. I just needed to know you were okay—and that you had help when you needed it.”

Lily meets my gaze, something unreadable softening in her eyes. “I’m okay, Emma. Really. I just don’t understand—why are you bringing this up now?” She turns in her chair to face me fully, eyes narrowing. “After all this time?”

I shrug, turning back to the stove. “Like I said, I was thinking about her. About that night.” I stir the stock in slow circles. “Sometimes I wonder what really happened.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The temperature in the room seems to drop another ten degrees.

“Just that accidents are strange things.” I add more stock to the rice, avoiding her eyes. “I’ve been having these dreams. Alice, the car, the water. Every night this week, the same sequence.” I watch the liquid absorb into

the grains. “I keep waking up convinced something doesn’t fit. You were there. Do you ever dream about it?”

“You know it wasn’t an accident, so why would you say that.” Not a question. A statement, delivered in a voice suddenly too adult, too knowing.

I turn to face her, wooden spoon dripping risotto onto the stovetop. “Are you still certain you’ll never visit your father?”

Something flickers across her face—too quick to read. Fear? Anger? She pushes her textbook away, the movement controlled but forceful.

“What’s this really about, Emma?” My name sounds like an accusation in her mouth. “Why are you suddenly playing detective about my mother’s death?”

“I’m not—”

“Save it.” She stands, chair scraping against the floor. “I know what this is. You’ve never really accepted me, have you? I’ve always been the inconvenient package deal. The murderer’s daughter. Damaged goods you got stuck with.”

“Lily, that’s not true—”

“Isn’t it?” Her voice rises, color flooding her cheeks. “You’ve always looked at me like I’m some kind of ticking bomb. Like there’s something wrong with me.”

It’s an accusation I’ve been circling but haven’t voiced directly. My silence is answer enough.

Lily laughs, a harsh sound with no humor in it. “Wow. Just wow.” She gathers her books with jerky movements. “You know what? I’m glad we had this little chat. Really clears things up.”

“Lily, please—” I step toward her, but she backs away.

“Don’t.” Her posture shifts to something defensive, protective. Her voice drops to a dangerous whisper that reminds me so much of Benjamin when he was angry. “Don’t pretend you care now. You’ve been waiting for a reason, haven’t you? A reason to get rid of me? To wash your hands of your husband’s mess?”

“That’s not what this is about.” But my voice lacks conviction.

“No?” She clutches her books to her chest like armor. “Then what’s with the interrogation? The weird questions? The new locks?” Her eyes widen slightly. “You think I’m dangerous, don’t you? That if my dad’s a murderer then possibly I could be too?”

I don’t answer. Can’t answer. I don’t know what to say. I want to say, “No, of course not.” But as I open my mouth, the words don’t come out. And by then it’s too late.

“I thought so.” Her face hardens, all vulnerability vanishing behind a mask that’s chillingly reminiscent of Margaret Stone. “For the record, I was twelve when my mother died. A kid. But go ahead and add ‘killer’ to the list of reasons you wish you’d never gotten stuck with me.”

She turns and storms upstairs, each footfall an angry declaration. The bedroom door slams hard enough to rattle the kitchen cabinets. I stand frozen by the stove, wooden spoon still in hand, risotto beginning to stick to the bottom of the pan.

The confrontation leaves me shaking, adrenaline with nowhere to go. I get back to the stove, turning down the heat, trying to salvage a dinner neither of us will want to eat. The mechanical actions ground me—stir, add stock, season. Normal things. Safe things.

I reach for the pepper grinder, and that’s when I see it. Or rather, don’t see it.

The knife block sits on the counter where it always does. Wooden, angled, holding our kitchen knives in descending order of size. Except one slot is empty. The eight-inch chef’s knife—the one I use daily, the one with the best edge—is missing.

My heart stutters in my chest. I check the sink, the dishwasher, the drying rack. Not there. I scan the countertops, thinking I might have left it out while prepping dinner. Nothing.

The knife is gone. And Lily just stormed upstairs, angry, accused, cornered.

I stand motionless in my kitchen, eyes fixed on that empty slot in the knife block, hearing Robert’s warning echo in my mind: *Some stones are better left unturned.*

But it’s too late for that now. I’ve upended everything, exposed suspicions I can’t take back.

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TWENTY-TWO

The house creaks and settles around me as midnight approaches. I sit in the living room, unable to find rest. Lily's light went out an hour ago. No music, no movement, no indication she's still awake.

The chef's knife is still missing. I've retraced my steps through the kitchen twice, careful not to disturb anything, but it's gone. Misplaced during cleaning, borrowed for an art project—maybe. Or tucked away somewhere, waiting. I can't sleep until I know.

I think of the camera in my bedroom vent, its cold lens trained on my bed. The photograph of me sleeping—my own vulnerability laid bare. Is this how Alice felt before she died? That crawling awareness of danger, the terrible certainty that someone close to her wished her harm?

My heart keeps up a relentless, prehistoric thudding, pumping cortisol and dread through my veins. *The knife is missing. The knife is missing.* I could chant it like a rosary. I hover, hand outstretched, not quite making contact with Lily's doorknob. If I opened it, I'd see her, hair splayed across the pillow, lips parted in that vulnerable, childlike slack. I could check the room, the closet, the drawers. But what does that make me? Not even a stepmother. I'd become the warden, a secret policeman. I'm already the sort of monster who watches someone sleep.

The air is humid, heavy with the scent of last night's rain. I drift away from the door, pacing the kitchen like a caged animal. My hand keeps finding the empty slot in the butcher block. I check under the cutting board, behind the breadbox, then open and re-close every drawer with barely muffled panic. The knife is not misplaced. I know it. It existed when I

unloaded the dishwasher, gleaming and recent, and then it didn’t. There’s an oily sense of time warping, small events rearranging themselves in my periphery. I try to reconstruct every moment: Lily’s laughter at the dinner table, the way she’d carefully cut her chicken, the quick flick of her eyes to the hallway as she cleared her plate. Was she watching me? Or was she watching him—her father, the ghost who’d once held that knife, too?

The camera in the vent looms in my mind. The single photograph: my own face, slack with sleep, hair in a splay of shadows on the pillow. I can’t stop thinking about how that picture was taken.

The clock above the stove glows 2:17 a.m. I drag a blanket from the hall closet and curl onto the living room couch, staring up at the fissure in the ceiling from a hurricane years back. At least that’s what the realtor said when showing me the house. I will keep watch, I resolve. I will be the last line of defense. I nestle the throw pillow under my cheek and pull my knees to my chest, a defensive posture even in sleep.

I don’t sleep. Not really. I drift in and out, nerves always alert for footsteps, breaths, the faintest metallic scrape. Every sound is amplified—the refrigerator’s cycling compressor, the tick of the grandfather clock, an owl somewhere outside. In the liminal space before dawn, I wonder if I have simply gone mad. If this house has become my own locked ward, and I the patient who can’t distinguish nightmare from truth.

* * *

When sunlight finally bludgeons its way through the blinds, I wake already bone-tired. The kitchen is transformed. Two bowls are set out, their rims dusted with cinnamon. A glass of orange juice beads condensation onto the runner. At the center of the table is a small, leather-bound book. Lily is there already, sitting primly in her pajamas, her hair tangled but her face composed. She watches me approach, eyes flickering from the book to my face and back.

“Morning,” she says, and it’s the world’s most ordinary morning, as if the night before never happened.

I glance at the table, then at her. “What’s this?”

She shrugs, then gestures to the book. “My journal,” she says. “I want you to read it. All of it. You think I’m hiding something, so… Here.” She nudges the journal closer with one pale finger. Her nails are bitten down.

She pours herself a glass of juice, motions for me to sit. “Please. I made breakfast. I want us to be honest with each other. No secrets.”

I hesitate, fingers brushing the cover. The leather binding is soft, the elastic band stretched from countless openings and closings. I look at her, searching for deceit. Lily’s face is a canvas in grayscale, the emotions carefully shaded but never outlined. I slide the elastic off the journal and open to the first page.

A drawing: Alice, not as a person but as a shape—falling, arms thrown up, mouth open in a silent scream. The background is all teeth, black vertical lines. Below, a caption: “She thinks no one’s watching. She’s wrong.”

I flip to the next page. Another drawing. Alice underwater this time, her hair floating like kelp, eyes wide and empty. I suppress a shiver.

The entries alternate between words and pictures. I read them aloud, my voice trembling at the edges:

“‘September fourth: She won’t look me in the eye any more. I think she’s afraid of what she’ll see.’

‘September fifteenth: He’s blind to her. Dad always was. I have to protect him.’

‘October second: She’s not my mother. She never was.’

‘October fourteenth: Sometimes I dream that she’s gone.’

‘Three days ago: I’m not sorry. I thought I would be, but I’m not.’”

Every sentence is a knife, a perfect echo of my own suspicions, but sharper. More brutal.

I close the journal and look up, vision swimming. “These… They’re very detailed,” I say, voice flat. “And very specific. Do you want to talk about them?”

She shrugs, refusing to meet my gaze. “I drew them for Dr. Winters. He says I should put my anger somewhere it won’t hurt people. It helps.” She sips her juice, then adds: “It’s not about you.”

I try to read the tells in her body: the fidgeting with the glass, the staccato tapping of her foot underneath the table. Is this guilt? Manipulation? Trauma?

“And these?” I point to the drawings of Alice in water, hair floating around her face. “These aren’t about the bridge accident. This is something else.”

Something shifts in Lily's expression—a softening, a vulnerability I rarely see. "I was nine. We were at Lake Okeechobee on my grandparents' boat. Mom had been drinking—she always drank too much on those trips. Dad was talking to Grandpa Robert about hospital politics."

She pauses, eyes distant with memory.

"Mom decided we should swim. Just us girls. The water was choppy. I wasn't a strong swimmer yet." Her voice drops lower. "She took me off the boat, away from the ladder. Then she just… let go. Said I needed to learn the hard way. I went under."

I feel the blood drain from my face. "So it is you in the drawing? She left you to drown?"

Lily's laugh is bitter, adult. "She was wasted. Thought it was funny, watching me panic. I swallowed so much water before Dad noticed and dove in. He got to me just in time, but Mom… she was just laughing like it was some great joke."

Could Alice—perfect, beautiful Alice—have been capable of such cruelty to her own child?

"The drowning drawings aren't about killing her," Lily continues. "They're about what she did to me. Dr. Winters says I fixated on water because of that trauma. That I'm working through it in my art. It's me in those drawings. Can't you see that?"

I want to believe her. Part of me does. But the journal entries, the camera, the missing knife—they form a pattern I can't ignore.

"What about the knife, Lily?" I decide to ask directly, watching her face carefully. "The chef's knife that's missing from the kitchen block."

Not even a flicker of reaction crosses her features. "What knife?"

"The eight-inch one. It's gone."

She shrugs. "Maybe you misplaced it. I haven't seen it."

I search her eyes for truth, for deception, finding neither definitively. Just the inscrutable gaze of a girl who might be a traumatized teenager working through grief, or might be something far more dangerous.

"I want to believe you," I say finally.

"I know." She doesn't look away. "You just don't."

"I don't know what to believe any more." The confession costs me something—an admission of my own vulnerability, my own uncertainty.

Lily stands, taking her glass to the sink. Her back to me, she says, "You know, for what it's worth, I never lied about that night. I really was at Zoe's

house when Mom died."

But Carlos saw them together. In the car. Arguing.

The night before.

Lily sets her glass down and turns. "Grandma Margaret keeps asking me what I remember too. About that night." She pauses. "She asks a lot."

"Really?"

"Yes. And she asks about you all the time too. It's really annoying. Can't you two just talk to one another and leave me out of it?"

Before I can respond, she turns, face composed into something almost kind. "I need to get ready for school. Can I have my journal back? It's personal. Even if you don't believe what's in it."

I close the journal but don't hand it over. "Of course. Thank you for sharing this with me. I really appreciate it."

She nods once, accepting this. As she walks toward the stairs, I notice how carefully she moves—each step measured, controlled. Just like Margaret. Just like her father.

I realize I need to understand why Margaret is asking questions about me.

And only one person knows her well enough to answer that.

As much as I want to avoid having to see him, I know what I must do next.

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TWENTY-THREE

The prison rises before me—concrete and steel against the cloudless Florida sky. I've driven past this place a dozen times in the past year, but never stopped. Never parked. Never forced myself to walk through those doors and face the man who lied to me for years, who at one time tried to kill me. The letter I wrote Benjamin sits on the passenger seat, folded and refolded so many times the creases have begun to tear. I have spent days imagining this moment, rehearsing what I'll say when I see him. What I'll ask about Alice's letters. About Margaret. About the truth he's kept buried beneath his confession.

I grip the steering wheel, and force myself to breathe. In. Out. Again. The guard at the security booth watches me through mirrored sunglasses. Waiting to see if I'll actually go through with this or turn around. No, not today. Today is different.

The walk from the parking lot to the entrance stretches longer than it should. Each step feels deliberate, final. I submit to the security process—ID check, metal detector, pat-down. The guard's hands are impersonal, professional, but I still feel violated. Though nothing compared to the violation of discovering a camera above my bed, watching me sleep.

"First time visitor?" The processing clerk looks up from her computer screen, eyes tired but not unkind.

"Yes." My voice sounds distant, like it belongs to someone else.

"Inmate number?"

"87241. Benjamin Stone."

Her eyebrows lift slightly. Does she recognize me? The ex of the famous doctor who killed his socialite wife. Tampa's own celebrity murderer. She hands me a plastic visitor badge and directs me to a waiting area where other visitors sit—mostly women with children, a few older couples. Their faces share the same tight expression, a mix of anticipation and dread.

Twenty minutes later, another guard leads me through a series of locked doors into the visiting room—long tables divided by waist-high Plexiglas partitions. Plastic chairs bolted to the concrete floor. Everything designed to prevent contact, connection, comfort. The distant clang of cell doors echoes through the space, punctuating the murmured conversations of other visitors.

I take my assigned seat and wait, hands folded in my lap to hide their trembling. Three minutes pass. Five. Eight. Then a door opens on the opposite side of the room.

Benjamin enters, and I hardly recognize him.

His face has collapsed inward somehow—cheekbones too prominent, skin sallow beneath the harsh lights. The confident surgeon's posture replaced by a subtle hunch. Prison clothes hang on his frame where tailored shirts once fit perfectly. Only his eyes remain unchanged—dark, intelligent, piercing enough to make me flinch when they lock onto mine.

He sits across from me; the Plexiglas between us should make me feel safe, but it doesn't.

"Emma." My name in his mouth is intimate. It makes me shiver. He no longer has the right to make me feel that way. "I didn't think you'd ever come here."

"Neither did I." I study him, searching for the man I married in this stranger. "You look different."

"Prison food." He attempts a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Not exactly the chef's table at the Black Pearl. This is as far from our lives at the Morrison Estate as I could ever get."

The mention of the estate sends a chill through me. Carlos's words echo—Alice and Lily arguing in the car that night. The night before Alice supposedly died alone.

"I need answers, Benjamin." I stop the pretense of normal conversation. "About Alice. About what really happened."

His expression shutters. “We’ve been through this. I confessed. I’m serving my time. What more do you want?”

“The truth.” I reach into my purse, fingers closing around the letters. “These came to our house. To me.”

I find the copies I have taken of the letters and press them against the glass. I have given the real letters and envelopes to Lucas so he can have them analyzed. Benjamin’s hands—surgeon’s hands, once so sure and steady—tremble slightly as he looks at them through the glass. I watch his face, cataloging every micro-expression. The slight widening of his eyes. The muscle that jumps along his jawline. The rapid swallow that travels down his throat.

“This isn’t possible.” His voice drops to a whisper. “This is-this is someone’s idea of a sick joke.”

“Is it Alice’s handwriting?” I press, leaning forward. I wanted to ask him if he’s writing them, but I can already tell he’s shocked to see them. Or is he? Can I even tell when he’s lying any more? “Tell me the truth.”

Benjamin’s eyes dart from the letters to my face, then back. “It looks like hers, but it can’t be. Alice is dead. I watched her fall. I watched the car —” He stops abruptly, color draining from his face.

“You watched?” I seize on his words. “You were there? At the bridge?”

His fingers touch the glass. “Figure of speech.”

“Don’t lie to me.” My voice sharpens. “Not now. Not after everything. Someone saw Lily with Alice the night before. In the car. Arguing. Twenty-four hours before the accident, when she said she was at Zoe’s.”

Benjamin closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them, something has shifted—resignation replacing defiance.

“Lily wasn’t supposed to be there.” The words come slowly, as if each one costs him something. “She was supposed to be at her friend’s house. But she and Alice had been fighting for weeks. Months, really.”

“About what?”

He hesitates, gaze dropping. “Alice wanted to send her away. To a residential treatment facility in Vermont. She’d already made the arrangements.”

“Treatment for what?” My pulse quickens.

“Behavioral issues. Escalating ones.” Benjamin rubs his forehead, a gesture so familiar it makes my chest ache despite everything. “There were incidents. Things Alice kept from everyone, but only told me. A neighbor’s

cat found drowned in our pool. Small fires in the garden. A teacher's car vandalized after she gave Lily a bad grade."

I think of the journal drawings—Alice falling, Alice drowning. Or was it Lily? The missing knife. The camera above my bed. "You're saying Lily had something to do with Alice's death?"

"I'm saying be careful what questions you ask." Benjamin's voice drops lower. "Some answers might be more dangerous than ignorance."

"I need to know." I lean closer to the partition. "For my safety. For Lily's future. What really happened that night?"

"The night before—they argued—violently. Lily was furious. Out of control." He pauses, swallows hard. "I got there just as it was escalating. Alice was threatening to have Lily committed immediately. Said she'd rather see her daughter institutionalized than turn into—" he pauses.

"What happened next?" My voice barely makes it past my lips.

"Alice and I kept fighting. She said terrible things. About me. About Lily. About our family. It went way into the next day when she was going to visit her sister. She finally decided to leave right after it got dark, around eight o'clock. She got in her car and drove off. Toward the bridge." His eyes fix on some middle distance, seeing that night instead of me. "I followed her. I had placed the shim in her car earlier in the day, in a fit of anger. I placed it underneath her brakes. I watched her drive into the water. I'm the killer here. Lily had nothing to do with it. I watched her die, and then I called 911. That was me. That's how sick I am."

His hand shoots through the document slot, fingers closing around my wrist with surprising strength. "Listen to me, Emma. If these letters are appearing now—"

"Dr. Stone." A guard's voice breaks our conversation. "No physical contact with visitors."

Benjamin releases me abruptly, leaving red marks on my skin. "I'm sorry," he says, and I don't know if he's apologizing for grabbing me or for something much bigger.

"Does your mother know?" I ask.

Benjamin's eyes darken. "What do you mean?"

"Could she be the one sending these letters? Lily says she's been asking questions. About the night Alice died, and about me."

He shakes his head. "I can't see why—"

“To get me out of the way. To get Lily. You know how hurt they were when she chose to stay with me over them. You know your mom and how sneaky she can be.”

“I really don’t see why she would do that,” he says.

But I don’t believe him. His eyes are avoiding mine. I know him enough to know when he’s lying.

“I think she’s doing it for you. She’s angry at me and thinks I’m to blame for you being in prison. She thinks it’s all my fault and wants to ruin all I have. And I think you know this. I think she told you about it, or even worse, you told her to do it.”

He stares at me. I can’t read his eyes. Is he surprised at what I’m saying? Is he acting?

The guard arrives at our table. “Visit’s over.”

I stand on shaking legs, gathering my purse and the copies. Benjamin watches me, desperation clear in his eyes.

“Emma,” he calls as the guard leads him toward the door. “My mother didn’t send those letters, and you know it. Someone else did. Be careful. Have you ever looked for Lily’s journal from that time? There are missing pages in it.”

The door closes behind him with a final-sounding click. I stand frozen in the visiting room, mind spinning with revelations and new fears. On my wrist, five distinct fingerprints bloom red against pale skin—physical proof of Benjamin’s warning, his desperation.

But my plan has worked.

This is clearly his and his mother’s doing. His reactions to my questions about Lily were rehearsed. His surprise at me mentioning Margaret was real. He thought I would never figure it out. But guess what? If it walks like a duck…

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TWENTY-FOUR

My hands shake so badly I miss the ignition twice before finally starting the car. The prison shrinks in my rearview mirror, but Benjamin's words expand to fill the car.

My phone rings, vibrating against the passenger seat where I tossed it. Ramirez's name flashes on the screen. My heart jumps to my throat—he must have the results from the handwriting analysis. I search for somewhere to pull over, spotting a gas station ahead.

The Sunoco sign glows against the afternoon sky as I turn sharply into the parking lot, tires protesting. I park near the air pump, away from the main building, and grab my phone.

"Lucas, what did you find?" I skip the greeting, too wound up for pleasantries.

"I have the preliminary results from the lab. Are you somewhere you can talk?" His voice carries that steady professional calm I've come to rely on.

"Yes. I'm alone." I scan the gas station—a mother wrestling two small children into car seats, an elderly man pumping gas, two teenagers sharing a cigarette by the dumpster. Strangers. Safe enough.

"The handwriting matches," he says. "Multiple points of comparison against Alice Stone's known samples—the capital E has a distinctive loop, there's a consistent right slant, the pressure patterns line up. And a fingerprint on the letter came back as hers."

My stomach drops. "So she's alive."

“That’s not what I’m saying.” He pauses with a deep sigh. “The lab ran additional analysis. The ink was manufactured within the last year. The paper is close to Alice’s preferred stationery, but not identical.”

“But it could still be hers?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out entirely. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

I think of Benjamin. The first letters came from him, he admitted they did—could he have arranged this too, found someone to do it for him? “Who could forge handwriting that convincingly?”

“Document examiners. Certain artists. Or…” he pauses, “someone who spent years around her. Studying her handwriting.”

“Could someone forge a fingerprint?” The question is out before I’ve decided to ask it.

Ramirez doesn’t answer right away. On his end, a phone rings twice and stops. “That would be very difficult. But not impossible. You could make a copy of it from a perfume bottle or glass by using sticky tape or something similar.”

My throat tightens. I look down at my hands, at the pale half-moons of my cuticles. “I went to see Benjamin today.”

“And?” The question is neutral, professional.

I hesitate, unsure how much to reveal.

“He seemed surprised by the letters,” I say carefully. “Disturbed.”

“Did he offer any insights about who might have sent them?”

I trace the red marks on my wrist with my fingertips. “He suggested I be careful. Then he told me that Lily has a history of behavioral issues.”

“Anything specific?”

Again, I hesitate. “He mentioned incidents. Things Alice kept from people outside the family. And that Alice planned to send Lily to a residential treatment facility. Benjamin and her fought about it on the night she died. But I don’t believe a word he says. He seemed on edge when I mentioned his mother.”

Ramirez processes this in silence. I watch a young woman at the nearest pump, phone pressed between shoulder and ear as she fills her tank. Laughing at something the caller says. Normal life continuing all around me while mine crumbles.

“Emma,” Ramirez says. “I need to ask—do you feel safe in your home? With Lily?”

The question I've been avoiding for days. Since the camera. Since the missing knife. Since the journal. "I don't know." The admission costs me something—some last pretense of normalcy. I still can't get an answer to why Lily would send me her own psychiatric evaluations. It makes no sense. Alice being alive would make more sense than that, to be honest.

"I guess."

"We still don't have evidence of an actual crime," he says carefully. "The camera, the forged letters—disturbing, yes. Possibly harassment. But not enough for an arrest or even a formal investigation of Margaret. I haven't been able to get ahold of Dr. Greene yet and verify whether or not Lily was his patient. I will keep trying."

"So what do I do? Just wait for something worse to happen?"

"Document everything. Set up your own cameras—visible ones this time, as a deterrent. And…" he pauses, "consider whether you want to continue as Lily's guardian. There are other options. Group homes. Residential facilities like the one Alice considered."

The same solution that might have led to Alice's death. Besides, this is exactly what the Stone family wants. "I need to check something first," I say, remembering Benjamin's final words. "The journal. There are supposedly missing pages from before Alice died."

"Be careful," Ramirez warns. "If Lily is behind this, confronting her directly could escalate the situation. Keep your distance until we know more."

"I will." The lie comes automatically. How do I keep distance from someone who lives in my home? Someone I'm responsible for? Someone I genuinely care for? "Thank you for the update."

"Call me anytime. Day or night."

I sit in the car after the call ends, watching people move through their ordinary afternoons. The mother buckling children into car seats. The teenagers sharing secrets and cigarettes. The elderly man meticulously cleaning his windshield. Normal people with normal problems.

I check the time again—2:43 p.m. Lily won't be home until after debate practice at 4:30. Time to search for those missing journal pages. Time to find the final piece of this puzzle before I decide what to do with my stepdaughter.

I start the car, suddenly aware of how exposed I feel sitting in this public place. How vulnerable. Anyone could be watching. Anyone.

Time to make a plan to catch Margaret in the act.

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TWENTY-FIVE

The house sits silent when I unlock the front door.

"Lily?" I call out, my voice carrying through the rooms. No answer. I step inside, closing the door behind me with a soft click.

I move through the first floor carefully, checking each room. Kitchen empty, dining room untouched since breakfast, living room silent. Upstairs then. I climb each step with deliberate quietness, though logic tells me no one is home to hear.

Lily's bedroom door stands slightly ajar—unusual for a teenager obsessed with privacy. I push it open with two fingers, half-expecting to find her there despite the silence. The room is empty, bed nearly made, curtains drawn against the afternoon sun. Nothing out of place in this meticulously maintained space. Nothing to suggest the mind Benjamin described—troubled, dangerous, capable of violence.

But appearances lie. Alice's perfect facade hid cruelty. Benjamin's professional competence masked murderous intent.

I have maybe an hour before debate practice ends. An hour to find answers.

I start with her desk—the logical place for college materials. The surface is organized chaos—textbooks stacked by size, colored pens in ceramic holders, sticky notes arranged in a rainbow pattern. I open the top drawer first—mechanical pencils, highlighters, paper clips. Nothing revealing. The second drawer holds folders labeled by subject, homework assignments neatly sorted. The third contains art supplies—charcoal sticks, erasers, blending tools.

Nothing unusual. Nothing suspicious. Just the possessions of a high-achieving student.

I move to the bookshelf next, scanning titles—art history volumes, classics, architecture guides. College preparatory books wedged between novels. I pull one out: *The Insider's Guide to Art School Applications* and flip through highlighted passages about portfolio presentations and admission essays.

Behind the row of books, a stack of brochures catches my eye. I extract them carefully, maintaining their original position. Pratt Institute. Parsons School of Design. The New School. All in New York. All far from Florida. All schools Lily has never mentioned to me.

Beneath the brochures, folded applications. Not just interest materials but actual applications—partially completed, awaiting only final submission. Intended majors circled: Architecture. Fine Art. Urban Design.

My hands tremble slightly as I refold the papers. Lily is planning to leave. To escape to New York. Not schools we've discussed together over dinner, weighing pros and cons. Secret plans. Secret applications. Secret life.

I replace everything exactly as I found it, then check beneath the bed—nothing but storage boxes labeled "Winter Clothes" and "Middle School." The closet yields only carefully hung clothes, shoes arranged by type and color.

Then I see it—a shoe box on the highest shelf, pushed back against the wall. Standing on tiptoe, I manage to drag it forward with my fingertips. It's lighter than expected, the lid secured with a rubber band rather than tape. Inside, photographs. Dozens of them, loose rather than in albums. Family photos from before my time—Benjamin younger, smiling, with his arm around Alice. Alice holding a toddler Lily at the beach. The three of them on the Stone family boat.

A happy family. Or the appearance of one.

I sift through the images carefully, noting how many feature Alice alone: Alice at gallery openings, Alice at charity functions, Alice in the garden at Morrison Estate. Her beauty captured from every angle, preserved in this box like specimens in a laboratory.

One photo slips from the stack: Alice in profile, looking out over water, hair lifting slightly in the breeze. I turn it over. No date, no caption. Just Alice, immortalized. But something's wrong with the image. The right side

is missing—a jagged tear where something or someone has been removed from the frame.

I flip through other photos. All intact. Only this one altered.

Who stood beside Alice in that moment? Benjamin? Lily? Someone else entirely? And why tear them from the scene but keep the photo?

A chill runs through me as Benjamin's warning replays in my mind. Check her journal. The missing pages. Pages that might show what happened before Alice died.

The kitchen knife. I'd almost forgotten it in my focus on college applications and photographs. I replace the shoe box exactly as I found it, then move quickly downstairs to the kitchen. The knife block sits where it always does, and the empty slot stares back at me like an accusation. Still missing. Not misplaced. Not in the dishwasher. Gone.

Hidden.

I stand motionless in the kitchen, mind racing through possibilities. Lily with a knife. Lily with New York applications. Lily with a torn photo of her mother. Lily with a history of behavioral incidents. Lily arguing with Alice the night before she died. Lily lying to the police about where she was.

The front door opens with a suddenness that makes me jump.

"Emma? Are you home?" Lily's voice carries from the entryway, normal and casual as if my world hasn't just tilted sideways.

I smooth my expression, force my breathing to steady. "In the kitchen."

Footsteps approach—lighter than mine, more measured. Lily appears in the doorway, school bag now slung over one shoulder, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail that emphasizes her cheekbones. Alice's cheekbones.

"You're home early," I say, leaning against the counter in what I hope appears to be a relaxed posture.

"Mr. Carstairs had a family emergency. Cut debate practice short." Her eyes move from my face to my hands, then back. "Are you okay? You look weird."

"Just tired." I smile, feeling the strain of it. "Big presentation this morning."

"Right." She drops her bag on a chair, moves to the refrigerator. "There's still leftover risotto, right?"

I watch her movements, searching for signs of deception, danger, the troubled girl Benjamin described. She reaches past the risotto container to grab a yogurt instead, movements efficient and familiar.

“How was school?” I ask, voice impressively steady.

“Fine. Got my calculus test back. Ninety-seven percent.” She peels the yogurt lid back, licks it clean. An oddly childish gesture from someone Benjamin just described as dangerous.

“That’s great,” I say. “Congratulations.”

“Grandpa Robert called me during lunch. Wants me to stop by the office tomorrow to discuss ‘future plans.’” She makes air quotes with her fingers.

My stomach tightens. Robert Stone calling Lily directly. Discussing future plans after I went to talk to Margaret yesterday. The timing feels significant. Intentional.

“What kind of plans?” I keep my tone casual while studying her face.

She shrugs, the perfect teenage dismissal. “College stuff probably. You know how he is—always planning three steps ahead.”

College stuff. The New York applications hidden behind books. The life she’s planning without telling me. Running away.

“Would you tell me if something was wrong?” The question slips out before I can stop it. Too direct, too revealing of my suspicions.

Lily’s spoon pauses halfway to her mouth. Her eyes lock onto mine with sudden intensity. For a moment, something shifts in her expression—a flicker of something cold and calculating that makes my skin prickle with alarm.

Then it’s gone, replaced by teenage annoyance. “God, Emma. What’s with the interrogation? I said everything’s fine.”

I force another smile. “Sorry. Just checking in.”

She rolls her eyes, finishes her yogurt in three quick spoonfuls, then tosses the container in the recycling bin. “I’ve got a ton of homework. Going to be in my room until dinner.”

I nod, watching as she retrieves her bag and heads for the stairs. Only when I hear her bedroom door close do I allow myself to breathe normally again.

Now Robert Stone is inserting himself directly into whatever game is being played.

And my time is running out.

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TWENTY-SIX

Dr. Greene's office building is nothing like the Gothic towers my imagination has built it into. I check my watch—2:55 p.m., five minutes early for our appointment. My fingers brush against the therapy notes in my purse, paper edges worn from my obsessive handling. Inside this unremarkable building, I'll finally get confirmation about Lily's disturbing past, the violent tendencies, the animal cruelty. And her grandmother's involvement. Or I'll discover something else entirely. My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape as I push through the glass doors and head for suite 307.

The hallway smells of antiseptic and artificial lavender. Suite 307 waits at the end—Dr. Howard Greene, Child & Adolescent Psychology emblazoned on frosted glass. I reach for the handle, but it doesn't give. Locked. I check my watch again—still early, but only by three minutes now. I knock softly, then harder when no response comes.

"Dr. Greene?" My voice sounds too loud in the empty hallway.

Nothing.

I try the handle again, jiggling it this time. Still locked. I press my ear against the door and hear muffled movement inside—papers shuffling, a chair scraping against floor.

"Dr. Greene, it's Emma Caldwell. I have a three o'clock appointment."

More movement, then footsteps. The lock clicks and the door opens—just enough for a man's face to appear in the gap. He's younger than I expected, early forties maybe, with sharp eyes behind rectangular glasses and a tight, professional smile.

“Ms. Caldwell. I’m sorry, but I have no appointment scheduled with you today.”

“But I booked the appointment online. Yesterday.” The first available appointment I could get. Panic flares in my chest. “It’s about Lily Stone. She was a patient of yours when she was twelve years old.”

His expression hardens. “I didn’t get any notification about this. And even if I had, I wouldn’t discuss a minor patient with anyone but their legal guardian.”

“I am her legal guardian.” I fumble in my purse for ID. “After her mother’s death and her father, Benjamin Stone, went to prison, I became Lily’s guardian. It’s all legal, documented.”

Dr. Greene studies my driver’s license, then my face, comparing them. “I still can’t discuss a case. Patient confidentiality.”

“Please.” The word comes out ragged. “Someone sent me these therapy notes. About Lily. Violent tendencies. Fantasies about her mother dying. I need to know if they’re real.”

Something shifts in his expression—a flicker of professional concern breaking through the protective barrier. He glances down the hallway, then opens the door wider.

“Come in. Five minutes.”

The office is exactly what I expect—muted colors, comfortable furniture, diplomas on walls, children’s drawings framed like precious art. Dr. Greene doesn’t offer me a seat. We stand facing each other in the small reception area, his arms crossed over his chest.

“These notes.” He doesn’t phrase it as a question, but the demand is clear.

My hands tremble as I pull the photocopied pages from my purse. The papers feel suddenly heavier, like they’ve gained mass from the weight of what it contains—or claims to contain. I hold them out, forcing my fingers not to shake.

Dr. Greene takes them, eyes narrowing as he scans the first page. His face gives nothing away—that practiced professional neutrality that makes therapists so hard to read. But as he turns to the second page, something cracks in his expression.

“Where did you get these?” His voice drops lower, tension threading through each word.

“They were sent to me. In an envelope with a letter supposedly from Alice Stone. Lily’s mother.”

“I thought she was dead.” He states this flatly, no room for debate.

“Yes.”

Dr. Greene looks up from the papers, eyes sharp enough to cut. “These are not my therapy notes.”

The air thins in my lungs. “What?”

“These are forgeries.” He taps the paper with one fingernail. “Good ones, I’ll admit. The handwriting is similar to mine. But I never wrote this content. Never documented these supposed violent tendencies. Never had these concerns about Lily.”

My legs suddenly feel unable to support me. I reach for the nearest chair, sinking into it without permission. “But they look so real.”

“They’re designed to.” Dr. Greene’s voice softens slightly as he sits across from me. “Ms. Caldwell, someone has gone to considerable trouble to make these look authentic. That should concern you.”

“It does.” My voice sounds distant to my own ears. “So Lily never—the violent fantasies, the animal cruelty—none of that happened?”

“Lily Stone was my patient for three years after her mother died. She was dealing with typical adolescent adjustment issues, complicated by the difficulties of her mother’s death. Nothing like what these notes describe.” He pauses, studying me. “There’s something else you should know.”

I look up, bracing for whatever new revelation is coming.

“Two weeks ago, someone called this office claiming to be Lily’s guardian. They wanted copies of Lily’s file. Said it was for a new therapist.”

My blood turns to ice water in my veins. “But I never—”

“I know.” Dr. Greene nods. “My receptionist became suspicious when they couldn’t provide basic verification information. She refused the request.”

“Someone impersonated me.” The words taste like metal in my mouth. “The same someone who forged these notes.”

“Most likely.” Dr. Greene hands the papers back to me, careful not to touch them more than necessary, as if they’re contaminated. “I’d like to know who’s impersonating me as well. This is a serious ethical breach, potentially criminal.”

My phone is in my hand before I consciously decide to reach for it, Ramirez’s number appearing on screen.

“I need to call someone. The detective investigating this.” My fingers hover over the call button, looking to Dr. Greene for permission.

He nods once, sharply. “Please do. I’d like to speak with them.”

Ramirez answers on the second ring. “Ramirez.”

“It’s Emma.” My voice shakes despite my effort to steady it. “I’m at Dr. Greene’s office. The therapy notes about Lily—they’re forgeries. Someone faked them. The same someone who tried to get access to Lily’s actual therapy files by pretending to be me.”

A beat of silence. “You’re sure?”

“Dr. Greene is sitting right here. He confirmed it. The handwriting is similar, but the content is completely fabricated.”

“Put him on.”

I hand the phone to Dr. Greene, who takes it. “This is Dr. Howard Greene.” He speaks for several minutes, his responses clipped and professional, occasionally glancing at me with unreadable expressions. Finally, he says, “Yes, I’d be willing to make a statement. And provide handwriting samples for comparison. This is a gross violation of my professional ethics.”

He passes the phone back to me. Ramirez’s voice comes through immediately: “I’m sending a patrol car to your house now. Someone’s gone to elaborate lengths to paint Lily as dangerous. That means you might be in danger too.” He pauses. “One more thing. Your neighbor from across the street has a Ring doorbell, and I just received the files from the camera. It caught someone dropping off that second envelope. We’re still pulling the full footage, but the first frame—” Another pause, longer this time. “Emma, you need to prepare yourself. Whoever it is looks exactly like Alice.”

“Alice? How is that possible?”

He sighs. “I-I don’t know. I need to look at it more and maybe have a specialist on it. It could be someone who just looks like her.”

I hang up, mind spinning with new possibilities. Not Lily sending the letters. Not Lily installing the camera. Not Lily with a history of violence. Someone setting her up. Someone setting me up. But who? And why now, six years after Alice’s death?

Could it be Alice? Alive and well?

Dr. Greene watches me, professional compassion warring with obvious concern. “Ms. Caldwell, you look like you might faint. Should I call someone else for you?”

“No.” I shake my head, trying to clear it. “I’m okay. I just… I have to go.”

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Last year, when the letters came, there were moments when I thought Lily's mother was still alive, but I truly never had any proof. Outside of her handwriting, her words, her journals, and the evidence Benjamin made me follow, I never saw anyone I thought was Alice.

This though, this woman on the footage dropping off this letter to my house. It could be Alice.

Lucas sent me the still after we spoke. She is slight, dark-haired, caught mid-turn so that her face is only three-quarters visible—enough to see the jaw, the particular way the chin comes to a soft point. She is wearing a pale raincoat. Her hand is already pulling away from the mailbox slot. I have stared at this image until the pixels blur and reassemble into something I can't name.

But then again, it could be staged. Has Margaret simply sought out someone who looks just like Alice to deliver these letters and panic me more?

The elevator opens onto the Stone Advertising floor and I step out into the noise of the creative department—someone's music bleeding through headphones, two copywriters arguing over a tagline, the smell of fresh coffee from the kitchen nobody ever cleans. I used to belong to all of this. Now I run numbers in a back corner, spreadsheets and quarterly figures, work that doesn't require me to show my face up here at all. Still, I'm here. Checking in. I'd call in if anyone asked. No one does. I pass through the room like a footnote, and the work goes on without me.

My mind still reels from Dr. Greene's revelations yesterday, the knowledge that someone has methodically fabricated evidence against Lily. Someone skilled enough to forge handwriting. Someone with access to details about our lives. Someone, perhaps, within these very walls.

Every hour a patrol car drives by my house now, reminding me of the bizarre situation I am in.

I weave between workstations, nodding mechanical greetings that don't register in my consciousness. The bright overhead lights feel too harsh, exposing. Until yesterday I believed my stepdaughter might be dangerous. Now I'm wondering if she's being framed—and if I'm being manipulated along with her. By her grandmother, and maybe even her father.

Movement catches my eye—Robert Stone's office, that glass-walled statement of transparency that hides more secrets than it reveals. Robert and Margaret stand facing each other, his hands animated in conversation, her posture rigid with disagreement. They shouldn't be visible from this angle, but the sun hits the glass at just the right angle to eliminate the usual privacy-providing glare.

Robert gestures sharply, face tightening in that way it does when someone challenges him. Margaret's back is to me, but I recognize the set of her shoulders—steel disguised as silk. They both glance in my direction simultaneously, as if sensing my observation. The conversation halts abruptly. Their expressions shift in perfect synchronization—from intensity to practiced pleasantness, the Stone family specialty.

I force myself to keep walking, pretending I haven't noticed their surveillance. My desk sits untouched in the corner of the room, where no one sees me. As I approach, my former assistant Jen steps into my path, coffee mug in hand. She places it in front of me. She doesn't have to do that any more. She's no longer my assistant. She's Jason's. The guy who has my old job. But lately she has become a friend, and right now I will take any kind and smiling face I can get.

"There you are," she says, smiling with the easy confidence of someone who's never been caught in the Stone family web. "I was beginning to think you'd taken another personal day."

"Client meeting ran long," I lie, matching her casual tone while watching Robert and Margaret resume their conversation, heads now bent closer together. "Anything urgent come up?"

"Just the usual fires."

I take a sip from my mug—the one with “But First, Coffee” written in script that stopped being clever three years ago.

“Oh, and your stepdaughter was here yesterday while you were out. I thought Lily wasn’t seeing them? I just found it odd. Is anything going on?”

I keep my expression neutral through sheer force of will, though my coffee cup pauses halfway to my lips. “Lily was here? At the office?”

“Yeah, spent nearly an hour behind closed doors with Mrs. Stone.” Jen’s eyebrows lift slightly.

My throat constricts. “Was she alone?”

“As far as I saw.” Jen shrugs. “Why? Was she supposed to have an escort or something?”

“No, just curious.” I take a sip of coffee to hide whatever emotions might be leaking through my carefully maintained pose. “Did she say why she was here?”

“Nope. But she looked different when she left.” Jen lowers her voice conspiratorially. “Calmer. More… determined? Like she’d gotten what she came for.”

My mind races with possibilities, each more alarming than the last.

“Did she mention where she was going afterward?” I ask, keeping my tone light, conversational, though my heart hammers against my ribs.

“She was on her phone as she left. Overheard her saying something about meeting someone at Hillsborough.” Jen steps closer, lowering her voice further. “Is everything okay? You’ve gone really pale.”

“Fine.” I force a smile. “Just remembering I promised to help her with a college application tonight. Hillsborough Community College must be part of her research.” Another lie, sliding easily from my lips.

Jen accepts this with a nod, then drifts back to her desk, interest already shifting to the next office distraction. Through the glass walls, I can still see Robert and Margaret, now seated at his desk, documents spread between them. They look like any executives discussing business strategy. But I somehow don’t think that’s what they’re discussing.

I sink into my chair, mind spinning with connections I can’t quite solidify. Lily meeting secretly with Margaret. Someone forging therapy notes to make Lily appear dangerous. Someone installing a camera in my bedroom. Someone sending letters in Alice’s handwriting.

My gaze returns to Robert’s office. What did Lily discuss with her grandmother? Why the urgency? Why the secrecy? And why did she leave

looking “determined,” according to Jen?

I pull out my phone, hovering over Ramirez’s number. I’m wondering if I should call him. To tell him what exactly? That my stepdaughter had a meeting with her grandmother without telling me? That’s hardly criminal. Without concrete evidence, I’m just a paranoid stepmother spinning theories.

Instead, I open my calendar app and check Lily’s schedule—the one she dutifully shares with me, the perfect cooperative stepdaughter. Debate practice until 4:30, then study group at Hillsborough Community College library until 7:00. Is the study group real?

Margaret looks up suddenly, catching me watching them. Our eyes lock across the expanse of workstations and glass walls. She doesn’t smile. Doesn’t nod in acknowledgment. Just stares with an intensity that makes my skin crawl before deliberately turning away, back to Robert, back to their private conversation about things I’m not privy to.

My fingers tap against my desk, a nervous rhythm matching my racing thoughts. I need answers, not theories. Evidence, not suspicions. And the only way to get them is to follow Lily, to see for myself what she’s doing at Hillsborough Community College with her “study group.”

I gather my laptop and files, arranging them in my bag, my mind already mapping the Hillsborough campus, planning observation points, sight lines.

As I exit the office, I feel Robert’s eyes on my back—calculating, assessing. But I don’t turn around. Don’t acknowledge his surveillance. Two can play at that game.

And I’m done being the only one who doesn’t know the rules.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

My car becomes a surveillance post, parked strategically across from Hillsborough Community College's main academic building. Students will begin streaming out in thirteen minutes when the afternoon classes end. I sink lower in my seat, adjusting the baseball cap I grabbed from my office—an advertising giveaway for some long-forgotten client pitch. The disguise is minimal, probably unnecessary, but it gives me a sense of purpose, of control. I've become an investigator in my own life; first I'm planning to follow Lily and then I'll track down Margaret. Hopefully, I'll find Alice's doppelganger and put this whole thing to bed.

The campus is small by university standards—five main buildings arranged around a central quad, the architecture a bland compromise between functionality and insufficient funding. Nothing like the prestigious institutions featured in Lily's college brochures. Nothing like the secret New York applications hidden behind her books.

At precisely 4:00 p.m., doors burst open across campus. Students pour out like a released tide—backpacks slung over shoulders, headphones in place, eyes on phones. I scan each face methodically, ignoring the voice in my head questioning what kind of stepmother spies on her eighteen-year-old from a parked car.

The kind who found a camera above her bed. The kind who received letters from a dead woman. The kind who discovered forged therapy notes describing violence that never happened.

Minutes pass. The initial flood of students thins to a trickle. I'm beginning to wonder if I'm wrong. That's when I spot her—dark hair pulled

into a messy bun, wearing the same outfit she left home in this morning. Lily emerges walking toward the building, head bent over her phone, walking with purpose. She's heading toward the campus coffee shop nestled between administration and science.

I wait until she's twenty yards ahead before exiting my car. The afternoon sun beats down on my shoulders as I follow at a careful distance, moving behind groups of students when possible. Lily walks quickly, still focused on her phone, occasionally typing responses to someone. She glances back once—a casual survey of her surroundings—and I duck behind a tree, heart hammering against my ribs.

When I peer around it, she's disappeared into the coffee shop. I wait thirty seconds, counting them silently, then approach. The shop's front wall is mostly glass. I position myself at an angle where I can see inside while appearing to study the campus map posted nearby.

Lily sits at a corner table, back to the wall, scanning the room with quick, nervous glances. She checks her watch, then the door, then her phone again.

Five minutes later, he enters—a man in his forties with dark hair and a tweed jacket complete with leather elbow patches. The academic uniform of someone trying too hard to look the part. He spots Lily immediately, his face brightening with a smile that transforms his ordinary features into something almost handsome. Almost predatory.

I slip my phone from my pocket and open the camera app, grateful for the zoom feature that lets me capture their interaction from a safe distance. The first photo catches his approach—Lily standing to greet him, his hand extended but aimed not for a handshake. Instead, he touches her shoulder in a gesture too familiar for a teacher and student.

They sit. Talk. Lean toward each other across the small table. His hand occasionally touches her arm to emphasize points, lingering longer each time. I take photo after photo, documenting everything—his expressions, her responses, the way she laughs at something he says, tossing her head back slightly.

When he turns to order from a passing barista, I zoom in on the ID badge clipped to his belt. Professor James Harris, Department of Psychology. I capture it clearly, then continue documenting their interaction.

The Lily sitting across from this professor bears little resemblance to the sullen teenager who moves through our house like a shadow. This Lily gestures animatedly as she speaks. Smiles frequently. Leans forward with intense focus when he speaks. She seems to be performing for him like she has created a version of herself crafted specifically for his consumption.

I watch them for forty-five minutes, taking photos at regular intervals. He shows her something on his phone that makes her eyes widen. She nods vigorously, then pulls papers from her bag—forms of some kind that they review together, heads bent close. He signs something with a flourish, then slides the papers back to her. Their fingers touch during the exchange—not accidentally.

My stomach twists with a confusion of emotions. Is this an inappropriate relationship with a professor? A scholarship application meeting as Lily would likely claim? Or something connected to the forged therapy notes, the camera, the letters? Is Professor Harris helping her, grooming her, or using her for some purpose I can't yet discern?

They stand to leave, and I retreat behind a nearby tree, continuing to document their farewell. He hugs her—a brief embrace that walks the line between professional and personal. Then he says something that makes her laugh again before they part ways—him toward the faculty parking lot, her toward the main campus entrance where she probably parked her car.

I wait until she's out of sight before reviewing the photos. Forty-seven images documenting an interaction that raises more questions than it answers. A psychology professor meeting privately with my stepdaughter. Physical contact that seems inappropriate for a teacher-student relationship. Papers signed and exchanged.

I zoom in on one image where the papers are partially visible. The header reads "Scholarship Recommendation" and below it, in smaller text, "Early Decision Program."

Early decision. Binding commitment to attend if accepted. The secret New York applications coming into clearer focus.

My phone buzzes with a text from Lily:

Study group running late.

Another lie to add to the growing collection.

I start my car, mind racing with possibilities. Is Professor Harris connected to the forged therapy notes? Does his psychology background give him insight into making convincing fabrications? Or is he simply a professor helping a talented student apply to schools her guardian knows nothing about?

More importantly—should I confront Lily about this meeting, revealing that I've been following her? Or should I gather more evidence, try to understand the full picture before showing my hand?

As I pull away from the campus, one thing becomes increasingly clear—I no longer know who to trust.

All I know for certain is that tonight, when Lily comes home, something has to break. This house of secrets and lies we've built can't stand much longer.

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TWENTY-NINE

My fork scratches against the plate, jolting me from thoughts of tweed jackets and wandering hands. Dinner—a pasta dish assembled on autopilot, my hands going through the motions while my mind was elsewhere. Earlier I had driven to Margaret's building and sat outside it for nearly an hour, watching the entrance. She never came down. Through the lobby glass I could see the elevator doors, the marble floor, the doorman reading something on his phone. Nothing moved that shouldn't have. No one who looked like Alice.

Lily sits across from me, fork pushing food around her plate, occasionally checking her phone that she keeps face down beside her water glass. She was here when I got home. The photos burn in my pocket. I'm waiting for the right moment, gathering courage, rehearsing words that won't sound like an accusation even though that's exactly what they are.

"How was study group?" I ask, pitcher hovering above her half-empty glass.

"Fine." She doesn't look up.

I set the pitcher down. The clink of glass against granite sounds too loud in our silent kitchen. My phone lights up on the table between us—a notification—and when I reach for it, and open it, I make a big mistake. Her eyes drop to the screen before I can move it away. The photo is still open. Lily and Professor Harris at the coffee shop, his hand on her arm.

Her fork pauses mid-air.

The color drains from her face, then returns in a rush of angry red that climbs her neck to her cheeks. She sets her fork down with exaggerated

control.

“You followed me.” Not a question. An accusation.

“Yes, I did. I wanted to see who you were meeting with. What is going on, Lily?” I swipe to another photo—his faculty ID badge clearly visible. “Professor James Harris, Psychology Department. Why are you meeting secretly with a psychology professor?”

She grabs the phone from my hand, scrolls through the photos with increasingly frantic movements. “You took pictures. You actually stalked me and took pictures?” Her voice rises with each word. “What the hell, Emma?”

“Answer the question.” I take my phone back, set it screen up on the table between us. “Why the lies about study group? Why the secret meetings?”

“It’s not secret.” Her jaw sets in that stubborn line so reminiscent of Benjamin. “He’s helping me with scholarship applications. For college.”

“For colleges in New York.” I watch her face, catch the flicker of surprise. “Yes, I know about those too. The ones you’ve hidden behind your books. The ones you’ve never mentioned to me.”

She pushes back from the table, chair legs scraping against tile. “You went through my room? My private things?”

“After I found a camera hidden above my bed. After I received letters supposedly from your dead mother.” My voice grows steadier with each listed violation. “So yes, I looked. I’m trying to protect you. That’s my job now.”

She stands now, hands flat on the table, leaning toward me. “You received more letters?”

I didn’t mean to say that. The weight of everything that’s happening is overwhelming me.

“I’m sorry, I should have told you. But you’re keeping things from me…”

“What did they say? How many did you get?” Tears swim in her eyes, but as terrible as it might be, I now know I have some leverage to get the truth out of her.

“Just explain the lies, Lily.” I remain seated, refusing to match her aggressive posture. “The secret meeting with Margaret that you never told me about. Professor Harris. The New York applications.” I pause, watching her face. “I’ve been patient, but I need to understand why the version of

your life you show me is never the whole picture—because if I can't trust you, I can't protect you."

"I don't owe you explanations!" The words explode from her, too loud for our small kitchen. "You're not my mother. You're just the woman who got stuck with me when my father went to prison."

That hurt, but I don't show her. "I'm trying to protect you."

"Protect me?" She laughs, harsh and brittle. "By spying on me? By going through my things? By following me around taking pictures like some deranged stalker?"

"I thought you might be in danger." I grip the edge of the table to keep my hands from shaking. "I've been sent forged notes about how you're dangerous—old therapy records from a Dr. Greene. Someone's trying to make you look troubled. I needed to know who you were meeting, what you were hiding."

Something shifts in her expression—surprise momentarily replacing anger. "What notes?"

"Someone sent me notes that were supposedly from your therapy sessions with Dr. Greene."

She looks surprised. "What? Who would do that? Why?"

"I don't know. To make me think you were dangerous. To drive a wedge between us. Your guess is as good as mine. I'm still piecing it together myself."

"And you're saying those notes were forged?"

"Yes." I seize on this opening. "Someone faked them, using handwriting similar to Dr. Greene's."

She blinks rapidly, absorbing this. Then the defenses rise again, walls slamming back into place. "So your solution was to start spying on me? Going through my room? Following me around? Taking pictures?" Her voice rises with each question. "You're spying on me just like Dad did to Mom! It's obvious Dad is just sending these letters again."

The words are electric with implication. My body goes still, every muscle freezing in place. "What did you just say?"

Lily's eyes narrow, a dangerous glint appearing—the same calculating look I've seen in Margaret's eyes, in Robert's. In Benjamin's when he's cornered. "You heard me."

"What do you mean, 'like Dad did to Mom'?" I keep my voice level despite the adrenaline flooding my system.

“Dad had Mom followed for months before she died.” Lily spits the words out like they taste bitter. “He was obsessed with knowing her every move. Hired someone to track her, photograph her, document everywhere she went, everyone she talked to.”

My mind races to process this new information. “How do you know this?”

“I found the pictures.” Her voice drops, becomes almost clinical in its detachment. “After Mom died. After Dad went to prison. I was looking for a photo album in his closet and found a box of surveillance photos instead. Mom going into buildings I didn’t recognize. Mom talking to people I’d never seen. Mom in a restaurant with a man who wasn’t Dad.”

The implication hits me full force. “You think she was having an affair?”

“I know she was.” Lily’s eyes lock onto mine, challenging me to dispute her. “Dad knew it too. That’s why he was having her followed. That’s why he—” She stops abruptly.

“That’s why he what, Lily?” I lean forward, heart pounding. “That’s why he killed her?”

“I didn’t say that.” She steps back from the table, arms wrapping around herself in a protective gesture that makes her look almost childish, vulnerable. “I don’t know what happened that night. I’ve told you a hundred times.”

But she’s lying. I can see it in the way her eyes slide away from mine, in the slight tremor of her lower lip. She knows something—something she’s never told the police, never told me.

“Where are those surveillance photos now?” I ask, voice just above a whisper.

“I don’t know.” Too quick. Another lie.

“Lily—”

“Stop interrogating me!” She slams her hand against the counter, the sudden violence making me flinch. “God, you’re exactly like them. The police. The lawyers. Everyone asking the same questions over and over like if they just phrase it right I’ll suddenly confess to something.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” I say, though we both know that’s not entirely true. “I’m trying to understand what’s happening. Someone is orchestrating all of this—the letters, the camera, the forged notes. Someone wants me to believe you’re dangerous.”

“Maybe you want to believe it.” Her voice cracks slightly. “Maybe you’ve been looking for an excuse to get rid of me since Dad went to prison. The inconvenient stepdaughter you never asked for.”

Before I can respond, she turns and storms toward the stairs, movements sharp with anger. I follow, calling after her, “Lily, wait. We need to talk about this. It’s not you I suspect.”

“We’re done talking.” She doesn’t look back, just continues her ascent.

“Lily—”

She reaches the top of the stairs, turns to face me with eyes that burn with something between hatred and hurt. “You’re just like my whole family—obsessed with control, with knowing everything, with making people fit into the story you’ve already decided is true.”

Her bedroom door slams with enough force to rattle the photographs on the hallway wall—pictures of a family that never quite existed. I stand frozen at the bottom of the stairs, mind spinning with this new revelation.

Benjamin had Alice followed. Had photographic evidence of an affair. A motive beyond anything mentioned in the police reports or trial transcripts.

I sink onto the bottom stair. The confrontation has yielded information but resolved nothing. Instead, it’s opened new questions, new avenues of investigation, new doubts about every person in this tangled family web.

If Benjamin was having Alice followed, documenting her affair, what else might he have documented? Perhaps things he knows about me…

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THIRTY

I send lots of emails in the morning, then schedule loads to cover the workday and decide to follow Margaret again. Trees press close on either side, creating a tunnel of shifting shadows that match my mood. Last night's confrontation with Lily plays on endless loop in my mind.

My car coughs. Once, twice. The engine hiccups like it's choking on something.

"No, no, not now." I tap the gas pedal, but instead of accelerating, the car shudders beneath me. The steering wheel goes suddenly heavy in my hands as power assist fails. Warning lights flash across the dashboard—a Christmas tree of automotive distress signals.

The engine dies completely. Momentum carries me forward while I wrestle the wheel toward the narrow shoulder. Gravel crunches beneath tires as the car jerks to a stop. My forehead hits the steering wheel—not hard enough to break skin, but enough to hurt, enough to leave a mark.

Smoke billows from under the hood, thin gray wisps that thicken as I watch. Not flames, at least. Not yet.

"Shit." I slam my palm against the wheel, then wince at the childish outburst. I'm better than this. Calmer. More in control.

Except I'm not. Haven't been since the first letter arrived with Alice's handwriting. Since the camera above my bed. Since the forged therapy notes. Since Lily's outburst last night.

My hands shake slightly as I reach for the hood release. When I lift the hood, acrid smoke hits my face, making my eyes water. I step back, coughing, waiting for it to clear.

I don’t know much about cars—just enough to recognize that this isn’t normal wear and tear. The smoke comes from around the fuel system. Something is wrong with the—

I stop, a terrible suspicion forming. No. It couldn’t be.

Did someone tamper with my car?

My stomach lurches. What if this wasn’t an accident or mechanical failure? What if this was sabotage?

I stumble back against the car, suddenly dizzy. Who? When? The car was in the garage overnight. Could someone have done it there?

My phone. I need to call someone. Need help.

I fumble to get it out from my purse, relieved to see one bar of reception. Not great, but enough. Enough to call the one person I still trust.

Ramirez answers on the second ring. “Emma. Everything okay?”

“No.” My voice sounds strange, distant. “My car. It broke down. I’m stranded on Pine Hollow Drive, about five miles west of the highway.”

A beat of silence. Then, voice sharper: “Are you hurt?”

“Just a bruise.” I touch my forehead where it hit the steering wheel. “But Detective—Lucas—I fear that this wasn’t an accident. I know it might sound paranoid but…”

“Stay where you are. Lock yourself in the car. I’m fifteen minutes out.”

“Thank you.” The words come automatically, but genuine gratitude swells behind them. In a world where everyone has ulterior motives, Ramirez’s straightforward concern feels like a life raft.

I sit in the disabled car, doors locked as instructed, jumping at every passing vehicle. The bruise on my forehead throbs in time with my racing heart. I check the time—only seven minutes since I called. It feels like hours.

My head is spinning with theories, all of them sounding crazy to me, yet somehow they make sense. If this was premeditated, then that means someone wanted to leave me stranded or cause an accident.

Someone who might be watching even now.

I scan the tree line, the curve of road ahead and behind. Nothing but shadows and silence and the occasional passing car that doesn’t slow.

* * *

Ramirez's sedan appears exactly twelve minutes after my call, pulling onto the shoulder behind my disabled vehicle. The sight of him emerging—solid, real, professional—makes my eyes sting with relief.

He approaches cautiously, eyes scanning the surroundings before focusing on me as I step out of my car.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He studies my face, gaze lingering on the bruise forming at my hairline.

"I'm fine." It's a lie. I really am not. "Just shaken."

He nods, not believing me but not challenging the assertion either. "Show me what's wrong with the car."

I lead him to it. He takes one look at the smoking engine, then goes straight for the gas cap. He pulls a penlight from his pocket, shining it into the opening. "Sugar."

"What?"

"It's definitely sugar. You can see the crystals that haven't dissolved yet. Very old school but efficient."

"Who would do this?" The question escapes before I can stop it—a childish plea for answers he can't possibly provide.

"Let's talk in my car." His tone carries an urgency that sends another chill through me. "I'll call a tow for this one."

* * *

Five minutes later, we sit in his sedan, the AC finally chasing away the heat. My disabled car waits forlornly for the tow truck, a testament to how vulnerable I've become.

"I don't like it. This is escalating," Ramirez says, hands at ten and two on the steering wheel though we're parked. "Letters. Camera. Now physical sabotage that could have caused serious injury or worse."

"If I'd been on the highway instead of…" I don't finish the thought. Don't need to.

The tow truck arrives, and Ramirez talks to the guy while I stay in his car. Then he comes back inside and looks at me.

"He's going to tow it to the shop. I called them and let them know what they're dealing with. It should be an easy fix and you'll have your car back later today. Now we need to do something about your situation," Ramirez says. "You need security cameras. Today."

“In the house?”

“House. Garage. Driveway. Full coverage. I’ll check with your neighbors again.” He pulls onto the road, heading toward my neighborhood rather than the city. “I can install them myself. Official police surveillance would require more evidence, more paperwork.”

“You’d do that?” I look at him, really look at him for the first time. The lines around his eyes speak of too little sleep. The set of his jaw reveals determination beyond professional obligation. Maybe that’s what makes him so attractive. He cares a lot.

“This whole situation,” he pauses, searching for words. “It matters. You matter.”

Something shifts between us—a current that has nothing to do with investigation and everything to do with two people recognizing something in each other. Two people who pursue truth regardless of cost.

“Thank you,” I say again, the words carrying more weight than before.

He nods once, eyes on the road. “We’ll catch whoever’s doing this to you. This is harassment. But first, we need to make sure you’re safe.”

As we drive toward my house, I catalog the suspects in my mind. Robert with his warnings and piercing glares. Margaret with her cold calculation and anger because Lily chose me. Benjamin and his manipulations.

Alice who might not be dead after all?

One of them, or all of them together, is trying to destroy the life Lily and I have carefully rebuilt. And I still don’t know why.

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THIRTY-ONE

The cameras arrive in four identical black boxes. Lucas carries them into my house like someone who's done this before, though I doubt installing security systems is standard procedure for homicide detectives. We'd stopped at a specialized electronics store on the way back from my disabled car—him choosing equipment with expertise while I stood nearby, jumping at every loud noise, scanning faces for anyone who might be watching us. Now he works methodically in my living room, unpacking tiny electronic eyes that will soon monitor my every move. Protection or invasion? The line blurs when you're desperate enough for safety.

"It's a good thing that Lily's at school," Lucas says, mounting the first camera in the corner where living room meets hallway. "Easier to do this without explaining."

"She has AP exams this week. Won't be home until four."

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the Florida heat pressing against the windows. "Though I'm not sure what I'll tell her when she sees these."

"The truth." He secures the camera with practiced movements. "Someone's threatening you. These are for protection."

I find myself saying, before I've decided to: "I told her about the therapy notes. The ones from the letters." He pauses almost imperceptibly. I continue. "We fought. She said I didn't trust her." I laugh, but it comes out wrong—too thin, too high. "She's wrong. I do believe her. And I do believe someone is trying to come between us."

Lucas climbs down from the chair and faces me. Something in his expression shifts—careful, considered. “You didn’t have to tell me that,” he says.

“I know,” I say. “I wanted to.”

I follow him through the house—my house, though it feels less mine with each passing day. He places cameras strategically: one overlooking the kitchen, another monitoring the back door, two more covering different angles of the front entrance and living room. Each installation feels like surrendering another piece of privacy, another admission that normal life is no longer possible.

“This one’s important,” Lucas says as we reach the upstairs hallway. He mounts a camera directly above my bedroom door, angling it to capture anyone approaching. “Given the previous camera we found in your room, this area needs extra coverage.”

I watch his hands work, steady and sure where mine would tremble. The bedroom—my most private space—has already been violated once. The thought of it happening again makes my skin crawl with invisible ants.

“This one is different from the hidden camera,” Lucas explains, connecting wires with quick efficiency. “This one is visible on purpose. We want whoever’s doing this to know they’re being watched.”

“A deterrent.”

“Exactly.” He steps back, admiring his work. “Sometimes the most effective security isn’t catching someone in the act—it’s preventing the act altogether.”

I touch my forehead where a bruise blooms from this morning’s impact with the steering wheel. The pain grounds me, reminds me this isn’t paranoia. Someone really is trying to harm me.

“Will it be enough?” The question slips out before I can stop it, vulnerability I’d rather not display.

Lucas meets my eyes, his expression softening slightly. “It’s a start. The cameras all connect to this app.” He holds out his phone, showing a grid of live feeds from the cameras he’s already installed. “You’ll have access from anywhere. So will I, if you approve my account.”

I nod, watching as he downloads the application onto my phone. The screen fills with images of my own home—the kitchen where Lily and I had our confrontation last night, the living room where I’ve spent sleepless hours wondering which version of reality to believe.

“Four more to go,” Lucas says, moving toward the stairs. “One for the garage, one for the driveway, one for the backyard, and a backup for the kitchen.”

I follow him downstairs, watching as he transforms my home into a surveillance zone. Each camera represents another failure of normal safety, another admission that someone close to me intends harm.

“The system alerts you to movement,” he explains, demonstrating on his phone. “You can customize sensitivity, and set quiet hours, even designate safe people whose presence won’t trigger alerts.”

“Like Lily.” The words taste bitter.

“That’s your call.” His tone remains neutral, professional, but his eyes convey understanding of my impossible position.

Lucas lingers over the garage camera, adjusting its tilt, squinting at the grainy low-light feed, murmuring about motion sensitivity. I lean in the doorway, mug of coffee cooling in my hands, watching his broad shoulders shift as he taps away on his tablet. Every now and then he pauses to glance at the battered side door—its weatherworn wood, the warped frame where the deadbolt once fit. He’s mentioned it twice already that this is probably where the intruder came in. I half-expect him to haul a brand-new door out of his car before he’s through with the camera.

Florida’s humidity hangs in the garage like a heavy curtain. Sweat darkens the fabric at his collar and seeps in a V down his spine. He seems oblivious, but I can’t stop noticing. My cheeks warm when I catch the outline of sinew beneath that damp shirt. I look away. I don’t want him to see me staring.

Instead I turn my glare at the empty slab of concrete where my car once sat, still stained by oil.

“Almost done,” he calls, voice echoing off the poured cement. There’s a tightness in his tone—his cop instincts running worst-case scenarios, I’m sure. “Need to sync this to the system.”

I clear my throat, heart ticking faster. “Can I get you something? Water? Lemonade?” Beer would feel desperate this early, but lemonade in a tall glass—icy, pink at the rim—feels almost flirtatious. I don’t know why I care so much.

“Lemonade sounds perfect,” he says, not looking away from his work.

I dash inside and return with a pitcher and two mason jars full of minty lemonade, frosted outside with condensation. He steals a sidelong glance as

I brush past him, and I catch the quick curve of his smile. My stomach flutters.

He takes a long pull, lips brushing the rim, and I almost blush watching him. “Thanks,” he says, voice low. His fingers graze mine as he tucks the jar between his palms—hard, warm.

I gesture to the garden door. “Lunch in the garden?” I have chicken-avocado sandwiches and grapes waiting under the hibiscus. It feels like an invitation and a dare.

He tilts his head, amused. “Sounds amazing. Lead the way.”

Outside, the garden is in riotous bloom—torrid hibiscus, palms arching overhead, a pale breeze rustling everything to life. I spread a checkered cloth on the grass beneath the biggest palm, and he sits beside me, posture straight but relaxed, legs brushing mine. My pulse hammers. He watches me unwrap the sandwiches like it’s a show.

“You’re good at this,” I say, offering him half my sandwich. “Security stuff, I mean.”

He takes the sandwich and leans in close enough that I catch a whiff of him—fresh sunscreen and something musky. “Habit. Comes with the job. You get calls from people who feel watched. Usually it’s just nerves—sometimes it’s real.” He pauses, eyes on my lips as I bite into mine. “But I’d bet on you being the cautious type.”

I laugh and sip my lemonade, trying to look nonchalant. “I like feeling prepared.” My voice softens. “And I definitely like you being here.”

His answer is just a slow smile. We eat the chicken salad in companionable silence, the only sounds the distant whirr of a weed whacker and bees humming around the flowers. I notice how precisely he wipes his mouth with a napkin, how he folds it again and tucks it on his knee. I’m staring—again.

“You ever get used to eating alone?” he asks, not looking up.

I set down my lemonade. “I’m still working on it. And I have Lily even if she rarely eats with me.”

He nods slowly, turning the mason jar in his hands. “Karen got the dining room table. I told her to take it.” A short exhale—not quite a laugh. “Actually, she got everything, the house, the kids most of the time, but for some reason I miss eating dinner at that table. I miss being a family around it, I guess.”

“When did you guys separate?”

“Last year. Feels longer.” He finally looks at me. “She said I was never really there, even when I was.”

The bees keep humming. I think about Benjamin at the head of our table, scrolling his phone while I talked about nothing.

“I know that feeling,” I say. “From the other side of it.”

Something shifts in his expression—recognition, maybe, or relief. His knee is almost touching mine. Neither of us moves.

“So, two more cameras,” I prompt. “Front entry and upstairs hallway.”

He nods, rising gracefully. I help him gather our plates, and we stroll back inside, hands brushing. In the foyer he notes the chipped tile, the dead fern by the stairs, the stack of takeout menus. At the front door he pauses, leaning so close I can feel his breath. “Do you always answer strangers at night?”

I shrug, tracing a stain on the floor with my toe. “Never.”

He meets my eyes. “Good.”

He works quickly—drilling, wiring, snapping components into place—but I hover close, watching his strong hands. When I bend to see the live feed on his phone, he edges nearer, our arms touch, and the air between us snaps electric. On the screen, I see myself framed in green, alert, ready.

“That’s you,” he murmurs. “Looking fierce.”

I grin. “Maybe I am.”

He looks at me then—quiet, steady. “You’ll be okay.”

For a heartbeat we just stand there, the hush of the hallway around us. Then he clears his throat. “Last one’s upstairs.”

“I’ll come with,” I say. He takes the stairs two at a time; I follow, watching the way his shirt clings at his back. Upstairs, the air is still, faint with dust and the ghost of Lily’s perfume. I point to the spot outside her door. “Here.”

He hesitates, as if wanting to say something more, before he clicks the camera into place. When he’s done, he stands beside me, both of us facing that closed door.

He hands me my phone—every feed live, synced. “You should be safe now.”

I nod, heart still pounding.

He starts down the stairs, then stops at the top, looking back.

“Call me if anything feels off, okay?”

“I will.”

His smile is soft.

I watch him go, the sun glinting in his hair, when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I check the screen—Robert. My stomach drops even as my spine straightens automatically, conditioned response to the man who is both my father-in-law and boss.

“Emma.” Robert’s voice carries that particular Stone family inflection—polite command disguised as greeting. “I need to see you in my office. Immediately.”

No inquiry about my well-being despite my absence at the meeting this morning. No room for negotiation.

“I have an appointment,” I lie, watching Lucas get into his car.

“Cancel it.” Robert’s tone hardens. “This concerns Lily. And your… recent behavior.”

The implication is unspoken but clear. My stepdaughter has been talking to her grandparents. About me.

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes.” I end the call before he can demand sooner, before my voice can betray the sudden spike of fear.

As I hang up, I stare at the security app on my phone—six tiny squares showing different angles of my home. My sanctuary turned surveillance state. The irony isn’t lost on me—seeking safety through the same mechanism someone used to violate me.

Being watched to prevent being watched.

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THIRTY-TWO

I take an Uber to the agency. The receptionist's smile freezes when she notices the bruise on my forehead, but she recovers quickly—professional courtesy or self-preservation, I can't tell which. "Mr. Stone is waiting for you," she says, not quite meeting my eyes. News travels fast in this building; everyone knows I'm summoned. I straighten my shoulders, check that my hair covers most of the bruise, and walk toward the elevators with the measured steps of someone who belongs. Fake confidence until it becomes real—the first rule of advertising and, apparently, of survival in the Stone family orbit.

The elevator rises smoothly. I use the mirrored wall to adjust my appearance—concealer barely masking the bruise, eyes too bright with tension, lips pressed thin. I look haunted, hunted. I rearrange my features into something more composed before the doors open.

Conversations pause as I cross the creative department. Heads turn, then quickly away when they catch me noticing. I hear my name whispered behind cupped hands, see pitying glances from the art department, catch the accounting team watching with undisguised curiosity. My absence from the important meeting this morning has been noted. Discussed. Judged.

Robert's office dominates the northwest corner—glass walls offering panoramic views of Tampa and the illusion of transparency. His assistant nods me through without announcement. No buffer, no preparation. Just me and the man who controls my professional life and, increasingly, seems determined to control my personal one as well.

“Emma.” Robert doesn’t stand when I enter. Power play number one. He remains behind his massive oak desk—an antique that belonged to his father, an anachronism in this otherwise modern space. “Sit.”

I lower myself into the leather chair across from him, spine rigid, hands folded in my lap to hide their slight tremor.

“Lily called me.” He leans forward, cutting off my defense. “She’s concerned about you. Says you’ve been acting paranoid.”

Of course.

“Did she mention that someone put a camera in my bedroom vent? Or that my car was sabotaged this morning?”

Robert’s expression doesn’t change, but something shifts in his eyes—calculation replacing concern. “She mentioned your… theories.”

“They’re not theories.” My fingers dig into my palms. “Detective Ramirez removed the camera himself. And this morning someone put sugar in my gas tank. I could have been seriously injured.”

I’m watching his face closely for a reaction. Does this surprise him? I see no signs that it does.

“Perhaps.” He steeples his fingers—an unconscious echo of Benjamin’s gesture when preparing to deliver unwelcome news. “Or perhaps you damaged the car yourself. Created evidence to support your narrative.”

The accusation leaves me momentarily speechless. “You think I’m making it all up?”

“I think stress affects people differently.” His tone softens to something almost compassionate, which makes it worse somehow. “You’ve been through a lot. Benjamin’s conviction, taking responsibility for Lily—it’s a heavy burden. No one would blame you for struggling.”

“I’m not struggling. I’m being targeted.”

My voice rises despite my efforts to maintain composure. “Someone is systematically trying to make me look unstable. Just like they tried to make Lily look dangerous with forged therapy notes. Did she tell you about those?”

Robert sighs, the sound heavy with practiced patience. “Emma, we all want what’s best for Lily. And for you. Perhaps you should consider taking some time off. We can help with Lily.”

There it is—the real purpose of this meeting. Not concern for my well-being. Control. Remove me from my position. Isolate me professionally.

Paint me as unstable. And then what? Take Lily away from me? Or maybe that has already happened?

"That won't be necessary." I straighten my shoulders, meeting his gaze directly. "I'm perfectly capable of fulfilling my responsibilities."

"Margaret and I disagree." He delivers this bombshell casually. "We've been discussing your recent behavior. The consensus is that you need time to recover. It's been a lot for you. We all understand. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"You've been discussing me?" The betrayal shouldn't sting—these people have never truly been my allies—but it does. "With Lily?"

"As Lily's grandparents, we have a responsibility." His tone shifts to the impersonal corporate voice he uses in board meetings. "Just until you resolve your personal… issues."

I stand, unable to remain seated under his dissecting gaze. "My 'personal issues' involve someone actively trying to harm me. Someone with connections to this family."

"Careful, Emma." His voice drops lower. "Accusations without evidence can be dangerous."

I think of my house, and the lease in Robert's name, the custody arrangement that hinges on his family's goodwill, the résumé gap I could never explain to another employer. I think of how lucky I was, once, to land here at all—and how that luck has never quite felt like mine to keep. Lily's face flashes through my mind. If I lose this, I lose everything.

"It can be dangerous, but so can sugar in a gas tank." I hold his gaze. "I won't be taking leave. If you want to fire me, you'll need to make it official."

Something that might be respect flickers across his face before disappearing beneath practiced neutrality. "No one is firing you. Yet. But I suggest you consider your position carefully. And perhaps spend more time focused on Lily's well-being rather than these… theories."

I turn to leave, dignity the only armor I have left. As my hand touches the door, Robert adds, "Family matters should remain private, Emma. For everyone's sake."

The same warning, repackaged. Some stones better left unturned. Family matters kept private.

I exit without responding, head high despite the trembling that starts in my core and radiates outward. Through the glass walls, I spot Margaret

across the hallway, watching my departure with hawkish intensity. She's talking to the media director, but her attention is entirely on me, calculating and cold. When our eyes meet, she doesn't look away—just inclines her head slightly.

I walk briskly to my office, gathering essential files and my laptop. I need to leave. Need space to think, to plan my next move in this chess game I never agreed to play.

On my way out, I pass the conference room where Margaret now stands alone, phone pressed to her ear. The door isn't completely closed, and her voice carries just enough for me to catch fragments:

"Yes, she was just here. No, Robert handled it. I'll keep you updated on her movements. Of course we're being careful."

I continue walking, not breaking stride, not giving any indication I've overheard. But my mind races with new questions. Who is Margaret updating about me? HR? Benjamin, calling from prison? Someone else entirely?

The elevator arrives empty, a small mercy. Once inside, I pull out my phone and open the security app Lucas installed. Six different views of my empty house fill the screen. No movement. No intruders. No Lily, still at school.

But the image offers cold comfort. Because the real threat isn't someone breaking in. It's the people already inside my life, already positioned to destroy it. The Stones with their secrets and power. Lily with her photographs and reports to her grandparents. The invisible someone manipulating us all like pieces on a board.

And I still don't understand the game we're playing, let alone how to win.

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THIRTY-THREE

The briefcase has been sitting unopened on the kitchen table since I got home. I pour a glass of wine, drink half of it standing at the sink, then finally unzip it. I have a lot of work to do tonight. I'm going to show Robert that I am not unstable.

I pull out my laptop, followed by a couple of folders, some receipts, and a pen I've been looking for. And then, near the bottom, I spot an envelope I don't remember putting there. No stamp. No return address. My name in handwriting I recognize the way you recognize a scar—not because you look at it often, but because you never quite forget its shape.

Inside I find a single photograph and a folded sheet of paper. The photograph is of Lily, maybe eleven or twelve, sitting on a porch swing that I recognize from my former house, when I lived there with her and Benjamin. Lily is staring at something off to the left, her expression flat and unreadable in a way that doesn't look like a child.

The note is brief. One sentence in the same handwriting as the envelope.

Ask her what she remembers.

I set it down on the table. Then I pick it up again. The kitchen is very quiet.

My heart pounds in my chest, the silence of the kitchen pressing in around me like a suffocating embrace. The weight of the past, heavy and oppressive, settles over me as I contemplate the cryptic message before me. *Ask her what she remembers.* What does that even mean?

I grab the phone again with trembling hands, sending a picture of the note and photo to Lucas as he instructed. Evidence. Documentation. It's a professional response, not an emotional reaction. But my heart hammers against my ribs, and sweat breaks out along my hairline despite the air conditioning's steady hum.

The phone rings less than thirty seconds after I press send. It's Lucas.

"I'm calling the patrol car back to your house," he says without preamble.

"Who is sending this?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"Listen to me, Emma. You must keep a calm mind. This is what they want. This is meant to rattle you. To show they're always one step ahead."

"It's working." I turn to stare out the window, scanning the street beyond my yard. Empty sidewalks. Parked cars that might hide watchers. Trees that could conceal cameras. "Lucas, they could be out there right now."

"A patrol car will be there in eight minutes. Stay inside, away from windows. I'll call you back when I know more. We're still looking at the footage from your neighbor's camera across the street. I will call him and ask if he can send me his recordings for today as well. It might give us a clearer picture of who this person is."

The call ends, leaving me alone in a kitchen that suddenly feels exposed despite the cameras monitoring every approach. I pace the perimeter of the room, checking locks I know are secured, peeking through blinds at empty spaces that might not be empty at all.

Eight minutes stretch to eternity. Finally, headlights sweep across the front windows—the patrol car pulling into my driveway. A uniformed officer does a perimeter check while his partner remains in the vehicle, watching the street. Their presence should comfort me. Instead, it underscores the danger that necessitates their surveillance.

An hour passes. Lily texts me—staying at a friend's house to finish a project, will be home around nine. The information should worry me. Is she safe there? Is she where she claims to be? But instead brings momentary relief. One less variable to manage in my increasingly complex equation of survival.

Lucas calls back as darkness falls completely.

"Your neighbor said his camera wasn't set off today at all, except for when the mailman was there, and Amazon packages. Also, I checked the

feed for the cameras at your house, and found nothing. But we just installed those, so it could have been taking place beforehand." His voice carries the frustration of confirmation rather than surprise. "I think it was placed in your briefcase at work, and that means you need to be very careful around your parents-in-law." He sighs, the sound heavy with responsibility. "The patrol car will come by every hour until midnight. I've arranged for another to take the overnight shift."

"Thank you." The words feel inadequate for the protection he's orchestrating far beyond professional obligation.

"I could come over?" his voice drops lower.

The implication hangs between us, unspoken but clear.

"No, no, it's fine. Should I be doing anything differently?" I hate how vulnerable the question sounds, how it betrays my growing fear.

"For now, stick to routine. Act normal." A pause follows. "But be ready to document anything suspicious."

After we hang up, I stand in my kitchen—the heart of what should be my sanctuary—feeling exposed from all sides. The cameras Lucas installed offer the illusion of security while reminding me of the violation that necessitated them. The patrol car in my driveway announces to the entire neighborhood that something is wrong here.

My phone shows the security app—six views of my empty house. Front door. Back door. Garage. Living room. Upstairs hallway. Bedroom approach. All clear. All monitored. All useless against someone who's already anticipating my every move.

A new determination rises through the fear. I've spent days reacting—to the letters, to the camera, to the forged therapy notes, to the sabotaged car. Always one step behind. Always the victim in someone else's plot.

No more.

Time to set my own trap.

I hear Lily's key in the front door at 9:17 p.m. From the security app, I watch her enter, backpack slung over one shoulder, phone in hand. She looks like any teenager returning from a study session—slightly rumpled, tired, distracted.

"Hey," she calls, heading toward the kitchen where I've started cooking —a simple pasta sauce, the normalcy of it a performance for her benefit.

"Hey yourself." I keep my tone light, casual. "How was the project?"

“Fine. Got most of it done.” She drops her backpack on a chair, peers into the pot I’m stirring. “You okay? You look tired.”

The concern sounds genuine. Is it? Or is this another performance in our household theater of deception? Has she forgotten our fight? Or has she decided to put it aside?

“Headache.” I touch my bruised forehead—not a lie. “I think I’m going to take something and turn in early.”

Her eyes narrow slightly. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It’s been a day.” I offer a weak smile. “My doctor prescribed sleeping pills a while back. I think tonight’s the night to use them.”

I rummage in the cabinet, producing the bottle of pills. I’ve never taken one—never been able to surrender consciousness in a house where I don’t feel safe—but Lily doesn’t know that.

“These knock me out completely,” I continue, shaking two pills into my palm. “Eight solid hours of nothing. Exactly what I need right now.”

I finish the pasta dish and serve her a plate, then make a show of filling a glass with water, placing the pills in my mouth, swallowing. They sit under my tongue, not down my throat—a sleight of hand learned from years of taking vitamins I dislike as a child.

“You sure you’re okay?” Lily asks, and again I can’t tell if her concern is genuine or performance.

“I will be after some sleep.” I rinse my glass, set it in the sink. “Help yourself to more pasta if you’re still hungry. I’m going upstairs.”

In my bedroom, I position myself carefully—covers pulled up, hair arranged on the pillow, eyes closed but not sealed shut. One hand hidden beneath the blanket, clutching my phone with the security app open and recording. The sleeping pills rest in a tissue on my nightstand, evidence of my deception.

Now I wait.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Time stretches differently in darkness. Minutes expand to hours as I lie perfectly still, breathing rhythmically, one hand curled around my phone beneath the covers. The security app glows faintly—six rectangles showing different angles of my silent house. Nothing moves except the digital clock in the corner, counting seconds that feel like individual eternities. Occasional creaks punctuate the silence—the house settling, the refrigerator cycling on, the wind testing windows. Or footsteps disguised as normal house noises?

The patrol car's presence passing by outside offers little comfort.

I keep checking. 1:17 a.m. 1:43 a.m. 1:58 a.m. Time crawls forward while my muscles grow stiff from enforced stillness. The urge to shift position, to relieve the numbness in my shoulder, grows nearly unbearable. But I remain motionless, eyes barely cracked open, watching the screen beneath the covers.

At precisely 2:04 a.m., movement catches my attention. The upper right rectangle—hallway camera—shows Lily's bedroom door opening. My breath stops. Heart accelerates. On screen, a slender figure emerges—dark hair loose around her shoulders, phone clutched in one hand. She moves with careful deliberation, each footstep placed to minimize noise.

I switch to another camera view—the one overlooking the stairs. Lily pauses at the top, head tilted as if listening. Checking if I'm truly asleep? Looking for the patrol car outside? Her face remains in shadow, unreadable in the dim glow of the nightlight we keep in the hallway.

But she doesn’t descend the stairs. Instead, she turns toward my bedroom.

I quickly switch back to the hallway camera. Watch as she approaches my door with measured steps. See her hesitate, hand hovering over the knob. Then, with painful slowness, she pushes the door open.

I close my eyes nearly completely, leaving just the narrowest slit to see through. The real Lily now enters my peripheral vision. I maintain the deep, rhythmic breathing of sleep. My pulse hammers so loudly in my ears I fear she might hear it.

She approaches like a ghost—silent, cautious. The faint blue glow of her phone screen illuminates her face from below, creating hollow shadows where her eyes should be. She stops beside my bed, looking down at my supposedly sleeping form. For a long, terrible moment, she simply stands there, watching. Then she raises her phone.

The camera shutter sound is disabled, but I know what she’s doing. Taking photos of me “sleeping.” Documenting me in my most vulnerable state. For what purpose? To send to someone?

She takes several photos, adjusting angles slightly. Then she moves to the nightstand where the sleeping pills sit prominently displayed. Another photo.

I fight the urge to confront her immediately. Wait. Let her finish. Let her leave. Then follow.

Finally, seemingly satisfied with her collection of images, she backs away from the bed. Her movements remain deliberate, careful not to wake me. The door closes with hardly a click behind her.

I count to thirty, tracking her on the security app as she moves down the hallway toward her room. Then I slide silently from the bed, feet finding the floor without sound. Years of trying not to wake Benjamin during his on-call nights taught me how to move through darkness without detection.

I reach the door just as Lily’s hand closes on the handle at the other end of the hall. Perfect timing. I step into the hallway and flip the light switch, flooding the space with sudden brightness.

“What were you doing in my room?”

My voice cuts through the silence. Lily freezes, one hand still on her doorknob, back to me. Caught.

Slowly, she turns. Her face cycles through emotions faster than I can catalog them—shock, fear, calculation, then something that might be shame

or might be performance.

“Emma.” My name emerges as a whisper. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Clearly.” I take a step toward her, keeping my voice low but intense. “You didn’t answer my question. Why were you taking photos of me while I slept?”

Her hand tightens around her phone, knuckles whitening with pressure. For a moment, I think she might throw it, smash it, destroy the evidence. Instead, she nearly drops it as her composure suddenly crumbles.

“I’m trying to help you.” Tears fill her eyes, spill over onto cheeks gone pale with emotion. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.” I maintain my position, not moving closer despite her tears. I’ve seen her cry before—like the night when she claimed I was controlling and paranoid. Tears can be weapons too.

“You’re—” She swallows hard, voice breaking. “I’m scared that you’re having a breakdown. Just like Mom did.”

“What are you talking about?” The question comes sharper than intended.

“Mom had episodes. Before she died.” The words tumble out between stifled sobs. “Paranoia. Insomnia. Accusing people of things. Dad kept it quiet, but I saw everything. I heard them fighting. Her wild accusations. Her conspiracy theories.”

She takes a shuddering breath, continues: “Then she started taking sleeping pills. Just like you’re doing now. She’d go days without real sleep, then crash for fourteen hours. It got worse and worse until—”

“The photos.” I struggle to keep my voice steady. “Why take photos while I sleep?”

“Evidence.” Lily wipes tears with the back of her hand. “For when you need help. Real help. So they’ll believe me this time.” Her voice cracks on the last words. “No one believed me about Mom.”

I stand frozen in the harsh hallway light, security cameras documenting our confrontation from multiple angles. Lily’s tears seem genuine—her body shakes with the force of suppressed sobs, her breathing ragged and uneven. But is it even real? Or is this another performance from the girl who keeps a journal of disturbing drawings? Who lies about where she goes and whom she meets? Who complained to Robert behind my back about my “issues”?

“Please.” She takes a step toward me, one hand outstretched. “I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m trying to save you. I can’t lose another parent. You’re all I have now.”

The terrible irony of our situation hits me—each of us believes we’re protecting the other while suspecting the worst. Each collecting evidence against the other. Each certain our version of reality is correct.

“We need to talk.” I gesture toward the stairs. “Downstairs. Now. All of this—the photos, the camera in my room, the letters—we need to figure it out together.”

She nods, relief visibly washing over her. “You believe me?”

Do I? The question remains unanswered. Because the truth is, I don’t know what to believe any more. Every fact I uncover reveals three new questions. Every answer branches into contradictory possibilities. Can I share with her what I really believe? That Alice might still be alive? Can I share with her that a woman who looked like her mother was seen outside of our house recently? I’m not sure, especially when I’m certain she’s sharing more than she should with Robert and Margaret. Plus, I can’t give her false hope that her mother is still alive, and then pull it back again if we find out that it isn’t true. I can’t do that to her.

But today is not about me. It’s about Lily, who for all her bravado and sarcasm is still a young woman whose world has been rewritten by strangers and courts and therapists and me, the last-woman-standing in a collapsed family photo. I can’t tell her what I don’t know. But I can tell her what I’ve seen, what I have been told, what I suspect. I owe her that much, even if it means destroying the fragile peace we’ve constructed. I owe her the full story, or at least the version I have right now.

* * *

I clear my throat, the way teachers do when they want the floor, and take the armchair across from her. She doesn’t look up. Her thumb flicks the screen on her phone in a slow, meditative rhythm.

“Lily, there’s something I need to say.” My voice sounds stripped, abraded, like I’ve sandpapered off the emotions to get to the bare words.

She lowers the phone, resting it on her knee. “It’s about the letters, isn’t it?”

Of course, it is. It always is. But it’s more than that. “I haven’t told you everything,” I say, and watch the way her eyes narrow, calculating. She’s not angry—she’s already skipped past anger to the next logical step. Mistrust. “I had to be sure before I said anything.”

She unfolds herself, setting the phone on the coffee table, fingers steepled. “Go on.”

“I think your mom might be alive,” I say. The sentence lands in the room like a thrown knife—no noise, just sudden, dangerous stillness. Lily is motionless, lips parted, but otherwise neutral. She’s too practiced to give anything away.

“Why?”

“I know this is a lot, and probably hard to believe or even understand. It is for me too. But she was caught on camera leaving one of these letters in our mailbox recently, or at least someone looking just like her. Detective Ramirez told me this. Also, there was a fingerprint on one of the envelopes that was a perfect match for your mother.”

Lily’s composure holds. She tilts her head, scrutinizing me as if weighing the truth of my words against some private metric. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

I want to say because I was scared, or because I hoped it would go away, or because sometimes love is just a series of controlled lies. But all I say is, “Because I didn’t want you to hope for something that might not be real.”

She smiles, sharp as glass. “So instead you let me google ‘my mother’s murder’ in the dark?”

I almost laugh at that, almost cry, but instead I reach for her hand. She flinches—then lets me hold it. Her palm is cold and dry, and I realize she’s been bracing for this moment since the first letter appeared.

“Lily,” I say, “whatever happens, I’m here. I’m not going to leave you.”

She squeezes my fingers, once. “I know.” But her mouth twitches, as if she’s holding back a hundred other sentences.

We sit like that for a minute, the two of us, suspended between certainty and total collapse.

My own beliefs feel less like convictions and more like temporary scaffolding, ready to topple with the faintest breeze of new evidence.

But the clock doesn’t stop. Life doesn’t pause for emotional clarity.

I stand, reluctant to let go of her hand, but needing to move, needing to prepare for what comes next. As my hand slides out of hers, she suddenly grabs onto mine again.

“There’s something I need to tell you too. I haven’t been honest either.”

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THIRTY-FIVE

Lily pushes open the door to her room. The bed is unmade, clothes spill from a laundry basket, textbooks stand in neat stacks on the nightstand. Normal teenage room. She motions me inside and leads me to her desk.

“I should have told you about this sooner,” she says.

She pulls out the bottom drawer. It sticks slightly. Together we ease it open. Pens and paper clips sit neatly. Then Lily reaches behind the back corner of the drawer, presses and hears the click of a hidden latch. “I found this compartment last year,” she admits, sounding small. She lifts a false bottom and reveals a stack of envelopes, each stamped Florida State Correctional Facility.

My breath catches. “Benjamin?” I whisper.

Lily’s cheeks flush. Her embarrassment is raw. “I didn’t want to worry you,” she says. “I thought I could handle it alone.”

With trembling fingers, I lift the stack and open the top envelope. The paper inside is cheap prison stationery, thin and slightly rough. The handwriting is unmistakable—that precise, measured script I used to find on anniversary cards and grocery lists. Benjamin’s handwriting. My husband’s words, sent from behind bars.

The date at the top reads three months ago. The greeting makes my stomach clench: ‘My sweet Lily-bear.’ His childhood nickname for her.

I scan the first paragraph—ordinary father-daughter catch-up. Then my own name jumps off the page.

Keep documenting Emma's behavior as we discussed. The mood swings, the paranoia, the times she speaks to herself when she thinks no one is listening. Your observations could be crucial later. Remember, mentally unstable people often hide their symptoms from everyone except those closest to them.

My hands shake so badly the paper rattles. I move to the next letter, dated two weeks later.

You're doing the right thing, sweetheart. Emma's family history of mental illness means we need to be vigilant. The photos you described—her staring out windows for hours, the disorganized state of her office, the pills she thinks you don't know about—all of it matters. Keep the journal detailed. Specific dates, times, behaviors.

I flip through more letters, each one worse than the last. Benjamin describing me as potentially dangerous. Suggesting I might be having psychotic episodes. Instructing Lily to document every unusual behavior, every moment of stress or anxiety, every time I seem "disconnected from reality."

The final letter in the stack is addressed differently—not to Lily but to someone named Jenna. I squint at the postmark, just three weeks ago. The letter inside is brief:

Jenna, thank you for forwarding these to Lily. I know it's an inconvenience, but until Emma's condition stabilizes, it's safer for everyone if she doesn't know we're in contact. Lily says you're a true friend. Please continue to be her lifeline to me.

—Benjamin Stone

A forwarding system. A secret channel of communication. My fingers go numb around the papers.

Everything Benjamin told me in prison—his warnings about Lily being dangerous, about checking for the missing pages of her journal, about protecting myself—it was all a lie. Or worse, a double game. Warning me about Lily while simultaneously directing her to build a case against my sanity. Was it him all along?

Again?

He could have had someone send those letters to me. Just to drive me crazy. Because I put him away. Or maybe even worse, just because he can.

I dump the letters onto the bed and photograph each one with my phone. My hands are steady now—the shock giving way to cold, methodical anger. I note dates, specific instructions, the way Benjamin phrases his suggestions as concern rather than manipulation.

“I’m sorry,” Lily says.

I touch her shoulder gently. “Don’t be. You were being manipulated by your father. It’s not your fault. I’m just glad you finally told me. It makes a lot of sense now.”

“Thanks for not being mad,” she says with a small smile.

When I finish, I reach for my phone and dial Lucas’s number. His voicemail picks up—he’s probably sleeping, I realize. I wait for the beep, forcing my voice to remain calm.

“Lucas, it’s Emma. I’m sorry for calling you in the middle of the night. I need to see you immediately. I’ve found something—letters from Benjamin to Lily. He’s been…” My voice nearly breaks. I swallow hard. “He’s been playing us against each other. Telling me to fear her while telling her to document evidence that I’m mentally unstable. Please call me back. I’d rather not discuss this at the station.”

I hang up, staring at the pile of betrayal on Lily’s bedspread. My phone buzzes almost immediately. Lucas.

“Emma? I just missed your call. What’s going on?” His voice is hoarse, like he just woke up, which he probably did.

“Not on the phone.” I glance toward Lily, suddenly paranoid about listening devices. “Can we meet somewhere? A coffee shop, maybe. Somewhere neither of us usually goes.”

“Bayshore. I can meet you there for coffee when they open at eight.”

“I’ll be there.”

I hang up. Lily gives me a look, and I have a feeling we’re thinking the same. How we’ll face this together—finally on the same side.

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THIRTY-SIX

Bayshore Coffee hunches between a dry cleaner and an empty storefront, its faded awning barely visible from the street. The bell above the door jingles as I push inside, scanning the nearly empty space. Mismatched chairs crowd around wobbly tables. Student artwork hangs on walls the color of weak tea. In the back corner, as far from windows as possible, I claim a table and wait.

When Lucas arrives, his eyes sweep the room with professional assessment before settling on me. Even in jeans and a rumpled button-down, he moves like a man accustomed to people getting out of his way.

"You ordered already?" he asks, nodding at my untouched coffee.

"I needed something to do with my hands." The cup sits cooling, forgotten once I placed it down.

Lucas settles across from me. "Your message sounded urgent."

I reach for my phone and show him the photos I took of the letters.

"They're letters from Benjamin to Lily. She kept them from me. They were hidden in her desk, but she showed them to me last night." My voice sounds mechanical, stripped of emotion. "Zoom in and you can read them."

Lucas's face remains professionally neutral as he grabs my phone. His eyes move methodically across the screen, taking in Benjamin's words without reaction. When he reads the second letter, something shifts in his expression—a slight tightening around the eyes, a barely perceptible tension in his jaw. By the third letter, he's no longer meeting my gaze when he looks up.

"You found these?" he asks, his voice carefully measured.

“Lily gave them to me.” The words taste bitter. “After everything he said to me about Lily being dangerous. About needing to protect myself from her. Meanwhile, he’s been writing to her for months, telling her I’m mentally unstable. Instructing her to document my behavior.”

Lucas sets down the phone, his movements exact, controlled. Too controlled.

“You knew about this,” I say. Not a question. The realization crashes through me. “You knew he was writing to her.”

“No.” He shakes his head, but there’s something guarded in his eyes now. “Not this specifically. But.”

“But what?” I lean forward. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Lucas sighs, reaches into his jacket pocket, and pulls out his phone. “Benjamin’s been writing to me too. Emails, mainly. Sometimes calls from the prison.”

The floor seems to tilt beneath me. “About what?”

He unlocks his phone, taps through to his email, then slides it across the table. The gesture mirrors mine with the letters—an exchange of betrayals.

The email displayed is dated two weeks ago. From Benjamin.

> Lucas, I appreciate your continued attention to my concerns regarding my family’s welfare. As I mentioned in our last call, Emma’s behavior has become increasingly erratic. The sleep disturbances I warned you about seem to be worsening—Lily reports hearing her wandering the house at night, talking to herself. I worry about the safety of both women, given Emma’s family history of mental illness (which she has never been forthcoming about).

I scroll down, then to other emails in the thread. Each one worse than the last. Benjamin describing paranoid behaviors I’ve never exhibited. Suggesting I might be having hallucinations. Expressing concern that I might harm Lily during a “psychotic break.”

“He’s playing both sides.” Lucas takes his phone back, expression grim. “Telling you Lily is dangerous while telling me you’re unstable. Telling

Lily to document your behavior while reporting that same fabricated behavior to me."

"Why?" My voice cracks on the single syllable. "What does he gain from this?"

Lucas shakes his head. "Control, maybe. Or he's setting up grounds for an appeal—claiming he was wrongfully convicted while his ex-wife and daughter were the unstable ones."

"Everyone's manipulating me." The realization rises like bile in my throat. "Benjamin. Lily. Margaret and Robert. Even you."

"Emma, I'm not—"

"Aren't you?" I cut him off, anger suddenly burning through the shock. "You've been receiving these emails for how long? And never thought to mention them? Never wondered if Benjamin might be doing the exact same thing to me and Lily?"

"I thought he was genuinely concerned. He's very convincing." Lucas reaches across the table, fingers extended toward mine. "I'm sorry. I should have seen it sooner."

I grip my coffee cup so hard the plastic lid suddenly pops off. Hot liquid splashes across the table, across Lucas's outstretched hand. He jerks back, but I remain frozen, watching coffee spread across the laminate surface, dripping onto the worn linoleum floor.

"Everyone's manipulating me," I repeat, voice just above a whisper.

Lucas reaches for my hand, his own still wet with coffee. "Let me help you, Emma. We can figure this out together."

I pull away, grabbing my phone with a quick, jerky movement. Coffee soaks into my sleeve, but I hardly notice. The need to escape—from this table, from Lucas's sympathy, from the suffocating web of manipulation closing around me—overwhelms everything else.

"Emma, wait—"

But I'm already standing. "I need to go."

"Go where?" Lucas rises too, concern etched across his face. "Emma, you shouldn't be alone with this. Let's talk through it."

"I'm always alone with this." The truth of it hits me fully for the first time. "That's the point, isn't it? Everyone working to isolate me, make me doubt myself, question my sanity."

"That's not what I'm doing."

But his protests fade behind me as I push through the door, bell jingling with false cheerfulness above my head. I leave him standing there, coffee still dripping from the table edge, the ghost of my presence lingering in the half-empty cup I didn’t bother to take with me.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

I step into the familiar marble foyer of the Stones' penthouse. Ever since that last confrontation with Robert, I've skirted this space as if it were a minefield. Now I clutch the Belmont proposal in my bag—a flimsy professional excuse for showing up on a Saturday. In truth, I need to face them both: to see Robert, yes, but even more to confront Margaret and learn what part she's playing in Benjamin's twisted game from behind bars. Tell them they may as well stop. I know what they're doing and it won't work.

The soft glow of recessed lighting picks out every crease in my hastily chosen suit. A dark coffee stain mars my sleeve cuff—a souvenir from my meeting with Lucas, reminders of the revelations still simmering in my mind. The housekeeper and a couple of staff glance up as I pass, their expressions flickering through surprise, curiosity, even unease. Word travels fast in the Stone household, especially when it involves the family's darkest secrets.

"Emma!" Janice, Margaret's longtime assistant, rises from behind a glass console in the living room. Her polite smile falters. "We weren't expecting you today."

"Just dropping off some files," I lie automatically, my voice sounding too high, too brittle. "Is Robert around?"

"Study, with Margaret." Janice's eyes flick toward the corridor lined with floor-to-ceiling windows. "They've been in there almost an hour. Looks intense."

I nod and step into the long hallway. On one side, tastefully curated art and a polished mahogany console; on the other, the Bay's glittering water.

At the end, the study door stands ajar. Voices drift out—Robert's measured tone clashing with Margaret's precise clarity.

I slow as I approach, intending to turn back until I hear my name.

"…Emma's influence on her," Margaret is saying. "We have to shield Lily from Emma before history repeats itself."

I freeze. History repeats itself? The words hang in the scented air of the penthouse even before I push the door open.

They notice me at once—Robert mid-gesture, Margaret tight-lipped, emotion flickering in her pale blue eyes. For a charged beat we stand framed in the doorway, power and secrets laid bare behind glass walls.

"Emma." Robert recovers first, his professional mask snapping into place. "I didn't know you'd be coming today."

"Evidently." The word slips out sharper than I intend.

He exchanges a look with Margaret, then gathers his papers with a polite nod. "I have a conference call. We'll resume this later, Margaret."

Without another word, he slips past me and out the door. I'm left alone with Margaret at the head of the sleek mahogany table, her manicured hand resting on the polished surface. Her pale blue suit mirrors the cool, calculating glint in her eyes. I've come because I want her on my side. I'm convinced she will be when I tell her how Benjamin is orchestrating every move from prison, manipulating us all. But now as I stand there, another question is all of a sudden more pressing.

"What did you mean?" I step fully into the room. "About history repeating itself?"

Margaret's lips curve into something that resembles a smile but lacks any warmth. "I think you already know."

"I don't, actually." I close the door behind me. "Why don't you explain it?"

She stands and begins to circle the table, each stride measured, predatory. "Alice knew."

Just two words, and the floor goes soft beneath me.

"Knew what?"

"About you and Benjamin." Margaret's voice drops lower, cold with precision. "About the affair."

My knees threaten to give way. I grip the back of a chair for support. "There was no—"

“Don’t.” She silences me with a look. “The Coronado Hotel. February tenth, six years ago. Three months before Alice died.”

Heat sears through my denial. The drab beige walls of that room. Benjamin’s hands, steady one moment, shaking the next. The promised divorce that never came. The shame trailing me like a storm cloud.

“It was once,” I manage, distant even to my own ears. “Just once.”

“Once was enough.” Margaret’s gaze never wavers. “Alice hired a private investigator after finding a text on his phone. She had hotel receipts, photographs, evidence.”

My stomach plummets. “She knew before she died?”

Margaret’s lips tighten. “She confronted him—he confessed. We learned this six months ago during a visit. It suddenly makes sense why he told us to hire you. He never showed any interest in our agency and all of a sudden he tells us about you.” She stops, presses a fingertip to the table.

I shake my head, tears threatening. My world tilts. No wonder Robert and Margaret have kept their distance. They blame me—maybe even for Alice’s death. I’ve kept this secret from everyone for years, certain Benjamin would keep it too. I even lied to myself. It would devastate Lily to know.

“He told me she was cruel, that they were separating, that she was unfaithful. I believed him. I never imagined… murder.”

Margaret’s eyebrow arches. “How convenient for you both that she ended up dead, right? You were the motive.”

“I didn’t know about the investigation,” I whisper, my hand slipping to the wall—its cool marble the only anchor. “I thought I was protecting Lily.”

“You were the motive, Emma,” Margaret says quietly. “The catalyst for everything. And now Lily knows too. We told her today. She deserves the truth.”

With a final look, she crosses to the door, her heels clicking a precise rhythm on the marble floor. She pauses, hand on the handle, then glances back.

Then she’s gone, leaving me alone in Margaret’s luxurious study, my narrative splintered. Outside as I rush down the hallway, staff avert their eyes. Inside of me, I face the crushing realization: I’m not just Benjamin’s second wife or Lily’s reluctant guardian. I was the other woman—the motive. The catalyst for a chain of events that ended with Alice at the bottom of the Bay, and Benjamin behind bars.

And everyone knows but me.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

I know something's wrong before I even unlock the front door. The house sits too still behind its blank windows. No lights. No shadows move behind curtains. My key turns in the new lock with a decisive click that echoes in the quiet street.

"Lily?" I call into the darkness, my voice already knowing the answer. No response comes. Just the hollow sound of an empty house that until today held two people pretending to be family.

I flip on lights as I move through the entryway, illuminating spaces that suddenly feel too large, too exposed. My footsteps echo against hardwood. The silence has weight, substance. It follows me up the stairs toward Lily's bedroom, where the door stands open—an invitation never extended before.

The sight stops me in the doorway. Dresser drawers hang open, their contents gone. Closet doors reveal empty hangers swinging slightly in the draft from the air conditioning. The bed is stripped down to its mattress, corners pulled free as if in haste. On the desk, dust outlines mark where her laptop and favorite art supplies once sat. All that remains are the heavier items—furniture, empty shelves, the architecture textbooks she apparently didn't want to take.

My hand presses against the doorframe for support as I back away, descending the stairs on unsteady legs. In the kitchen, a single sheet of paper sits on the counter, weighed down by the salt shaker. Lily's handwriting—precise, controlled, so much like Alice's—delivers the final confirmation:

I’m moving in with Grandma and Grandpa. It’s better this way.

No explanation. No goodbye. Just surgical extraction from my life, clean as one of Benjamin’s incisions.

I grab my phone, dial Lily’s number. It rings four times before kicking to voicemail. I hang up, call again immediately. Same result. Third attempt. Fourth. Each ring echoing in the empty kitchen, mocking my desperation.

After the sixth call, I give up. My fingers hover over Lucas’s number next, then drop away. After everything I’ve learned today—the letters, the emails, Margaret’s revelation—who can I trust? What would I even say? My stepdaughter has left me for her grandparents after discovering I had an affair with her father before her mother died?

I pace the house instead, moving from room to room as if seeking something missing beyond Lily herself. The walls seem to inch closer with each circuit. The ceiling lowers. The air thickens until breathing requires conscious effort.

In the living room, I pause before the liquor cabinet. Inside sits a bottle of cabernet I’ve been saving for some special occasion—some moment worth celebrating in a life that’s offered few such moments lately. I grab it. The first glass disappears too quickly, red washing down my throat in gulps rather than sips. The second glass I carry with me through another circuit of the house, pausing before photographs on the walls.

Lily and me at her eighteenth birthday, my arm around her shoulders, her smile not reaching her eyes. Lily at last year’s art exhibition, standing proudly beside her architectural rendering that won regional recognition. Lily and Benjamin in an older photo I kept because it was the only one where she looked truly happy.

The third glass empties as these thoughts spiral tighter. The fourth glass I take to the couch, where I sink into cushions that seem determined to swallow me whole. The empty house creaks and settles around me, its familiar sounds now sinister in the context of absolute solitude.

I don’t remember closing my eyes. Don’t remember setting down the wineglass. But suddenly I’m jerking awake to the unmistakable sound of breaking glass, the living room now pitch black around me.

My phone says 2:17 a.m. I've been asleep for hours. The power is out—no lights respond when I fumble for switches. Outside, the street lamps still burn, so it's just my house affected. Circuit breaker, perhaps. Or something else.

I activate my phone's flashlight, illuminating a path through the darkness. The breaking glass sounded like it came from upstairs. My bedroom. I climb the steps slowly, phone held before me like a talisman, casting dramatic shadows across the walls.

"Hello?" My voice sounds small, swallowed by darkness. No response comes. The cameras on my phone show nothing. They're all out because the power is out.

My bedroom door stands open, though I always close it. The beam of light sweeps across the threshold, revealing my bed still made from yesterday, my reading glasses on the nightstand, everything apparently untouched.

Then I angle the light downward, and my heart stops.

On the floor before me, arranged in a perfect circle, are all the framed photographs from throughout the house. Lily and me at her birthday. Lily at her art exhibition. Lily and Benjamin. Every single image of us together, carefully positioned like some ritual artifact. But that's not what sends ice through my veins.

It's the eyes. In every photograph my eyes and her eyes have been scratched out with something sharp—violent, intentional gouges through glass and paper. The damage is methodical, thorough. Even in group photos, only Lily's and my eyes have been obliterated, leaving hollow, scratched voids staring upward from the circle.

I stumble backward, nearly dropping my phone. My back hits the wall as panic floods my system. Someone has been in my house. Someone gathered these photos, arranged this display, vandalized these images with violent intent.

I spin around, sweeping the light across every corner, expecting to find someone watching, waiting. The beam catches only familiar furniture, shadows, empty spaces. I back toward the stairs, unwilling to turn my back on the room with its circle of mutilated photographs.

As I reach the top step, my foot kicks something small that skitters across the wooden floor with a metallic sound. I freeze, then slowly direct my light toward it.

A cufflink. Silver, gleaming in my phone’s beam. I bend down, fingers trembling as I pick it up. Turn it over. I know exactly whose cufflink this is.

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THIRTY-NINE

The light in the bridal suite is the kind that makes everything look like it's been dipped in honey. Gauzy white curtains filter the last of the evening sun into something soft and gold, and the room itself is small—too small, maybe, for a wedding night, but Robert had insisted on the historic suite at the Vinoy, and Benjamin hadn't argued, and so here we are. My dress pools around my feet in a spill of white silk, the lace bodice tight across my ribs, and I can't quite remember how to breathe normally in it any more. Six hours in this thing. My back aches. My feet are numb. But I'm so happy. I have just married the man of my dreams.

Benjamin stands at the bedside table, working at his cufflinks.

Left wrist first. His fingers are steady—surgeon's fingers, long and sure—and the silver link slides free with a faint click against the wood. The sound is precise. Deliberate. He moves on to the right wrist without pausing, without looking up. Click. The second cufflink comes free. He places it beside the first, and I watch his hands adjust them—a millimeter to the left, a breath of space between them—until they're parallel. Perfectly parallel. Two silver points on dark wood, catching the last of the gold light.

I stare at them a beat too long.

My mother would say I'm overthinking. My mother isn't here. The room is quiet except for the distant thrum of the reception three floors below us, music bleeding through the old building's bones, and the sound of Benjamin's breathing, which is even and calm the way it always is. The way it was when he proposed on the dock behind his parents' summerhouse, the water dark and still below us. The way it was this morning when he stood at

the altar in his charcoal suit, watching me walk toward him with my father's arm linked through mine.

My father cried.

Benjamin shrugs his dress shirt off his shoulders now, and the movement is fluid, practiced. Not hurried. Not careless. He turns and hangs the shirt over the back of the chair beside the bed, and then—this is the thing, this is what I can't stop watching—he smooths the collar flat with two fingers. A press, an adjustment. The shirt hangs perfectly centered, the sleeves aligned, as if he might need to put it back on in exactly five minutes.

He turns to face me.

I blush.

My fingers find the seam of my skirt and press into the fabric. The silk is cool and heavy under my touch. My wedding ring—new, still strange on my finger—catches the light and throws it back in a thin white line across the wall. I twist it. Twist it back. The diamond cuts into the side of my middle finger, and I don't stop.

"You're doing that thing," Benjamin says. His voice is low, warm. Familiar.

"What thing?"

"The ring thing." He smiles. The smile reaches his eyes, which is something I catalog without meaning to: Benjamin's smiles come in gradients. This one is a seven out of ten. Genuine but measured. "You've been doing it since the ceremony."

"I haven't."

"You have. First during your vows, then when my father made that toast about legacy, and then again when the cake was being cut." He takes a step toward me. Another. "It's your tell, Emma. You fidget when you're thinking too hard."

I want to argue, but he's right, and we both know it. My hand drops to my side. The ring is warm against my skin.

"I wasn't thinking too hard," I say. "I was just—"

"Analyzing." He reaches me, and his hand finds my bare shoulder. His palm is warm, dry. The touch is light but certain, and something in my chest gives way—a knot I didn't realize was pulled so tight—and I exhale. The sound is louder than I mean it to be. Relief, undignified.

Benjamin's thumb traces a small circle on my collarbone. "You know what I realized today? During the reception?"

“What?”

“I lost a button.” He says it like it’s the punchline to a joke I should already know, his voice dropping to something dry and quiet. “Middle of my speech. Felt it go. Probably rolled under someone’s chair and is currently being vacuumed into the Vinoy’s historic dust collection.”

I laugh. The sound surprises me—bright, real—and the knot loosens another half-turn. “That’s what you realized? Not that you just married me? Not that your father gave a thirty-minute toast about the Stone name that made half the room check their watches?”

“I realized that too.” His hand slides from my shoulder to the nape of my neck, fingers threading through the hair there, and the weight of his touch is exactly right. Not too much. Not too little. Benjamin has always known how to calibrate pressure. “But the button was more immediately concerning. Do you know how hard it is to find a matching button for a Tom Ford suit at nine o’clock on a Saturday in St. Petersburg?”

“Tragic,” I say. “We should call the manager.”

“Already did. He was very sympathetic. Offered me a complimentary champagne flute with the hotel logo on it.”

I laugh again, and this time it sits easier in my throat. The room feels warmer. The gold light has deepened to amber, and Benjamin is close enough that I can smell his cologne—something expensive and subtle that his father picked out, because Robert Stone has opinions about everything, including how his son should smell on his wedding day. I can taste the champagne still on my tongue, faint and sweet.

Benjamin’s hand moves to the back of my dress. His fingers find the first hook—small, metal, sewn into the lace with military precision by a bridal consultant who looked like she hadn’t slept since the Clinton administration —and he pauses.

“May I?”

It’s such a Benjamin question. Formal, even now. Even here, in this honey-lit room with the reception still rolling beneath us and my heart doing something complicated behind my ribs.

I nod. Turn away from him.

His fingers work the first hook free. Then the second. Each one comes loose with that same precise click—not as loud as the cufflinks against wood, but there, a sound I can follow in the quiet. The dress loosens across

my back by degrees. Cool air finds my skin where the lace had been sealed tight for hours, and I shiver.

Benjamin's hands are steady. Methodical. Left side, then right, working down the line of hooks like he's closing an incision—suture by suture, perfect tension—except he's opening me instead of closing me, and the thought is so distinctly Benjamin that I almost say it aloud. Medical metaphors. He can't help himself. Even here, even now, his brain translates everything into the language of his hands.

I keep my eyes on the bedside table.

The cufflinks sit where he left them. Two silver points, side by side, perfectly parallel. The light hits them differently now as the room darkens—sharper, colder—and they look less like jewelry and more like instruments. Precision tools. Things designed for a specific purpose, placed exactly where they belong.

I can't look away.

Behind me, Benjamin's hands move. The dress sighs open across my shoulders, the weight of the silk shifting, and I feel exposed in a way that has nothing to do with skin. There's a vulnerability in being undressed by someone who does everything with such care. Such control. Benjamin doesn't rush. Doesn't fumble. Each hook comes free on the first try, his fingers finding the metal without looking, and I stand perfectly still and let it happen.

The distant reception hums below us. Someone is laughing—a bright, carrying sound that rises through the floorboards and fills the space between Benjamin's measured movements. Music thrums, bass-heavy, the kind of wedding playlist that Robert insisted on because it was "timeless" and "dignified" and also, not coincidentally, full of songs from his own wedding thirty-five years ago. I can make out the melody if I concentrate. Something with strings. Something that makes the old building feel older.

Benjamin's hands reach the small of my back. The last few hooks. The dress is barely holding on now, and I feel the first real slide of silk against my skin as the bodice starts to give way. Cool air everywhere. Benjamin's breath against the back of my neck, warm and even.

I keep my eyes on the cufflinks.

They haven't moved. They won't move unless someone moves them. Benjamin set them down with the same care he brings to everything—the same care he's using now on the hooks of my wedding dress, the same care

he used hanging his shirt over the chair, smoothing the collar flat—and they will stay exactly where he placed them until he decides otherwise.

Two points of silver light. Side by side. Perfectly still.

I think about the button he lost. The one that came loose during his speech and rolled away under some stranger's chair, vanishing into the machinery of the evening. A small failure of control in a day designed for perfect control. Benjamin noticed it. Of course he noticed it. Benjamin notices everything. The missing button, the ring on my finger twisting back and forth, the way my breath changes when he touches me.

His hands find the last hook. The dress surrenders.

The silk slides down my arms, heavy and sudden, and I have to catch it before it hits the floor—instinct, or vanity, or the simple understanding that this thing cost more than my first car—and Benjamin helps me, his hands steadying the fabric, guiding it down until it pools around my feet in a second white sea. I step out of it. Stand in my underwear and the stockings that are cutting off the circulation to my toes and probably leaving permanent marks on my thighs, and none of that matters because Benjamin's hands are on my waist now, turning me toward him, and his eyes are dark in the fading light.

But I look past him. One last glance.

The cufflinks are still there. Two silver points on dark wood. Unmoved. Unchanging.

Benjamin's mouth finds my neck, just below my ear, and his breath is warm and his hands are sure and the distant reception rolls on beneath us, music and laughter rising through the floor like the heartbeat of something much larger than this room, this moment, this marriage.

I close my eyes. Let myself feel his hands. Let myself forget, for one breath, about the cufflinks on the table, perfectly parallel, catching what's left of the light.

They'll still be there in the morning.

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FORTY

My tires screech against pavement as I take the corner onto Bayshore Boulevard too fast. The waterfront mansions blur past—monuments to old Tampa money and the secrets it can buy. I feel naked, exposed. Scared.

The building housing the Stone penthouse reveals itself gradually—twenty-three stories of gleaming glass and brushed steel that catch the sunlight like a diamond necklace. My 2008 Honda Civic, with its peeling clear coat and the dent above the left rear wheel, looks shabby against this backdrop of wealth and permanence, like a stray dog that's wandered onto royal grounds and left muddy pawprints on marble floors.

No time for intimidation. I leave the car running, driver's door hanging open as I sprint toward the front entrance. The glass door slides open, admitting me to a foyer larger than my entire first apartment. Crystal chandelier. Marble floors. Fresh flowers on an antique table that probably costs more than my yearly salary.

There's no security guard. Could be away for just a second, maybe he's not here on Sundays, it doesn't matter right now. All that matters is that it means no one to let me in, no one to get the elevator to open for me as he usually does.

I run to the elevators, my heels clicking frantically against the marble floor, and jab at the call button three times. The intercom crackles to life and Margaret's voice meets me, cold as refrigerated vodka.

"Yes?"

"It's Emma," I say, breathless. "It's important." I press my palm against the wall to steady myself, feeling my pulse hammer against the cool

surface.

A long pause follows—long enough for me to count five shallow breaths—before she finally breaks it.

“Fine.” The word drops like a stone, and the elevator begins its descent with a mechanical groan.

As the doors open, revealing the penthouse apartment, I follow the sound of voices—cultured tones, the gentle clinking of silverware against fine china. These are the measured cadences of people whose worlds are perfectly in order.

The dining room doors stand partially open. I shove them wide, momentum carrying me across the threshold, and then freeze.

Before me sits a scene so bizarrely normal it feels staged—the Stone family at a Sunday lunch, crystal glasses catching light from the chandelier, candles flickering in sterling holders. Robert and Margaret occupy opposite ends of the long table. Lily sits on one side, beside a middle-aged man I recognize with a jolt of shock: Professor James Harris, the man from the coffee shop, the psychology professor whose inappropriate touches I photographed.

All four heads turn toward me in perfect synchronization, like actors responding to a director’s cue.

“Emma,” Margaret says, her voice a masterpiece of forced pleasantness. I know she used her phone to buzz me in. It is still clutched in her hand.

Robert stands, his napkin falling forgotten to the floor. His expression cycles quickly through shock, displeasure, and finally careful neutrality. “Emma. We weren’t expecting you.”

I can’t find words immediately. My hair hangs wild around my face. I must look deranged compared to their dining room perfection—Margaret in pearls, Robert in a sports jacket, Lily in a summer dress I’ve never seen before, Harris in tweed despite the Florida heat.

“I need to speak with Lily.” My voice sounds too loud, too rough for this refined space. “It’s urgent.”

Lily stares at her plate, refusing to meet my eyes. Her fingers grip her fork with unnecessary force.

“Perhaps this isn’t the best time.” Robert gestures to their guest. “We’re in the middle of dinner with Professor Harris. Lily’s special college advisor.”

Special. The word hangs in the air, loaded with implications I can't quite decipher.

"We've met." I step further into the room, eyes locked on Harris. "Though we weren't properly introduced when I saw you with Lily at the coffee shop."

Harris's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Ah, you must be the stepmother. Lily mentioned you might have seen us during one of our mentoring sessions." He turns to Robert and Margaret. "I was just explaining to her parents how exceptional Lily's portfolio is. One of the strongest I've seen in twenty years of university admissions."

Parents. Not grandparents. The subtle linguistic shift doesn't escape me—Harris positioning Robert and Margaret as Lily's primary family, erasing me from the equation entirely.

"Lily needs to come with me. Now." I take another step forward. "There's been a situation."

At this, Lily finally looks up, something like fear flashing across her features. "What happened?"

"Not here." I glance meaningfully at Harris, whose hand rests casually near Lily's on the table—too close, too familiar, just as it was in the coffee shop.

"Professor Harris is practically family now, Emma." Margaret's voice carries that precise chill I've heard in boardrooms when she's about to eviscerate someone's campaign proposal. "Whatever you need to say can be said in front of him."

Family. What does that even mean? Is Margaret family to me? If she placed the photos in my bedroom to scare me, is that still considered family? Isn't family supposed to be someone you trust?

Perhaps not.

Is Benjamin family?

"James has been instrumental in securing Lily's future." Robert resumes his seat, gesturing for me to do the same. "He's arranged early acceptance at Pratt Institute with a full scholarship. We were celebrating."

Early acceptance. The application papers I saw them reviewing in the coffee shop. The New York schools Lily hid from me.

"That's not—" I stop, redirect. "Lily. I need to talk to you. You helped me once when I needed it. I'm here to warn you."

The room temperature seems to drop ten degrees. Harris's hand moves to cover Lily's completely, a gesture of protection or restraint, I can't tell which.

"Lily." I focus solely on her, ignoring the others. "I fear you might be in danger."

The silence that follows feels physical, pressing against my skin. Then Lily looks up, meeting my eyes directly for the first time. What I see there isn't guilt or fear or even anger.

It's pity.

"Emma," she says, voice soft but steady. "We've been worried about you. The stress of everything—the letters, your confrontation with Grandma, us finding out about your affair with Dad before Mom died—it's been too much."

My mouth opens, but words fail me. They've flipped the narrative completely, making me the unstable one.

Harris clears his throat. "As Lily's psychologist, I've been concerned about the home environment for some time. The surveillance you conducted, following Lily to the coffeeshop, taking photographs, going through her things—these are troubling behaviors, Ms. Caldwell."

Psychologist. Not professor. Not college advisor.

"Emma." Robert's voice is gentle now, the voice he uses with difficult clients. "You've been unwell. The medications you've been taking—"

"What medications?" I shake my head violently. "I'm not on any medications."

Margaret exchanges a significant look with Harris. "This is exactly what we discussed, James. The memory gaps. The denial."

They're gaslighting me. All of them. Creating an alternate reality where I'm the unstable one, the threat, the problem to be solved.

I back toward the door, suddenly understanding the tableau before me with perfect clarity. This isn't a Sunday lunch. It's the final act of a play that's been running for months, maybe years. And I've just been written out of the script.

"I know what you're doing." My voice shakes but holds. "All of you."

Harris stands, approaching me with professional concern painted across his features. "Emma, why don't we talk in the other room? I can help you understand what's happening."

I continue backing away, unwilling to let him near me. “Stay away from me.”

“She’s decompensating,” he says to the others, not bothering to lower his voice. “Just as we feared.”

The dining room door feels miles away now. I turn and run, their voices calling after me with false concern. Into the elevator. Through the foyer. Out the massive front door. To my car where the engine still runs, door still open—my unplanned escape route waiting.

As I drive away, hands shaking on the wheel, I can still see them in front of my eyes—Robert, Margaret, Harris, and Lily. A perfect family portrait.

United against me.

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FORTY-ONE

The Night Owl Inn's neon sign flickers pathetically against the darkness, half the letters burnt out so it reads "Ni t Ow In." Perfect. A place as broken as I feel. I pay for the room in cash, giving the name "Alice Smith" to the night clerk who merely glances up from his phone screen. No ID required—another mark in the plus column for establishments with cigarette burns on the counter and bulletproof glass separating staff from customers. He slides an actual metal key attached to a plastic tag across the scuffed counter. Room 17. Ground floor, around back, where my car won't be visible from the road.

The room assaults my senses the moment I push open the door—the stale smell of old cigarettes layered over industrial cleaner, with undercurrents of mildew and despair. I flip on the light switch, revealing a tableau of faded respectability: polyester bedspread in a pattern popular thirty years ago, laminate furniture with peeling veneer, carpet worn to concrete in paths between bed, bathroom, and door. The wall-mounted TV might be older than Lily.

I lock the door, then wedge a chair under the handle for good measure. The chair wobbles—one leg shorter than the others—but it's better than nothing. I check the bathroom, half-expecting to find someone hiding behind the shower curtain like in some B-grade horror movie. Empty. The window is too small for anyone larger than a child to squeeze through, but I lock it anyway, pulling closed the blinds with broken slats.

Sitting on the edge of the bed feels like admitting defeat. The mattress sags beneath me, springs sighing. I keep my coat on despite the room's

stuffiness, a thin armor against everything that's happened. My hands won't stop trembling. I clench them into fists, press them against my thighs, trying to push away the memory of Margaret's voice when revealing she knows the "full extent" of my relationship with Benjamin, the part that I've never spoken of aloud.

It's all my fault. I caused it. Alice wouldn't be dead if I hadn't had that affair. Lily would still have a mother and a father.

A door slams somewhere down the row of rooms. I jump, heart slamming against my ribs, before recognizing the mundane sound for what it is. Then comes laughter—harsh, male, followed by the high giggle of a woman who sounds too young to be here. More ordinary motel sounds. Nothing sinister. Nothing directed at me.

But every noise from the parking lot sends fresh adrenaline coursing through my body—car doors opening and closing, voices passing by my window, the rumble of an idling engine. I'm poised for flight, muscles tense, ears straining for any sound that might signal danger approaching.

I sink back onto the bed, eyes fixed on the door, waiting for whatever comes next. Then sleep overcomes me, finally.

I wake to the sound of breathing that isn't mine. My eyes snap open to darkness punctuated only by thin strips of streetlight filtering through broken blinds. Someone sits in the corner chair—a hulking shadow against deeper shadows. I don't move, don't change my breathing pattern, though my heart hammers so violently I'm certain whoever watches me can hear its desperate rhythm. The cheap mattress digs into my back, springs a reminder of how far I've fallen in twenty-four hours. Homeless. Hunted. And now, no longer alone.

"I know you're awake, Emma." Lucas Ramirez's voice fills the small room, too calm, too familiar.

My hand slides across the scratchy bedspread, searching for something—anything—that might serve as a weapon. My fingers find the heavy ceramic lamp base on the nightstand. Not ideal, but better than nothing.

"Don't." He shifts forward, the chair creaking beneath his weight. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"Says the man who broke into my motel room to watch me sleep." My voice emerges steadier than I feel. "How did you find me?"

He lifts something that catches the dim light—my driver's license. "Night Owl Inn is the third closest motel to your house. I tried them all." He shows me his phone and a recent photo of me. "I showed them this. It helps when you have a badge."

I sit up slowly, keeping my back against the headboard, fingers still curled around the lamp base. My eyes have adjusted enough to make out his features now—the stubbled jaw, the shadows beneath his eyes, the rumpled shirt.

"I should have you arrested for breaking and entering." The words sound ridiculous even as I say them.

"You'd have to call the police." His hands rise in a gesture of surrender. "I know how that sounds—I am the police. But I need you to hear me out. Please."

The "please" catches me off guard. There's something raw in his voice, something desperate that wasn't there before. I glance toward the door—the chair I'd wedged beneath the handle now sits back in the corner with Lucas, lying on its side. He followed me, disabled my pathetic security measures, and watched me sleep. Yet I'm not dead. Not restrained. Just being asked to listen.

"Five minutes." I keep my grip on the lamp. "Then I scream loud enough to wake every drug dealer and prostitute in this place."

Lucas leans forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped as if in prayer. In the striped light filtering through the blinds, he looks like a man in a confessional. I don't like it. I fear for what he is about to tell me.

"When working on Benjamin's case, I became involved. Emotionally." His voice drops lower. "I told myself it was still about the case, but that wasn't entirely true."

In another reality, this might be flattering—the dedicated detective who crossed professional boundaries because he cared too much. But it somehow doesn't feel that way.

I think about the cufflinks and remember another detail. It wasn't only Benjamin who was wearing them at the wedding. He had given his groomsmen the same ones, so they could all match.

Of course. I can't believe I didn't see this earlier.

"It was you. You sent me letters pretending to be my husband's dead wife." I keep my tone flat, factual. "You installed a camera above my bed. You forged therapy notes to make me fear my stepdaughter." I can't believe

I trusted him. He put the camera up in the vent, and conveniently found it himself when I asked for help. Who does that?

"Yes." The admission comes without hesitation. "I needed you to need me. I knew you'd come to me for help. I love you, Emma. I'm in love with you. I know you'll never feel the same way about me. I thought if I could get you to need me, see me as your protector, then perhaps…"

The words echo in my head. *I love you!*

"And the sugar in the gas tank?"

"That would be me. I hoped you'd call me for help."

I feel the bile rising in the back of my throat. It's hard to keep my anger from erupting. "I bet you lied to me about all of it, right? You doctored the surveillance footage of Alice on my driveway? It never happened. There was no fingerprint either, am I right? You just needed me to believe it."

"That wasn't—" He stops, recalibrates.

"And the mutilated photographs? The circle on my bedroom floor with our eyes scratched out?"

He frowns, genuine confusion crossing his features. "That wasn't me. I swear it."

I study his face, searching for deception. Either he's telling the truth or he's a better liar than I've given him credit for.

"I think Harris did that," he continues. "I have been watching Lily. To protect her from him. He's been grooming Lily, just like he did with other vulnerable students. Three complaints filed and buried. Two hushed settlements. The university protects him because of his family connections."

"Professor Harris?" The psychology professor with the wandering hands, the man who sat at the Stone dining table like family. I am confused. "What does he have to do with it all?"

"I've been watching him for a long time. James Harris comes from old money, just like the Stones. His family's foundation funds half the university's psychology department." Lucas leans forward, voice urgent now. "He specializes in manipulating vulnerable girls from wealthy families. Gets close to them, isolates them from support systems, then uses them however he wants, mostly for money. I suspect that when Lily brings him to the house, she disables the cameras. She's smart like that."

"She has the app too," I say.

The pieces slot together with sickening clarity—Harris's "mentoring" of Lily, the scholarship to a New York school, the way Margaret and Robert

welcomed him into their home. Not just a creepy professor but a predator with a pattern.

"Why would the Stones allow that?" I ask, genuinely confused.

"Because he's useful to them." Lucas's voice hardens. "Harris provides the psychological credibility they need to control Lily and discredit you. They're using each other."

Every sentence he speaks adds another strand to this web I'm caught in. The truth is buried somewhere beneath layers of deceit, but I can't see it clearly. His eyes hold mine as he confesses both love and calculated manipulation in the same breath.

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FORTY-TWO

Lucas is mid-sentence about Harris's previous victims when his phone rings and Margaret Stone's name appears on the display. We both freeze, staring at the device like it might explode. He puts it on speaker.

"Hello?" Lucas answers, signaling for me to stay silent while he speaks.

"Lucas?" Margaret Stone's voice cracks through the speaker, stripped of its usual controlled precision. "Thank God you picked up. Is Lily with you?"

Lucas looks at me briefly before he answers.

"No. Why would she be?"

"She's gone." Margaret's voice breaks on the second word. "Left a note saying she needed to meet you. Urgent. About her mother."

My eyes lock with Lucas's across the dim motel room as he opens his mouth to speak. "I didn't contact her, Margaret. I haven't spoken to Lily since the trial. When did she leave?" Lucas asks, while I'm already reaching for my shoes. I was going to yell at Lucas for what he did. I was going to throw him out and tell him to never contact me again. But hearing the distress in Margaret's voice, and knowing it has to do with Lily, I forget it all. For now.

"We last saw her hours ago. Nine, maybe ten." Margaret's composure crumbles further with each word. "We thought she was in her room. Robert just went to the bathroom and found the door to her room open. Inside, he found the note. She's not answering her phone."

"I'll find her," Lucas promises. "I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

He ends the call and turns to me.

“I was telling you the truth about Harris. If Lily’s with him—”

“Then we need to move.” I finish his thought, decision made despite my misgivings.

“We should go to my apartment first. I can try and track her phone. But I need my computer.”

* * *

The drive to Lucas’s place passes in tense silence. Tampa streets blur outside the window, neon signs and streetlights smearing like tears across my vision. Lucas keeps both hands visible on the steering wheel, a considered choice to appear non-threatening. It doesn’t work. Every few seconds, my mind replays the image of him watching me sleep, the very thought causing me to shiver.

Yet here I am, getting deeper into his web instead of running in the opposite direction. Because of Lily. Despite everything, despite her coldness and lies, she’s still the teenager I promised to protect. And she did the unthinkable for me once. I can do that for her too.

Lucas parks in front of his brick building. It looms above us, windows like empty eyes watching our approach. Inside, the elevator creaks upward, carrying us to the fourth floor in uncomfortable proximity. When he unlocks his apartment door, he steps back, allowing me to enter first—a courtesy that feels like mockery after everything he’s done.

I step inside and freeze.

An entire wall of his small living room has been transformed. Photos, notes, newspaper clippings, and red string connections spread across the surface like an infection. It’s a shrine.

My legs go weak as I register what I’m seeing: dozens of images of me.

Me sleeping in my bed, taken from the perspective of that hidden camera above my headboard. Photos of me at work, walking through the car park, getting out of the garage. Some of me in the garden, on the porch, through the kitchen windows as I make dinner for Lily.

The man is insane. The entire wall of photos reveals his obsession, and craziness.

And there are photos of Lily too. At school, driving in her car, sitting in coffee shops. Benjamin in prison during visitation hours. And Alice—alive,

smiling.

"What is this?" My voice emerges as a whisper.

Lucas closes the door behind us, the soft click of the latch sounding like a gunshot in the quiet apartment. "My investigation."

I move toward the wall as if pulled by gravity. My fingers reach out, trembling, to touch a photo of me asleep, face half-buried in my pillow, completely vulnerable. The date stamp in the corner reads three months ago.

"You've been watching me for months." The realization spreads through me like ice water. "Before the letters. Before the forged therapy notes."

The rest is devoted to newspaper clippings, printouts of police reports, and handwritten notes connected by red string in the classic conspiracy theorist style.

"Jesus, Lucas." The words escape in a horrified whisper as I step closer.

From this angle, I can see the meticulous organization behind what initially looked like chaos. The photos are arranged chronologically, creating a visual timeline of our lives over the past six months. Small yellow sticky notes accompany key images, noting observations in tight handwriting.

Emma leaving Stone Advertising, 2:17 p.m.

Lily meeting unknown male (later ID'd as Harris) at campus coffee shop, 4:35 p.m.

Emma at pharmacy picking up prescription sleep aids, 7:23 p.m.

Every moment documented. Every movement tracked.

In the corner, a desk holds dozens of sheets of paper—practice attempts at Alice's handwriting. I pick one up, stomach churning at the mimicry of the dead woman's script.

Lucas speaks from the doorway, keeping his distance. "I went too far. I see that now."

"Too far?" I turn to face him, letter still in hand. "You terrorized me. Made me question my sanity. All while pretending to help me."

He nods, accepting the accusation without defense. "Yes."

The simple acknowledgment deflates my building rage, leaving only cold purpose. I pull out my phone, holding it where he can see the recording app still running.

“I’ve recorded everything you’ve said since the motel room. Your confession to installing the camera, sending the letters, forging the therapy notes.” My finger hovers over the share button. “One tap and this goes to your captain. Your career is over.”

He doesn’t try to grab the phone or stop me—another point in favor of his current sincerity. “Do what you need to do, Emma. But please, we have to find Lily first.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because I’m the only one who believes you.” His eyes meet mine, steady and resigned. “The Stones have positioned you as mentally unstable. Harris has professional credibility as a psychologist. Who will believe your accusations against them without evidence?”

The truth in his words stings like alcohol on an open wound. “If you help me find Lily, I’ll consider not sending this recording. For now.”

Relief flashes across his features, quickly replaced by professional focus. He moves to a laptop on the kitchen counter, opening it and typing rapidly.

“I can try and track her phone.” He glances up at me. “If you give me your password to your Apple ID. I assume you have a family plan with her?”

“I do.” I hesitate, then step forward to enter my credentials myself, maintaining this small boundary. He opens the Find My app. The screen fills with a map of Tampa, a pulsing blue dot appearing after several seconds of loading.

“There.” Lucas points to the location. “Her phone is active. It’s at a lake house outside the city.”

I stare at the blue dot, mind racing through possibilities—none of them good. “How far?”

“Forty minutes.” Lucas is already grabbing his car keys. “We should go now.”

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FORTY-THREE

Cypress trees line the narrow dirt road leading to the lake house, their moss-draped branches forming a tunnel. Lucas drives slower now than when we rushed through the city, headlights cutting through gathering shadows. My hands grip my knees tightly. Each bump in the rough road jars my spine, my teeth, my already frayed nerves. Forty minutes that feel like forty hours. Forty minutes during which anything could be happening to Lily.

"Almost there." Lucas keeps his voice low, as if the trees might be listening. "Property's just around this bend."

I nod, throat too tight for words. Despite everything, my body hums with primal fear for her safety.

The trees part suddenly, revealing a small clearing where a wood-framed house perches at the edge of dark water. Lake Thonotosassa stretches beyond it, surface rippling with evening breeze, reflecting the deep purple-orange of the fading sky. In different circumstances, it might be beautiful.

Lucas kills the headlights and rolls to a stop fifty yards from the house. "That's Harris's car right there." He points to a black BMW parked in the gravel driveway. "No lights on inside though."

We sit in silence for a moment, assessing. The house stands two stories tall, its weathered exterior suggesting decades of Florida summers. A wide porch wraps around three sides, leading to a wooden dock that extends twenty feet into the lake. All windows remain dark, curtains drawn on most. No movement visible. No sound except cicadas singing their nightly chorus and the gentle lap of water against shoreline.

“Stay behind me,” Lucas says, reaching under his seat to retrieve a gun.

I nod, fear crawling up my throat like bile. We exit the car silently, closing doors with gentle clicks instead of slams. The gravel crunches beneath our feet despite our efforts at stealth. Each step toward the house feels like moving through water—resistance growing, time slowing, sounds amplifying.

Lucas motions for me to stay back as he approaches a side window where curtains haven’t been fully drawn. He peers through the narrow gap, body tense, then beckons me forward with two fingers.

I press my face to the cool glass, squinting to see through the gap. Inside, furniture has been overturned—a coffee table on its side, sofa cushions thrown across hardwood floors, books scattered from shelves. A lamp lies shattered on the floor, its ceramic base in pieces.

“Something happened here,” I whisper, stating the obvious.

Lucas moves toward the back of the house, gun held low but ready. I follow, scanning the tree line, the water’s edge, anywhere someone might be watching us. The back door stands slightly ajar—an invitation or a warning. Lucas pushes it open with his elbow, wincing at the slight creak of hinges.

“Harris?” he calls out, voice firm but not shouting. “Tampa PD. Anyone here?”

Silence answers. He steps inside, motioning for me to stay close. The kitchen shows more signs of disturbance—a chair knocked over, a glass broken on the counter, cabinet doors standing open. But no blood. I cling to this observation like a life raft in rising waters.

“Lily?” I call, unable to maintain silence any longer. “Lily, are you here? It’s Emma!”

My voice bounces off walls, returning to me empty. Lucas moves through the house methodically, clearing each room with professional exactness. I follow, less disciplined, opening closet doors, checking behind furniture, growing more frantic with each empty space we discover.

The home office hits me hardest—papers scattered across a large desk, drawers pulled out and emptied onto the floor. A small dark stain mars the hardwood beside the desk. Lucas kneels, touching it with his fingertip.

“Blood,” he says quietly. “Not much. Could be from a minor injury.”

Or the beginning of something worse. The unspoken possibility hangs between us.

I move to the desk, rifling through papers with shaking hands. Most appear to be student evaluations, university documents, bills. Then my fingers find something different—a photo, partially hidden beneath scattered mail. I pull it free and my breath catches.

It shows Lily and Professor Harris on what appears to be this very dock. Lily wears a sundress, her smile tight. Harris stands too close, one arm around her waist, possessive. The photo looks recent, taken perhaps in the last few weeks.

“He brought her here before,” I say, showing Lucas the picture.

He takes it, expression darkening. “There are more.” He points to a corkboard on the wall where several photos have been arranged—all young women with Harris in various settings, all bearing that same uncomfortable smile, all looking like Lily in different packaging.

“My God.” The words escape as almost a whisper. “He’s been doing this for years.”

Lucas nods grimly. “Let’s check upstairs.”

The upper floor yields nothing but more questions—an unmade bed in the master bedroom, women’s clothing that looks too small for an adult in one drawer, a bathroom with two toothbrushes in the holder. No sign of Lily, no indication of what happened here tonight.

I move back downstairs, drawn toward the back door that leads to the dock. The darkness has deepened while we searched, the lake now a sheet of black glass reflecting the stars. I step onto the wooden planks, my footsteps hollow against the weathered boards.

“Lily!” I call again, her name carried away by the gentle breeze. “Lily, please!”

The dock creaks beneath my weight as I walk to its end, scanning the dark water as if she might suddenly surface, safe and whole. Nothing moves except small waves lapping against the wooden pilings. I turn to head back when something catches my eye—a glint of silver among the reeds at the dock’s edge.

I drop to my knees, reaching into the cold water without hesitation. My fingers close around metal—a delicate silver chain with a small heart pendant. Lily’s bracelet. The one her mother gave her for her tenth birthday, the one she never takes off.

“Lucas!” My voice breaks as I hold up the bracelet. “It’s Lily’s. Her mother gave it to her.”

He’s beside me in an instant, taking the bracelet with careful hands. “Could she have dropped it?”

The question hangs between us, neither wanting to voice the alternative—that someone removed it from her wrist, that it was torn off during a struggle, that it might be all that remains of her presence here.

“She never takes it off,” I whisper, staring at the small silver heart gleaming in the fading light. “Never.”

Lucas pulls out his phone, his face grim. “I’m calling for backup. We need boats, divers, a full team out here.”

As he makes the call, I remain kneeling at the dock’s edge, my fingers trailing the area where Lily’s bracelet was found. The lake keeps its secrets, its gentle waves continuing their endless rhythm against the shore. Somewhere on or in this water might be answers—or Lily herself.

In the distance I hear the tree frogs chime in, joined by the hum of insects and the occasional splash of fish breaking the surface. Normal night sounds. Peaceful sounds. Nothing to suggest the violence that clearly erupted inside the house, nothing to indicate what might have happened to Lily. In the distance a storm is approaching. I can see flashes of lightning on the horizon.

“They’re on their way,” Lucas says, crouching beside me. “Fifteen minutes.”

I clutch Lily’s bracelet against my chest, the metal warming against my skin. “We don’t have fifteen minutes. She doesn’t have fifteen minutes.”

“Emma—” His hand hovers near my shoulder but doesn’t touch.

“If he’s hurt her…” I can’t finish the sentence, can’t form words around the fear crushing my chest.

“Emma, listen to me. They’ve located Professor Harris.”

“What? Where is he?”

“They caught him at the gas station on Route 92. Lily wasn’t with him.”

My head snaps up, the air punched from my lungs. Harris is found. Which means he must know where Lily is.

“Let’s go,” I say, already moving toward Lucas’s car before the words finish leaving my mouth. He doesn’t argue, just follows, barking instructions to the officers on their way to the lake over the phone. “Start the search. We’ll be at the Harris scene.”

* * *

The drive takes seven minutes that stretch like seven hours. I count my heartbeats, each one a thunderclap against my ribs. Lucas swings the car into the gas station lot, tires squealing against asphalt. Red and blue lights strobe across the night, painting everything in alternating shades of emergency.

An ambulance sits with its back doors open. Inside, paramedics hover over a figure on a stretcher.

Harris.

I'm out of the car before Lucas fully stops, running toward the ambulance. A uniformed officer steps in my path, hand raised.

"Ma'am, you can't—"

"I'm Emma Caldwell. That's my stepdaughter's professor. She's missing." The words tumble out, fast and desperate. "I need to speak with him."

Lucas flashes his badge. "Detective Ramirez. We need two minutes with him before transport."

The officer hesitates, then steps aside. We approach the ambulance where Harris lies strapped to a gurney, his face ghastly pale beneath the harsh interior lights. Blood mats his gray hair on one side, a deep gash visible along his temple where paramedics have cleaned but not yet dressed the wound. His left eye is swollen shut, already purpling into an angry bruise.

"Professor Harris," I say, climbing into the ambulance despite a paramedic's protesting gesture. "Where is Lily?"

His good eye flutters open, pupil dilated. Concussion, I think automatically. His gaze struggles to focus on my face.

"Ms. Caldwell." His voice comes out slurred, a whisper. "I tried to stop her."

"Stop her from what?" Lucas appears beside me, his presence solid and authoritative. "What happened to you?"

Harris winces as a paramedic applies antiseptic to his wound. "She attacked me. When I wouldn't help her."

"Help her do what?" I demand, leaning closer despite the metallic smell of blood that threatens to turn my stomach.

“Run away.” He grimaces, eye closing briefly before forcing itself open again. “She wanted money. My car. Said she needed to disappear before you ruined everything.”

Lucas gestures toward the car still sitting at the gas pump, driver’s door hanging open. Even from here, I can see the dent in the metal, a small smear of blood marking the impact point.

“She hit you with the car door?” Lucas asks.

Harris gives a small nod, then immediately regrets the movement. “It started at the lake house. She started throwing things around and hitting me. I told her I would take her back to town. I was trying to talk her down. She was hysterical. Kept saying you’d discovered something, that she had to leave before you told the police.” His breath comes in shallow gasps. “When I refused to give her my wallet, she slammed the door into my head as I bent over. I blacked out. When I came to, she was gone. With my wallet.”

My mind races, putting together pieces that don’t quite fit. “Why were you even meeting her?”

“She texted me.” He shifts on the gurney, face contorting with pain. “Said she needed my help. It was urgent.”

“And you just took her to your lake house? At night?” Lucas’s voice carries a dangerous edge.

Harris’s good eye moves between us, something like shame flickering across his face. “She said she needed a place to stay the night. That I was the only one she had, and could trust. She’s been… manipulating me for months. It started with college applications. Then personal counseling. Then she began sharing things about you.” His gaze locks onto mine. “Stories about you mistreating her. Checking her phone. Following her. Being unstable.”

The paramedic interrupts, “We need to transport him now.”

“One more minute,” Lucas insists, then turns back to Harris. “You’ve been grooming Lily.”

Harris flinches as if the words physically struck him. A few drops of rain hit his face as the storm approaches us.

“No. She said Ms. Caldwell was dangerous, paranoid. I thought she needed protection.” His breath catches on what might be a sob. “I believed her. God help me, I believed every word.”

The paramedic firmly pushes between us. “That’s it. We’re moving now. He needs a CT scan immediately.”

They begin loading the stretcher into the ambulance. Harris rallies momentarily, grabbing my wrist with surprising strength.

“She kept saying ‘back to where it started.’ Over and over.” His fingers dig into my skin. “Said she had to ‘fix everything.’ I don’t know what she meant.”

The paramedic breaks Harris’s grip on me, and the ambulance doors close. The vehicle pulls away, siren wailing into the night.

“The bridge,” I whisper. “She’s going to the bridge where Alice died.”

Lucas is already running toward the car, radio in hand, calling for units to converge. I follow, legs moving without conscious command, mind racing faster than my body.

The water always tells the truth.

The same water that claimed Alice’s life six years ago. The water Lily thinks will somehow “fix everything.”

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FORTY-FOUR

The rain slashes sideways as I jump out of Lucas's car while it hasn't come to a complete stop. My shoes slap against wet pavement as I run toward the bridge's pedestrian walkway, each step heavy with dread and purpose. The wind tears at my clothes, my hair, my resolve, but I push forward, eyes locked on the distant silhouette standing midspan where the repaired guardrail gleams dully in the storm.

The bridge stretches before me, a concrete and steel monster crouched over churning black water. Forty feet below, whitecaps form and dissolve like ghosts in the darkness. I know these measurements from the accident report—forty feet from guardrail to water surface, four minutes until Alice's car fully submerged, three days until divers recovered her body. Numbers that never conveyed the true horror until this moment.

A car passes behind me, tires hissing against wet asphalt, headlights briefly illuminating my desperate progress before darkness swallows me again. I'm soaked through, clothes plastered against my skin, hair dripping into my eyes. None of it matters. Only the figure ahead matters—Lily, standing perfectly still at the bridge's apex, her back to me, hands resting on the exact spot where metal was replaced after Alice's car crashed through.

I slow my approach when I'm fifty yards away, suddenly afraid that running toward her might trigger the very action I'm desperate to prevent. The walkway narrows here, barely four feet wide, separated from traffic by concrete barriers and from the fatal drop by metal railings that suddenly seem absurdly inadequate. My steps become careful, measured, while my heartbeat remains frantic, thundering in my ears louder than the storm.

Thirty yards now. Close enough to see how the wind plasters her thin dress against her frame, revealing the sharp angles of a body that's grown too thin these past months. Her hair—so like Alice's in the photos—whips around her head like dark flames. She doesn't turn, though she must hear my approach over the storm. Instead, she remains facing outward, toward the distant shoreline where city lights blur through sheets of rain.

The railing beside me vibrates under my hand, metal thrumming with the bridge's response to wind and passing vehicles. It's newer here, shinier than the sections flanking it—the replacement installed after Alice's car tore through the original barrier. I try not to imagine the scene: metal screaming as it gave way, tires briefly spinning in empty air, the terrible, suspended moment before gravity claimed the vehicle and its driver. Did Alice know what was happening in those final seconds? Did she see the water rushing up to meet her?

Twenty yards separate us now. I can see Lily's grip on the railing, the rigid set of her shoulders. Another car passes, this one slower than the last, driver perhaps noticing the two figures on the walkway in this ungodly storm. Its taillights recede, leaving us alone again in the shifting darkness.

"Lily!" I call, my voice thin and strained against the wind. "Lily, please don't do anything rash. Let's talk."

For several seconds, she doesn't move. Then, with terrible slowness, she turns to face me. The expression on her face stops me cold, freezes me mid-step. Not despair. Not the desperate anguish I expected. Instead, her features hold an eerie calm, almost a relief, like someone who has finally put down an unbearable weight.

"I knew you'd come," she says, voice carrying with surprising clarity over the storm. Her lips curve in a smile that doesn't touch her eyes. "I've been waiting for you to figure it out."

I take another careful step closer, now just fifteen yards away. The bridge sways slightly beneath us, a subtle reminder of our precarious position. Below, Tampa Bay churns and heaves, hungry for secrets, for confessions, for bodies.

"Figure what out?" I ask, though I already know. The pieces have been assembling themselves since Harris's revelation, since perhaps the very first moment I stepped into the Stone family's web of secrets.

"What really happened to my mother."

Lily’s hands remain on the railing, but her body turns fully toward me now. Rain streams down her face like tears she doesn’t need to cry.

“Lily, please—” I inch closer, calculating the distance between us, wondering if I could reach her in time if she suddenly decided to jump. “Whatever happened, we can work through it together. Just step back from the edge.”

“I always wondered when you’d see the truth.” She ignores my plea, voice dreamy and distant. “But I guess for a long time you were too caught up in your own guilt to notice. I think you couldn’t bear to think about what your affair started.”

Ten yards now. Close enough to see the goosebumps on her bare arms. How long has she been standing here in the storm? Waiting for me? Planning this final confession?

“I’m here now,” I say, moving another step closer. “And I’m listening. But you’re soaked and freezing. Let’s go somewhere dry to talk.”

“No.” The word comes sharp and sudden. “Here. It has to be here.” She gestures toward the water below, then to the repaired section of guardrail. “Where she went over. Where Dad made it look like an accident.”

My breath catches in my throat. The confession I suspected but still wasn’t prepared to hear.

“It wasn’t an accident,” I whisper, the words almost lost in a fresh gust of wind. “And he didn’t kill her. It was you.”

Lily’s face softens, that terrible calm giving way to something more vulnerable, more human. For a moment, I see the child she was six years ago—twelve years old, carrying an impossible secret.

“Finally. I’ve been waiting for you to figure it out,” she repeats, her eyes locking with mine across the shrinking distance between us. “So I could finally tell someone the truth.”

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FORTY-FIVE

We stand five yards apart on the narrow walkway. Lily's face appears ghostly in the intermittent flashes of distant lightning, stripped of the carefully constructed masks she's worn these past years. Water cascades from her hair, her clothes, pooling around her feet like the secrets finally breaking free of their container. I take another cautious step forward, my palm raised as if approaching a wounded animal.

"Tell me what happened," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "Tell me everything."

Lily's eyes, so like her mother's, meet mine with startling clarity. "I heard them arguing that day. In Dad's study." Her voice remains eerily composed against the storm's backdrop. "Mom found texts on his phone. From you."

The accusation hits like a physical blow. I've known this, of course—Margaret made it clear that Alice had discovered the affair. But hearing it from Lily, here on this bridge where Alice's life ended, feels like a fresh wound tearing open.

"She was screaming about divorce lawyers. About sending me away to some school in Vermont." Lily's body shifts, a subtle dance between defensive posture and raw vulnerability. "She'd already enrolled me. Already packed my things without telling me. We had an argument about it the day before. She said I was too much for her to handle. So she decided to get rid of me."

"In the car," I mumble mostly to myself. "You had the fight in the car."

My stomach knots with guilt and shame. The chain of events my actions helped trigger suddenly stretching before me, each link connecting inexorably to this moment.

“I wasn’t supposed to be home,” she continues, rain streaming down her face like tears she refuses to shed. “I’d told them I was at a friend’s house for the entire weekend. And I did go there. After my argument with Mom, she dropped me off there. But I forgot my laptop and we were going to play computer games, so I came home to pick it up. I borrowed my friend’s bike.”

A car passes behind us, headlights briefly illuminating Lily’s face—the hollows under her eyes, the sharp angles of cheekbones too pronounced. She doesn’t flinch at the vehicle’s passing, too deep in her remembering.

“Everything I heard while they argued made me scared. Mom was saying she’d destroy him. Take everything.” Her fingers tighten on the railing, knuckles white with pressure. “Then she said something about you being pregnant.”

My breath catches. No one was supposed to know about that. Not even Benjamin knew for certain—just my suspicions, my missed period, my terror at the possibility before the miscarriage resolved the question.

“I confronted her after Dad left in anger, driving away in his car.” Lily’s voice drops lower, forcing me to step closer to hear her over the wind. “She was on the balcony off their bedroom, smoking a cigarette. She only smoked when stressed out. Dad didn’t know about it. On the bed was an almost-packed suitcase.”

Four yards between us now. Close enough to see how her body trembles—not from cold, but from memory, from the weight of confession.

“She didn’t even try to deny it. Just said we were leaving, that I’d thank her someday.” Lily’s laugh holds no humor, just broken glass edges. “When I refused, she slapped me. She’d never done that before.”

My legs weaken at the image forming—twelve-year-old Lily, face stinging, confronting a mother intent on uprooting her life. I grip the railing for support; the metal feels slick beneath my fingers.

“I pushed her away from me. Just to make her stop talking.” Lily’s voice wavers for the first time, a hairline crack in her composure. “She was standing against the railing. It was lower than this one.” Her hand pats the bridge barrier, measuring the difference. “Just decorative. Not meant to catch anything.”

Horror spreads through me like ice water in my veins. I know the mansion's layout. I used to live there. The master bedroom's balcony overlooks the stone patio three stories below. The railing there is ornamental wrought iron, beautiful but almost waist-high.

"She fell backward." Lily's eyes take on a distant quality, seeing not me but that night six years past. "Just… tipped over. Didn't even scream. There was this horrible sound when she hit the patio. Like…" She stops, searching for words that won't come. "I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Just stood there staring down at her."

My body reacts before my mind can process—stomach heaving, gorge rising in my throat. I swallow hard against the nausea, fingers gripping the railing so tightly my joints ache. The forty-foot drop below us suddenly feels too close, too real, too similar to the fall that killed Alice Stone.

"Dad came home and found me still standing there. She wasn't moving. There was blood." Lily's voice has gone flat, mechanical. "He checked her pulse, then looked up at me on the balcony. He knew. Right away, he knew."

A sob builds in my chest, pressing against my ribs like a living thing seeking escape. Lily continues, relentless in her unburdening.

"He told me to go to my room, to change my clothes, to say nothing." Her gaze drifts to the churning water below. "I heard him dragging something. Later I realized he'd put her in her car."

The pieces slot together with sickening clarity—Benjamin finding his wife dead, his daughter in shock, making a split-second decision that would reshape all their lives.

"He staged the accident here." Lily gestures at the repaired section of guardrail. "Made it look like she'd driven off the bridge during an argument with him. He confessed to placing a shim underneath the brakes, but that wasn't what happened. She was already dead when the car hit the water. He came up with the shim later and paid the towing company to say they found it in the car. It was supposed to make you look guilty. He made sure it had your fingerprints on it. You were the affair, the very reason all of this happened. He knew you'd fall for him and his deceit if he played his cards right. But in the end, once I realized what he was planning, I couldn't let him do it to you. You've always been nothing but nice to me. That's why I showed the video in court, where he attacked you and admitted his guilt.

When he couldn’t frame you for it, he went to prison for what I did. To protect me.”

My mind reels, unable to fully process the horror of what she’s describing. Benjamin carrying Alice’s broken body, placing her behind the wheel, sending the car into Tampa Bay to hide the truth of her death. To protect Lily. To protect himself.

“He came home soaked, made me swear never to tell anyone.” Her voice cracks finally, the first tear mingling with raindrops on her cheek. “Said they’d take me away, put me in juvenile detention, maybe try me as an adult. Said no one would believe it was an accident.”

“Oh, Lily.” The words escape me, inadequate against the weight of her confession.

The betrayal cuts deeper than I thought possible. Benjamin orchestrating my torment, using his own daughter as his instrument.

I stare at her, this child-woman before me, trying to reconcile the manipulative presence in my home with the traumatized twelve-year-old who witnessed her mother’s death and was taught to hide it.

“All this time,” I whisper, “you’ve been carrying this alone.”

Something in her face shifts, a terrible resolve settling over her features as she glances once more toward the water below. “Not any more.”

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FORTY-SIX

Lily takes a small step backward, her heel now inches from where the walkway ends and the forty-foot drop begins. I hadn't noticed her subtle repositioning during her confession—each sentence accompanied by an almost imperceptible shift toward the edge. My body tenses, instincts screaming to lunge for her, but I force myself to remain still. Any sudden movement might trigger exactly what I'm desperate to prevent.

"Lily," I say, her name barely audible above the storm, "please step forward. Away from the edge."

She doesn't move, just continues speaking as if discussing something ordinary, not life and death. "When Dad first brought you to the house, I hated you so much I could barely breathe around it." Her voice holds no anger now, just a detached observation. "You were living in our house, sleeping in their bed, using Mom's things. The very woman that he had slept with, causing my mother to want to divorce him and send me away. I thought if I just waited long enough, you'd leave. If I made your life miserable, then you'd be gone soon enough."

Another small shift backward. The heel of her right foot now hovers partly over empty space. My heart hammers against my ribs as I calculate the distance between us—too far to grab her quickly, too close to risk sudden movements.

"But you didn't leave," she continues, rain plastering her hair against her scalp, making her look younger, more vulnerable. "You kept trying. Kept pretending we could be some kind of family. It made me hate you even more."

I edge forward, one tiny step, then freeze when she notices. “I understand that hatred,” I say, keeping my voice level despite the terror clawing at my throat. “I would have hated me too.”

“Then something changed.” Her eyes find mine through the curtain of rain between us. “I started to like you. Not all at once. Just moments. When you helped with my college essays. When you brought me tea during finals. When you didn’t tell Dad about that party I had while you guys were on your honeymoon.”

Three feet separate us now. Close enough to grab her if she moves to jump, but still too distant for comfort. The rain has lessened somewhat, no longer a blinding downpour but a steady drumming against the bridge.

“That scared me more than anything,” she admits. “Caring about you felt like betraying Mom.”

Another subtle backward shift. My breath catches. “Lily, please—”

“Grandma and Grandpa were so easy to manipulate. They wanted to believe the worst about you. When they finally got to know the whole story, when Dad told them about the affair, I pretended like I didn’t already know. I just played along. Dad was so angry at me for showing up at the courthouse with that video. He kept saying that we had a plan, a deal to have you take the fall, but I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t. So he started playing us against each other. Sending me letters where he said you were unstable and for me to document it all. He wants a retrial. I guess that if he can prove you’ve lost your mind, maybe he’d have a better case. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to help him but did it anyway. Took pictures of your medication and reported back to him what I saw. Meanwhile he told me he made you look for missing pages in my journal that never existed. And he told you I was dangerous.”

I see it now—the terrible dance she’s been performing. Each sentence bringing her confession closer to completion, each word moving her body closer to the edge. She’s not just telling her story; she’s preparing for its end.

“When I saw you were getting close to the truth, I panicked.” Her voice drops lower, forcing me to lean forward to hear. “But part of me wanted you to figure it out. To make it stop. All the lies. All the pretending.”

I take another careful step forward. “We can still make it stop, Lily. We can face the truth together.”

Her eyes, so like Alice's in the photographs, fix on mine with terrible clarity. "There's no together. Not after what I've done."

"Listen to me." I risk another small step, now close enough to reach her if I stretch my arm fully. "I'm as responsible for what happened as anyone. I knew he was married. I knew about you."

She blinks, surprise momentarily replacing the resignation in her expression.

"I saw pictures of you on his phone the first time we met. He had one as a background photo. I knew he was married. I was just so… in love with him, it didn't matter." The confession burns my throat, years of shame finally finding voice. "I knew exactly what I was destroying when I started that affair. I told myself it was just physical, just temporary, but I lied to myself as much as Benjamin lied to everyone else."

The wind gusts suddenly, pushing against us both. Lily sways, her balance precarious on the edge of the walkway. I move forward another half step, my hand outstretched but not yet touching her.

"I didn't stop when I should have," I continue, desperation making me reckless with truth. "Even after your mother had found out, I met Benjamin one more time. To tell him I had lost his child. Part of me wanted him to say he still would leave his family for me. That's the real me, Lily. Not the perfect stepmother I've pretended to be. I'm selfish and weak and so, so sorry for the part I played in destroying your family."

Something shifts in Lily's face—a softening, a recognition. For perhaps the first time, we see each other clearly, without the veils of manipulation and resentment between us.

"I thought I was the only one," she whispers, a child's confusion breaking through the adult facade. "The only one who did something unforgivable."

"No one is beyond forgiveness, Lily." My fingers stretch toward hers, almost touching. "Not you. Not me. Not even Benjamin."

Her hand lifts slightly, as if to meet mine. The moment hangs suspended between us, fragile as spun glass. Then a shout shatters it.

"Emma!" Lucas's voice carries from the southern access point, where police lights now flash against the night sky. He's running toward us, radio in hand, other officers close behind.

Lily startles violently, her body jerking backward. Her foot slips on the wet metal, ankle twisting. A small cry escapes her as she pitches backward,

arms windmilling, fingertips scraping desperately against the top rail.

I lunge forward without thought, without calculation. My body moves on pure instinct, hands reaching, grasping, finding her wrist as she falls. The sudden weight nearly pulls me over with her, my hips slamming against the railing, pain exploding through my side. But I hold on.

She dangles now, suspended above the same dark water that claimed her mother six years ago. Our eyes lock, hers wide with terror, no longer welcoming death but suddenly, violently afraid of it.

“Don’t let go,” she gasps, fingers clutching my forearm with bruising strength. “Please don’t let go.”

My muscles scream with effort, shoulders threatening to dislocate from their sockets. Rain makes her skin slippery under my grip. I plant my feet against the bottom rail, using it as leverage, fighting for every inch as I try to pull her up.

“I’ve got you,” I grit out, the words a promise I refuse to break. “I won’t let you fall.”

Lucas appears beside me, reaching over the railing to grab Lily’s other arm. Together, we pull, the tendons in my neck standing out with strain. Lily’s body rises inch by excruciating inch until her torso clears the top rail. With a final surge of strength, we haul her over and collapse backward onto the walkway, the three of us a tangle of soaked limbs and heaving breaths.

I wrap my arms around Lily’s shaking body, holding her against me as she sobs into my shoulder. Her tears mingle with rain on my skin. Around us, officers secure the scene, radios crackling with updates, but I focus only on the girl in my arms—not a murderer, not a manipulator, just a broken child who’s carried an impossible weight for too long.

“It’s over,” I whisper against her hair, rocking her gently as the storm begins to subside. “You don’t have to carry this alone any more.”

Above us, the clouds part briefly, revealing a single star—a pinprick of light in the vast darkness.

Lily’s fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt, holding on as if I’m the only solid thing in her crumbling world.

And perhaps, for this moment at least, I am.

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FORTY-SEVEN

The headlights cut through the window, throwing harsh shadows across the area where Lily is sitting in the back of an ambulance. The car door slams. Robert Stone appears first, his tall frame silhouetted against the night. Rain darkens the shoulders of his expensive coat—he didn't bother with an umbrella in his haste. Margaret follows close behind, her silver hair impeccably coiffed despite the storm, her face a mask of controlled concern. The performance begins before they even cross the threshold—Tampa's power couple, arrived to manage the situation, to protect the family name as they've always done.

Robert's eyes find Lily immediately, narrowing as he takes in her huddled form under the emergency blanket. He strides toward her with the confidence of a man accustomed to commanding space, to being obeyed.

"What's going on here?" His voice fills the silence we have felt between us since the confession. "We get a call that Lily's been found, and now we find her with you two?" He gestures sharply between Lucas and me.

Lucas steps forward, professional mask sliding back into place. "Mr. Stone—"

"Don't speak to me." Robert cuts him off with a slicing motion. He turns to Lily, his voice shifting to something gentler but no less commanding. "Lily, come here. We're leaving now."

Lily shrinks further into the blanket, eyes wide and uncertain. For the first time since her confession, real fear crosses her features.

"She's not going anywhere," I say, moving to stand between Robert and his granddaughter. "Not until this is finished."

Robert’s expression hardens. “This doesn’t concern you, Emma. Not any more.”

“Lily nearly jumped off a bridge tonight,” I snap, my exhaustion giving way to a fresh surge of anger. “She confessed to causing Alice’s death. Everything concerns me.”

His face drains of color, eyes darting to Lily. “What lies have they made you tell?” He moves toward her, hands outstretched. “Don’t say another word. Not one more word.”

The threat in his voice is unmistakable. He looms over Lily, using his height to intimidate her back into silence. She seems to fold in on herself, becoming smaller beneath his shadow.

What happens next surprises all of us.

Margaret steps forward, her perfectly manicured hand pressing firmly against her husband’s chest. “Let her speak, Robert.” Her voice carries a steel I’ve never heard from her before.

Robert blinks, clearly shocked by her intervention. “Margaret—”

“No.” She holds her ground, this elegant woman suddenly immovable as stone. “We’ve silenced her for too long. All of us.”

She turns to me then, her usual cold demeanor cracking like thin ice under spring sun. Something vulnerable shows through—something human beneath the perfect exterior.

“I’ve suspected for some time,” she tells me, her voice quiet over the distant sound of police radios and the steady patter of rain. “About Lily’s involvement in Alice’s death. I found one of her journals after Benjamin went to prison. She said that Alice died at the house, from a fall. Lily wrote that she saw her fall. It was just enough to make me realize the truth. I ripped out the pages and burnt them, then confronted Benjamin about it when visiting him in prison. He never told me the truth, but he didn’t have to. A mother knows.”

Robert’s face contorts with disbelief. “You never said—”

“Of course I didn’t.” Margaret’s eyes never leave mine. “It was easier to blame you, Emma. To make you the villain. The home-wrecker who drove Alice to her death. The unstable stepmother endangering our granddaughter.” Her voice catches. “It was easier than facing the possibility that Lily…”

She doesn’t finish, doesn’t need to. The unspoken truth hangs in the air between us. It was easier to hate me than to consider that their beloved

granddaughter might have killed her own mother.

Lucas clears his throat. “We need to formalize Lily’s statement. At the station—”

“Not yet.” Margaret’s voice regains its familiar authority. “She’s eighteen and in shock. Any official statement can wait until morning, with proper legal representation.”

I expect Lucas to argue, but he simply nods, the fight gone out of him.

“We should go to the house,” Margaret continues, surprising us again. “The Morrison mansion. It’s empty now, but that’s where this started. That’s where we should finish it.”

“The house?” I echo, confused. “Why there?”

“Because Alice deserves that much.” Margaret’s eyes shift to Lily. “The truth should be spoken where she died.”

Twenty minutes later, our strange procession of vehicles pulls up to the mansion. The house stands dark and imposing against the night sky, windows like vacant eyes staring out at the circular driveway. I haven’t been here since Benjamin attacked me there, trying to frame me for the murder of Alice, unable to live with the memories. The house belongs to his parents, and always has. Lily is supposed to inherit it, but I doubt she would want to live there ever again.

Robert unlocks the massive front door, the key turning with a sound that echoes through empty spaces beyond. No furniture remains, just bare hardwood floors and walls with lighter rectangles where paintings once hung. Our footsteps create hollow percussion as we move through the foyer into what was once the living room.

Lucas stays close to Lily, not touching her but positioned to intervene if necessary. Robert walks ahead, his back rigid with tension. Margaret moves with uncharacteristic hesitation, her hand trailing along the wall as if to steady herself against memories that rise like ghosts from every corner.

The living room is cavernous without furniture, our breathing and footsteps amplified in the emptiness. Moonlight streams through uncurtained windows, creating silver pools on the floor where shadow-monsters once hid under coffee tables for a young Lily to imagine.

“This is where we had Christmas,” Lily says suddenly, her voice small in the large space. “Mom would put the tree right there.” She points to a corner where the hardwood is slightly faded.

Robert turns away, facing the dark fireplace. Margaret stands by the windows, arms wrapped around herself as if warding off a chill that has nothing to do with temperature. Lucas positions himself near the doorway, a sentinel watching but not participating.

I move to Lily's side, not touching her but close enough that she can feel my presence. "Tell them," I say softly. "All of it."

She nods, the emergency blanket still draped around her shoulders like a child playing at being a queen. In this house, in this room, she seems both older and younger than her eighteen years—the weight of her past and the uncertainty of her future colliding in this empty space where her childhood ended.

"I pushed her," Lily begins, her voice stronger now, bouncing off bare walls. "We were arguing about the boarding school. About leaving Tampa. She slapped me, and I pushed her. She fell over the balcony railing upstairs."

Robert makes a small, wounded sound but doesn't interrupt. Margaret's eyes close, tears escaping despite her rigid self-control.

"Dad found me standing there, looking down at her. He checked her pulse, then told me to go to my room." Lily's voice grows steadier as she continues, the truth gaining momentum like a boulder rolling downhill. "He put her in her car and drove to the bridge. Made it look like it was an accident."

The bare walls seem to lean in, amplifying her words, making them more real with each syllable. In this empty house, there's nowhere for secrets to hide any more, no furniture to bury them under, no paintings to distract from their ugliness.

"He did it to protect me," Lily continues. "Then made me promise never to tell anyone. Said they'd take me away forever if they knew what really happened."

"So you both just lived with this?" Margaret's voice cracks. "For six years?"

Lily nods, eyes fixed on the spot where the Christmas tree once stood. "It got easier, in a way. To pretend. To make Emma the enemy. To blame her for everything."

I feel the weight of their combined gaze—Robert's, Margaret's, Lucas's—all turning to me. The other woman. The catalyst. The convenient villain in their family tragedy.

“I’m sorry,” Lily whispers, not to them but to me. “For making you think you were going crazy.”

In another life, these words might feel like victory, like vindication after years of being blamed and ostracized. But standing in this empty house where a woman died, where a family shattered, because of one night of weakness, there’s no triumph in being right. There’s only the broken pieces of lives destroyed by secrets and lies.

“What happens now?” Robert asks, his voice stripped of its usual authority. In this moment, he’s not Tampa’s advertising titan or the family patriarch—just an old man facing the collapse of everything he’s tried to preserve.

Lucas steps forward from his post by the door. “That depends on all of you.” His eyes meet mine briefly before focusing on Lily. “On how much truth you’re finally willing to tell.”

Outside, the thunderstorm has finally passed, leaving behind a dawning morning washed clean of clouds. Sunlight streams stronger through the windows, illuminating our small circle in this empty house filled with ghosts and memories and terrible truths too long unspoken.

And in that bright light, standing on the exact spot where a family Christmas tree once stood, Lily looks at me—really looks at me—perhaps for the first time. Not as an intruder. Not as an enemy. But as the only person who didn’t let her fall when she was hanging over the edge.

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FORTY-EIGHT

Lucas paces across the bare hardwood, his footsteps sending hollow echoes through rooms that once held life. I watch him from my spot on the floor beside Lily, tracking his movements as he passes through patches of sunlight streaming through uncurtained windows. Each time he walks into the glow, his face reveals another layer of the battle raging inside him—duty versus compassion, truth versus consequences. His phone dangles from his right hand like a loaded gun he's afraid to use.

"I have to call it in," he finally says, words bouncing off empty walls. "You understand that, right?"

Lily's shoulder trembles against mine. I place my hand over hers—cold, so cold despite the stuffy air in this abandoned house. She doesn't pull away.

"Yes," I answer for both of us. "We know."

He nods, stops pacing, stares down at his phone. His thumb hovers over the screen, hesitating like a man about to jump from a high ledge. Lucas—the man who surveilled me, terrorized me, manipulated me—now hesitates to do the right thing. The irony isn't lost on me.

"Your career," I say softly, surprising myself with the concern in my voice. "You're already too entangled in this. They might suspend you."

He gives a short, bitter laugh. "That's the least of it. Tampering with evidence. Falsifying documents. Invasion of privacy. Harassing a witness." His fingers tighten around the phone. "They could bring criminal charges."

"You made choices," I tell him, not unkindly. "Like we all did."

He holds my gaze for a long moment, then nods once before stepping into the adjacent room. I hear him dial, then his voice—suddenly professional, detached—explaining the situation to his captain in clipped sentences. Words like “voluntary confession” and “minor at time of incident” and “willing to cooperate” drift through the doorway.

Lily leans heavier against me, her body curling inward like a wounded animal. In the light, she looks so young—nothing like the calculating teenager who tormented me for months, just a scared child who’s carried an impossible weight for too long.

“I never meant to kill her,” she whispers, voice cracking on the last word.

“I know.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders, feeling each knob of her spine through the thin emergency blanket still draped around her. “It was an accident.”

“But everything after wasn’t.” Her admission comes in a shuddering breath. “All the lies. The manipulation. Making you think you were losing your mind.” She looks up at me, eyes reflecting sunlight. “Why are you being kind to me?”

Lucas returns, phone still pressed to his ear. “They’re coming,” he says, covering the mouthpiece.

“I need to tell you something else,” Lily says, her voice so quiet I almost miss it beneath the growing commotion in the foyer. Her eyes meet mine with a desperate intensity that stops my breath. “Just you. Please. Can we go upstairs?”

Lucas glances over, hearing her request, and I see the conflict flash across his face—the detective who doesn’t want to leave a witness, battling with the man who knows he’s no longer in control of this situation. Eventually, he nods, gesturing for the Stones to follow him into the foyer, while Lily and I go up the stairs to what was once Alice’s bedroom, and later mine.

* * *

The room feels smaller without furniture, just bare walls with rectangular shadows. Morning light spills through the window where Alice must have sat countless times, looking out at the garden. I wonder if her ghost lingers here, listening to the confessions of her daughter.

Lily walks to the center of the room, arms wrapped tightly around herself. Without the emergency blanket, which she left folded in the other room, she looks painfully exposed. Her dress—still damp from the rain on the bridge—clings to her thin frame.

“I told you that I knew about you and Dad before Mom died.” She speaks to the empty corner, unable to look at me directly. “I didn’t just know. I’m the one who told her.”

I take a step back, shoulder blades hitting the doorframe.

“What?” My voice sounds distant, disconnected from my body.

“I saw you together.” Now she turns, eyes meeting mine with an intensity that pins me in place. “At the Coronado Hotel. Six weeks before she died.”

The place registers immediately—the hotel where we met, that one day Benjamin and I were together before Alice’s death. One single weakness. One terrible mistake.

“How did you…?” I can’t finish the question, throat closing around the words.

“I followed him.” Her voice hardens with the memory. “I knew something was wrong. He’d been different—checking his phone constantly, making calls from his car instead of the house. I thought maybe he was having money problems or was gambling.”

She moves to the window, silhouette sharp against the moonlight.

“That day, I told Mom I was going to a friend’s house to study. Instead, I followed Dad from the hospital.” Her fingers trace invisible patterns on the glass. “I watched you meet in the lobby. I took pictures with my phone when you kissed in the elevator, before the doors closed.”

My stomach lurches with nausea. “Lily, you were twelve—”

“I knew what I was seeing.” She cuts me off, voice suddenly older than her years. “I watched the elevator numbers stop on the fourth floor. I waited in the lobby for three hours until you both came back down. Different elevators, five minutes apart. Like that made it less obvious.”

The memory of that day burns fresh in my mind—the desperate need, the promises we made and broke in that hotel room, the guilt that followed me home like a shadow.

“I showed the pictures to Mom a week later.” Lily’s voice drops to nearly a whisper. “I thought she’d leave Dad, that it would be just the two

of us. I never imagined she'd try to ship me off to Vermont to some school, away from everything I knew."

My legs weaken. I slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the floor, trying to absorb this new truth. "You're saying you were the one—my affair with your father—"

She finishes my sentence mercilessly. "I'm the one who made sure Mom found out."

She moves away from the window, pacing the empty room with nervous energy.

"When you took me in, I wanted you to pay. I watched you cry yourself to sleep. I recorded your nightmares. I showed the footage to Professor Harris as proof you were unstable."

"Harris." The name comes out as a whisper. "You were using him."

She nods, a bitter smile twisting her lips. "He thought he was rescuing me from an unstable stepmother. He never realized I was manipulating him to create an escape plan—the scholarship, the New York apartment. I needed to disappear before anyone figured out what really happened to Mom."

My head spins with the scope of her deception—not just a traumatized child but a calculated architect of years of psychological torture.

"Those photographs with the eyes scratched out? The circle on your bedroom floor?" Her voice has become a monotone, as if she's reading from a script. "That was me. I cut the power to disconnect the cameras. I placed the cufflink to make you blame Lucas. He dropped it here one time when he was visiting my dad last year. I also took the knife and hid it."

As she speaks, tears begin tracking down her face, but her expression remains eerily composed, disconnected from the emotion escaping through her eyes.

"I was going to run away. I tried to get Professor Harris to help me, but he refused. We got into a fight at his lake house. It got ugly. I trashed his place completely. Then I ran down the dock saying I would kill myself if he didn't help me, and he finally said he would. But as we drove toward town, I realized he was going to have me admitted. That's when I hit him with the door at the gas station and stole his wallet."

"And while on the dock you dropped your bracelet, maybe when Harris grabbed your arm?"

She nods. “After that… there was no turning back for me.” She stops, swallows hard. “I decided it had to end. Either I’d tell the truth, or I’d jump.”

The sunlight catches the tears on her cheeks, making them shine like trails of pearls. Her shoulders curl further inward, making her look small, defeated.

“One minute she was there, yelling at me about boarding school, and the next…” Her breath hitches. “The sound when she hit the patio. I’ll never forget it. Like something inside her broke all at once. I was so sure they would find out when getting the body out of the water. That they could see that she hadn’t drowned and come asking questions. But no one did.”

She drops her hands to her lap, shoulders slumping completely, her body seeming to collapse in on itself. When she raises her face to mine again, she looks stripped of all defenses—just a scared, broken eighteen-year-old who’s been living with unspeakable guilt.

“Do you think Mom can ever forgive me?” she asks finally, the question hanging between us like something physical, fragile, impossible. “Or Dad?”

I look at her—really look at her—and see Alice’s daughter, Benjamin’s child, a girl who’s been shattered and rebuilt herself with jagged edges. A girl who pushed her mother to her death and has been falling herself ever since.

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FORTY-NINE

I hear the sirens before I see the lights—a distant wail growing steadily closer, cutting through the quiet night that blankets the empty mansion. Lily's body trembles against mine as I hold her, her tears soaking through the thin fabric of my blouse. Neither of us speaks. What could I possibly say now, knowing everything? That I forgive her for terrorizing me? That I understand why she pushed her mother that night? That I accept my own responsibility in setting these events in motion? The truth is both simpler and more complex: we are bound together by invisible threads of guilt and consequence that no amount of forgiveness can fully untangle.

The sirens grow louder, then cut off abruptly. Red and blue lights still pulse through the windows, painting the bare walls in alternating colors of emergency. Lily pulls back slightly, wiping her face with trembling hands.

"They're here," she whispers.

I nod, unable to form words around the lump in my throat. My mind keeps replaying the chain of events that led us here—my first meeting with Benjamin, the spark of attraction I should have ignored, the hotel room where Lily photographed our betrayal, the balcony where Alice fell to her death. My actions didn't push Alice over that railing, but they helped create the circumstances that led to that fatal moment. The weight of this realization sits heavy on my chest, making each breath an effort.

"I'm scared," Lily admits, voice small and younger than I've heard it since I entered her life.

I take her hands in mine, surprised by their coldness despite the warm air seeping through the empty house. "I'll be with you," I promise, my

voice steadier than I feel. “Through whatever comes next. You don’t have to face this alone any more.”

Tears spill from her eyes again, but she nods, a flicker of something like relief crossing her features. The sound of car doors closing echoes from outside, followed by measured footsteps on the front walk.

Lucas appears in the doorway, his face set in lines of exhaustion but also something like peace. The burden of his own secrets has been lifted, replaced by the weight of consequences he seems finally ready to bear.

“I spoke with Captain Martinez,” he says, addressing us both but looking mostly at Lily. “Given your age when it happened and the circumstances, they’re going to proceed carefully. You’ll be taken for a psychological evaluation tonight before any formal charges are discussed.”

“Will I go to jail?” Lily asks directly.

Lucas runs a hand through his hair, a gesture so human it reminds me that beneath the detective who terrorized me is just a man who lost his way. “That’s not for me to decide. But I’ve explained everything—that you were twelve, that Benjamin staged the scene to protect you, that you’ve voluntarily come forward now.”

He steps further into the room, hands in his pockets. “I also disclosed my own actions—the surveillance, the falsified documents, the letters.” His mouth twists in a grimace. “I’ll be facing my own investigation.”

The front door opens, and the sound of multiple footsteps fills the foyer—professional, measured, neither hurried nor hesitant. The police have arrived to take Lily away. The reality of what comes next suddenly crashes over me.

Two officers appear behind Lucas—a man and a woman in crisp uniforms, their faces carefully neutral. Their radios crackle with coded messages, the sound oddly intrusive in the empty house.

“Lily Stone?” the female officer asks, her voice surprisingly gentle.

Lily freezes, my hand still gripping hers. Something shifts in her posture—her shoulders straightening, chin lifting slightly. Despite her tear-stained face and rumpled dress, she suddenly looks older, more composed.

“Yes,” she answers clearly. “I’m Lily.”

Lucas steps forward, effortlessly sliding into his professional role. “Officers, Ms. Stone has provided a voluntary confession regarding her mother’s death six years ago. She was twelve at the time of the incident. She’s been fully cooperative and poses no flight risk.”

The officers exchange glances, then nod. The woman steps forward. “We’ll need to take you to the station now. Captain Martinez has arranged for Dr. Wilson to meet us there for an initial evaluation.”

“Can Emma come?” Lily asks, her hand tightening around mine.

“Family is permitted during processing,” the officer confirms after a brief pause.

I’m struck by the word “family”—so simple, yet so complicated in our case. Not bound by blood or even legal ties any more, yet connected by something perhaps stronger: shared trauma, shared guilt, shared hope for something like redemption.

“I’ll be right beside you,” I assure her.

Lily nods, her face set in lines of determination despite the fear I can feel trembling through her hand. She releases my fingers and walks toward the officers, each step deliberate and steady. There’s a dignity in her surrender that catches in my throat—the child who manipulated and terrorized now facing consequences with more courage than many adults I know.

As the officers lead her toward the foyer, I follow, my legs moving automatically though every step feels like moving through deep water. Robert stands near the front door, face carved from stone, eyes tracking his granddaughter’s progress with unreadable emotion. Lucas hangs back, already speaking with a plainclothes detective who must be there for his statement.

Just before Lily reaches the door, a slender figure steps into her path. Margaret, her perfect posture finally broken, reaches out to touch her granddaughter’s cheek with trembling fingers.

“I’ll follow right behind,” she says, voice thick with tears she refuses to shed in public. “Your grandfather and I will get you the best lawyers.”

Lily nods once, accepting the support without comment. The officers guide her gently through the door and down the steps to the waiting cruiser.

I move to follow, but stop when I feel a light touch on my arm. Margaret stands in the threshold between rooms, her hand not quite on my sleeve but hovering close, as if unsure of her right to make contact.

“Emma.” My name sounds different in her mouth now—not the cold, clipped syllables I’m used to hearing from her, but something softer, almost uncertain. “Wait.”

I turn fully to face the woman who has worked tirelessly to undermine me and push me from Lily's life. The harsh light throws her face into sharp relief, revealing every line of age and worry usually hidden beneath perfect makeup.

"She needs us both now," Margaret says simply, her voice lacking its usual sharp edge. "Despite everything."

A tentative olive branch, not quite an apology but perhaps the beginning of something like understanding. In this moment, we are not rivals for Lily's affection or enemies across battle lines of family loyalty. We are simply two women who love the same broken girl, who will fight to see her through what comes next.

"Yes," I agree, meeting her eyes directly. "She does."

Margaret nods once, a gesture that acknowledges what passes unspoken between us. This isn't forgiveness or friendship—there's too much history, too much pain for that. But it's a truce, fragile and necessary.

As we walk together down the steps toward separate cars that will follow the same path to the police station, I feel the weight of the past six years—the lies, the manipulations, the hidden truths—begin to lift, replaced by the uncertain weight of what comes next. Not lighter, perhaps, but clearer. More honest.

And in this moment, that feels like enough.

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FIFTY

SIX MONTHS LATER

The envelope sits on my kitchen table like a bomb waiting to detonate. Official, imposing, with “In re: Lily Stone” handwritten on the label in neat black script. Morning sunlight cuts through my half-unpacked kitchen, illuminating dust particles that dance around the envelope. I’ve been staring at it for twenty minutes, coffee gone cold beside me, afraid to open what might be inside. The court’s seal stares back, patient and unyielding.

I trace the edge of the envelope with my fingertip, feeling the quality of the paper. Not the cheap, thin stuff of utility bills or junk mail. This is substantial. Important. Life-altering. My nail catches on the sealed flap, and I realize I’m out of excuses to delay.

The tear is clean, decisive. Inside, a folded document with the court’s letterhead waits, crisp and formal. My hands tremble slightly as I unfold it, the paper crinkling loudly in the silent apartment.

“In the matter of Lily Stone…”

My eyes scan the legal terminology, catching phrases that rise from the page like islands in a sea of jargon. “Voluntary confession.” “Mitigating circumstances.” “Age at time of incident.” “Psychiatric evaluation.” Each term carries the weight of the last six months—interviews with detectives, meetings with attorneys, courtroom appearances.

Then I find what I’ve been looking for, what I’ve feared and hoped for in equal measure:

> The court hereby orders Lily Stone to undergo two (2) years of mandatory psychiatric treatment at the Lakeside Rehabilitation Center, followed by supervised release until her twenty-first birthday.

My breath escapes in a rush, shoulders dropping from where they've been hovering near my ears. Not juvenile detention. Not prison. Treatment. The word repeats in my mind like a prayer, a lifeline. Treatment, not punishment.

I read further, absorbing details about visitation rights, educational requirements, quarterly progress reports. Benjamin's name appears once, acknowledging his "continued partial responsibility" for concealing the circumstances of Alice's death. His own sentence has been changed—six years for obstruction of justice, tampering with evidence, and perjury. With credit for time served, he could be out in less than two.

The thought sends a chill through me despite the warm morning. Benjamin free. Benjamin back in Tampa. Back in the world where I'm trying to rebuild some semblance of a life.

I set the document down and stand, needing to move. Three steps take me across the entire kitchen—a far cry from the spacious one in the house I shared with Lily. This apartment is temporary, functional. And it was all I could afford right now. I got lucky that the owner accepted my bad credit so I could sign the lease by myself. Finally, I have a place to call my own. A way station between what was and what will be. Boxes labeled "KITCHEN" and "BOOKS" line the wall leading to the living room, where my couch sits alone on the bare hardwood floor, an island of comfort in an ocean of empty space. I unpacked my bed, my coffee maker, enough dishes for one person to eat a simple meal. Everything else remains in cardboard limbo, waiting for me to decide what stays and what goes in this next chapter.

My fingers return to the court document, tracing the raised seal at the bottom of the page. The official stamp of an ending. Or perhaps a beginning. I'm not sure which yet.

Lily's face appears in my mind—not the calculating teenager who terrorized me for months, but the broken girl on the bridge, rain plastering her hair to her pale face as she confessed to pushing her mother to her

death. I hear her voice from our last visit at the treatment facility: “Dr. Levine says I need to stop thinking in absolutes. That people aren’t all good or all bad.”

Including herself. Including me.

I move to the window, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. Outside, my new neighborhood wakes up—dog walkers, joggers, a woman watering plants on her balcony across the street. Normal people doing normal things, their dramas contained and manageable. None of them know about Alice’s fall from the balcony, about Benjamin’s staged accident at the bridge, about Lily’s years of carrying that secret while methodically tormenting me. About my own role in the chain of events that led us all here.

Two years of treatment. The court’s sentence feels both insufficient and appropriate. What therapy can undo that kind of damage? What counseling can piece together the shattered fragments of Lily’s psyche? And yet, what punishment would serve any purpose except vengeance?

I return to the table, reading the document once more. Between lines of legal language, I find small mercies—Lily will continue her education. She’ll have weekly visits. She’ll receive specialized trauma therapy and medication management. She’ll have a chance.

And what about me? What sentence have I given myself? This empty apartment. This careful distance from the Stone family and their legacy. This tentative job at a new agency where no one knows me. This is my self-imposed penance—starting over from nothing, carrying only what I need.

I fold the document and place it back in its envelope. Not to hide it away, but to protect it. Proof that something good might emerge from the wreckage. Evidence that justice doesn’t always mean punishment. Hope, thin as the paper it’s printed on, but present, nonetheless.

My phone buzzes on the counter—a calendar reminder. Job orientation at Archer Creative in one hour. Reality intrudes on my reflection. I need to shower, dress, transform into someone professional and put-together. Someone without a connection to Tampa’s most notorious family scandal. Someone who didn’t sleep with a married man whose daughter later confessed to killing her mother. Someone normal.

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FIFTY-ONE

The Thai restaurant occupies a converted bungalow, its original architectural elements blending with modern Asian design. Warm light spills from paper lanterns hanging at different heights, creating pools of gold against deep blue walls.

Joseph already waits at a corner table, his tall frame folded comfortably into a wooden chair. When he spots me, his smile reaches his eyes first, then spreads to his mouth—the opposite of the practiced expressions I grew accustomed to in the Stone family.

It's been three weeks since we met at the therapy group for those affected by violent crime. Joseph's sister was assaulted two years ago, the case only recently resolved. My story—the sanitized version I share in group—involves being "connected to a family tragedy." No details about affairs or manipulative teenagers or detectives who became obsessed. Or even about my own part in it.

Just enough truth to belong there.

"Emma." He stands, not reaching for me but opening his posture in welcome. Three dinner meetings and he already understands my need for space, for choosing when contact happens. He's an architect, not a doctor or in advertising. Something new and refreshing.

"Sorry if I kept you waiting." I slip into the chair opposite him, setting my purse on an empty chair beside me.

"Not at all. I was early." Joseph settles back into his seat. "I wanted to check out the woodwork in here. The owner preserved all the original Craftsman details while opening up the floor plan."

I glance around with new appreciation, noticing the exposed ceiling beams and intricate window frames that I'd overlooked. Joseph sees buildings the way I see advertising concepts—layers of intention and meaning where others see only surface.

"The contrast works," I observe. "Traditional structure with modern purpose."

"Exactly." His eyes light up. "Like those corner joints—1920s craftsmanship supporting contemporary lighting fixtures. Respect for the past while embracing the present."

A server approaches with water and menus, momentarily pausing our conversation. Joseph orders Thai iced tea; I choose ginger lemonade. No alcohol tonight—we both avoid it on therapy group days. Another unspoken understanding between us.

When we're alone again, Joseph's expression softens. "How are you feeling today? I noticed you were quiet during share time."

I trace a drop of condensation down my water glass, buying time. "It was… difficult. The new person who joined, her story was triggering. You heard her; she's a mother whose daughter was killed by her husband." My throat tightens. "Her grief felt too familiar."

Not from losing a child, but from that specific type of betrayal—discovering the person you love is capable of terrible things. Though I don't say this aloud.

Joseph nods, understanding without pushing. "Those sessions can blindside you. One minute you're feeling strong, the next something triggers everything fresh again."

"How about you?" I ask, ready to shift focus. "You mentioned last week your sister's case was approaching resolution?"

His long fingers curl around his water glass. "Final sentencing was yesterday. Eight years." He shakes his head slightly. "My sister says it feels both too much and not enough."

"I understand that paradox." The words slip out before I can consider them.

A silence breaks out between us and our food arrives.

"You were right about the Tom Yum," I say after my first spoonful of the fragrant soup. "Definitely the best in Tampa."

Later, when Joseph walks me to my car, he maintains a respectful distance while still providing a protective presence. At my driver's door, he

pauses, hands in his pockets.

"I enjoyed tonight," he says simply.

"So did I." The admission feels significant, an acknowledgment that joy is still possible after everything.

"Maybe next week, that new exhibit at the Museum of Art? Thursday evening they're open late."

I nod, surprised by how much I want to say yes. "I'd like that."

He doesn't lean in for a kiss or even a hug. Instead, he offers a warm smile and a small wave before stepping back. "Drive safely, Emma."

As I pull away from the restaurant, I check my rearview mirror and see him still standing there, making sure I leave safely. Not following, not controlling, just caring in a way that asks for nothing in return.

Maybe I can have a future after all.

Rain hammers against my umbrella as I make it home, the sound amplified in the enclosed stairwell of my apartment building. Three more flights to go. The property manager swore the elevator would be fixed by now, but the "Out of Order" sign still hangs on the doors. I shift the weight of the grocery bags I filled on the way home and continue upward, my footsteps echoing against concrete steps. The sound of my breathing, the rustle of paper bags, the persistent drum of rain—these familiar noises ground me after the unexpected pleasure of dinner with Joseph.

Nothing can ruin my new life. My hope for the future.

Not the ex-husband soon to be out of jail.

No more letters.

Right?

***

Want to find out if Emma has finally escaped the Stone family? Get the next book in the series, *To Her New Husband*, and discover another gripping twist in this heart-stopping tale of secrets, letters and lies...

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TO HER NEW HUSBAND

THE STONE FAMILY BOOK 3

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Easy as One, Two, Three

There's No Place Like Home

Needles and Pins

Where the Wild Roses Grow

Waltzing Matilda

Drip Drop Dead

Black Frost

Standalones

Her Second Husband

The Woman He Married

My Husband's Mistress

Available in Audio

THE STONE FAMILY

To His New Wife (Available in the UK and the US)

DETECTIVE BILLIE ANN WILDE SERIES

Don't Let Her Go (Available in the UK and the US)

Then She's Gone (Available in the UK and the US)

In Her Grave (Available in the UK and the US)

Find My Girl (Available in the UK and the US)

STANDALONES

Her Second Husband (Available in the UK and the US)

The Woman He Married (Available in the UK and the US)

My Husband's Mistress (Available in the UK and the US)

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A LETTER FROM WILLOW

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading *To His Ex-Wife*, the second book in the story of the Stone family. If you did enjoy it and want to keep up to date with all my latest releases, just sign up at the following link. Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

Sign up here!

I hope you loved the story, and if you did, I would be very grateful if you could write a review. As you can probably tell from the ending, the story isn't quite over yet. There will be a third book, where we will finally get to the bottom of all the secrets this family has been hiding for years.

As always, thank you for your support. It means so much to me. If you can, then I would really appreciate it if you left a review of this book.

I want to say thank you to my editor, Jennifer Hunt. Without her, these books would never have happened. It's a joy to work with her.

Take care,

Willow

www.willow-rose.net



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MY HUSBAND'S MISTRESS

Darcey White is one of few female detectives in her quiet suburb in Florida. Respected by her peers as a working mom, with her wonderful lawyer husband Bradley by her side, she believes she has the perfect life…

But when Darcey is called to a murder in an expansive family home, she learns that Bradley has been lying to her. He's been having an affair with beautiful, elegant housewife Charlotte Kane. And Charlotte's husband has been murdered.

Darcey knows she must step away. She cannot possibly be impartial in this investigation.

But then Charlotte accuses Bradley of killing her husband.

The only way to find out the truth is by risking everything to stay on the case and interview Charlotte. **She knows Bradley has broken his vows and ruined their marriage. But is he capable of taking another man's life?**

Or has Charlotte put together the perfect plan to destroy Darcey's family?

Completely unputdownable from the first jaw-dropping chapter to the final, unbelievable twist. An unforgettable psychological thriller from

multi-million-copy bestseller Willow Rose, perfect for fans of *The Housemaid, The Perfect Marriage* and *The Silent Patient*.

Get it here!

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THE WOMAN HE MARRIED

Nobody trusts her. How far will they go to get rid of her?

The wine glass feels cool in my hand. **Marie**, the housekeeper I'm about to hire for my son, is sitting opposite me. Her fingers fiddle with the hem of her blouse. I take a deep breath. **"I need you to spy on my daughter-in-law," I say.**

Marie doesn't react. She seems trustworthy, quiet, discreet. I think of **Elizabeth**'s feigned smiles and the mysterious phone calls I see her take at family events. All those secrets she harbors.

My son is my world. He used to call me every week, but not anymore. I feel him slipping away from me with every passing day. To spend more time with *her*. I need Marie to find out exactly what Elizabeth is hiding.

But the next day, when the police arrive to tell me Richard has disappeared, I realize, I might be too late…

An unputdownable thriller from multi-million-copy bestseller Willow Rose. Fans of Lisa Jewell, Freida McFadden and Jeneva Rose will be glued to the pages as they race to the final twist.

Get it here!

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DON’T LET HER GO

DETECTIVE BILLIE ANN WILDE BOOK 1

A missing five-year-old girl is the key to unlocking a detective's terrifying past…

When **Detective Billie Ann Wilde** receives a desperate call that **five-year-old Emma Wilson is missing,** she rushes to the family home. But inside the picture-perfect house surrounded by Florida marshlands, she finds no children's clothes or toys, no photos of the innocent child Emma's mother Marissa describes. Billie suspects Marissa Wilson is hiding from someone.

It's a race against the clock to find Emma. But Marissa refuses to tell Billie anything about her past, and before long, she also disappears…

And then Billie realizes who Marissa is.

She's the ten-year-old girl Billie failed to find in her first ever case fourteen years ago. The leads went cold because Billie made a fatal mistake.

As more bodies turn up in the same marshlands, Billie must revisit her past and face up to her demons to find Marissa and her child. **But she is unknowingly putting herself in the path of a terrifying serial killer…**

An explosive new crime series from multi-million-copy bestseller Willow Rose. Fans of Lisa Regan, Robert Dugoni and Kendra Elliot will be on the edge of their seats, unable to put this book down!

Get it here!

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PUBLISHING TEAM

Turning a manuscript into a book requires the efforts of many people. The publishing team at Bookouture would like to acknowledge everyone who contributed to this publication.

Audio
Alba Proko
Claire Cowan
Hannah Wilson

Commercial
Hannah Richmond
Imogen Allport

Cover design
Eileen Carey

Data and analysis
Mark Alder

Editorial
Jennifer Hunt
Lucy Greenwold

Copyeditor
Janette Currie

Proofreader
Lynne Walker

Marketing
Alex Crow

Ashleigh Scott
Eleanor Pilcher
Cíara Rosney
Martyna Młynarska

Operations and distribution
Russell Antcliff
Joe Morris
Kiah Tooke

Production
Hannah Snetsinger
Nadia Michael

Publicity
Noelle Holten
Jess Readett
Sarah Hardy

Rights and contracts
Peta Nightingale
Richard King
Saidah Graham
Izzy Beaumont

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RAISING READERS

Books Build Bright Futures

Dear Reader,

We'd love your attention for one more page to tell you about the crisis in children's reading, and what we can all do.

Studies have shown that reading for fun is the **single biggest predictor of a child's future life chances** – more than family circumstance, parents' educational background or income. It improves academic results, mental health, wealth, communication skills, ambition and happiness.

The number of children reading for fun is in rapid decline. Young people have a lot of competition for their time, and a worryingly high number do not have a single book at home.

Hachette works extensively with schools, libraries and literacy charities, but here are some ways we can all raise more readers:

- Reading to children for just 10 minutes a day makes a difference
- Don't give up if children aren't regular readers – there will be books for them!
- Visit bookshops and libraries to get recommendations
- Encourage them to listen to audiobooks
- Support school libraries

- Give books as gifts

There’s a lot more information about how to encourage children to read on our websites: **www.RaisingReaders.co.uk** and **www.JoinRaisingReaders.com**.

Thank you for reading.

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Dublin 15 D15 XTP3
Ireland
(email: info@hbgi.ie)

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